

5-25-2018

Rendering Identity: Normativity in Conventional Contemporary Queer Documentary

Lea G. Kreck
Portland State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/honorsthesis>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Kreck, Lea G., "Rendering Identity: Normativity in Conventional Contemporary Queer Documentary" (2018).
University Honors Theses. Paper 614.
<https://doi.org/10.15760/honors.626>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

Rendering Identity: Normativity in Conventional Contemporary Queer Documentary

Lea Kreck

Portland State University, Honors College

Abstract

Depictions of queer subjects in documentary filmmaking predominantly emphasize the promotion of queer visibility and activist rhetorics. Limited research and discourse has been executed, practically or academically, to explore documentary form as holding potential to contribute to subversive renderings of contemporary queer experience. The following thesis outlines possible basis for reconsidering contemporary queer filmmaking through the disposition of current documentary production limitations. This includes synthesizing tenets of queer theory and film theory to support the potential applications of queer documentary and recommending a premise for subversive documentary principles to better express contemporary queerness. The primary issue confronted is the capacity in which filmmakers seeking to create queer content, and more specifically content that embodies queerness' radical fluidity, within the confines of a formulaic medium.

Keywords: documentary, queer, LGBTQ, film production practices, homonormativity, film formalism

Documentary as a subversive film form is not a consideration widely explored — or, frankly, explored at all — in filmic academia (Nichols, 1991). While queer content and the rendering of queer narratives has held a significant status within the academic community, the predominant areas of focus surround queer narrative cinema, experimental works, and to a lesser extent documentary. While nonfiction works have been considered within the larger lexicon of queer film analysis, the exploration of the form is limited to the functions of documentary filmmaking as a tool of advocacy for queer communities, and reclamative potential for queer histories; the medium has not been explored in regards to its potential to serve subversive ends by intentional, fundamental use of film elements. Investigations of queer documentary are primarily concerned with the uses of documentary towards pseudo-journalistic ends in order to present the concerns and experiences of the community in manners that are authentic, unifying, and often aimed to appeal to hegemonic sympathies. That, even in queer communities, align with neoliberal, bourgeoisie validations of subjectivity. While documentary filmmaking is not understood as a sole promotional tool, the common historic and contemporary utilizations of the medium follow very specific, activist driven angles. Films such as the 1990 documentary touchstone, *Paris Is Burning*, and its contemporary, *Kiki* (2016), exemplify these positions. Both films explore the culture of the New York City Ball scene, a performance community composed primarily of queer people of color and individuals of trans experience. While both films are centered around queer subjects, the intended audiences are not necessarily queer.

While the methods of the traditional model of queer-centered documentary filmmaking may be effective and powerful tools in gaining equitable power politically, socially, and culturally, the potentials of the form outside of its established uses remains largely unexplored.

There is potential for queer documentary to move outside of strictly advocacy-based aims and towards the establishment of subversive documentary form which extends provisions of complex experience, emotional nuance, and ownership of individual expression. The closest implications to these potentials are found in cross-genre explorations of experimental queer documentaries which often center around autobiographical renderings of queer personhood, experiences, and histories. Even within the context of experimental film works; however, the potentials of documentary specifically are often referenced as an aside to the subversive expressions of experimentation, which by nature radicalized the medium towards queer ends. In conjunction, scholarly investigations of documentary filmmaking within the context of queer subjects is equally lacking in presenting the association between documentary form and the potential service towards radical queer objectives. Nick Davis' Deleuzian-based analysis of queer cinema discusses the potential of the crystal-image as a process by which to evoke queerness as a vast coalescence of experience. The Deleuzian model is formed as a concern of temporal relations, by which the rendering of a single image in itself encapsulates a myriad of potential relations to possible pasts, presents, and futures simply in the rendering of the singular (Davis, 2013). The Deleuzian framework becomes vital in the considerations of queer persistence. The theory posits the potential of film to evoke temporal connection between a single image and the expansive potentials of past and future in relation. In documentary, that implied temporality becomes concrete, for the subject's image is tethered to an experienced, linear, and definable personal history rooted in reality, as well as an expansive potential future outside of the fixity of the moment of rendering. The primary issue confronted is the capacity in which filmmakers seeking to create queer content, and more specifically content that embodies queerness' radical fluidity,

within the confines of a formulaic medium. Considering that documentary form is a process that asserts hierarchical power dynamics further compounds the necessity of reflection in the creation of queer content. The connotations changing production practices become twofold, insisting upon both a shift in the ethical framework of rendering queer subjects through documentary and an accepted transparency in these processes. Productions that are created with queer intentionality, which I understand to be those informed by intrinsic resistance to hegemonic powers and hierarchies, may require reinvention of the most basic processes of production to assert more communal, non-hierarchical, as — as follows — queer means of production.

Both *Kiki* and *Paris Is Burning*, despite their decades long divide, are engaging with the expectation that the viewership of the films will be dominated by privileged audiences and in response tailoring the films to assert the community's humanity, validity, and need for support. It is not a question of qualifying either film based on their intent or target audiences, especially when considering the amount of support that is necessary socially, politically, and economically in the pursuit of equity and liberation for these communities; rather, the films, like most within their genre, were inherently not made for, by, or in community with their subjects — even as they may appear to be made in this way to non-community audiences. *Kiki* was not made for Gia's viewing, nor any member of the community it represented. In the context of such a vibrant, creative, passionate, and insightful community, and in an age in which filmmaking does not need to be an art of the higher classes the implicit conservatism of the film becomes particularly clear, inciting an inspection into why queer experiences continue to be filtered through traditional, formulaic films — especially films essentially indebted to the limited perspective of an outsider. While it is not the responsibility of queer individuals to create films which express

the stories and experiences they embody, the roles of a filmmaker must shift in the creation of queer content so that power of filmic representation is given to those denied the privilege to represent themselves. The film was curated within the explicit intention of encouraging compassion from systematic powers and individuals outside the community itself through the subject's experiences: not unlike *Paris Is Burning*. The resulting synonymy of the two films becomes attached to the motivations of the films to seek support under existing structures of power more so than the linkage of similar subject matter.

Where *Paris Is Burning* serves as a testimonial of queer documentary's continued function, *Kiki* — in its orthodoxy — exemplifies a potential in queer filmmaking that has not yet been largely explored. Standard approaches to documentary filmmaking assert a level of imbued normativity which, when attributed to queer subjects, numbs the radicalism of their political messages, dulls the power of their expression, and keeps them subjugated within heteropatriarchal expectations. *Paris Is Burning* was a radical film for its era, but it can no longer be classified as such within the context of the contemporary queer experience. *Kiki* comes significantly closer but, as a result of the use of orthodox filmmaking practices and excessive reliance on the innate subversion of the subject, did not fully disengage from the legacy of *Paris Is Burning*.

In this thesis I explore the potential of contemporary documentary to subversively render queer subjects. I begin with an evaluation of current documentary filmmaking standards and how commitment to traditional documentary practices and values limit the form's potential to depict more nuanced, complex, and current expressions of queer experience. I illustrate the trends towards traditional practices and argue the resulting conservatism of current queer

documentary through the comparison of the films *Paris Is Burning* and *Kiki*, both films that approach the portrayal of the microcosm of the New York City Ball scene in different decades. In their relation to one another and the subjects they depict, each film provides comprehensive synthesis of queer documentaries' persistent utilization of classically-informed production values, their effect upon the rendering of queer subjects, evolving needs and cultures surrounding queer experience, and potential avenues of subversion, even if ineffectively utilized. The combination of the theoretical intersections of queer theory, nonfiction filmmaking, and experimental documentary production provide the potential basis for queering documentary practice to be formally reflective of queer fluidity, multiplicity, and complexity. Finally, I submit consideration of particular shifts in production practices and methodology that would serve to subvert normative approaches to queer subject based upon the privileging of queer audiences, the destabilization of filmmaker and subject power differentials, and intentional expression as queer narratives as existing independently from rhetoric. Documentary films have the unique potential to create nuanced renderings of queer experience, but current, traditional practices prevent these opportunities. Subversive renderings of queer subjects within mass-targeted documentary films would rely on an adjustment of perspective surrounding the process of creating queer documentary films to include considerations of power, fluidity, and expression in contemporary queer experience.

Paris Is Smoldering

Kiki was written and directed by Sara Jordanö who had been asked to create the project by Twiggy Pucci Garcon, a predominant queer rights advocate and community leader within

New York's LGBTQ+ and ballroom communities. As a collaborative writing team, Jordenö and Garcon created the community portrait film over the course of a four year span, tracking the lives of seven individual subjects within the context of the New York City kiki scene -- the youth-focused arm of the New York City ball culture. The evolution of the characters and the community develop against the backdrop of shifting tides of contemporary American politics, creating poignant, intimate dialogue surrounding the dangers, hopes, and realities that face the members of the kiki community. The film is heavily cited as a significant piece of contemporary queer media in that the work emphasizes the experiences of queer and transgender youth of color who have been considerably underrepresented even as mainstreamed emphasis on queer issues has become more prominent socially, culturally, and politically since the dawn of the 21st century. *Kiki* sought to provide something of a reality check in response to the dominance of white male expressions of queerness as the standard of the modern LGBTQ+ movement, while also celebrating the resilience, power, and beauty of a specific, vibrant community.

In the midst of *Kiki*'s success within festival circuits and subsequent media interest, one particular theme continues to arise — much to the frustration of the film's primary creators: the connection between *Kiki* and the celebrated 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning*. *Paris Is Burning* (1990) is an American documentary directed by Jennie Livingston which explored the experiences participants in the late 1980's New York City drag and ball communities. The film has been repeatedly recognized as a highly influential piece of queer cinema. This is due primarily due to its unparalleled exploration of the persistent trials, obstacles, and dangers faced by New York City's vibrant drag and performance culture. Filmed amidst the height of the HIV and AIDS crisis in America, *Paris Is Burning* was a deeply radical exploration of the era's

struggles with homophobic, racist, and classist injustices — spans from a lack of resources to violent hate crimes. *Paris Is Burning* bolsters formerly invisible depictions of queer and transgender people of color to international attention. In doing so, the film asserts their visibility and humanity in an era where LGBTQ+ populations faced particularly intensive institutional and social violence.

Released twenty-six years after *Paris Is Burning*, the creators of *Kiki* have been vocally resistant to the direct correlation between their film and *Paris Is Burning*. Thus causing some controversy between the filmmakers' intention for the piece and public perception of it. The rationale behind the creator's resistance to the correlation also varies. From Garcon's perspective, *Kiki* embodies a very specific subset of ball culture that is politically efficacious, radical, and youth-lead. In casting *Kiki* as a follow-up to *Paris Is Burning*, Garcon believes that the public becomes inherently ignorant to the intricate power of the film's youth-emphasized political insight upon contemporary iterations of the queer experience (). Jordanö's resistance to the connotations of *Kiki* being linked to *Paris Is Burning* lies in the ways the comparison stagnates the film by tethering it to an older film that does not reflect the same level of contemporary vision and intersectional political concern as Jordanö sought to capture. Jordanö created *Kiki* as a collaborative political effort with Garcon and the larger community to bridge the impasse between "insider and outsider" access to the kiki culture. In doing so, each sought to and thus instill a level of subject influence over the production of the film as well as the content in a way Livingston did not necessarily attempt. The concerns of the creators speak to embroiled issues of depicting queerness filmically — or at least within the confines of current production modes. In spite of filmmaker resistance, however, *Kiki* has continued to be referenced as the

“unofficial sequel” or “remake” of *Paris is Burning*, and while the intentions of the filmmakers may better contextualize the purposes of the film, public recognition of a connection between the two films persists. *Paris is Burning* occupies a particular level of legacy, however the complete lack of acknowledgement in *Kiki* of the preceding film or its lasting filmic impact leads to an assertion that despite each film’s emphasis on distinctly similar communities, *Paris Is Burning* did not — in any way, according to the creators — directly shape or influence the creation of *Kiki*. Admittedly, an overly-emphasized interconnection may give way the writing off of *Kiki* as an unnecessary reiteration of what has already been addressed in *Paris Is Burning* — despite the *focus* of *Kiki* being as radical in the present as *Paris Is Burning* was at the time of its release — for *Kiki* renders radically different experiences of contemporary queerness versus those of the late 1980’s. In contrast, however, the similarities between the two films are far too numerous and distinctive to ignore. Outside of each film’s specific interest in ball and drag culture in New York City, each also draws similar lines between the experiences and engagement of each culture’s participants and their confrontations with hegemonic rejection. Both films seek to equally humanize and politicize these particular branches of drag culture — the more prominent ball scene and the kiki scene — through an equitable exploration of the culture’s innate expressive liberation in contrast with the oppressive realities of their experiences as queer individuals within their particular time and space.

Each film expands upon significant and disparate periods of queer experience, activism, and history. *Paris Is Burning* was made within the context a clearly delineated era in contemporary American queer history — the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980’s and 1990’s — largely in contribution towards the evolution of queer visibility and within the context of a

deeply dangerous time for the queer community. The contextualization of the film within queer community's persecution, traumas, and invisibility at the time speaks significantly to the film's impact and — assumed — intent as a preformative, expository rendering of the community through a “humanizing” perspective. Considering the more subdued nature of the community within the context of the larger culture, *Paris Is Burning* approaches the exposure of the community in a manner that is overtly, and almost uncomfortably, fascinated with its own subjects. The film feels like an explanation, using queer bodies, performances, and experiences as a purposeful gateway by which the audiences of the hegemony may grow accustomed to — and perhaps patronizingly charmed by — an incredibly vulnerable community. *Kiki*, conversely, emphasizes a youth-community who despite holding intimate recognition of the dangers and injustice they continue to face, are depicted as being significantly more politically-minded and active than their predecessors. The kiki community openly reflects upon its own status as a community organization expressly intent upon the building of their youth through both creative self-expression and persistent advocacy. The subjects of kiki are locally and nationally socially and politically active; they are critical of how their experiences have been influenced by discrepancies in power; and see their pursuit of liberation as being a continuous path that will be carried on by the youth of the movement rather than a final destination.

In consideration of these contrasts, the films are significantly more telling of an implicit conservatism in classical documentary practice than any argued similarity of the queer experience. While each film's subject matter hold similarities, I argue that the link is largely due to the fact that — despite a twenty-five year gap between the making of *Kiki* and *Paris Is Burning* — formulaic documentary standards have not shifted significantly enough to represent

the liberatory path Garcon and others understand to be a binding experience for the community. Classical film elements of a deeply subversive community numbs the depth of the community's liberation and radicalism. Furthermore, it may serve to typify the community in the context of their challenges, marketing the film as a mode of presentational education for the mass public, rather than seeking to express the community authentically. The formulaic approaches to documentary process expand from concerns of visual aesthetics to the structure of production relationships. The predominant concern that emerges is imbued association of documentary as holding an elevated relationship to truth or reality, providing the filmmaker with a significant opportunity to manipulate recognitions of queerness or queer subjects as embodying an exact "reality," that is both stagnant and self-fulfilled. Regardless of the intention of the filmmaker, the systemized processes imbued in the practice reinforce concerning relations of power and constructs of "truth" that assert concerning hierarchical dynamics of representation, lend to standardized expressions of queer personhood, and emphasize normative viewership of "othered" queer bodies.

The relationship between these two milestones of queer documentary expression provides a unique opportunity to study and provide potential alternative documentary modes in support of the discourse currently negotiating *contemporary* queer filmic expression through direct comparison with past iterations of an evolving queer community. Considering the radically subversive nature of the subjects, community, and activist tendencies of those depicted in *Kiki*, would lead to an expected conclusion that the film embodies that same level of contemporary subversion as an overall piece. Yet, the film as a completed work is not in itself radical. The intensely modern, subversive nature of the film relies predominantly on the radicalism,

creativity, and vibrance of its source — the *Kiki* community. Despite genuine efforts towards undermining the aspects of normative documentary practice, which I will examine, the film falls short. Thus, the specter of *Paris Is Burning* takes on a significantly different connotation. The earlier film now becomes a critique of the evolution of documentary practice rather than a concern solely of subject matter.

As would be expected after twenty-six years, the expressions of queerness in *Kiki* are significantly more acceptably liberated than those portrayed in *Paris Is Burning*. This is true primarily due to the distinctly different social and cultural circumstances of each film. Yet despite the significant advancements in queer visibility, politics, and social recognition since the era of *Paris Is Burning*, the subjects and culture of *Kiki* are still representative of some of the most marginalized and targeted groups within the queer community. Discussion of the evolution of queer politics becomes a focal point within the film. Multiple subjects address the realities that many of the celebrated gains of the queer community over the last decades are in the service of white, male, cisgender queerness, and has not properly recognized — let alone addressed — the concerns of the larger queer community. At no point do the subjects of the film adhere to mainstream conventions of queer political standing — specifically concerns of gay marriage — and make it clear the priorities of their community are far more subversive and significantly too dire to ascribe to homonormative queer progress. The subjects are conversely intent upon the sociopolitical effects of stigma against queer people of color including the persisting presence of HIV/AIDS; protection of queer sex workers; and rampant violence against queer youth of color. Many of the issues established in *Paris Is Burning* re-arise in *Kiki* but in their contemporary forms. HIV is spoken of not as an active pandemic, but as a facet of everyday healthcare

reminded of through the advertisement of community health clinics announced at the balls. Sex work is not displayed openly in interviews conducted on street corners with working women but is provided more intentional, community attention, depicted in enclosed discussions between youth and community leaders, or interviews such as that of Izana Vidal, who describes her time as an escort in the comfort of an enclosed interview space, accompanied by her mentor and confidant. Death of community members is depicted through the attendance of a memorial ceremony accompanied by eloquent eulogies, rather than discussed resignedly in interviews with subjects who had become disturbingly familiar with death and loss. In many ways, the reminders of what remains the same for these communities equally illustrates how significantly the experiences of this particular microcosm has changed in the last quarter of a century in terms of health, safety, and social capital. These aspects, however, serve to widen a divide between the objectives of less marginalized queer identities and communities such as the kiki scene that was significantly less explored in *Paris Is Burning*. *Kiki*'s political messages and intent move beyond resistance of the white heteropatriarchy to include significant critique of the queer community as it is commonly framed: through white, cisgendered, homonormative emphasis.

Each film was creatively led by an outsider of the community. Both Livingston and Jordenö are white, cisgender women who had no personal experience within the cultures they documented, nor the experiences of their subjects. As a result, each film holds an unintentional level of separation from the subjects and community, maintaining the role of an onlooker upon a culture and community the filmmaker innately seeks to decode, understand, and/or connect with. The fissures between the filmmaker and the community are assumably not deliberate, considering the inclusion of Garçon in the filmmaking process as well as both Garçon and

Jordenö's defense of the project as a collaborative work. The resonating suggestion is that Garcon, credited with a significant production role, held a more significant level of power in the creation of the film, thus infusing the film with a creative perspective rooted in the community itself. In this capacity, *Kiki* seeks to subvert the implicit concerns of an outsider perspective in documentary work by creating a collaborative piece between the outsider, Jordenö, and an active member of the community, Garcon. Collaborative connection within documentary, particularly with identity work, can be exceedingly powerful in subverting the hierarchical power structures within documentary process by providing an insider to a particular community the opportunity to influence and shape the community's depiction, thus providing the subjects a level of power over their own rendering and depiction. Strictly in the context of viewable evidence, these shifts in power can range in on-screen visibility from depicting the process of the film production as a concern of the film, to subtle shifts in overall tone. Each technique highlights the inclusion of the subject as a credited contributor. These shifts are not necessarily classified within the diegesis of a film; rather, these processes regard a shift in the procedural ethics of documentary production as well as a level of intended transparency between the film as a product and its process. The complicating matter is that the engagement of these decentralizing concepts relies heavily upon the dedication of the filmmaker to work intentionally towards these aims, calling into consideration the necessity of shifting pedagogy surrounding documentary filmmaking practices, process, and intent. What becomes evident in my analysis is how these practices are alluded to in principle but fall short or are not vigorously engaged in the film's pursuit of mass audience.

The collaborative aspect of *Kiki* is the cornerstone on which *Kiki* stands apart from *Paris Is Burning* based on form alone. However, the collaboration does not necessarily fully negate the intercultural disconnect and power differentials between the filmmaker and subject. One of the most telling examples within *Kiki* of the film's underlying outsider dissociation occurred when Gia Marie Love, a trans woman of color and central subject of the film, is verbally harassed during filming by a group of young boys. After a brief verbal altercation, Gia and her friend stand under a bus depot and Gia states that the experience was triggering for her. At this point, Jordanö enters the frame asks Gia "you're triggered?" Jordanö then asks Gia if she is ok, to which she immediately and pointedly says no. The exchange illustrated a subtle, but powerful disunity between Jordanö and Gia, in which Jordanö misreads the implications of the situation and responds unnecessarily to Gia's experience. Uncomfortable interactions are not representative of personal disconnect, however, this moment for Jordanö revealed her privilege, discomfort, and distance from the community she depicts. While the intent of Jordanö's statement appears to come from a place of care, there is a level of obliviousness in her reaction born of a lack of experience. Gia's approach to handling harassment has been built from her experiences as a black woman of trans experience and previous instances of conflict and harassment. Jordanö's ability to conduct herself comfortably in relation to Gia's preferences are limited by her own experience. Fundamentally, the groundwork for miscommunication is built. What Jordanö lacks, and what makes the moment so telling, is empathy. The moment Gia posed is one of connection and understanding in which she processes the experience and voices her discomfort, specifically relating this discomfort to past instances of harassment or trauma. Jordanö does not recognize the loaded term, does not recognize the adapted silence shared by

Gia and her companion, and compound the uncomfortability of the moment by inserting herself into the moment. It is at this moment in the film that she reveals that she inherently does not understand what the moment meant for Gia, does not understand the implications, and is seeking an explanation on her terms. In further insisting upon explanation from Gia — “you’re triggered?” and “are you ok?”— Jordanö asserts herself as an outsider seeking understanding rather than a companion in Gia’s experience. Considering the insistence upon *Kiki*’s production being based in collaborative processes, moments such as these reveal the necessity of deeper interpersonal engagement between subject and filmmaker, not in service to the perspective of the outside or the vision of the filmmaker, but in equitable building of complex experience. In this way, *Kiki* is unsuccessful. While the collaboration was an important facet of the film and its subversive leanings, it did not quite reach a level in which the divides between an outsider filmmaker and the subject could be bridged. Placing a member of the represented community in a position of creative power within the production implies a breaking of standard filmmaker and subject hierarchies which provide the filmmaker, especially those from outside the community, significant power over the depiction of the subject and the immortalization of their experiences. The film sought to deconstruct the boundaries of filmmaker over subject but did not quite bypass normativity. Later in the film, Gia questions why queer individuals — specifically those of the *Kiki* community — seek to assert themselves within existing structures of power, “why don't we create our own systems?” *Kiki* was not the creation of a new filmic system built to better engage with queer audiences, experiences, and expression, but simply created a new film within the pre-existing systems of documentary filmmaking.

A further consequence of these detachments between subject and filmmaker become apparent in the assumption of audience, particularly within the framing of the film within standards of education or information; implying through the filmic form that the intent of the film emphasizes the representation of a community to hegemonic audiences rather than as expressions of queerness for the benefit of queer viewership. Both films progress through communal depictions of queer counterculture rituals, celebration, and solidarity in tandem with explorations of individual characters within the culture itself. Each film explored specific iterations of drag culture through a craft-like lense, in which the community and the principle subjects provided informational content surrounding ball culture — exploring facets from costuming, the structures of their “houses,” competitions, and development of their dance style. Each of the films contain paralleled depictions of various aspects of the culture at large, as subjects in each film are depicted setting up their competitions, creating costumes, practicing their dances, putting on their makeup, competing in the shows, and breaking it all down at the end. The evolution of the audience’s understanding of the culture grows progressively over the film, as various character contribute to a communal understanding of their craft and culture — largely in simplistic, outsider-friendly terms. These portions of the film, in particular, serve an information-heavy balance by which the participants *Kiki* sought to create portraits of seven principle subjects — Chi Chi Unbothered Mizrahi, Gia Love, Divo Pink Lady, Twiggy Pucci Garçon, Izana Lee Vidal, Christopher Waldorf, and Symba McQueen — all of which are connected to and have benefited within the kiki scene.

Similarly to *Paris Is Burning*, the individual interaction of subjects serve as a means of humanizing the films’ social and political contexts. In both films, the individual profiles of

characters are established through a mixture of standard talking head interviews, conversational interaction in public spaces, and various depictions of the subject's involvement in the balls themselves. The subjects in both films are not limited to providing an informational background for their cultures, but a combined narrative in which they equally educate the audience on the nuances and intricacies of the communities while providing a personalized contextualization of the scenes' impact, necessity, and relation to outside power structures. Where communal investigations of the larger community garner attention through the vibrancy and spectacle of the culture, individual focus reasserts the politicization of the scene through emphasis of personal narrative and engagement with the humanity of the subjects. The particular formula utilized in both films, by which the phenomenon of spectacle serves to introduce investigations of underlying injustice, discourse, and empathic encouragement, establishes the films as modes of outreach to communities — assumably those with more power within present structures.

Ultimately, neither *Paris Is Burning* nor *Kiki* are implicitly un-queer. The purpose of this paper is not the qualification of queer documentary works under singular assumptions of adequacy, but to present an investigation of the connotations of documentary formalism in depicting queer subjects and present an alternative production perspective which could provide a potentially more subversive, queer-informed filmic perspective.

Boundaries of Queer Cinema Theory

Contemporary queer cinema exists within the parameters of a post-visible queer cinematic age in which queerness is explicitly cited within major filmic works rather than strictly coded into cultural contexts. The inception of queer cinema — as recognized by coextensive

developments of queer-centric films that feature queer characters, protagonists and themes as well as formalized, publically-regarded intellection of queer theory — is known as the New Queer Movement, which extended from the late 1980's into the early 2000's (Nowlan, 2010). The movement was most dominantly seen in the United States and areas of Europe. It was developed by independent filmmakers and artists to radically construct narratives of sexual and gender identity rejected within heteropatriarchal social conformity. The intent of the movement was associated with the establishment of a queer film canon in which radical expressions of non-normative sexual and gender identities were made visible. A queer conceptualization of filmic representation, participation, and intent was critical to the fundamental principles of the movement. The implicit assertion of *queer* film relied heavily on subversive, ambiguous rejections of hegemonic standards and thus, unobliged to normative categorizations (Nowlan, 2010). Through the preponderance of the New Queer Movement, designation of what qualified as queer works were under persistent negotiation. The movement saw many iterations of its collective principles, which were intrinsically informed by the correlating trends of queer activism, politics, and experience. Following this progression, contemporary mid-2000s-2010s queer cinema became uniquely distinctive from its previous iterations. In his essay "Queer Theory, Queer Cinema," Nowlan explains how the particular concerns of queer representation in contemporary film is a struggle against attempted acclimation by the mainstream. The queer experiences of this era are significantly impacted by the vital socio-political gains of the queer community as well as massive increases in queer visibility in both new and old media. As a result, queer representations have become increasingly mediated by normative powers. As queer visibility became more overt, Nowlan argues, the mainstream has brought forth an era of queer

renderings that are distinctly *un-queer* in nature, more specifically, these representations that are characterized by — delusive — representations of queer identities interposed by fetishization, commodification, and a standardization of queer experiences (Nowlan, 2010, pp.15-19). Queer representational content created in service of mainstream, hegemonic intentions is unable to deny, destabilize, and disregard normative power structures. Therefore it is unable to fulfill the core conation of *queer* film.

Initial concepts established by the New Queer Movement — as well as its numerous re-definitions — are not *directly* applicable; rather, the lasting impact of the movement is manifested in the considerations of how queer expressions are defined and made pertinent within particular filmic traditions, socio-political concerns, and expressions of radical subversion. Concerns of normativity become inferred by the adoption of queer expressions into the mainstream and the responding production of “queer” media from the mainstream in order to educate, placate, and suppress. Where previous queer cinematic concerns hinged upon hegemonic rejection and queer visibility, contemporary queer cinema is faced with the conflicting challenges of reasserting radical identity within the normative collective. Of the base intents and qualifications Nowlan finds associated with contemporary queer filmmaking — which include the breaking of categorical designations, the deconstruction of Western binaries, defiance of normative assertions, and an exhaustive commitment to expressing identity complexity — the recognition of queer filmmaking is not limited to subject, but style, aesthetics, and form speaks to more expansive considerations surrounding the limitations of medium (Nowlan, 2010 pp. 18). Distinct limitations in the present literature surrounding collective understandings of queer film are presented in the primary emphasis of narrative — and

normative — film form. While filmic forms outside of the narrative film sphere — experimental and documentary — are referenced and discussed, there remains significant emphasis upon narrative filmmaking in foundational understandings of queer film (Holmlund & Fuchs, 1997; Nowlan, 2010). Out of context, narrative filmmaking is not overtly unradical or unqueer. The innate level of conservatism associated with classical narrative filmmaking practices have been asserted through a significant history of Western-centric storytelling that serves as the focal point of mainstream, commercial filmmaking. It is emphasised as an aspirational aim for “successful” films to adhere to particular styles, stories, and aesthetics that served the Western narrative — and by proxy, the established dichotomies, standards, and ideals of western hegemony (Dixon & Foster 2002; King, 2006).

Schoonover and Galt (2016) argue that while western narrative models may contribute to a reinforcement of normative assertions, the possibility of de-westernized and foreign narrative formulas may contribute to the establishment of a subversive narrative medium (pp 12-14). Within the context of contemporary Western filmic form, however, narrative cinema is largely linked to hierarchical, occidental reinforcement. The association of narrative cinema practices as establishing hegemonic standards is particularly enforced when considering Western filmic corporatizing, Hollywood’s assertive cultural power, and overtly financial considerations in the film industry (Dixon & Foster, 2002, pp 1-3). As a result, scholarly consideration into the potential of subversive filmmaking is largely attributed to explorations of avant-garde and experimental filmmaking, which are understood as to be functionally linked to renegade expressions of cinema in intent, production, style, and subject. Experimental film has specifically assumed the mantle of holding distinct potential for queer film expressions because the nature of

the mode's form is associated with a rejection of normative practice (Borden, 2010; Dixon & Foster, 2002). Furthermore, experimental and avant-garde films exist outside of the confirmative boundaries established by Hollywood and the corporate film industry as an authoritative collective. Because of this experimental and avant-garde filmmakers are inherently limited by industry authority — even if that may be due to resulting financial challenge (Dixon & Foster, 2002). The recognition of “otherness” and nonconformity by design as a tenant of experimental film creation establishes space in which the queerness of a particular film is asserted and supported by the film's very form in addition to or outside of the subject matter.

Documentary form is regarded in the scholarship as less assured than experimental film in the capacity of the form to resist the normative assertions imbued in mainstream filmmaking. Avant-garde and experimental are subversive based on their rejection of filmmaking norms and traditional practices. These practices are well suited to the intentions of queer cinema because the form itself resists normativity. Documentary holds a similar potential but where experimental works are subversive in technical form, documentary would rely more prominently upon production practice and subject matter. Centering documentary around queer expressions allows for the exercise of a subject's disloyalty to dualistic and hegemonic recognitions of gender, sexuality, and personal expression. Rendering a subject's experiences queerly provides opportunities to depict queerness as being unbound by the limitations of a temporal or spatial relationships, because the existence and experiences of the individual serve to subvert the stacticity of “representation.” Rather, the subject's implied attachment to a persistent, nondiegetic “reality” — understanding that the subject exists, lives, and changes outside the scope of the film — asserts a continued trajectory of queer expression outside of the film itself.

Kathleen McHugh explores these potentials in “Irony and Dissembling: Queer Tactics for Experimental Documentary,” stating that “[q]ueer filmmakers perhaps have an edge in experimental, reflexive nonfiction because of their experience living in reflexive and rhetorical subjectivities” (p. 225). While McHugh’s argument is largely centered upon the integration of queer experience with a filmmaker’s perspective, the applicability of documentary as a reflexive queer form extends beyond stringent recognitions of queer films and experiences as exclusive to individualistic queer experience or otherwise relying on queer filmmakers as the only potential interpreters of queer experience. While queer filmmakers hold the potential to reframe queer documentary as a subversive medium, the reliance solely on a filmmaker’s personal experience is naive when considering the implications of privilege, power, and conformity within the processes of production. Rather, the consideration of using documentary — or more widely, nonfiction — as a subversive form of queer reference and reflection that indicates queerness as existing autonomously from the confines of the film itself. As I have found, queer-focused documentary provides a perspective upon the queerness of the documentary subject through persistent choice.

This concept recalls Judith Butler’s theories of gender and sexual practice which recognize that gender and queerness exist as a consistent choice of disloyalty to the hegemony rather than a contained moment of disruption (Butler, 2011). By nature of the subject holding an assumed existence outside the bounds of the filmic diegesis, the persistence of the individual’s queerness is liberated from the confines of a representational singularity. This concept is perhaps best illustrated in considering long-term, referential documentary projects, like *Kiki*, in which subjects are filmed over the course of multiple years. While this practice is not a necessity to

prove any subject's life outside of the film, its practice highlights the subject's progressive, sustained autonomy outside of the diegesis of a film. When a subject is revisited over an extended period of time, the audience becomes privy to individual's personal evolutions. Shifts in mannerisms, lifestyle, attitude, and opinions all serve to represent the individual's progression of life, all outside of the audiences' or filmmaker's perview, but nonetheless concluded simply by virtue of the subject having moved through their lives between the points in front of the camera. The implication of the character's sustained queerness no longer stands as a solitary representation of a character within a specific time and space, but an evolving individual in constant disruption of normativity; the individual, over the course of a period of time, is proven to have engaged consistently in their queerness, even if the expression of that queerness was changed and negotiated over time. The rendering of queer identity is consequently designated a fluid, living process existing outside the boundaries of the film. In contrast, films that do not provide an expansive view of a subject moving through their lives, and inevitably changing throughout, runs the risk of connoting queer experience as a fixed point. In films where a subject is rendered within the singularity of a particular phase in their life, the film may then imply that their experiences of queerness and understanding of their identity is resolute. Multiplicity of queer experience thus becomes the cornerstone of conceptualizing queer renderings filmically. However, the qualification of what, essentially, counts as an effective or meaningful rendering of queer experience becomes the dominant concern for creators, filmmakers, and viewers alike: in what capacity does a film depict queerness and how may that queer intentionality be recognized.

Davis asserts a similarly reflective and abundant resonance for renderings of queerness, specifically queer desire. The essential implication is that the rendering of queerness in

singularity, applied correctly, indicates a spectrum of referential potentials for queer desire outside of the single, depicted moment. Davis' considerations surrounding queer multiplicity pose a more fluid and expansive potential for the redirection of queer images from the confines of definable identities towards complex nuances of experience that resists the attraction of "positive image" by which queerness is standardized, tempered, and palatably depicted for the underscored ease and acceptance of heterosexual viewership (Davis, 233). The relational considerations of queer depiction under the umbrella of desire, while more related to contemporary queer concerns than other scholarship on the subject of queer cinema and desire Davis' is still an incomplete consideration. He positions desire as the base necessity in rendering and interpreting queer subjectivities in film. Admittedly, he relays that what he terms *the desiring image* is underlined by a resisted nostalgia; however, the positing of desire so definitively as the sentry of multiplistic queer possibilities is challenging to apply in consideration of queer existence and confirmation of identity (30). The emphasis on desire throughout his work evokes two primary concerns: privileging conversations of sexuality over those of gender identity and understanding desire, particularly emotive and physical desires, as equally shared. With concern to issues of gender, the desire model of queer multiplicities may only serve a fractional potential. The implicit relation becomes based within external expressions of desire rather than within the personal understanding of individual experience and identity. This emphasis on the act and placement of desire serves as the definitive indications of queerness when much of the expressive potential in queer subjects, or in this case characters, is embedded in personhood rather than exterior expressions of desire. Furthermore, the desire model becomes defined in terms of who or what is desired, without consideration to how or to what degree.

Particular interest may be placed on asexuality in this particular context, as it provides an example of queer desire that has more to do with the degree in which an individual desires — little, not at all, or under certain circumstances — rather than the directive of that desire. Rather, to build off of the implied spectrum of desire in Davis' assertions, to truly capture the intentional basis of queer multiplicity the spectrum must instead be considered as an abstracted, three dimensional object: cognizant of the intersectional natures of queer experience between direction and degree of desire, gender identification, and the infinite variabilities within. In relation to rendering these nuances in film, Davis' crystal-image model, or perhaps simply the model of multiplicity, becomes further expanded in considering the variability of personal choice and experience — rather than limiting the assertion of infinite potentials to a single aspect of queerness.

The conservatism of documentary is largely imbued within the recognition of the form's formulaic processes, enforcement of power-relations, and manipulation of assumed "reality" towards specific ends. The form itself is easy to exploit by virtue of cultural perceptions of its close relationship to "truth," which is more widely assumed by audiences than for narrative films. By all intents and purposes, documentary should not hold radical potential. The form itself is built upon strict power relationships between filmmaker and subject which often coincides with existing expressions of hegemonic dominance; considering the basis of the form relying on the interpretation of individual or community experience upon the *reinterpretations* of that experience through the perspective of a filmmaker. Foundational understandings of documentary are built upon a misinterpretation of the core aims and abilities of the genre. Documentaries are discursive They are not meant to express renderings of fact or truth but to

create conversations through the depiction of life and experience (Davis, Preface X). The concerns in application to the creation of contemporary queer documentary works are rooted in both the assumption of inherent truth or reality in documentary works based upon the identification of the medium as the closest possible model of depicting a “reality,” and the resulting lack of critical reflection on the form’s contribution to interplays of power and normative preference. Not to disregard theoretical frameworks, but the predominant complication of documentary works when considered in correlation to film theories is that the power of the filmmaker is compounded by the expectations of rendered reality. Theoretical frameworks that insist upon distinctions between reality and what is depicted on screen are more challenging to parse when the fundamental understanding of the form is connoted in reality more than fictional works (Davis, 4-6). As a result, despite assertions to the contrary, documentary form is not liberated from the expectations of abject reality. The power of the documentarian bypasses the possibilities of “realism” in fiction film to hold significant, largely uninvestigated, potential for enforcing mass understanding or opinion through the manipulation of assumed so-called realities. The ever present concern repeated throughout Davis’ book is a return to the conceptualization of ethical negotiation between the filmmaker and the subject. While the form and ethics of the medium demand the active consideration of the subject as an equal participant in the filmmaking process, or more generally that they are treated with respect, established ethical standards of subject and filmmaker engagement end up having very little impact upon the clear differentiation of power between the two. In relation to the contextual implications of ethnographies and pornography, Davis writes, “[i]f the truth stands as a cultural ideal...that attaches it to matters of power and control, it also stands in close proximity to documentary”

(201). The implications of the ethnographic process serves as the closest tie to queer content, particularly in the 2000s, in which the depiction of queer subjects and communities became linked to recognitions of a “cultural other,” which was then documented and studied through the interpretive processes of the dominant heteropatriarchy. Characteristic of the ethnographic process is assumed lack of interference between filmmaker and film subject due to the latter’s recognition of a need to seek a level of appropriate distance to justify the assumed unbiased nature of the process. The development of queer documentaries were not quite as interwoven with the ethnographic concerns as other culturally vulnerable and “othered” communities, however the overlap provides significant insight into the foundational components of mass marketed queer-subject documentaries : namely, an assumed objectivity on the part of the filmmaker that I see coinciding with a lack of critical inspection within the dynamics of power at play. The implicit intentionality of depicting queer subjects as part of an educational process or introduction to assumed hegemonic audiences, alongside the “othering” of queer individuals through film form and the correlative processing of the “other” into normative categorizations, serves to disregard the validity of queer viewership. In consideration of documentary form’s core associations to issues of power, hegemony, and misrepresentations of so-called reality, the apparent understanding is that the medium is not, and would not, be well suited for the exploration of queer subjects. This is especially the case if the core aim of the works was to explore depictions of queerness as unbound by categorical recognitions and formulaic processes. However, despite the standard ethics and practices of the form, the borderline repressive nature of the classical form offers a matched provision towards subversion.

Alexandra Juhasz's essay, "No Woman Is an Object: Realizing the Feminist Collaborative Video," incites a critical exploration of the effects via which non-normative production practices may pass upon the themes and forms existing in feminist documentary works. Juhasz's analysis of synthesized vision and production between creators and subjects alike subverts the inherent patriarchal forms and assumptions of mainstream film: namely the objectification of subject, dominance of the filmmaker, and assertion of a subject's victimhood. Juhasz asserts a level of binary transcendence in collaborative filmmaking, allowing for the breaking of typical filmic dynamics of a subject's victimhood and a filmmaker's dominance to engage with nuanced multiplicity through "the linking of politics, method, and theory" (p. 74). Juhasz's conceptualization of collaborative production insists upon a series of subversive methods which in culmination shift documentary intent from the classical stasis of revelation and observation to more active insistence upon active, discursive engagement. Primary facets of the model include the democratization of artistic vision, subject engagement within the processes of their representation, and discomfiting self-reflexivity on the part of all participants — the subjects, filmmakers, and viewers. The intended result is to revolutionize documentary production and aesthetics to directly contradict the assertion of power disparity and objectification associated with the medium. The potential application of Juhasz's collaborative production processes within contemporary, queer-specific documentary provides an interesting conceptual avenue in which the subversion of normative standardization of queer representation may become complicated by virtue of decentralized and democratized modes of documentation. Within the systematized assumptions of documentary works, representations of experience are amassed to create mediated impressions of reality in which subjects are utilized as vehicles for

intentions, stories, and assertions that are not their own, but are centralized around the dominance of filmmakers' singular vision — or else the perspective singularity of assisted power differentials (Juhasz, 2003, p. 79). Comparable to Juhasz's vision of a feminist revitalization of documentary through collaboration, democratized forms of filmic production provide equitable potential to queer expressions and representation these approaches resist the typifying and trivializing of queer experience in pursuit of palatable meaning and the creation of opportunities for normative opposition, discursive engagement, and the elevation of individual personage. Juhasz's conceptual scaffolding of collaborative documentary production specifically emphasises "the victim critique," in which the specific power dynamics of victim-based documentary projects are intentionally nuanced through subversive practices. The victim critique particularly investigates the reduction of experience as a tool of assumed documentary "realism," particularly within the context of dangerous tendencies which shifts a mediated, objectified lens towards real individuals (Juhasz, 2003, pp 77-81). Disruptions of these dynamics requires an ineffably complex intervention, in which perceptions of the filmmaker, subject, and self become purposefully convoluted to both negate the dynamics of power within their relation *while* recognizing the existence of that power. The subversion requires active resistance against the endemic "othering" of documentary subjects within classic syntaxes of power through the engagement of the subject as a collaborator of their own representation. In relation to queer documentary, the critiques surrounding "victimhood" documentary emphasis becomes a questionable classification within the context of contemporary queer visibility, engagement, and representative power. The victim critique insists upon a level of imprisonment, and attribution of power to those "with the vision" (Juhasz, 2003, p. 73). Dynamics of power within the hegemonic

system is reaffirmed in the ability of one individual to control the representation of another through film, rendering the “victim,” or the subject of the film, to become “imprisoned” by their lack of power over their own experiences and visual representation.

The connotations of the “victim” documentary paradigms becomes outdated when attributed to contemporary queer documentary, primarily in considering the expansive availability of technology and the increased powers of self-representation. Within the context of queer documentary, the correlation feels closer attributed to a youth or adolescence, in which measures of freedom have been provided but are still gathered under hegemonic controls. Queer images remain mediated, controlled, and held, but they are not entirely void of self-representation or reflexivity. Contemporary queer documentary, potentially with the assistance of informal queer ethnography (Holmlund & Fuchs, 1997), has bypassed the level of victimization attributed in the article to reach a measure of dependence upon the hegemony and a deeply controlled level of power negotiation attributed more so to an understanding of youth or adolescence. The connotations of this particular classification regard contemporary queer documentary as having bypassed the standard dichotomy of being seen and represented to hold a variable level of self-control; however, the limitations and continued assertion of hegemonic power remains undisputed. Thus, Juhasz’s convolution of perceptions suggests a necessity towards expanding beyond the liminal context of representation to investigate and reform documentary as self-expressive, multiplistic, and radical.

Holmlund and Fuchs anthology, *Between the Sheets, in the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, and Gay Documentary*, serves as an editorial of queer documentaries placement within the trends and concerns of queer cinema of the latter 20th century. The collection is predominantly concerned

with denoting the subjects, production, and reception of queer documentaries within the more expansive contexts of given tendencies in queer activism, theory, and cinema. The precedents established by the collection are largely unexplored, as queer documentary at large has been bypassed as a larger area of study within the context of queer cinema (Holmlund & Fuchs, 1997). The range of contributions — which are distinctly categorized by their intent, time, and particular considerations within queer history — are consequently linked by a larger insistence that “sexuality (the sheets) and activism (the streets) are closely connected” (Holmlund & Fuchs, 1997, p. 2). Thus, the collected works emphatic focus upon documentary filmmaking asserts queer-centered documentary as distinctly political propagations of queer thought, intent, experience, and performance. Contemporizing these essential understandings in relation to post-digital and 21st century recognitions of queer documentary work requires a level of contention within the more definitive assertions of the collections’ framework. While contemporary queer documentary may still hold on to the essential parallel drawn between sexuality and political action, analysis of contemporary queer documentary works must synthesize the contemporary politics of identity, queerness, and activism in conjunction with the shifting connotations of developing filmic processes — online distribution, technological availability, and contemporary documentary aesthetics. Furthermore, as I see it, the issues of asserting queer representation is not inherently fixed upon simple visibility, but rather on the re-radicalization of queer expression in resistance to the perfunctory acknowledgement and provisions provided in the mainstream.

Erika Sunderburg’s article within the anthology, “Real/Young/TV Queer,” presents a particularly unique argument concerning the establishment of the contradictions within

“mainstream” depictions of queer individuals and the normalizing nature it could impose upon queer representations and ongoing media renderings of queer experience. Sunderburg’s analysis poses particular concern to the depictions of queer youth within televised and mainstream documentary practices, providing a general recognition of these representations situated as a problematized social issue presented to normative audiences. Sunderburg’s initial inquiry surrounding the intents of late-1990s, queer-focused documentary is perhaps the most succinctly telling: “what does a “real” queer look like?” (Holmlund & Fuchs, 1997, p. 47). Through analysis of three mainstream documentary works surrounding queer youth: *An American Family*, *The Real World*, and *The Ride* Sunderburg traces the contradictory effects of the era’s queer-focused documentary in terms of the work’s representative power. The synthesis of Sunderburg’s filmic analect suggests a consequential tension between the explanatory scrutiny of these films’ intention to contextualize newly fashionable “alternative sexualities” for standard audiences and the empowering of queer communities through nuanced queer visibility. The determinations of mainstream queer documentaries’ lasting impacts become essentialized within the expression of a supposed reality and apparent subtlety of representation in documentary contexts; queer individuals were thus afforded a level of complication, visibility, and representational power in the mainstream. In tandem, however, the pseudo-educational and hegemonic framing of these documentaries — created under the dominion of non-queer makers — intends to ascribe only ostensible images, actions, mindsets, and expressions to queer representations. These framings haphazardly attempt to provide a concise explanation of “what a “real” queer look[s] like,” unconcerned with the inherent ambiguity of the “answer” (Holmlund & Fuchs, 1997, p. 47).

Sunderburg's essay looks forward to contemporary musings as to how later documentaries centering around queer individuals will shift once "queer visibility is no longer an end in itself" (Holmlund & Fuchs, 1997, p. 66). In considering the current explorations of queer documentary, many of Sunderburg's testimonials concerning the contradictory natures of queer visibility in documentary hold validity. While the concerns originally outlined in "Real/Young/TV Queer" were in regard to the specific considerations of queerness in the late 1990's, the tensions surrounding the palatability of queer representation for normative audiences and its radical potential to empower queer expression continues. However, considering the expansive globalizing powers of the digital age and revolutionizing of "mainstream" modes of filmic production and distribution, visibility of queer communities may — as Sunderburg predicted — have become less consequential in and of itself. Yet, while present concerns surrounding queer representation now exist outside the duress of invisibility, Sunderburg's assertions still hold merit in their clarification of a contradistinction between the interpretive powers of the hegemony and resistive powers of queerness; thus, Sunderburg's essential findings illustrates a theoretical chasm in which the resistive power of queer-centered documentary remains limited by the persistent ease by which representations may be re-contextualized into the mainstream.

These recognitions are vital, particularly as they concern the limitations of present understandings of expressing queerness via desire, as outlined by Davis. The compulsion for film practice and pedagogy to interpret queer narratives as encapsulated within specific rhetorics, or the preponderance of queer subjects utilized as movers of queer tangibility to hegemonic audience, is implicitly ignorant of queerness as a conceptual topic and personal experience.

Furthermore, the intention of so-called visibility films and films created with similar rhetorical ends are made and structured in consideration of normative palatability. When the dominant intentions of queer documentary and queer media at large are constructed to appeal to mass audiences without the privileging of queer viewership, the ending effect is an oversimplification on both parts: not only do queer renderings become tempered for the supposed sake of non-queer viewership, but hegemonic audiences are invited to ascribe to more simplistic understandings of queer experience in an attempt to contextualize queerness within the parameters of existing socio-cultural powers. The concern, however, is not outrightly visible, but rather the consistency in which queer documentary films preference mere presence over authentic expression, especially in contemporary contexts, as Sunderburg warns, will eventually create an impasse in which queer depictions must evolve beyond the standards established within the boundary of simply being seen. Decades following Sunderburg's writings, the impasse has long since been reached, however the imposed limitations of effective expressions of queerness remain largely fixed.

In her essay "Irony and Dissembling: Queer Tactics for Experimental Documentary," Kathleen McHugh provides the most applicable study of the fissures and consequential potentials of documentary filmmaking in a queer-specific context. She links a defining complication of the rendering of queerness in documentary upon the preponderance of heteronormativity — by which, "the queer subject becomes an actor in a scene staged by another, by another's cultural imaginary" — and the assumptive imaginings of documentary as truth (224). These "ironies," when left unfronted, allow for documentary works to enforce their validity. However, by engaging with these paradoxes filmmakers are able to depict queerness in the borderlands of

cinematic limitations, continuously pushing towards more fluid, reflexive potentials of expression. McHugh advocates for documentary — in this instance experimental documentary — to intentionally disturb notions of an existing normativity in queerness and reality in documentary through various modes of subversion. Where McHugh's emphasis is concerned with how to visually and narratively complicate assumed documentary 'reality' through experimental modes and practices, the resulting analysis provides the foundational basis of understanding possibilities for a queered film form, both in production and final product. Central to McHugh's synthesis is the works of John Gross, Bill Jones, and Joyan Saunders who each utilized distinctive experimental approaches to documentary works which served to illustrate the convergences between the ironies of assumed reality, dynamics of power in portrayal, and the implicit truth in subjectivity. Gross' works were explicitly analyzed for the confrontation of assumed documentary reality, with specific emphasis on *Wild Life* (1985). The film is about two best friends in Los Angeles, both Latinx teenagers who identify as gay. It sets out to atmospherically render the experience of being imbued in the subject's "wild lives," with near total disregard of providing assurance of "truth" through classical documentary forms. Rather, Gross intentionally confronts these norms to emphatically create a filmic experience of the habits, cadences, and tensions of these men's lives together. The film becomes an interesting exploration on two fronts: first, with its concern with the intentioned depiction of an experiential authenticity over a formulaic assertion of realism, and second, in the impact of subject and filmmaker collaboration. In terms of embodying a queered production process, *Wild Life*'s active seeking of truth in the authenticity of personally mitigated participation with queer experience creates a complex contradiction. While the film is based within the experiential, non-formulaic

assertions of queerness as an abstracted experience, this basis still intentionality creates the implication of otherness.

Collaborative elements of the film are more directly concerned with queered perspectives, as even the name of the film was provided and defined by the subjects themselves. The subjects are also depicted within the film as active, equal participants in the film process, explicitly stating what they want the film to be about — the answer being “their ‘wild life [the term is theirs], what [they] encounter, how [they] take the life’” (227). Thus the film unfolds in relation to their will, and is developed in relation to the subject’s desires for personal expression rather than the development of Gross’ own intentions or agendas. Consequently, the experimental forms McHugh emphasizes in Gross’ work — total elimination of sync sound, exaggerated reenactments, and contradictory soundbites from the subjects — reveal the films dedication to the perspective of the outsider and, inevitably, Gross’ own perspective. However, the contribution of transparency provided in the expression of the subjects’ desires for the project on screen holds Gross to a level of accountability in the resulting project, as the film is established as being designated by the subjects and interpreted through the filmmaker.

In relation to contemporary films, the potential applications of existing experimental modes of documentary production have not been fully applied or realized in the structural practices of queer renderings in mainstream, mass-marketed documentary works. Rather, the tensions explored, powers destabilized, and ironies confronted in experimental documentary works remain largely on the fringes of the queer documentary canon and are rarely utilized as a methodological and technical extension of queer conceptualization. While moments of

experimental leaning have infiltrated contemporary documentary works, the applications of these techniques remain variably unexplored for their potential and are rarely utilized with the explicit intention of reworking *process* to better emphasize queer themes. *Kiki*, for example, is known for utilizing similar tactics of collaborations as seen in *Wild Life*. The difference being, however, that *Kiki's* reliance on formal assertions of documentary truth does not provide the same interpretive subjectivity as seen in *Wild Life*. Thus, the film becomes a presentational depiction of the community and individuals as seen by an outsider without the rhetorical reflection of the filmmaker's position. The collaborative aspects of *Kiki* become secondary in the pursuit of appealing towards mass audience, whether by consequence or design, and loses its potential tethers to the authenticity of the community in the process of visual and narrative sanitation. More broadly, McHugh's overarching considerations engage with the necessity of experimental documentary, especially those rendering queer experience, to hold active reflection towards the tension endemic to the limitations of film form, regardless of mode, and queer expansiveness. At large, the concern of experimental works turns towards the open recognition of the medium's inherent manipulations and inability to coalesce queer experience into unbiased, all-encompassing, or definitive depictions. McHugh argues that "[t]he only truths that can be told about identity and truth are limited, and the truest statements, the most veracious documentation, can only document those limitations" (p. 240). The analysis of experimental queer documentaries in her essay are integrated to insist upon documentaries as denied truths rather than allowing the persistent expectation of reality. In upsetting the standards of how "reality" is rendered on screen by leaning into disruptive subjectivities and shifts in perspective emphasis — especially in regards to the privileging of subject over the filmmaker's project — the fissures created in these

disruptions provide opportunities for the communication of latent, experiential, and personal truths. The resulting potential allows for the complication of queerness as an adjudication based on manipulated and constructed filmic “evidence” and as a contribution to a larger contextual potential. By seeking to explore and expose the imbued limitations of expressing queerness in a single subject and community, the multiplistic and expansive potentials of queerness are alluded to as existing outside of what can be rendered in the singularity of representation.

The potential of queer documentary to subvert the normative leanings of the medium rely predominantly on a recognition of the form’s presently imposed limitations — as well as inherent limitations of “truth” — and intentionally subverts them with an explicitly queered intention. If documentary filmmaking is to radicalize these aims it would require a level of reinterpretation upon the assumed ethos of documentary filmmaking practices towards more collaborative, decentralized, and auter-less intentions. In conjunction, however, for the form to become truly liberated from its formulaic processes and conservative histories, scholars and filmmakers must also consider how any attempt to rectify these aims may themselves become imposed limitations. Any reinvention of process must instead be conceived of through a recognition of its potential to be inherently limiting. The process of creating fundamentally queer documentaries must recognize both the limitations and powers of the form. While documentary filmmaking cannot fully render truth or reality as they are experienced, the breaking of imposed boundaries in the process, which lead to implicit appeals towards hegemonic audiences, hierarchical power within the process, and implications of queer experience as a comprehensive, shared reality would provide a more authentic rendering of queer experience in service to queer reflection.

Three Potential Frames

In what follows I propose a set of methodological deviations from current iterations of standard documentary filmmaking towards an intentional process motivated by queer conceptualization. The queering of documentary practice would rely on perspective adjustments surrounding the process of queer documentary: re-configuration of assumed audience, destabilization of present filmmaker and subject hierarchies, and intention to render queerness in unfixed multiplicities rather than through systemized identity assertions. The subversive motivations I will investigate are not a comprehensive authority on the creation of queer-motivated documentaries, specifically in the recognition that any level of prescription dictating the validity or qualification of queer works is in and of itself un-queer. Rather, these three potential frames for reprocessing the approaches to queer documentary provide opportunities for films, even within their earliest stages of development, to be critically considered based on the possibility of the film contributing to the implicit subjugation of its subjects as well as the preferential address of hegemonic audiences, and the normative narrative of fixity in queer experience, all of which may contribute to misconceptions of contemporary queerness and the persistence of inadvertent “othering” of queer individuals.

The first potential influence towards queering documentary practice is the recognition and attentive concern towards queer audiences as participants in mass viewership, both distinctive from the hegemonic majorities but not existing outside of the proposed “mass” audiences. In consideration of the persistence of this particular expression through documentary practice, the resulting effect within contemporary contexts may unjustly labor the subject’s to

viewer judgement rather than assert their expressions and experiences as valid within themselves. It is necessary to reconcile the assumed audiences of queer documentaries to privilege queer viewership over the expectation of a hegemonic audience in need of convincing. In reframing the viewership and creating documentaries with the intention of reaching queer audiences, the educational labor of expository information — such as ‘definitions’ of sexual orientation or gender — are no longer the responsibility of the subject, but treated as an assumed understanding within the audiences and thus demanding hegemonic audiences to regulate their own gaps in understanding rather than placing it upon queer subjects to explain and queer viewers to be unnecessarily reinforced. The intentionality of empowering queer viewership also serves to open the potential of queer documentaries towards more expressive and subversive modes and subjects without the expectation of audience appeal. If queer documentaries are no longer bogged down by the limiting tendencies of a formulaic documentary approach, room opens within the process to more intensively explore queerness as fluid, varied, and assuredly human.

The second potentiality is the destabilization of power dynamics between filmmakers and their subjects. The implicit power afforded to documentarians to render interpretive “realities” not only exists in the external relations of power — as the filmmaker is able to assert a level of assumed truth — but also internally in relation to the subject. In these instances, filmmakers are provided with an exceptional amount of power and control over their subjects because the filmmaker constructs on-screen depiction and, by extension their, the so-called reality of these representations. In essence, a filmmaker becomes the decisive factor in the depiction of their subject by holding a creative license over the subject’s story and personhood. The dynamics of

power that exist within the classical structures of documentary filmmaker serve as extensions of more expansive relations of power and representation, reinforcing dangerous hierarchical processes. What serves as prominently concerning in the consideration of the consequences of established interpersonal and professional powers is then in parallel other iterations of privilege. In the case of *Paris Is Burning* and *Kiki*, for example, the dynamics of power between the filmmakers and their subjects is further compounded by the race, social class, and gender disparities between the filmmakers and their subjects—both women are white, queer, and cisgendered—the resulting relationships between the filmmakers and their subjects become socially and racially coded by the differential of power on a cultural level as well as within the film itself. Generally, these relations, in which queer people of color are rendered by white, queer individuals, is not wholly uncommon and nearly always present the potential for critical concern. In this way, the issue of personal contribution to one's own filmic rendering also becomes coded within the context of larger socio-political concerns, namely the allowances of a filmmaker, especially traditionally privileged filmmakers, who holds the power of representation not only of the individual rendered but the community at large. Whether or not a filmmaker is consciously aware of the power they hold, the concerns remain the same as the power of representation becomes intensely centralized based on the particular biases or intentions of the documentarian and their audience. Juhasz's discussion concerning the practices of feminist collaborative filmmaking as a subversive means of documentary production are also comparable to queer iterations. Of particular importance is the recognition of hierarchical powers and privilege within documentary filmmaking, specifically that of the filmmaker over the subject. The first process is the recognition of a filmmaker's power to manipulate the rendering of a

subject whether to serve a filmmaker's vision, advance a particular rhetoric, or intentionally exploit to serve aims of comprehension in the film itself. Documentary filmmaking holds a particular power in the way it represents a real individual in a film form imbued with an assumed edge of reality. In that respect, documentary is a more precarious form than narrative or experimental filmmaking because it shapes an understanding of "reality" through the experiences of an individual, not a character. As such, the filmmaker's aim in any mode of documentary that holds a representational element, must be both cognizant of their influence and seek to disrupt it at any opportunity.

Through my research I conclude that the third, and most effective means of empowering the subject and subverting filmmaker power, is to reimagine the filmmaker's role as a means by which the *subject's* perspective is depicted and not the other way around. Where the present basis of documentary form relies on a filmmaker to effectively translate a narrative through their subject in service to the filmmaker's overall vision, the implications of placing oneself in the service of their subject's experiences provides unique and radical opportunities to complexly and authentically render the individual. The general stance of the documentary community on a subject's control over their own film image is rooted within the recognition that it may become warped and manipulated by the individual's perception of self, intentions, or a desire to present themselves in a particular fashion. To contradict this sentiment, however, it is important to recognize that in denying a subject power over self-representation, they instead become chained to an equal degree of manipulation to suit a filmmaker's intentions. Effectively, either option is met with the reality that a filmic depiction of a subject will not be completely objective nor accurate; however, giving the subject the power to control their own image empowers

perspectives generally denied within the current documentary system. Congruently, the approach towards rendering a subject should build upon an assertion of collaborative engagement with the subject as a participant in a collective vision rather than a source of interest, testimonial, or discourse-advancement. Emphasizing a subject's comfort, perspective, and experiences over the tenants of documentary formalism expands both the opportunities to develop radical depictions of communities and experiences as well as incites creative development within the film. In practice, collaboration with subject would rely upon a filmmaker's willingness to work in relationship with a subject towards formulating films that are intimately crafted and true to the individual—or group's—perspective both internally and within the context of more broad social and political contexts.

Finally, filmmakers seeking to develop a more queer-informed process of documentary production must consciously remove the intentionality of serving explicitly LGBTQ+ discourses and instead refocus their intention upon engaging with queer subjects as individuals who, through their own perspectives and experiences, contribute to queer topics, themes, and intentions. This particular reconsideration refers to the trends of assumed heteronormative audiences as the mass viewership for queer documentaries. The major issue concerning the creation of intentionally LGBTQ+ documentary works is the emphasis placed upon the compartmentalized status of the subject within the boundaries of a particular identification. Engagement with fluidity and multiplicity as foundational components of queered documentary practice are, contradictorily, rooted in the emphasis of individual experience. The concern of multiple intentionalities is not an attempt to render through quantity but to intentionally create films that pose an outstanding relation to a more vast potentiality marked by *queer* experience.

Considerations of multiplicity are most significantly tied to the typifying or characterization of subjects within documentary works. Due to the formal conventions that define standard documentary process, typifying themes emerge by which subjects, despite their individual complexity, become attached to particular tropes of character that serve to promote a fictionalized standardization of queer experience as existing solely in categories of personal identity. In both *Kiki* and *Paris is Burning* there are parallel ties between subjects that link their particular experiences of queer personhood despite the decades-long separation and shifts in socio-cultural contexts. Both films employ something of a cast of subjects who serve as convenient vehicles for rhetorical understandings of queer experiences: the overachiever, the sex worker, the “guardian,” and so on. On a broader scale, these concerns are also associated with the tonal resonance of documentary works, specifically in the exploration of queer individuals within the dichotomies of inspiration and tragedy. The resistance in the intention of multiplicity is the recognition of the subject as multidimensional and inherently impossible to simply or completely fully render. There is a level of implied discomfort in the assertion of rendering queer subjects as they exist in the moment of the film itself, rather than partitioning a subject’s provided material with the intention of creating films with more “satisfying,” fictionalized interpretations of queer personhood. Inherently, the shift towards rendering queerness in multiplicity of their being and experiences begins with the intentionally non-rhetorical and explicitly authentic depictions of queer individuality.

Working from Davis’ conceptualization of the crystal image, and McHugh’s assertions of filmic limitation, the implication of rendering queer subjects as nuanced individuals, emancipated from necessitated tropes or rhetorics, is in the wider understanding that within

assertions of incredibly personalized, highly specific renderings of queer personhood, other, equally as nuanced experiences exist in relation. The intentionality of unmitigated dedication to rendering genuine experience negates the necessity for a subject to fulfill a particular role towards the contribution of a particular image of queerness. Instead of placing subjects in the position to function as figureheads of queer experience, subjects become liberated to instead embody their own queerness in relation to the infinite other expressions of queerness that are not the representative body of queerness at large. These intensive interests in individual personhood and experiences of queerness also have the potential to be most effective in relation to other queering shifts — specifically the deconstruction of filmmaker hierarchies — as the subject would have the capacity to provide filmic contributions towards the depiction of their individual perspective and well as asserting the profilmic content of those perspectives in their bodies, narratives, and experiences. Furthermore, the freedom of intentional rhetorical purpose in the creation of the film does not necessarily equate to an apolitical potential. Rather, the removal of a filmmaker's biases or desired rhetorical affiliation simply provides opportunities by which the subject themselves may orient their experiences contextually in discursive spaces defined by their experiences rather than the filmmaker's needs in the construction of a documentary with a classically legible form. The opportunity is asserted for which the supplication of outside contextual information — with concern specifically to advocacy or politics — would become a relational element to the subject and reemphasize the value of queer individuals in contrast to the correlation with the “queer community” as a cohesive body. Fundamentally, the concept would assert that queer experiences in and of themselves contribute to queer visibility, without explicit connection to queer advocacy, stereotypes, or justifications.

Conclusion

While the academic and practical considerations of modern queer documentary are limited, the synthesis of the disparate components of the form indicate the potential for queer-focused documentary productions to incorporate more subversive, collaborative practices that could better serve a rendering of queer experience in line with modern representations of queer complexity, fluidity, and nonconformity. Modern queer cultural attentions and the present state of socio-political discourses of queer identity are not fully explored under the conditions of classical documentary standards, which rely on queer subjects primarily as vehicles for activist rhetorics deemed necessary for the progression of queer liberation within hegemonic social order. These values have grown intrinsically repressive, not fully allowing for the exploration of queer experience and personhood as radical contributions to queer social narrative. This includes the recognition of queer audiences as necessary targets of viewership and interpretations of queerness that exist outside of conventional, binary assertions of gender, sexuality, and identity formation. The juxtapositions of *Kiki* and *Paris is Burning I* orchestrate articulates the presence of stagnation in documentary process that is not shared by the queer community. Where communities, experiences, and discourses have evolved on a trajectory of increasing radicalism and fluidity, the processes of rendering these trends have remained locked within conventional dispositions and in service to conventional audiences. The tendencies illustrated in the comparison of each film do not exist exclusively, but they concisely clarify trends throughout queer-focused, mass-targeted documentary works. Contemporary queer documentary, principally, and assumably unintentionally, service a cultural identification of queerness as

dormant and affixed to expectations of queer experience that are more readily mutable towards conventional, hegemonically prescribed definitions.

The concern illustrated by my research, and compounded by actualization in film practice, is the limitation of present iterations of documentary form — in theory and in practice — to render queer subjects queerly. Prescriptive efforts to suggest means of utilizing documentary form as a subversive means of expressing queerness would be counteractive to the inherent conventional disobedience embodied by queer conceptualization. Regardless, recognition and comprehensive retrospection upon documentary form in consideration of queer aims, expressions, and experiences provide the most discernible first move towards the radical rendering of queer subjects. Plainly, the queering of documentary practice is founded in the subversion of embedded power dynamics across the social and technical spheres of filmmaking. To concede the mass representative and creative powers in documentary practice from the filmmaker and hegemonic audiences in service of queer prerogatives would thus invigorate both the form and the films produced to complicate complicity in present efforts towards ‘queer’ conformity. Production principles could range significantly, incorporating various iterations of collaborative, experimental, and subversive approaches to applying core documentary principles which privilege the perspectives of queer individuals in production, product, and viewership, relationally allowing these dynamic rendering to contribute qualitatively to humanistic adaptations of queer activist rhetorics while simultaneously contributing to the rejection of hegemonic influence upon cultural understandings of queer culture and personhood. Shifts in intention towards more encompassing and decentralized processes, in contradiction of trends towards conformity and power confirmation, may eventually progress into methodological trends

of filmmaking that could later necessitate reinspection to consider the process' regression towards stagnation. The potentials of film to better encapsulate queerness as fluid, and address queer audiences may become clearer over time, and would require the continued critical consideration of filmmakers to apply and re-evaluate the boundaries of practice.

As it currently stands, the opportunities for documentary to effectively render queer subjects in ways that are expressive of queerness remains largely unexplored. The queering of documentary practice would rely on an adjustment of perspective surrounding the process of creating queer documentary, and a more persistent dedication towards the continued development of production practice towards these aims.

References

- Anderson, T. (2018). *Los Angeles Times - We are currently unavailable in your region*. [online] Latimes.com. Available at:
<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-kiki-paris-is-burning-20170224-story.html>.
- Borden, A., 2016. On the question of inclusivity in queer cinema studies. *The Routledge Companion to Cinema & Gender*, p.98.
- Butler, J., 2011. *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. Taylor & Francis.
- Butler, J., 2011. *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Davis, N., 2013. *The desiring-image: Gilles Deleuze and contemporary queer cinema*. Oxford University Press USA.
- Dixon, W.W. and Foster, G.A. eds., 2002. *Experimental cinema: the film reader*. Psychology Press.
- Hess, T., Rinaldi, P., Eagan, D., Wissot, L., Macaulay, S., Schwarz, J., Salovaara, S. and Mills, M. (2016). "The Vanity of Trans-People Versus the Humanity of Trans-People": Sara Jordanö and Twiggy Pucci Garçon on KIKI | *Filmmaker Magazine*. [online] Filmmaker Magazine. Available at:
<https://filmmakermagazine.com/97506-the-vanity-of-trans-people-versus-the-humanity-of-trans-people-sara-jordeno-and-twiggy-pucci-garcon-on-kiki/#.WpekpZPwYw1>.
- Holmlund, C. and Fuchs, C., 1997. *Between the sheets, in the streets: queer, lesbian, and gay documentary*. U of Minnesota Press.

Kiki. (2016). [video] USA, Sweden: Jordenö.

Juhasz, A., 2003. No woman is an object: Realizing the feminist collaborative video. *Camera Obscura*, 18(3), pp.70-97.

Kahana, J., 2008. *Intelligence work: the politics of American documentary*. Columbia University Press.

King, G., 2006. SPECTACLE AND NARRATIVE IN THE. *Contemporary American Cinema*, p. 334.

Paris is Burning. (1990). [DVD] USA: Livingston, J.

Nichols, B., 1991. *Representing reality: Issues and concepts in documentary* (Vol. 681). Indiana University Press.

Juett, J.C. and Jones, D. eds., 2010. *Coming out to the mainstream: new queer cinema in the 21st century*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Schoonover, K. and Galt, R., 2016. *Queer cinema in the world*. Duke University Press.

YouTube. (2016). *KIKI Documentary of New York LGBTQ Scene with Filmmakers*. [online] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GAdLUQVsJqo>.