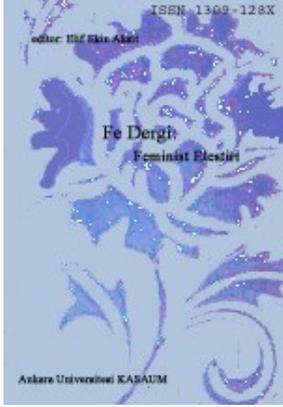


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Paris is burning: A critic of gender
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Paris is burning: A critic of gender

Mine Egbatan*

Examining drags, where femininity and/or masculinity are performed by opposite sexes, gains importance for providing a new insight into gender issue. The films focusing on the life in drags are considered to be significant tools to understand issues related to gender. Paris is Burning, a film directed by Jennie Livingston, is an invaluable source for attracting attention towards drags, transsexuals, gender and relatively race in this regard. The film focuses on the drag balls where black gays and transsexuals living in New York perform femininity as drag queens by giving crucial clues about how those people define and evaluate femininity and gender. In this article, the film, Paris is Burning, will be analyzed on the basis that whether the attitudes of gays and transsexuals in the film will bring a revolutionary perspective, which is the rejection of the norms of heterosexist and patriarchal culture, into gender issue.

Key words: drag, femininity, patriarchy, gender, Paris is Burning

Paris Yanıyor: Bir toplumsal cinsiyet eleştirisi

Kadınlık veya erkekliğe dair rollerin karşı cinse mensup kişiler tarafından canlandırıldığı yerlerin incelenmesi toplumsal cinsiyet ile ilgili yeni bir bakış açısı getirmesi açısından önemlidir. Bu yerlerdeki yaşamı inceleyen filmler toplumsal cinsiyeti ilgilendiren konulara atıf yapması açısından önemli kaynaklar olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Jennie Livingston tarafından yönetilen Paris is Burning filmi de transseksüeller, toplumsal cinsiyet ve görece ırk ile ilgili konulara dikkat çekmesi açısından bu alanda eşsiz bir kaynaktır. Filmde New York'ta yaşayan siyahî gey ve transseksüellerin yaşamları ele alınmakta ve bu kişilerin toplumsal cinsiyet ve kadınlık ile ilgili konulardaki tanım ve değerlendirilmelerine yer verilmektedir. Bu makalede, Paris is Burning filmi incelenerek filmdeki gey ve transseksüellerin toplumsal cinsiyet ve kadınlık ile ilgili söylemleri üzerinde durulacak ve filmdeki bu kişilerin toplumsal cinsiyet ile ilgili yaklaşımlarının heteroseksist ve ataerkil söylemlere karşı çıkan, toplumsal cinsiyet ile ilgili devrimci ve yeni bir yaklaşım getirip getiremediği tartışılacaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: toplumsal cinsiyet, kadınlık, ataerkillik, heteroseksizm, Paris is Burning filmi

Introduction

Drags are important in understanding transgenderism and issue related to gender. Drags are places where femininity or masculinity is performed by opposite sexes. Films are giving an importance to drags to understand issues about gender. The film, *Paris is Burning* (1991), directed by Jennie Livingston, is an invaluable source for current cultural studies as it touches very important issues, including race, gender, consumer culture and otherness. The film is about lives of black gays and transsexuals who live in New York and constitute a subculture, which is differentiated from dominant culture in a given society. The film shows this culture of gays and transsexuals, who are African American or Latin and most of whom are poor and it focuses on drag balls where those gays and transsexuals perform femininity as drag queens. Drags are also a new form of community which creates a sense of belonging for these people who are rejected and marginalized by society because they do not conform to the expectations of white heterosexist, patriarchal culture, what is called as dominant culture. In drags, they compete over different categories, such as school boy/girl, which are evaluated under the title of realness, which can be defined as appearing as a straight woman or man. This realness issue and other implications about gender give very important clues about how they understand femininity and how to define and categorize gender. Although it seems that drags are the signs of opposition to white heterosexist culture, which is revolutionary, it can be seen that gays and transsexuals in the film have a conservative attitude against gender and femininity. They actually equate femininity with being a white, rich and beautiful real woman, which is dictated by patriarchal and heterosexist society.

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Revolutionary Drags

*“You’re born naked and the rest is drag”
RuPaul, American drag queen*

While watching *Paris is Burning*, the first impression one can have is that those gays and transsexuals are challenging dominant culture, which is white heterosexist/patriarchal culture whose norms are strictly defined to exclude what is different in the society. Therefore, gays and transsexuals establish “drags” and “houses” to define their rules freely in an environment where they are committed to each other. In drags, they perform femininity as male-bodies, which brings a revolutionary question to the stage; whether gender is a performance or not. These people in the film are born as male but in drags they impersonate woman from how they wear to how they behave with an aesthetic concern. This makes drags significant in understanding their potential in changing dominant cultural norms based on the assumption that sex is always already gender. Bodies can be male or female according to their genital features. However, they are grown up with a set of rules which say them how to behave according to their sex. Gender is a learning process as it is defined by Judith Butler:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender.¹

Gender is a learned performance that one could follow throughout his/her life. If one is born as a male, he needs to behave within the framework of certain rules that means he has to like woman and he has to conform to masculine ideas and these are not always already there. One needs to learn how to behave as a male and a female. Therefore, drags are significant signs of gender as a construction by challenging the idea gender is categorized into only two as male and female. Being a male wearing woman clothes is unthinkable. In *Paris is Burning*, contrary to main argument, male bodies wear like a woman and perform femininity by walking like a woman or talking like a woman. In the film, Dorian Corey is seen while wearing make-up as a drag queen. He is a gay but he puts make-up on his face, which is considered to be special to woman which is dictated by compulsory heterosexuality based on gender binarism. According to Taylor and Rupp, drag queens are challenging binary gender considerations by offering a third category. They say; “Drag queens emerges as a kind of third gender category in a society that insists that there are only two.”² “Voguing” category in drags is another good example that strengthens the idea of gender performativity. In this category, voguers dance like models. Willi Ninja, mother of the House of Ninja, is the best voguer who teaches other women modeling. He is a male biologically but this does not prevent him from teaching how to model to other women, which shows that biology is not destiny and gender is just a performance. He is also conscious about gender performativity by saying those words in the film: “Do not believe just because I’m a guy that I can not do it. In order to be a teacher and show girls how to do it, I have to know how to do it. New York City women are a little bit harder than most women. Basically I’m trying to bring that femininity back and bring some grace and poise.”³ Examples on gender as a performative role are crucial for challenging compulsory heterosexuality and may bring a subversive understanding in changing gender binarism. Drags have a revolutionary role in this sense. Barret emphasizes the significance of drags in representing performative potential of gender, which abolishes traditional gender categories by citing “Scholars argue that drag is not about woman but rather about the inversion or subversion of traditional gender roles. These scholar always praise drag queens for demonstrating that gender displays do not necessarily correlate anatomical sex and typically see drag as a highly subversive act that constructs traditional assumptions concerning gender identity.”⁴ What Pepper Labeija, the mother of House of Labeija, says in the film shows subversion of norms based on heterosexuality. He says: “I can never say how a woman feels; I can only say how a man who acts like a woman or dresses like a woman feels. I never wanted to have a sex change.”⁵ Newton describes the potential of drags in changing dominant norms of heterosexual society by saying “At its most complex, drag is a double

inversion that says, 'Appearance is an illusion.' Drag says, "my 'outside' appearance is feminine, but my essence 'inside' is masculine."⁶ All these examples in the film give a revolutionary answer that challenges dominant heterosexual norms and gender definition. Drag queens in the film are simply fighting against conventional gender roles by their performance as being a male but behaving like a woman, which make the film important.

However, this is one side of the characters in the film. By establishing drags and playing their own games by establishing their own rules which are contrary with heterosexual norms of society, they may be successful in bringing a new understanding of gender but it is limited because they are trying to impersonate the very norms of heterosexual society. When the characters in the film are analyzed, it is possible to claim that they mostly conform to gender roles dictated by society. When they consider femininity, not only gender issue but also race issue as well as richness are on the stage.

Conservatism of Transsexuals: Being A White Woman

"Everybody who is young has a hope and a dream and I do not think that it has ever been any different in the history of the world."

A character in Paris is Burning

Drags in *Paris is Burning* are significant to show performative side of gender. On the other hand, it is a further conformity to gender roles after examining the characters in the film. Gays and transsexuals in the film compete over several categories, Ivy League student or military servicer. There is one important criteria that determines who successfully performs in these categories, which is realness. Tim Dean says; "For the characters in *Paris is Burning* realness is the ultimate accolade since this term denotes the degree of successful imitation produced by a gender performance."⁷ To be real, as Pepper Labeija, mother of House of Labeija, says, is "to look as much as possible like your straight counterpart."⁸ Being real is equated with conforming to what is dictated as right in the society, in the film it is mostly conforming to heterosexual norms. Butler says;

"Realness" is not exactly a category in which one competes; it is a standard that is used to judge any given performance within the established categories. And yet what determines the effect of realness is the ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized effect. This effect is itself the result of an embodiment of norms, a reiteration of norms, an impersonation of a racial and class norm, a norm which is at once a figure, a figure of a body, which is no particular body, but a morphological ideal that remains the standard which regulates the performance, but which no performance fully approximates.⁹

Wanting to look like what they are not in real life is important to understand how they desire to conform to the norms of heterosexuality, which is also significant to be visible in the society and to do what they want to do. Realness is a key for an ideal life for them. Dorian Corey in the film says; "When you are gay, you are monitored for everything, but you can do whatever you want, when you are straight."¹⁰ By achieving realness, they can be visible in the society and get what they do not have with their current situation. Being conformed to societal norms will enable a more easy life for them. However, being real is achieved by aesthetic concerns. Characters in the film give importance to look like a woman by wearing make-up or fashionable clothes. Realness is not necessarily related to internal features, feeling like a woman as Pepper Labeija, the mother of House of Labeija says; "I can never say how a woman feels, I can only say how a man who dresses like a woman feels."¹¹ Although this is important in understanding that gender as an identity is constructed, it reproduces patriarchal norms because it equates being a woman with only appearance. Furthermore, Venus Xtravaganza, a member of House of Xtravaganza, is an example of reproduction of heterosexual norms. As a transsexual, she says; "I would like to be a spoiled rich white girl. They get what they want, whenever they want it. I want to be with a man I love. I want my sex change. I want to be a complete woman."¹² Her further wishes to engage in a

heterosexual society are to marry in a church and have children, which are taboos due to heterosexist understanding of gender and which are shaped by patriarchal culture. Family and having children are traditionally associated with being a woman. "A woman needs to marry and produce children" is a motto of patriarchal culture. A life without a family or children for a woman is impossible and unthinkable. In the film, Venus wants to marry because family is an accepted form of life. Having family may be seen as a protective area from outside society, since family life is approved by society which she thinks when she marries, she will be protected by sacred family life and this will enable her to be visible in society by being a real woman. Moreover, by marrying, she will find the chance to show that she is not addicted to sex, which is a common image of transsexuals in any society. She will give the message to other members of the society that she is "normal" to be able to marry and have a family. Her desire to marry in a church has the same intention of having a family and having children. Religion, which has strict categorizations and rules, is not in favor of undergoing an operation whose aim is to change one's sex that is given by God and due to this; it is thought to be irreversible. However, marrying in a church will give her power to sustain a relatively "normal" life as she will gain the protection of religion although by wanting to change her sex, she is opposing to religious norms, which is in fact revolutionary. Although she is a little conservative while she is asking for the protection of religion, some other drag queens, not necessarily in the film, do not want to change their sex by believing that it is given by God. In the book called *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, written by Taylor and Rupp, Sushi, one of the drag queens, could not change her sex because she thinks "It is a religious thing, I was born in this way."¹³ She is really conservative; she does not want to oppose the rules brought by religion. Venus, at least, can oppose religion by having a sex surgery but she wants the help of religion for being accepted as a real woman. Moreover, by this way, she may find the chance to say "Religion, which is against having sex surgery to change one's sex, is now accepting that I am a real woman, so they allow me to marry with a man in a church. Therefore, you can not oppose to the reality that I am a woman", which will ease her attempts not to be rejected by other people in the society. With the help of all these institutions, which are evaluated as sacred, she is actually sending the message that "I am the same with heterosexuals, there is no difference between us, and heterosexuals' social institutions can also offer a life for us." What is interesting with this message is that although they are the representatives of an alternative understanding of gender, firstly, they act according to norms of a patriarchal society. Pursuing liberation with the help of having a family, wearing make-up, giving birth to a child is not consistent with challenge of existing heterosexual norms. Secondly, she wants to have sex change to make her biological situation consistent with her appearance. This is again a rule which is always already there in a society which creates gender dichotomies. Having a sex change surgery is nothing more than to serve for heterosexuality and binary gender norms because what a heterosexual society wants is to reproduce an understanding over sex is equal to gender. This hinders the revolutionary potential of drags and transsexuals or transgender. Drags give messages that being defined as a woman has nothing to do with genital sex. As Sushi, a drag queen, mentions "A drag queen is somebody who knows he has a dick and two balls."¹⁴ In another film on transgenderism, called *TransAmazon*¹⁵, Joelle first wants to have a sex change surgery. Then, she changes her mind because she thinks that having such a surgery will not help to alter heteronormative culture. This should be the case, but in *Paris is Burning*, they are conservative because they are conforming to what is traditional in a society, including family, religion and having children. This brings the paradox of transsexuals to the stage. The concerns for visibility as a "proper" member in the society are the key reason for this kind of understanding. They are challenging heterosexual norms by being born as a male but gendering themselves as a female, but since they want to legitimize themselves, they follow the path of heterosexuality and patriarchy. Another example in this regard is that they also regard femininity as a realm of powerlessness. Bell Hooks says; "To cross-dress as a woman in patriarchy was also to symbolically cross from the world of privilege into world of powerlessness."¹⁶ Woman, no matter in which society one lives, are considered to be weak, powerless and they live the burden of living in a patriarchal society. They are killed by men in the name of honor killings; they are beaten although some characters in the film think that when they have sex change surgery, they will be treated well because as a drag queen, they are under pressure. On the other hand, some characters in the film emphasize powerlessness of woman, which is again a norm established by a patriarchal society. Power relations are gaining importance in this regard as Bell Hooks mentions; "To choose to appear as a 'female' when one is 'male' is always constructed in the patriarchal mindset as a loss, as a choice worthy of ridicule."¹⁷ In the film, Pepper Labeija says; "I never wanted to have a sex change. That's just taking it a little too far.... Women get treated badly. You know, they get beat, they get robbed, and they get dogged, so having the vagina, that doesn't mean that you are going to have a

fabulous life. It might in fact be worse.”¹⁸ This praises to be a man by showing that Pepper’s idea is not necessarily different and he knows that being woman in a patriarchal society will bring problems and has almost no difference than being a transsexual. Another dimension of gender in the film is that they equate femininity with being a white woman. This brings a race issue along with gender in question. Venus wants to be a white woman. Being white is a key in being visible in the society. By being white, they can not be oppressed or excluded. Pepper says; “It is every minorities dream to live, look and work as the white person.”¹⁹ Characters in the film do not want to look like a black woman because they think that this will not make their life easier than their current life. Bell Hooks says; “The black woman depicted was usually held up as an object of ridicule, scorn, hatred.”²⁰ Therefore, being black in a society where whiteness is rewarded for being superior and being a transsexual or gay at the same time are not a wanted situation. They think that being black will make them powerless and bring them misery. Being black means being have to fight against others all the time as Pepper Labeija mentions; “This is white America. And when it comes to the minorities, especially black, we have had everything taken from us and yet we have all learned how to survive.”²¹ Having the experience that blackness is equal to inferiority, troubles and more attempts to sustain a good life, their role model is always white woman. Characters in the film want to look like Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe, who is beautiful, famous, white woman. They do not desire to look like Lena Horne, who was a famous black actress because they think that blackness will bring them trouble, although they can achieve to be famous, they can not get the love of other people and their black skin does not bring them enough fame. This is voiced by Dorian Corey in the film. Corey says; “Nobody wanted to look like Lena Horne. Everybody wanted to look like Marilyn Monroe.”²² Pepper Labeija summarizes the dream of transsexuals by these words which are about being a white rich woman: “It is so obvious that if you have captured the great white way of living or looking or dressing, or speaking, you are a marvel.”²³ Characters in the film undermine their race and emphasize the importance of white race, which is dictated by a white culture, which makes their ideas traditional and conservative. Actually this brings another dimension about gender and femininity. Being a white woman is not enough for them. Characters in the film do not want to be an ordinary white woman. They want more. They want to be famous by being a film actress or a model. Their role model is a rich, famous, white woman. This desire is obvious in most of the characters. Black transsexual Octavia Saint Laurent both wants to have a sex change surgery as a sign of liberation and to be like her ideal super model Paulina, who is white and famous. By achieving these, she believes that she will get what they want and be visible in the society. However, she wants these without knowing that this serves for white patriarchal societal norms. She says; “I hope the way I look will help me make money. I don’t want to end up an old drag queen with nothing going on for me but winning balls.”²⁴ She further says “I want people to look at me as ‘There’s the model, Octavia’, ‘There’s the actress, Octavia’.”²⁵ This kind of idea is a further strengthening of patriarchal norms. In a society where patriarchal norms are settled, being intelligent or doing works related to intellectual knowledge are not suitable for woman. Importance is given to their body and beauty and the jobs related to these are suitable for them. Octavia’s words are reflections of how she is affected by these norms because their choice of famous white actress is distinguished with their beauties. They earn money, since they are very beautiful; they are in a good shape. Aesthetic concerns shape the image of woman. Being a woman is nothing more than to be beautiful, thin, and attractive. They also evaluate realness according to these categories. One of the characters in the film describes drags by emphasizing the importance of beauty; “Either you have got a nice body, or you are very fashionable, or you are very pretty, but there is always something there for everyone.”²⁶ Achieving richness and fame can only be succeeded by using one’s beauty and body. Other qualifications, such as intelligence or intellectual knowledge, do not offer a way for woman who wants to show her potential in making money or gaining fame. This idea is a reflection of how the image of woman is represented in patriarchal societies. Therefore, the supporting of this idea by the characters in the film reflects that their ideas are conservative and helps to make traditional ideas strong. What is conventional about drags is that they are reproduction of family in a different sense. Although it seems that drags are offering a new form of community. They create houses to act as free as they want. These houses are thought to be alternative to what dominant culture offers. Participants of drag balls define drags as a place they can do whatever they want. “A ball is the very word, whatever you want to be, you be. You have a chance to display your elegance. You can become anything and do anything right here and won’t be questioned.” However, actually they are sustaining the role of traditional family life. The very idea of protection and commitment are fulfilled by a person who is called mother. Mother of the house is the protector of other member of the house and mother is the main caretaker. Pepper Labeija, the mother of House Labeija, displays this very well in his words: “It is important to be the

mother because it is so many little kids that I have to look out for.”²⁷ Traditional roles of mother are again displayed in drags or houses, which does not offer a new understanding of family.

When all these are brought together, it is obvious that characters in the film have conservative ideas about femininity because they rely on traditional institutions, like family and religion, to be accepted by society, they equate femininity with being beautiful and white, which are expressions of heterosexual, patriarchal, white culture.

Conclusion

Drags, where male bodies impersonate women, are very crucial in explaining issues related to transgenderism and transsexualism. A lot of film handling drags is picturized. *Paris is Burning*, which is directed by Jennie Livingston in 1991, is showing the lives of black gays and transsexuals by bringing gender as well as race issue into consideration. A quick view of the film is significant in showing performative side of gender. Drag queens, which perform femininity as male bodies by wearing make up or putting clothes on like a woman, are challenging the norm that biology is destiny and if one is born as male, he should live how a man lives.

Characters in the film show that sex is not always gender. Gender is a learning process and one can perform it as soon as he/she learns. The king of “Voguing”, a dance category in drags, Willi Ninja is a proof of gender is just performativity because he teaches other women how to vogue, which means how to walk as a model. Therefore, drags in the film have revolutionary role, which helps to alter traditional understanding of gender roles.

However, this role is a limited revolt, which is understood when the characters in the film are analyzed carefully. Although by performing a sex’s feature that is contrary to their original sexes, they are fighting against white, patriarchal, heterosexist society, their understanding of femininity is conventional and conservative. Being visible in the society, which means being accepted as a proper member of society, is very significant for them. In order to achieve this, they rely on traditional institutions of heterosexual, patriarchal, white society. Transsexuals in the film want to have sex change, to marry in a church, to adopt children, to be a white, rich, famous, beautiful woman. They do not want to be an ordinary woman. They equate femininity with being a white woman. By achieving this, they think that they will be famous, rich and beautiful and they will no longer be rejected by society. However, they disregard their potential to alter existing gender roles in drag balls or shows. They conform to the norms of traditional society, which makes their thoughts conservative and their situation paradoxical.

¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (USA: Routledge, 1993), 140.
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³ Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (USA: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 44.
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⁵ Paris is Burning, DVD. Directed by Jennie Livingston, (Miramax Films, 1991).
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⁷ Rusty Barret, "Indexing Polyphonous Identity in the Speech of African American Drag Queens," in *Reinventing Identities: The Gendered Self in Discourse* ed. M. Bucholtz, A. C. Liang and L. A. Sutton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 315.
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⁹ Paris is Burning, DVD.
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¹¹ Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (USA: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), 30.
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¹³ Tim Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* (USA: The University of Chicago Press, 2000) 14.
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¹⁵ Paris is Burning, DVD.
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¹⁷ Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, 129.
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¹⁹ Paris is Burning, DVD.
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²¹ Paris is Burning, DVD.
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²³ Paris is Burning, DVD.
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²⁵ Rupp and Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, 37.
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²⁷ Rupp and Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, 32.
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²⁹ TransAmazon: A Gender Queer Journey, DVD. Directed by Laurie Wen, (UNH Video Services, 2003).
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³¹ Bell Hooks, *Reel To Real: Race, Sex and The Class At The Movies* (USA: Routledge, 1996) , 214.
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³³ Hooks, *Reel To Real: Race, Sex and The Class At The Movies* , 215.
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³⁵ Paris is Burning, DVD.
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³⁷ Paris is Burning, DVD.
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