

VERDI'S GOT TO BE REAL: RECKONING WITH OPERA IN *PARIS IS BURNING*

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Opera. That word that, when dropped in conversation, lowers the room's temperature, heightens the gravitas of dialogue, and, for some, provokes the irresistible urge to seek the nearest exit. Opera. Yes, let it melt over the tongue; roll it around your palate. *Op-er-a*. Taste the *mustiness*, the distinct tang of *haute* culture, that delightful hint of aged dust. It's an acquired flavor, one that Western societal consciousness has traditionally believed is only able to be enjoyed by its wealthier white hegemony. The edifice of opera has been constructed in popular thought to be impenetrable; its gates only open to the privileged, the prosperous, the powerful. Why, then, in Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning*, a film exploring the Black queer community in New York City during the late 1980s, while the ball scene raged, does 120-year-old opera music feature prominently?

Halfway through the film, the "Triumphal March" from Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Aida* soars over a clip of two Black drag queens dressed in sailors' suits and drinking champagne during a ball (*Paris* 00:41:50). These balls are stages where the queer community seeks "realness," the attempt to attain, through performance, "everybody's dream and ambition as a minority—to live, and look, as well as a white person is pictured as being in America" (*Paris* 00:42:26–38). However, Verdi's composition continues to play even as these ball scenes cut away, the operatic theme recursively defined as it cycles through chordal space, inexorably tying these balls—and the gay Black men who participate in them—to scenes of upper-class white America. Verdi's score permeates both worlds. I—a classical musician who has played clarinet for over a decade—must ask: why Verdi, here? After all, the dead Italian's music is situated in the same cinematic breath as disco tunes like Cheryl Lynn's "Got to Be Real," seemingly more appropriate to the time and place on which *Paris is Burning* focuses.

But why do I, a musician, feel the knee-jerk reaction to deem one cinematic appropriation of music "appropriate" and another not so? African-American feminist scholar bell hooks, author of the provocative analysis of *Paris is Burning* titled "Is Paris Burning?" posits that our shared social perceptions tend to skew towards binaries. We do not often think of opera as the native cultural language of the demographics illuminated in *Paris is Burning*. Rather, as hooks states, we see Black gay drag queens "worship[ping] at the throne of whiteness" (149) when Verdi's music plays, in a perpetuation of the very colonialist narratives that attempt to strip Black Americans of their inherent self-worth and beauty. hooks forces us to question whether *Paris is Burning* is subversive to the status quo, or whether it maintains that very status quo whereby the white ruling class is comfortable and safe within its own power because the way they live and look is idolized by those they have historically oppressed.

Judith Butler, on the other hand, pushes back against this binary lens. In “Gender is Burning,” a critical response to hooks’s claims, Butler defines Livingston’s *Paris is Burning* as an entity that exists in-between: in-between a subversion and an acceptance of the socio-cultural beliefs of hegemonic power structures, in-between a parodying of dominant socio-cultural norms and a grounds for their displacement (386). They state that drag is the implication of the self in “the very regimes of power that one opposes” (384). This self-implication opens space for subversion while, at the same time, it engenders the risk of self-subsumption by and into a hegemonic heteronormative white culture. Perhaps, then, the “Triumphal March” scene in *Paris is Burning* shifts our perceptions of opera as a binary entity, one that has been closed up in the dusty lock-box of *haute* whiteness under the towering, imposing edifice of “high” western culture, into opera as an entity existing in-between—one that applies to and holds significance for both Black drag culture and the white upper-class with which it has been traditionally associated.

This in-betweenness, this socio-cultural transference of opera, forces us to ask whether we can think of the drag balls in *Paris is Burning* as a sort of operatic performance themselves. I say yes; the implication of the self that Butler describes in their work is central not only to opera but to how *Paris is Burning* utilizes an appropriation of Verdi’s music to subvert opera’s traditional social image as well. Opera is an art form parallel to drag wherein actors take on new identities through costume, makeup, acting, and music. Drag echoes with some familiarity to me—a heterosexual white male classical musician—because it might be thought of as a cultural permutation of opera. Yet the acrobatics of instinct which illuminate such a permutation are checked in their course; Verdi’s *Aida* focuses only on heterosexual relationships. It seems that the drag balls—foundationally homosexual—and the opera *Aida* are inverse images of the same cultural and artistic act. Butler claims that heterosexuality in dominant social culture is grounded in the repeated imitation of self-idealization, whereby the performativity of heterosexuality points toward the unachievable nature of its idealizations that destabilize heterosexuality’s claim to “naturalness and originality” (384). But, if Butler states that imitation lies at the root of the creation of a heterosexual norm, where “naturalness and originality” are no more natural or original than that which is performed onstage, what are we to make of hooks’s claims about the physical, tangible dangers of minorities attempting to emulate that norm through performance, whereby misogyny and colonialism are born and bred? This must point toward performances as cultural acts, yes, but with implications that travel beyond the hermetic venues where performances occur and influence, in their hermeneutics, the realities of the world. When society views opera as the performance of hegemonic norms that are themselves created through performance, thus having little claim to “naturalness or originality,” we are complicit contributors to the further detrimental idealization of those norms. This social re-idealization of hegemonic norms circularly influences the image of “realness” that the

drag minority attempt to emulate through the ball scene. In Butler's words, this only leads to further "disappointment and disidentification" (388) when the minority cannot assimilate into the idealized, socially crafted hegemonic norm, even with the most "real" drag performance.

As a classical musician, I often find myself ruminating on these personal, social, and cultural implications of performance, of an audience accepting music in one space and breaking hermetic seals to carry it into others. *Paris is Burning* forces everyone to consider this same question when the "Triumphal March" is carried across scenes from two different worlds. In the world of the ballroom, the opera score feels expatriated. An audio-visual repatriation occurs, perhaps, in our socially-molded psychology when scenes of "white America" are spliced in under the same music. However, the music seems to originate, diegetic, from the ballroom and is superimposed, post-editing, over the scenes of white America. Here, *Paris is Burning* forces the binaries of a viewer's social preconceptions to fracture in confusion; preconceived notions about opera are supposed to be validated by its return to images of hegemonic, wealthy white America, yet it is in these very scenes that the music feels least organic, least like it belongs. In this way, *Paris is Burning* offers us performances of both the heteronormative hegemony and the oppressed minority, asking us to determine which presents as more "real." The greatest performance is that which makes the audience suspend disbelief for its duration. And so, as the captive audience ourselves, of our question of disbelief we must ask: to whom is the victory wreath handed? Who triumphs? With our psychological tendencies laid bare, we hesitate, wreath in hand.

But this decision feels impossible to make. That group with which we traditionally associate opera, whose performance of claim on the art form we would normally not hesitate to name, has been made to appear ironically estranged from it. Instead, the drag queens of the New York City ballroom seem to take up opera as their own, twisting it free from its binaries to implicate the white hegemony in their own privilege in a new culturally regenerative manner. The threefold performance that maintains this scene's structure—of drag, of hegemony, and of music—forces a perspective shift in the viewer, fundamentally altering deeply-ingrained socio-psychological preconceptions. Maybe we are not meant to choose a victor, lest triumph turn to tragedy. By choosing, we would enact a binary—either the drag queens of *Paris is Burning* "triumph" and are seen as attempting to transform into the idealized image of a norm they can never attain, or white America "triumphs," and the hegemonic norms, destructive both to opera itself and to the minorities who participate in drag, are upheld without further thought. Instead, this scene shows that we would be remiss in choosing either option. It opens space for reflection and begs, from some region of the self usually unlit by a critical light, this question: have I been guilty of perceiving opera through such a binary lens? It is an admittance by a heterosexual white male classical musician that seems at once unsurprising yet feels deeply troubling. I do not

want opera to die—I’ve grown to appreciate its taste. But, nonetheless, it is dying. Whether due to a failure to modernize, an aging-out of its traditional audience, or the social image of opera as exclusive in every socio-economic and cultural sense, opera draws breath on cultural life-support. And a society which views opera as binary will only hasten its untimely demise.

By situating Verdi’s music next to Cheryl Lynn’s 1978 hit “Got to Be Real,” *Paris is Burning* forces the viewer to consider the historical evolution of culture and reveals, through such artistic relativism, its capacity to act as an operatic life-preserver. Popular music of the late 20th century, while trending toward anarchic, is historically situated within a distinct artistic evolution. The music of Lynn is one artistic node in the western cultural timeline, inexorably connected to the operas of Verdi and his contemporaries. The musical breakthroughs of Verdi and other opera composers vaulted music forward into the modern day—phantom memories acting in all too tangible aural manners on the music of artists like Lynn. Here, again, the physical cultural impacts of performance are felt. In collapsing this temporal distance by positioning two seemingly estranged pieces of music next to each other, *Paris is Burning* creates space for the viewer to reckon with how the music of an artist like Lynn emerged from that of Verdi in the same way that drag culture must have emerged from a cultural evolutionary precedent based on the very hegemony from which it attempts to break away. Am I arguing that *Paris is Burning* is part of the legacy of opera? Yes. But *Paris is Burning* also provides us a space where—by reckoning with the socio-cultural ambiguities, transpositions, and inversions of the “Triumphal March” scene—we can move toward a redefinition of opera that can and should survive into the present day and beyond, rather than disappear into the past.

I was a young child, maybe five, when I tasted opera for the first time. I remember it sporadically, vividly—Tom and Jerry conducting the overture to Johann Strauss II’s *Die Fledermaus* operetta at the Hollywood Bowl. I consider this earliest memory of opera somehow an authentic and authenticating origin (to mis-present the words of Adam Phillips) in my evolution as a musician and like to think I owe my career in classical music at least partially to an opera overture conducted by a cat and a mouse. During Saturday morning cartoons, I fell in love with a vision of opera free from the gold chains with which society has shackled it, a vision I am convinced is worth saving. So do we tear down the edifice of opera-as-white, opera-as-privileged, opera-as-binary? Perhaps, but triumph stems not from destruction, which only serves to deepen the binary rifts that have sundered social groups. The destruction of one problematic norm simply opens space for another to replace it. Triumph will stem, rather, from “realness.” It seems fitting that we use the very criterion by which ball victories are won to begin a fundamental perspective shift, a social redefinition of opera. We’ve got to let opera be real for it to survive, to become the complex narrative tool of social commentary and individual revelation that we seem to forget lies at its core, cutting it free from its popular image and creating space for opera to hold meaning for more

groups than solely the wealthy white hegemony. Let us remember: “Got to Be Real” has a taste of opera. *Paris is Burning* has a taste of opera.

Is that not enough for *us* to develop a new taste for opera?

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