

# The Implicated and the Immune: Cultural Responses to AIDS

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WHEN AIDS FIRST PENETRATED AMERICAN consciousness back in 1981, few cultural critics were prepared to predict that this epidemic would have a broad and deep impact on the arts. But nine years later, it is possible to argue that virtually every form of art or entertainment in America has been touched by AIDS. Every month, it seems, more is added to the oeuvre of art, dance, music and fiction inspired by the current crisis. Not even tuberculosis, that most literary of epidemics, produced a comparable outpouring in so short a time.

Though epidemics have played a major role in shaping American society, artistic production in response to devastating periodic outbreaks of yellow fever, cholera, and influenza (not to mention consumption) has been few and far between. There is no great American novel about the "Spanish Lady" that killed millions in the years following World War I; no revered poem or play commemorating the evacuation of a major American city due to rampaging disease; no major motion picture about the polio epidemic that swept the nation in the 1950s. Nothing in American literature is comparable to the preoccupation with pestilence that had inspired great works of European realism by writers as diverse as Defoe, Ibsen, Mann, and Camus. Taken as a whole, American culture's response to epidemics—from Edgar Allen Poe's "Masque of the Red Death" to Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith* and

Hollywood melodramas like *Jezebel*—has been romantic and didactic. We have wanted to see these outbreaks as anomalous and otherworldly—something occasioned, if not caused, by self-indulgence and other signs of moral laxity.

How different from this stilted silence is our response to AIDS. The current epidemic is the subject of dozens of novels, essays, plays, and poems: family sagas like Alice Hoffman's (1988) *At Risk* and Robert Ferro's (1989) *Second Son*; elegies for lost loved ones like Paul Monette's (1988) companion volumes, *Love Alone* and *Borrowed Time*; blistering critiques like Larry Kramer's (1985) *The Normal Heart*; pastoral evocations of the risk-free past like Andrew Holleran's *Ground Zero*; and intimate accounts of the uncertain present like *The Darker Proof*, a collection of stories by Adam Mars-Jones and Edmund White (1988). In addition to these works, there has been a profusion of polemics, from Susan Sontag's (1989) erudite deconstruction of *AIDS and Its Metaphors* to the more radical *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Practices*, an anthology of activist/academic writing edited by Douglas Crimp (1987). Larry Kramer set the standard for the fierce neo-Ibsenism of many plays about AIDS, but there have also been intimate dramas such as William Hoffman's (1985) *As Is*, bold attempts to reconcile sexuality with survival such as Robert Chesley's *Jerker*, and even musicals like *Positively Me*, recently performed at the La Mama theater in New York, and *The AIDS Show*, produced by San Francisco's Rhinoceros Theatre Company. Though many of these productions were created by and for the gay community, the commercial success of both Kramer's and Hoffman's plays suggests that the audience for works about this epidemic is broader and more empathetic than ever before. AIDS has been felt across America as a dark presence if not an actual disease, and art has followed the trail of the unfathomable. Alan Bowne's play *Beirut*, in which New York is imagined as a city divided between the infected and the well, is one example of the many works in which AIDS becomes a metaphor for the quality of ordinary life in the 1980s.

## AIDS: Catalyst For Cultural Response

The cultural response to AIDS was initially literary, but in the last few years there have been newly composed requiems, operas, dances, and

performances, as well as painting, photography, videography, and installation art. (Indeed, the intrusion of AIDS into the iconography of contemporary art is startling enough to have inspired the recent controversy between the National Endowment for the Arts and an exhibition space in lower Manhattan that mounted a provocative show of works about the epidemic. It might also be argued that AIDS has sensitized the art world to the significance of sexuality as a subject, thereby fueling the recent congressional ban on federal funding of "obscene art.") Of course, all works about AIDS are also about sex; almost as extraordinary as their candor is the range of formal strategies and thematic concerns these works embody. Some artists have taken utterly traditional aesthetic stances, in an attempt to validate an emotional bond between gay men that is almost as reviled as their desire, while others have opted for postmodern text-and-image, in an effort to generate political activism. This outpouring of work in so many genres and styles has placed AIDS at the forefront of the arts: a stunning departure from our traditional obliviousness to epidemics and their significance. So extensive is the current response that the 1989 International Conference on AIDS in Montreal found it necessary to include a series of presentations on SIDART [this acronym combines the French word for AIDS with art].

One reason for this explosion of interest is the population in which AIDS was first identified. It is often supposed that homosexuals are, by nature, artistic, and, in fact, AIDS has taken an appalling toll among gay men in the creative disciplines. But the arts have also served as an arena in which homosexuals can address—and redress—the inequities of their social status. When AIDS struck, this complex involvement with creativity became a powerful weapon for a community under medical and political siege. The arts enabled gay men to bear witness to their situation, express feelings of grief that society often distorts, and create a model for communal solidarity, personal devotion, and sexual caution that would be necessary to combat a sexually transmitted disease with no known cure.

No comparable process of self-expression exists among the other groups hit hardest by AIDS—IV drug users, their children, and their mostly black or Hispanic partners—in part because of the paralyzing impact of poverty and stigma among these groups, in part because there is no "community," perceived as such, to bind drug users together. In their isolation and secrecy, these people with AIDS are far

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less visible than the middle-class white homosexuals whose plight has been so amply documented. Pregones, a bilingual troupe that performs highly evocative dramas in New York, is one of a few theater groups that represents the distinct experience of Hispanics with AIDS, their lovers, and their families. *Ojos Que No Ven* [Eyes That Fail to See] is a rare video production that addresses issues of indifference and discrimination against people with AIDS in Latino communities. Much of the work directed at minority audiences is funded by hospitals and social service agencies. Its thrust is largely pedagogic, its concerns are often incomplete (the crucial subject of bisexuality in these communities is rarely broached), and its reach is limited; neither Pregones nor *Ojos Que No Ven* has appeared on network television. AIDS is increasingly a disease of impoverished people of color. Yet, if one were to describe this epidemic from works of art alone, one would have to conclude that only white women and gay men have shed what Oscar Wilde called “alien tears.”

### The Implicated and the Immune

But the parameters of representation do not end with the fine arts. Popular culture, too, has found itself drawn to depictions of the causes and consequences of HIV infection. The epidemic's image in movies, popular music, comedy, and television is very different—though no more accurate or inclusive—than its representation in the arts. These two images reflect quite distinct cultural responses. The first, located in the arts, is focused on people with AIDS, portraying them with a nuanced complexity intended to compensate for social insulation and stigma by “implicating” us in the epidemic. The other carries the perspective of the mass media; it presumes to be objective or, in terms more suited to this discussion, “immune.” This mass cultural response is largely concerned with the society surrounding people with AIDS: the spouse, children, family, friends, and colleagues of the infected. A host of distinctions follows from this shift in point of view.

The arts attempt to tell the “story” of AIDS from the inside out. The protagonist is presumed to be innocent and is seen, if not in isolation, than in the solitude of a heroic relationship. Stigma and dying are regarded with equal seriousness, and the artist struggles to give the person with AIDS a fully human complexity. He (sometimes she) is a

kind of everyperson, struck at random and often rendered more, not less, typical by the disease. One senses in much art about AIDS a sense of familiarity with its subject, as if the artist were immersed in dealing with the epidemic—as so many are. Many of the best works about this disease have been produced by people at various stages of HIV infection. Perhaps they have lost a lover, nursed a dear friend, or attended a dozen funerals at a young age, and feel themselves to be, in every sense, set apart by the experience. They are implicated. Their art signifies a collective trauma—mass death in the midst of life.

But AIDS in America—more than even other sexually transmitted diseases—has seemed to “select” its victims from among previously defined groups: at first, homosexuals and IV-drug users; more recently, women of color and their children. Though, in fact, no one who is sexually active can be presumed immune to AIDS, the progress of this epidemic (and the technology that enables us to assemble a perceptual pattern of its spread) has given AIDS in the West the quality of a selective blitz. That, in turn, has made it possible for mass culture to assume the perspective of a “witness” to AIDS who also stands outside it. This second cultural response—unbounded by direct experience of the epidemic—reflects the fears and fantasies of those who regard the world of AIDS as emblematic of the “other”. If the arts have positioned themselves with the implicated, the mass media represent the immune.

This point of view makes the image of AIDS in a TV movie vastly different from its representation in painting, choreography, serious fiction, and noncommercial cinema. In television, where demography is destiny, the person with AIDS is rarely an innocent everyman. That category is reserved for infants and young hemophiliacs. Adult males are usually represented as transgressors whose behavior places others in jeopardy; infected women are usually exempt from blame, but rendered nearly as helpless as their children. In these prime-time masques, it is not the person with AIDS who is victimized but those threatened or affected by the disease. Family and community occupy center stage, and the issue is not survival but cohesion: how to deal with a breach in the safety net.

This disjunction between art and entertainment corresponds to the tension between empathy and anxiety that pervades the nation’s political response to AIDS. The locus of the epidemic in America has made it possible (so far) to think of this as a disease of subcultures, pitting

ancient emblems of stigma and taboo against modern concepts of pluralism and the prerogatives of identity. The AIDS crisis, coming at a time of crisis for American liberalism, seems to signify the clash between contemporary and traditional values. The ambivalence unleashed by this "epidemic of signification," to borrow Paula Treichler's (1987) term, makes it necessary to have not just one cultural response to AIDS, but two of them: one representing the implicated, the other the immune.

### AIDS in Film: Representations of Immunity

"AIDS has all the elements for a good movie—drama, passion, tragedy," the film critic Vito Russo, an AIDS activist and a person with AIDS, recently told a reporter. Yet, at this writing, not a single film about the epidemic has been released by any major studio. Only independent films, such as Bill Sherwood's bittersweet gay comedy, *Parting Glances*, have dealt more than glancingly with the disease. That film—in its wry, unflinching familiarity with the subject and its determination to place the epidemic in the context of ordinary life—shares the "inside-out" stance of the fine arts. But, except for a few exploitation films that warn of sex-borne devastation, Hollywood has turned a cold shoulder to people with AIDS. The best-known AIDS drama, *The Normal Heart*, has been optioned by several major stars (including Barbra Streisand), according to its author, Larry Kramer; but the play has yet to be made into a film. In his powerful essay, *Reports from the Holocaust*, Kramer (1989) compares Hollywood's obliviousness to AIDS with its failure to make films about the Holocaust until years after it occurred. Just as Jewish studio heads then conspired in silence, today, gay executives reason: better *Batman* than the boy next door dying of a sexually transmitted disease.

That does not mean, however, that the impact of AIDS has gone unnoticed by Hollywood. A film like *Fatal Attraction*, with its scenario of the adulterous husband who unwittingly brings a voracious killer concubine into his family, evokes the anxieties this epidemic has generated without requiring its audience to confront the lives of homosexuals and drug addicts. Indeed, the entire aura of the sex comedy has changed since AIDS. Now, the swingers envy the stable relationship,

and even the unrepentant take precautions, as in the appearance of a glow-in-the-dark condom in *Skin Deep*, a recent Blake Edwards comedy.

But it is horror films—the genre which most vividly refracts collective angst—that have responded most vividly to the aura of AIDS. Punishment for illicit sex (along with retribution for technological hubris) have always preoccupied American horror films. Indeed, these are the contemporary equivalents of lurid breviaries with images of syphilitics before the judgment of Christ. Those who commit the sin of fornication (or that of Faust) must bear the cost: In the classic observation of horror films, “They tampered with God’s will.” AIDS has revived a traditional symbol of such concerns: the alien organism that invades the body and transforms it into something terrible to behold. This metaphor for disease, and for ancient images of mortification of the flesh, is updated in *Alien*. Here, an extraterrestrial monster enters the body of an astronaut by literally inseminating him through the mouth—a deft allusion to sodomy—and then bursts forth from his belly, a pathology that clearly relates to the violation of gender roles.

An even more resonant image is provided by *The Fly*, a remake of the 1950’s horror classic, in which a mad inventor creates a machine that can transport matter, only to see his own protoplasm contaminated by that of a fly which has entered the machine. Both the original film and its remake offer a critique of scientific hubris, a common horror theme since *Frankenstein*. But the 1980’s version also contains a heavy dose of sexual paranoia. A “liberated” woman—often the object of punishment in horror films—has fallen in love with the inventor, but his flylike incarnation shatters her self-confidence: “Be afraid—be very afraid!” she screams. The arrogant inventor has not only become an insect; in the process, he has lost his hair, teeth, digits, even his penis. This is a distinct allusion to the specter of AIDS, a disease often portrayed as reducing handsome young men to monsters with running sores that ooze from their swollen features. To complete the identification with HIV, the inventor’s condition is passed on to his son in a sequel, *The Fly 2*. Contaminated genes transform the child, too, into a monstrosity.

One of the ways American culture comes to terms with an unanticipated event like AIDS is to invest it with a scenario that resembles the plot of a horror film. This is the structure of most contemporary journals of the Plague Year, from Robin Cook’s (1986, 1987, 1988, 1989)

medical fiction to Randy Shilts's (1987) reportage. *And the Band Played On*, Shilts's journalistic history of the epidemic's early years, bears a formal resemblance to a thriller like *Jaws*. Both works feature a lurking leviathan that assaults the unaware at play, while heroic doctors, cast in the mold of Ibsen, do battle with a malignantly indifferent society. Of course, the traditional victim in a horror film is a vulnerable young woman, and the traditional resolution involves destruction of the monster by a virile man. Thus, the fantasy of seduction-by-salvation overcomes our dread of the unknown. But AIDS offers no such denouement. Its shape and scale can only be hinted at in the imprecise terms of epidemiology. Its victims can hardly be characterized, by a society fraught with ambivalence about homosexuality and drug addiction, as innocent young things. And its heroes are anonymous caregivers and activists, engaged in the often thankless task of keeping a vengeful society—along with a monster—at bay.

### AIDS in Popular Music and Comedy: Stand-up Hate

Popular forms like rock music and stand-up comedy, which have often served to clarify the terms of social conflict, offer only an oblique image of AIDS. Not even rock music, whose candor, subjectivity, and youthful audience might have made it the ideal medium for education and opposition to orthodoxy, has dealt with the epidemic, except in surreptitious (and remarkably crude) asides. Though rock stars compete to appear in benefits, they rarely refer to the actual disease in their songs; when they do, it is usually in veiled allusions like the one Prince employs when he sings of a friend who died of "a big disease with a little name." Lou Reed's angry eulogy for friends he will no longer see in the Halloween parade is one of the few attempts in rock to acknowledge the reality of AIDS. In contrast, openly gay rock stars like Boy George, and sexual iconoclasts like Madonna, have not mentioned the epidemic in their lyrics—perhaps because any attempt to do so might dampen the suggestiveness at the core of their appeal. Indeed, AIDS threatens the hedonism of rock music in general, heightening resentment against those deemed responsible for the epidemic.

Heavy-metal moralists like Axl Rose have captured the field of commentary on AIDS in rock music. In a popular lyric, Rose sings:



Immigrants and faggots  
Make no sense to me  
They come into this country  
And think they can be free  
To start a mini-Iran  
Or spread some fucking disease.

The most shocking thing about this little ditty is that it dates from 1988, when such sentiments were supposed to have been overcome. Yet, a sub-rosa repertoire of jokes continues to express the onus of a terrified and self-righteous populace. In some circles, “gay” has come to stand for “got AIDS yet?,” and the disease itself—renamed “WOG” for “wrath of god”—is referred to as an illness that can “turn an animal into a vegetable.” When rumors recently flew that Richard Pryor was dying of AIDS, the comedian denied them, insisting the slander had been spread by his former wife, who “doesn’t want me to get laid anymore.” The comedian Eddie Murphy draws material for his act from the reinvigorated stereotype of homosexuals as vectors of disease. In one routine, Murphy refuses to date women who kiss their gay male friends, lest that contact give him AIDS. Murphy’s homophobic japes are more than matched by Sam Kinison, who asserts that gay men spread lies about the need to use condoms in order to repress the heterosexual libido, and blames the spread of HIV from animals to humans on the propensity among homosexuals for “screwing monkeys.”

These scabrous routines, and others, have drawn huge appreciative audiences, proving that, though the official culture condemns such sentiments, they persist because they correspond to enduring anxieties. As is often the case in comedy, insecurities about sexual identity are at the core of this humor-of-rage. Gay men are the “other,” yet they may infect others, suggesting that the distinction between homo- and hetero-sexual desire may be less firm than we acknowledge. In response, gay men have developed jokes of their own to describe their precarious position. “Hi mom, I’ve got bad news and good,” went one joke of the early 1980s. “The bad news is, I’m gay. The good news is, I’m dying.” In another perceptive jab at the fluidity of stigma, some gay men asked each other: “What’s the hardest thing about having AIDS? Trying to convince your mother that you’re Haitian.”

Rock music and stand-up comedy, which once stood for sexual and social revolution, now reflect fear of contagion and rage at the “other.” AIDS is not the only reason for this shift, but the epidemic has clearly

played a part in aligning these forms with conservative social values. The audience for rock and stand-up-comedy—as well as horror films—is young and mostly male. For this cohort, bombarded by contradictory information about abstinence and safe sex, AIDS must seem especially unfathomable: a disease of junkies and queers that anyone can contract; a scourge that transforms its victims into the “other,” depriving them not only of vitality but of identity. The paradoxical image of AIDS is compounded by society’s ambivalence toward its victims: they are labeled sinners, yet are also perceived as fully human, even heroic. Rock and comedy, not to mention Hollywood films, have been unwilling to risk alienating their audience by dealing with such a paradoxical tableau.

### AIDS on Television: A Matrix of “Immunity”

With other popular forms unwilling to decipher AIDS, the task has been left to that most didactic American medium, television. Initially, this “story” was considered too contentious and too complicated for the prime-time market place. With the death of Rock Hudson in 1985, however, TV news executives abruptly discovered the “human-interest” aspect of AIDS. They realized that uncertainties about who might be at risk could draw a huge audience. The spectacle of young men dying in their prime, of a disease that often wasted their bodies, offered an opportunity for television to represent the gay community without seeming to condone its practices. The illness could function as a device to shift onus away from both sexual deviancy and social bias. Television used AIDS to construct the perspective of the immune, allowing the American people to confront gay men at their least threatening and most affecting.

As it became apparent that the audience for AIDS programming was huge, made-for-television movies about the epidemic proliferated and many dramatic series wove motifs about AIDS into their story lines. The show *Midnight Caller* has run two episodes about a woman suffering from AIDS, who happened to be the hero’s former lover. The first installment was devoted to the “problem” of a bisexual man who had infected her; gay groups objected strenuously to the premise, forcing the show’s producers to alter the ending, so that the hero contem-

plates, but rejects, vigilantism. The second episode focused on the "victim," using her experiences as a device to get at the plight of people with AIDS. Despite its controversial—and quite banal—aspects, this show apotheosized many of the conventions TV drama has adapted in dealing with AIDS: the victim is a white, middle-class woman, the perpetrator a transgressive male, and the mode of transmission heterosexual. This is hardly the typical cast and scenario of AIDS in America today: most sexual transmission has occurred between men; most women have been infected from IV drug use or from sex with an addicted male (not a bisexual); and the overwhelming proportion of heterosexual transmission cases has occurred among women of color.

The image of the epidemic on prime-time TV is skewed by political and demographic considerations. Showing blacks or Hispanics as people with AIDS might fuel stereotypes about these groups and exacerbate racial tensions; in any event, it would certainly raise concerns among civil rights groups. The result, tragically, may have deprived black and Hispanic women—especially in urban areas—of crucial information about the actual extent of their risk. TV news shows do not misrepresent the epidemiology of AIDS, but neither have they emphasized the facts about who is at risk; and TV movies about AIDS—which carry all the paradigmatic power of popular fiction—invariably focus on whites. Since homosexuality is easily as contentious as race, at least where representation is concerned, TV movies about AIDS have tended to shy away from gay male protagonists. To focus on drug addiction would make it difficult for the producers of these films to build sympathy for the afflicted: a hallmark of TV movies about any illness. Consequently, the typical protagonist is a young, virtuous, and vulnerable woman: the traditional emblem of innocence. This device has another advantage. It corresponds to the demands of the primary audience for TV movies: women. This demographic base is very different from the mostly male audience for rock music or horror films, and it creates an image of the epidemic quite distinct from what prevails in those other forms.

Films about the ordeal of families faced by one member's illness are immensely popular in prime time—indeed, terminal illness is an adventure the whole family can enjoy—and when that illness is AIDS, the presentation is skewed by what programmers perceive to be the perspective and concerns of women. If young men evince a fear and loathing of homosexuals, the female audience is thought to have a

more tolerant attitude. Therefore, people with AIDS (even when they aren't gay) are generally more sympathetically drawn in TV movies than in other popular forms. This characterization is especially true when the protagonist is what one TV movie referred to as *The Littlest Victim* (the original title, *The Most Innocent Victim*, was changed under pressure from gay and AIDS activists). Children are the most common heroes of AIDS movies, and stories about Ryan White, the Ray family (whose home in Florida was firebombed), and other tales of young hemophiliacs have drawn large audiences.

Women are not portrayed much differently from "the littlest victims." They, too, have had suffering and stigma inflicted upon them, often by the deceit of men. Offstage stands the prostitute, frequently identified as the source of infection, though, in reality, relatively few cases have been traced to that source. In *Intimate Contact* (a British TV movie shown in this country on the Home Box Office cable network), Claire Bloom plays a prosperous suburban housewife whose life is shattered when her husband is diagnosed with AIDS and confesses his dalliances with prostitutes. This scenario, whatever its relation to reality, transforms AIDS into a crisis for the family, introducing the message of monogamy in stark dramatic terms. (Alone among significant works of fiction about AIDS, Alice Hoffman's [1988] *At Risk* has a single mother, whose daughter was infected by a transfusion, as its protagonist. By turns touching and horrifying, Hoffman's novel is an antidote to the bathetic conventions of TV movies. But, like the characters in prime-time weepers, everyone in *At Risk* is suburban and white.)

Casing the epidemic in strictly heterosexual terms avoids the wrath of activists, but this convenient dramatic device also avoids confronting the actual contours of AIDS, and creates a false impression that everyone is equally at risk. On the other hand, if the protagonist of an AIDS movie were a gay male, the networks might arouse the wrath of religious fundamentalists—unless the "victim" were cast in an offending light, which would offend gay activists, not to mention many women viewers. As a result, the networks have produced only one major film about a gay man with AIDS. *An Early Frost* remains a highly instructive paradigm of how popular culture deals with both the problem of deviance and the anguish of premature mortality.

As this made-for-television film opens, the hero lives apart from his family with another man. When AIDS strikes, he returns home—the faux household of a gay couple is revealed to be a fragile shelter that

must give way to the enduring arms of mother, father, sister, and grandma. Unfortunately, father is repulsed by his son's homosexuality, and most of the action in the film occurs between these men, as the women struggle to effect a reconciliation. To them falls the task of caring for the doomed deviant, and, though sis has some initial reservations about allowing her brother to touch her baby, the victim soon finds himself enveloped in a cushion of love, and even father relents when he realizes what lies ahead. This is not an implausible story, nor is it ungenerously told, with sympathetic portraits of other gay men, including the former lover and an AIDS patient who dies courageously but alone. Still, as this tale unfolds, the protagonist becomes less and less central to the plot. The family, rather than the person with AIDS, is the actual subject of this film.

*An Early Frost* achieves its ambition, which is to fold the mythography of AIDS into the conflict between father and son. This is a tale in which love overcomes (male) righteousness, and sin is forgiven in the face of death. As the credits roll, the son has been reconciled with his family. He drives off into an uncertain sunset, but the family—through its own capacity to change and grow—coheres. As a model for dealing compassionately with the stigma of AIDS, *An Early Frost* is far from illiberal. But as a strategy that makes the person in crisis peripheral, subordinating his needs to broader social concerns, it is hardly empathetic or, for that matter, true to what people with AIDS have struggled to achieve.

## Representations of Implication

How different this prime-time scenerio is from *Second Son*, a novel by Robert Ferro (1989), who died of AIDS shortly after it was published. In this tale, too, AIDS brings the rifts within a family to a head, and here, too, an obdurate father is forced by his gay son to face himself. But because this is a novel, free of the populist demands of television, and because it was written by a gay man who knows his subject well, the changes wrought by AIDS are far less archetypal. The father never fully relents, the family cannot transcend the tragedy of the protagonist's illness, and he fails to find solace among them. If the real subject of *An Early Frost* is the cohesion of the social unit in the face of an epidemic, the subject of *Second Son* is illness as a catalyst for es-

tablishing autonomy. The alternative to family is not, as in *An Early Frost*, to live and die alone. This gay man finds another man with AIDS, and as the novel ends, they sit gazing out at the sea, imagining an endless cruise on a magic ocean liner: the very image of what this book constructs as a gay male utopia.

Though *Second Son* is hardly a didactic work, one can imagine the furor if this story of two men with AIDS who find love in each other ever appeared on prime-time television. It is only in the more sheltered, and segmented, venues of theater, fiction, art, and dance that gay men have been able to tell their side of the story. Art about AIDS has several important functions within the gay community. It commemorates people whose identity has been stigmatized, compensating for the loss of social status that often accompanies AIDS by the simple fact of declaring the disease a fit subject for art. It validates bonding between gay men at a time when such relationships are widely regarded as essential for survival, reversing the image of widespread sexual activity which prevailed in gay culture before the epidemic. It creates an image of the gay community as an agency of support and nurturance, in contrast to the malign indifference of mass society. And it seeks to empower people with AIDS, both personally and collectively, through images that can serve as the basis for political action. Finally, art about AIDS seeks to rescue the struggle for survival from its statistical abstractions by bluntly declaring, as George Whitmore (1989) does in his journalistic account of AIDS in America, *Someone Was Here*.

Even a casual observer of art about AIDS must notice how much weight is placed on love as a counterforce to oppression and death. Much as Larry Kramer's play, *The Normal Heart* intends to function as a call to arms—and to sexual continence—it ends with an image that would seem to be outside its political agenda: a bedside wedding between two gay men. But this utopian gesture is central to Kramer's social—and sexual—ideology. Throughout his work, devotion is the ideal poised against the twin realities of promiscuity and hostility from the world at large. In William Hoffman's (1988) less strident drama, *As Is*, the mutual caring and acceptance of two ex-lovers (one of whom has AIDS) is all that remains of their formerly ornate sex lives; it makes the present crisis bearable. Even an unrepentantly liberationist playwright like Robert Chesley incorporates bonding into his work about AIDS. In *Jerker*, (which nearly cost the license of a California radio station that broadcast segments of the play) a relationship between two

men, that exists entirely on the phone, deepens as one of them becomes ill and finally disappears.

Though this emphasis on coupling seems novel, it is a traditional concern of gay male culture, evident in Walt Whitman's concept of "adhesiveness" and E.M. Forster's ([1910]1989) less gender-bound admonition: "Only connect." Love between men was, for Whitman as well as Forster, a democratic paradigm as well as an alternative to the duplicity and denial of bourgeois life. AIDS has occasioned the recovery of romanticism in many gay representational works—much as tuberculosis fueled operatic masques of purity amid pollution. Once again, death sanctions love and gives it a tragic edge. Once again, a disease is thought to single out the abnormally passionate, creative, and effete. But, Terrence McNally's recent play, *The Lisbon Traviata*, notwithstanding, it is hard to imagine the contemporary gay man as a latter-day *Dame aux Camélias*. The confrontational stance of today's gay culture gives the bond between people with AIDS in fictional works a more insistent edge. In Paul Monette's (1988) angry elegy, *Love Alone*, the devotion of two men—one dying and the other infected but well—becomes a cry against death and an affirmation that gay men can love:

I hear how trapped how frantic was my friend / not to go it rings in  
the wind around me / like a signal sent by a dying star bursting /  
here in my dead heart a bloom of black light / calling WE ARE  
NOT A MILLION MILES AWAY / SAY WE ARE NOT ALONE.

The same impulse to use traditional imagery of devotion to elevate and commemorate a gay relationship is evident in "Absence," Bill T. Jones's dance in honor of his dead lover and collaborator, Arnie Zane. It opens in a setting that resembles a morgue or hospital. Male dancers, dressed in flowing white sheets, move with the painful deliberation of the dying. Then the scene changes: sheets become ballgowns, and the dancers' racking movements are stately, processional. They move toward the rear of the stage, now bathed in blue light, to Berlioz's "Nuits d'été." The music, the movement—almost still enough to be a *tableau vivant*—and the play of white gowns (on men) against blue light seem at once campy and utterly funereal. Jones appears, his muscled black body doubled over in laughter. It is the sort of incongruous image that might well appear in a dream about the death of a lover—

lavish yet aching and somehow concretely gay. Though this dance has none of the rage of Monette's poetry or Kramer's dramaturgy, like both these works it uses emblems of high romanticism to eulogize a bond others might revile. These works, and many others like them, answer the need to make sense, not just of an epidemic, but of a social status denied significance.

The de facto and covert nature of gay relationships may have been in activist Cleve Jones's mind when he came up with an idea for what has become the best-known artwork about AIDS. The Names Project is a giant quilt the size of several football fields, consisting of commemorative panels prepared by friends and loved ones of the deceased. Each panel is inscribed with a name and epitaph or emblematic object—often an image of innocence, such as a teddy bear, or of transformation, such as glitter and drag—intended to evoke the person it honors. The allusion is to quilting: an American craft traditionally reserved for women, one that connotes comfort, care, and community. All these concepts are crucial to the strategy of collective survival, and in that sense, the Names Project speaks to the living, evoking an image of gay culture in the face of crisis very different from the assumptions of prime-time artifacts. This quilt literally contains multitudes, and its sequences of panels are bisected by cloth aisles, so that, when seen in the company of others who have come to pause, lay flowers, or pray, it resembles an alternative cemetery.

In *The Names Project*, as in Bill T. Jones's dance, the methodologies of fine art—in this case, site-specific installation works—are enlisted as a response to social stigma. Few of those commemorated in this giant quilt have tombstones that acknowledge their true identities. These panels are modular and mobile, affirming that there will be no official memorial for those who died in this epidemic. Instead, their memory may be carried from city to city, and displayed in shop windows, carried during rallies, or, on special occasions, laid before the White House and the Capitol as a mute reminder of what has been lost. Like the Vietnam Memorial, a sunken slab with names inscribed, this moveable quilt embeds the individual in a collective, commemorating the communal in uncertain times.

The rituals of life and death that have become commonplace in the gay community are rarely recorded by the mass media, which is why the impulse to document them is so strong in art about AIDS. Caregiving, traditionally regarded as a feminine skill, takes on a special



meaning for gay men, not just because it defies the traditional rules of gender, but because so many people with AIDS prefer to be nursed by their friends. *A Death in the Family*, a film from New Zealand that has been shown on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), borrows documentary techniques to tell a fictionalized story of a gay man dying of AIDS. In *An Early Frost*, the AIDS patient came home to his family, but here, home is where the heart is. The implication is that care provided by peers, in an affirmative environment, is more effective and humane than either institutional nursing or the mercies of a family that harbors conflict toward the person with AIDS. This validation of community is at the core of art that positions itself inside the epidemic—and it is notably missing from much photography about AIDS, raising urgent questions about whether these graphic, sometimes grotesque portraits are to be regarded as artifacts of implication or immunity.

### AIDS in Photography: Flashpoints of Ideology

The criticism leveled at photographic representations of AIDS is complicated by the fact that, until recently, many well-known gay photographers shied away from the epidemic in their work. Robert Mapplethorpe, whose death from AIDS is often mentioned in articles critical of his sexual iconography, was reluctant to discuss his own illness and did not confront it in his oeuvre. Peter Hujar, who took a less heroic view of gay eroticism, and who graphically represented death and dying in his work, shied away from AIDS—though Hujar, too, died of the disease. Activist-photographers like Jane Rossett, a board member of the People With AIDS Coalition, have produced a more engaged image of the epidemic. Perhaps deliberately, her work lacks the formal panache of fine-art photography, which remains problematic (at least to many activists) because it often reflects both the ideology of the implicated and that of the immune.

Even an empathetic photographer like Rosalind Solomon, who invests her subjects with a determined dignity, shares some of the biases of mass media. Often, she shows us the person with AIDS embedded in his or her family, eulogizing the bond between mother and (sick) child, or (sick) mother and child. Though these images of devotion and

reconciliation are immensely moving, they fail to probe beneath the familial embrace, or to raise questions about the impact of social structures on the stigmatized individual. Other portraits show people with AIDS alone, or with their lovers; but even here, the sense of social struggle is often muted, almost beside the point. For all their artfulness and verisimilitude, many of Solomon's photographs affirm the domestic paradigm of a TV movie.

Another photographer of people with AIDS, Nicholas Nixon, avoids the snare of sentimentality by focusing on the individual in extremis. But his portraits raise another concern, often mentioned in regard to news photos of people with AIDS as well. The grotesquerie of the disease is evident in Nixon's work, almost as if its real subject were the process of physical deterioration. Nixon's use of eerie light and stark framing accentuates this sense of separation from the world. While his aim is to bypass the interpersonal aspects of AIDS, uncovering the objective processes of life and death (as Nixon has done in other, equally graphic, portraits of babies, poor people, and the frail elderly), the effect of his stance is to transform the subject into a specimen. The viewer shares in a voyeuristic spectacle, not unlike the one tabloids revealed in during the early years of the epidemic, when before-and-after shots of young men in the late stages of AIDS were accompanied by veiled allusions to the wages of sin. Of course, Nixon has no such agenda, but his work raises doubts about the presumed neutrality of photography.

Given the capacity of imagery to shape our perceptions, many artists now presume that representations of AIDS can never be objective. Mere empathy is deemed an insufficient response. The artist is enjoined to compensate for the virulence of stigma by engaging its image in popular culture. The absence of this mediation signals that the artist is not to be counted among the implicated.

## The Deconstruction of Immunity

"Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing" is the title of the recent Artist's Space show about AIDS. It includes works by David Wojnarowicz, whose scabrous essay for the show's catalogue, criticizing political and religious leaders, catalysed the fracas between this exhibition space and

the National Endowment for the Arts. Wojnarowicz's art uses found photos as well as drawings and text of his own devising to impose a critical—often homoerotic—perspective on the epidemic. For Wojnarowicz, gay sex is at the core of our terror of AIDS, and the body becomes a prism through which lust and violence are refracted and revealed. Other works in this show—many by women—address similar themes. The casual visitor may conclude that these artworks, in a jumble of media and styles, are merely an attempt to document the emotions of grief and rage, in a variety of chic postmodern modes. But there is an order to the disorder here, and an underlying sense of mission. The aim is to empower the afflicted by enabling them to deconstruct representations of themselves.

In *Bright Eyes*, a video made for Britain's alternative TV network, Channel 4, Stuart Marshall exhumes the dark tradition of medicalizing homosexuality, juxtaposing images of people with AIDS with nineteenth-century typologies of "moral imbeciles" and "sexual perverts," and placing this legacy against the famous Nazi bookburning (which chose, as its initial target, the library of Magnus Hirshfeld, Weimar's most celebrated gay liberationist). Marshall took the title of his video from a caption in a British tabloid ruminating on the sad fate of a once "bright-eyed" gay man with AIDS. The form of *Bright Eyes*—its odd jumbling of dramatization and documentation, its disruptive uses of light and dark tonalities—is meant to disrupt the presumption of objectivity. Fiction and nonfiction are not distinct discourses, Marshall argues. Though medicine and media claim to describe reality, both are heavily weighted with social subjectivity. AIDS is the latest evidence that our conceptions of sexuality and disease are regulated by their representation in science and art.

Departing from the elegiac tone of much gay fiction about the epidemic, works like these are abrasively confrontational. The aim is to produce an alternate AIDS aesthetic, one that undermines the assumptions of mass culture while appropriating the terms of representation. Videographers like Isaac Julien and John Grayson have issued counter-commercials about safe sex, far more affirmative about sexuality (especially homosexuality) than the public service announcements the networks are willing to show. Other videos show people with AIDS in the full bloom of mundanity, living with rather than dying from the disease. The videographer's object is to direct the techniques of documentation toward activist ends, and the target is not just the media's

hidden agenda, but the insularity of the art world and its refusal to become engaged. As editor Douglas Crimp (1987) writes, in his introduction to a special AIDS issue of *October*, the radical art journal: "We don't need a cultural renaissance; we need cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS. We don't need to transcend the epidemic; we need to end it."

Crimp's call to arms has mobilized a cadre of commercial artists affiliated with the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power—better known as ACT-UP—who have organized themselves into art-collectives that produce slogans, symbols, and installations to be used in street demonstrations. The ubiquitous "silence (equal sign) death," framed by a pink triangle from the Nazi concentration camps, functions as an emblem of the AIDS movement. There are also posters, T-shirts, and formal art exhibitions produced by collectives affiliated with ACT-UP. They "read" very effectively on television and in news photos, because their production techniques are borrowed from advertising and commercial design. Unlike the videos, which are too pedantic and formally evolved to reach a mass audience, art by ACT-UP uses the techniques of mass culture to deliver a message of dissent. "If there is to be a movement that will shift the discussion of AIDS away from moralizing," writes Gregg Bordowitz (1987) in *October*, "it will be built out of an emergent popular culture, one that affirms the lives of those afflicted."

There is an inevitable tension between those who think that art—or, as they would call it, "cultural production"—must empower the afflicted, and those who insist on a more subjective—or as they might refer to it, "essential"—response. This conflict is ideological, temperamental, and even demographic. The audience for Edmund White's elegant stories about AIDS might find ACT-UP's iconography depersonalized and severe, while the activist legions might find the lush opacity of White's prose indulgent and remote. But both these responses are functional. White's protagonist finds a respite from his overwhelming sense of sterility by having sex with a young Greek hustler (who uses a condom), consoled by the entire history of gay culture in the West. Gary Indiana's (1989) novel, *Horse Crazy*, does not promote a political program but it vividly evokes the current climate of helplessness and horniness, belying those odes to the joy of couplehood that saturate the media (and much gay fiction). Bill T. Jones's dance contains no call to arms, but it addresses the grief and reconciliation which are as much a product of the epidemic as are anger and action. And the Names Proj-

ect stands against the denial of devotion that is as much a signature of homophobia as is the denial of civil rights. These works are models for mourning and renewal, and they stand alongside the exhortations of ACT-UP as elements in a cultural response whose aim is to promote survival, demand attention, and defeat stigma.

This response, coupled with political activism, has been highly effective. Rates of infection have flattened among gay men (at least in large cities). A citizens' movement, unprecedented in medicine, has won significant reforms in the release of new drugs. And the worst excesses of homophobia, which many thought would rise to the fore in the wake of AIDS, have so far been averted. Would the populace have tempered its initial fear and loathing of people with AIDS without artful action on the part of activists; and would dramatic changes in behavior have occurred in the gay community without potent iconography?

In a sense, the power of a coherent cultural response is most evident in its absence among those who do not perceive themselves to be at risk. The progress of AIDS among white, middle-class heterosexuals has been far more subtle than its rapid spread among drug users and gay men. Indeed, some conservative commentators (e.g., William F. Buckley and Pat Buchanan) have argued that, for drug-free heterosexuals who do not practice anal intercourse, AIDS does not represent a threat at all. Safe-sex education has been hampered by religious ideologies, and the rich potential of popular culture to organize a response to social crisis has been blocked by demographic constraints. In the face of these obstacles, movies, music, and media have dealt with AIDS in a highly inflected manner, offering reassurance in the form of domestic dramas and warnings in the style of sex-and-splatter films. While these works are popular, because they deal with collective fears and fantasies, it is doubtful that they have convinced many people to alter their behavior. No meaningful attempt is being made to reach teenagers—the group most likely to think itself invulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases—though there is increasing evidence that AIDS is spreading among them in urban areas. Nor has mass culture represented IV drug users, whose social status makes it impossible for them to represent themselves. Another group at significant risk—women of color—has been similarly ignored. Partly as a result of this malign neglect, the epidemic is growing fastest among these groups. They are, in the language of TV movies, “the most invisible victims”: the implicated among the immune.

## Conclusion: Assimilating the Unfathomable

The question remains: Why has the cultural response to AIDS been so elaborate? The mere fact that many artists are affected does not account for the profusion and appeal of these works. A fuller explanation may lie in the distinct anxieties this epidemic aroused. AIDS arrived in the midst of a moral (and political) panic over sexuality. The assumption that medicine had conquered venereal disease was replaced by an ominous revelation: science could not contain a new and deadly sexually transmitted disease. If anything, technological sophistication added to the anxiety by making AIDS seem unlike any previous pandemic. Here was an illness whose long latency differentiated it from influenza or plague, which could sweep through a population in only weeks. Now, it was possible to ascertain that infection occurred years before the onset of disease. This "diagnosis" created a new class of "patients," forced to live between sickness and health, giving a tangible twist to the old medical term, "worried well." But AIDS anxiety was hardly confined to the infected. Given the vast numbers of Americans who had experimented with sex and drugs during the previous decade—and the cultural backlash against such behaviors—many people outside so-called "risk groups" feared the stigmatization of AIDS.

Both art and entertainment spoke to these anxieties, albeit in very different ways. Mass culture provided a paradigm of social cohesion, while the fine arts offered a model of social struggle. Popular culture gave voice to the fear and rage of the majority, while the arts helped dispel stigma by deconstructing it. Both the fine arts and mass media worked (though certainly not dialectically) to enable Americans to assimilate the unfathomable. Cultural representation, combined with political activism, forged the current consensus on AIDS.

The crisis certainly has not passed, but it is fathomable now. There is general agreement about what AIDS is and how it spreads. The infected are learning to live with the ambiguities of their situation, and the rudiments of an effective therapy have created the hopeful impression that the epidemic will soon be "manageable." Indeed, the struggle now is to get treatments and prevention information to those in need. As society comes to terms with AIDS, its representations are becoming more variegated. The epidemic has generated a context within which issues of sexuality may be broached—even on television. PBS

will soon present *Longtime Companion*, a gay-oriented drama about AIDS whose candor would have been impermissible just a few years ago. There is some indication that Hollywood is about to bite the bullet: several AIDS-related films are being cast.

Signs of polarization remain—in politics as well as culture. The director of a student production of *The Normal Heart* in Missouri recently has his house firebombed; Congress has forbidden federal funding of homoerotic art. No doubt, there will always be a perceptual gap between the implicated and the immune, but as the epidemic becomes part of ordinary life, one can hope, at least, that the two cultures of AIDS will grow less distinct.

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