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Paris Is Burning: Representation and Music

American history has long dealt with issues of representation. Many of the issues are still being dealt with in present times, such as the representation of the LGBTQ+ community. In the media, marginalized communities are often represented in stereotyped, generic, or superficial ways. However, music is the one media who provides an open outlet for the LGBTQ+ community. With the introduction of music videos in the 1980s, LGBTQ+ artists and their allies were able to use music as an outlet to present themselves as authentically as possible. The film *Paris Is Burning* highlights the New York LGBTQ+ club scene and shows how these people began to feel free in their own skin while expressing themselves through music and dancing. **The film *Paris Is Burning* portrays the LGBTQ+ experience as “fantasy” in a firsthand way, and the performance aspect of the film mirrors those of musical acts in the 1980s, such as Prince or Madonna, who used music as a form of expression, gender fluidity, and individuality.**

The film *Paris Is Burning* brings plenty of firsthand access to the LGBTQ+ community and how they use music as an outlet for representation. The film is based largely on the concept of the “balls” that people go to, where they dress up, strut and dance with each other. They have as much freedom of expression as straight males or females would in their everyday lives. One man is quoted as saying “Those balls are just like our fantasy of being a superstar...like The Oscars.” These “fantasies” are decked out in dresses, bright colors, feathers, and a hunger for expression. In essence, these balls are representative of the people participating in them.

According to the film, the essence of the balls are based around one simple concept: “Whatever you want to be, you be.” This concept of individuality and expression, especially in the 1980s, was hard to come by for the LGBTQ+ community. Even then, they were being ostracized, ridiculed, and looked up as different from “normal.” The film does an incredible job of portraying the human side of this, as real-life videos and firsthand interviews help the audience truly understand what these balls and functions mean to a community that was being so marginalized.

What the film is also able to do is add a layer to how we understand media perceptions of this community. Before the 1980s, there was a very clear dominance of male rock stars with long hair and slung guitars. However, in the 1980s and beyond, the landscape began to shift. With the introduction of the music video and MTV, artists could express themselves and their identities in ways previously unknown. In general, musical artists began to take pride in not just the song, but the *performance*. Artists were not just singing; they were playing characters and expressing other sides of themselves.

In a lot of ways, the balls portrayed in the film *Paris Is Burning* can be drawn in comparison to music videos. On a certain level, these balls are music videos for the LGBTQ+ community. They are channels and mediums for visual expression. They use bright colors, vibrant imagery, dancing, and a form of expression not necessarily suitable for “real life.” Music videos are escapes from life, and provide a “fantasy” world for the artist to live in and create a sense of individuality. Balls are the same way. These people can be themselves, even if it is just for a moment.

Music videos in the 1980s can connect with this film's representation of the LGBTQ+ community to form one new lane to discuss media representation of marginalized groups. When a gay or transgender young teen turned on MTV in the 1980s, they were able to see Prince wearing blouses and makeup while shredding on the guitar. In this way, they were able to feel welcome. They were able to see a prime example of gender boundaries being pushed and melded together. In music videos, Prince was not a male or female— he was just Prince. These same teenagers could then go to the balls at night, donning similar clothes to Prince, and feel the same way the music video made them feel. Expression of marginalized groups began to shift in the music industry during the music video era, as more artists began to challenge roles and standards. With artists like Prince, the LGBTQ+ community could watch a music video and feel like they were at a ball in New York. In this way, there is a clear connection between the film and the themes of individual expression and representation in the media, particularly the music industry.

Overall, the film *Paris Is Burning* is a very layered experience. It seems to just show the LGBTQ+ community having fun on the surface. In reality, however, it is a complete and individual example of the community beginning to find themselves at least somewhat at home, at a time when they did not feel welcome. You can connect this film to music, as the balls they went to mirrored the gateway of individuality that music videos offered artists in the 1980s. This community could turn on the TV and see people that looked like them, dressed like them, and acted like them on stage. In some sort of “fantasy” world, the artists were able to express themselves in the same way the people at the balls could. This film does an excellent job of showing music and art as a form of expression and individuality. Everyone at the balls felt like themselves, and if the point of music is to express some corner of your personality, then the film did it to perfection.