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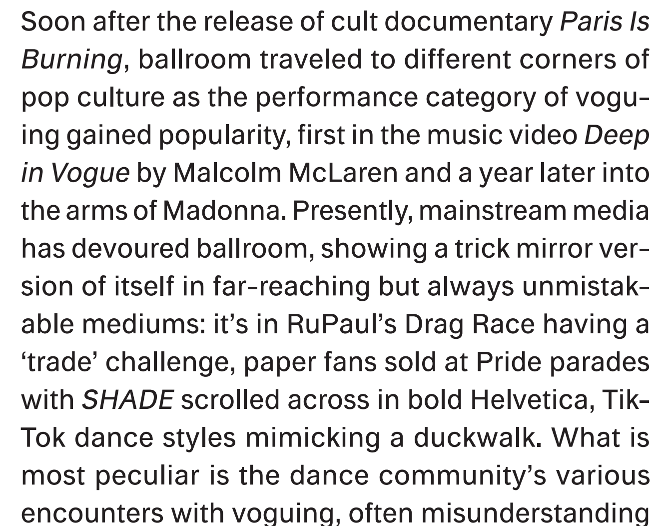
POP, DIP AND SPIN

The ball circuit of 80s and 90s New York—energised, cutthroat, shady—revealed itself to many as a corrective to heterosexual nightlife, to masculinity, and everything promised by neoliberalism but never quite delivered. You settle arguments on the floor, sometimes drinks are spilled, and then you hug it out in the end. You leave the function feeling like you took a bath full of ecstasy.

The history and origins of ballroom culture are deeply rooted in the 1960s drag circuit of NYC. Crystal Labeija, a Black drag queen performing in a majority white scene, had to whiten up her face just to have a shot, but even that didn't help. Having placed third runner-up at one historic pageant in 1968, she unleashed her long overdue frustration, walking off the stage while disparaging the racism of the organizers. Soon after, with her drag sister Lottie Labeija, the two started holding balls for Black and Latinx drag queens. And as with any living culture, it evolved into a lifestyle. If the drag scene held up the female figure and twisted it out, then ballroom widened the net, dissecting and lampooning all the social orders created by capitalism that make us so miserable. If the Wall Street exec is an alienating and cold figure to you, why not dress up like them and give executive realness? In categories like *pretty boy face* or *female figure realness,* members would catwalk to the judges in their most convincing imitation of the straight community's various sub-genres. The straight world became Play-doh to a nighttime scene morphing and parsing through it in the daytime.



Soon after the release of cult documentary *Paris Is Burning*, ballroom traveled to different corners of pop culture as the performance category of voguing gained popularity, first in the music video *Deep in Vogue* by Malcolm McLaren and a year later into the arms of Madonna. Presently, mainstream media has devoured ballroom, showing a trick mirror version of itself in far-reaching but always unmistakable mediums: it's in RuPaul's Drag Race having a 'trade' challenge, paper fans sold at Pride parades with *SHADE* scrolled across in bold Helvetica, TikTok dance styles mimicking a duckwalk. What is most peculiar is the dance community's various encounters with voguing, often misunderstanding

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Cesar Valentino at a ball. Artist unknown

and even hostile to its existence. When helicoptered in to spice up mainstream dance competitions, there's often arguments about which category it belongs in (Hip-hop? Jazz? ~*Fusion*~?), the mystique of a subculture rubbing against more formalized expressions until something uncanny leaks out. Like when Lasseindra Ninja battled Javier Ninja at Funkin' Stylez, a dance competition in Dusseldorf. At one point Lasseindra, a gay man up in drags, climbed onto the judges' table as he's known to do. A judge immediately stood up in anger, like he had just been accosted by a gay beast.

What's missed in the endless attempts to classify voguing is that the myriad of influences and the intangible aura of its display are in fact what make it ballroom: it makes sense that a community working against social norms would move in and out of specificity, and dismiss any rules and inevitability in grounding a dance style.

However, the ballroom community is never shy to address where their influences came from. Below is my attempt at gathering a few, but certainly not all, of the influences on the original Old Way style of voguing. Importantly, ballroom remains an oral history, and this breakdown should be observed as that: another side story in a very long conversation.

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Da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* (c. 1490) is a fine pencil drawing of a nude man somehow posing in two positions at once, arms stretched out, touching a square within a circle. It's based on the Roman architect Vitruvius' writings about the ideal body proportions and size. The image is credited as informing later quests for the übermensch—the superior Western man of tomorrow. Glossy magazines and print advertisements carry on this task, trying their best at capturing the most aspirational forms of human beings.

To fully embody this normative figure, Vogue magazine tells us you have to be white and wealthy. You have to internalize the American-style materialism solidified in the 80s. Until then, you are somewhat shapeless and subhuman. Consider Venus Xtravaganza in *Paris is Burning*: "I want a car. I want to be with the man I love. I want a nice home away from New York." These ideas promise safety and something to grasp onto for the working class and those living in the margins.

Still from *How Do I Look* (2006) dir. Wolfgang Busch

But in response to these deceptive depictions of an idealized life, the ballroom community, who were mostly Black, Latinx and poor, mimicked the poses of models holding perfume bottles or fanning themselves, but exaggerated and to the beat, as if affronting the Western man—knowing that material accumulation was never in their line of sight, why not pantomime it?

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Many credit Paris Dupree in the 1970s as the first to vogue when one day he was listening to music while flipping through Vogue magazine. He started putting the model's poses to the music, adding lyricism and grace between each pose. He took it to the clubs, where everyone freaked out and screamed, and then he took it to the balls.

VIETNAM WAR

Icon Stan Elle in his studio via Instagram

Ballroom witnessed the tail-end of the Vietnam War, but its presence reverberated at every ball. Some members of the scene who were working class and conscripted had just returned home, others had stints in jail for protesting the war. The floors looked a bit more sparse and melancholic. To come to terms with one of the longest wars in history, some of the fashion categories like Best Dressed were adjusted, asking walkers to come in head-to-toe military wear as an act of trouble-making, but also condolence.

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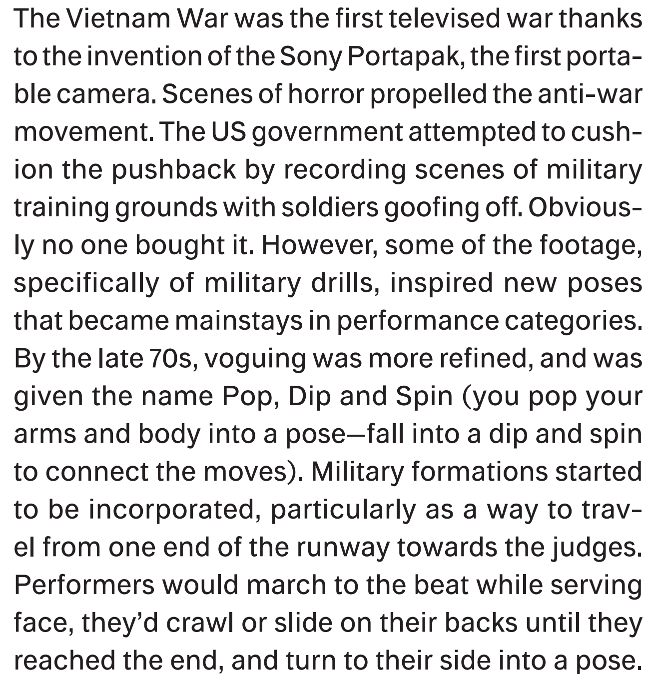
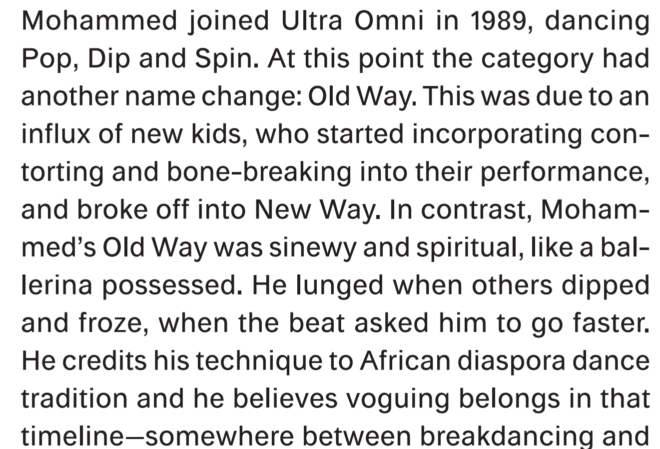


The Vietnam War was the first televised war thanks to the invention of the Sony Portapak, the first portable camera. Scenes of horror propelled the anti-war movement. The US government attempted to cushion the pushback by recording scenes of military training grounds with soldiers goofing off. Obviously no one bought it. However, some of the footage, specifically of military drills, inspired new poses that became mainstays in performance categories. By the late 70s, voguing was more refined, and was given the name Pop, Dip and Spin (you pop your arms and body into a pose—fall into a dip and spin to connect the moves). Military formations started to be incorporated, particularly as a way to travel from one end of the runway towards the judges. Performers would march to the beat while serving face, they'd crawl or slide on their backs until they reached the end, and turn to their side into a pose.

SPIRITS AND HIEROGLYPHICS

The House of Ultra Omni started in 1980, first as the House of Omni, from Latin meaning "all" as the house members' talents encompassed every type of art form present in ballroom. The house's father, Kevin Omni later added 'ultra'—"beyond all"—indicating a house that transcended everything that is material and earthly. This informed some of his house children's performance styles, particularly Mohammed Ultra Omni, whom he says is "very into his afrocentrism."



Mohammed joined Ultra Omni in 1989, dancing Pop, Dip and Spin. At this point the category had another name change: Old Way. This was due to an influx of new kids, who started incorporating contorting and bone-breaking into their performance, and broke off into New Way. In contrast, Mohammed's Old Way was sinewy and spiritual, like a ballerina possessed. He lunged when others dipped and froze, when the beat asked him to go faster. He credits his technique to African diaspora dance tradition and he believes voguing belongs in that timeline—somewhere between breakdancing and

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house. There's also his poses, woven at times to resemble Egyptian hieroglyphs. In the 2006 documentary *How Do I Look*, Mohammed is dancing on the Brooklyn bridge with his voiceover running a list of Old Way's predecessors, from African American folk dances to Alvin Ailey. He praises the unpredictable flow of voguing, the contradictions between each step, and mostly—the unrestrained nerve of it all. The sentiment was shared with Queen Latifah, who, in her music video for *Come Into My House,* had a grab bag of African dances hailing from South Africa and Ndombolo from Congo as well as some Old Way. They come together smoothly and undisturbed, tapping in one after the other.

Music video for *Come Into My House* by Queen Latifah (1990)

Through the ages, ballroom always finds new antagonists to argue with and eventually piss-take. The crude machismo of breakdancing has a gay cousin in the spin and dip. Editorial models couldn't pull the shapes the dancers could. And afrocentrism, a cultural and political vantage point that's sadly found home in homophobic and regressive Black circles, could instead be captured by someone like Mohammed Ultra Omni. What else could the prism stare at? Videos emerged in 2020 of ballroom members in yellow hazmat suits, voguing down even as their goggles fogged up. One of the most viral ballroom clips I've seen lately has been at the weekly ball in NYC, with a member wearing a generic face mask with a roll of toilet paper in hand. She waves at the judges, her other hand carrying a bottle of disinfectant spray. She spritzes the floor and with one elegant swoop, wipes the stain and leaps into a dip.

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Zima Gorgeous Gucci at the Deja Vu Ball (2020)

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