HIV/AIDS IN FILM & TELEVISION

READING

HIV/AIDS IN FILM & TELEVISION

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PRESENTED BY: MARIE CHEN | KEYU
Overview

Motivated

Background

Study of AIDS Movies

Focus

“Otherness” Concept

Implications

Gay Men Representation as Primary Other

Politics of Victim Blaming
Perception of AIDS

AIDS = GRID
Gay-Related Immune Deficiency

GAY CANCER

GAY PLAGUE
Social Construction of AIDS

Question: How do you spread a message about AIDS?

- Human discourse & social power are inherently intertwined
- Human communication process determine constituents of “truth” and appropriate social actions
- Serves to convey a sense of certainty in an uncertain world

- Terminology power to define & influence social issues & conditions
- Social construction are not necessarily objective truths
- “Invention of AIDS”: stories disseminated by more powerful and authoritative sources → shared social understanding

- Influenced on ways to perceive the real world: uses constructions to guide personal responses despite its validity
Question: How is the media utilized to spread message about AIDS?

1. Shape the way public thinks about and responds both socially & politically to pandemic

2. Internalization of social constructions

3. Representational practices mold a society’s cultural relationship to pandemic

4. Simultaneously enable & restrict what individuals can say about any aspect of “reality” at a given time

- Media representations of social phenomena contribute to widely shared social perceptions
- Use culturally shared codes & conventions to communicate social information
- Provide broadest common background of assumptions
- Transparent mediators of reality: where a component of audience knowledge is derived from

Final Result: Representations become commonly accepted ways to discuss HIV/AIDS
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AIDS Movie Study: Introduction

AIMS

• Analyze representation of AIDS in narrative creations of significantly longer length
• Materials: American movies released during first two decades of AIDS pandemic
• Theorize likely social ramifications of AIDS representations

RESEARCH QUESTION

In what ways do movies about HIV/AIDS influence American ideology and contribute to ongoing social construction of the pandemic?
Definition of AIDS Movie
Any fictional narrative movie that satisfy the following criteria

CONDITION #1: CHARACTER(S) POSSESSES ≥ 1 CHARACTERISTIC

- Infected with HIV
- Developed full-blown AIDS
- Grieving recent AIDS-related death of loved one

CONDITION #2: EXPLORES PROCESS OF CHARACTERS CONFRONTING REALITIES

- HIV Transmission
- Living with HIV/AIDS
- Dying from AIDS
Significance of Study

“no representation is ever free of social construction” – Thomas Piontek

- Mass media-texts can assemble and disseminate social constructions and not “reflections” that frequently become the perceived “reality” of audience
- Fictional portrayals can be more influential in beliefs formation about social groups relatively unfamiliar to audience
- Characteristics of HIV/AIDS pandemic that further increase significance of media representations:
  - Little first-hand knowledge of topic/group
  - Representations not readily contradicted by other culturally pervasive beliefs and ideologies
Motivated

Background → Study of AIDS Movies

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“Otherness” Concept

Implications

Gay Men Representation as Primary Other → Politics of Victim Blaming
“Otherness” in Films

- Applications to HIV/AIDS
- Risk Groups vs Non-Risk Groups
- Contaminated vs Pure Blood
- Innocent Victim vs Guilty

Characteristics of the “Other”
- Unacceptable
- Marginal
- Morally Deviant
- Distinguished
- Relative to Status Quo

Media representations of “Otherness” usually engage feelings like fears and anxieties.
Approach

- Genre: Melodrama
- Representation of Otherness
- Syfy
- Familiarity with AIDS movies
- Genre: Science Fiction
Parallels from Science Fiction

**SCIENCE FICTION: THX1138 (1971)**

- Dystopian universe: everything is controlled by computers and people are kept in their submissive state by powerful sedatives
- Main character attempts to escape with the male roommate
- Deviant behaviour: having sex, getting pregnant and breaking into the computer system
- Draws parallels to the social realities of America at that time --- the continual use of computers and technology leading to such dystopic setting
# Parallels from Science Fiction

## Science-Fiction Films
- Deals with human’s **hopes and fears** about the unusual and unknown (the ‘other’)
- Presents scenarios that deviate from current mainstream social conditions and norms
- Allows audience to recognize the potential end result of the world due to **man-kind creation**

## AIDS Films
- Focuses on **hopes and fears** of the fate of human civilization with regards to AIDS
- Unfortunate health realities being experienced by increasing number of individuals are **human-made** end result of more permissive sexual mores

**Ideological Implication: Unseen Terrors Under the Surface Normality**
Parallels from Science Fiction

Movie premise: seeds from space entered Earth and reproduced themselves

Seeds took over the minds and bodies of humans and leaving zombie-like duplicates in their place

Threatened the well-being of the entire human race
Parallels from Science Fiction

AIDS: PHILADELPHIA (1993)

- Main character (Andre Beckett) is an HIV-infected lawyer
- Initial portrayal: vibrant, health-looking
- As movie progresses, it shows how Beckett transforms into a compromised version of himself through physical deterioration, increasingly frail, increasing white hair
Parallels from Science Fiction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCIENCE-FICTION FILMS</th>
<th>AIDS FILMS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The ‘other’ as a physical being or a social phenomena <strong>threatening well-being</strong> of humans</td>
<td>HIV infections taking over individuals and changing their lives physically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eg: radioactivity in <em>On the beach</em> (1959)</td>
<td>• Transform normal-functioning individuals into immuno-compromised versions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eg: alien microorganism in <em>The Andromeda Strain</em> (1971)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Transformation of normal human beings into the ‘other’/ alternate version of themselves.**
### Parallels from Science Fiction

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<th>SCIENCE-FICTION FILMS</th>
<th>AIDS FILMS</th>
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<tr>
<td>- Scientific credibility: doctors and scientists saving the world from disaster/disease</td>
<td>- Medical science is presented as making committed attempts at saving people from ‘the other’ (threatening HIV)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Offers the hope that science will ultimately save humanity from ‘the other’, but ‘otherness’ in terms of HIV/AIDS seems to indicate a death penalty nevertheless.
### Parallels from Science Fiction

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCIENCE-FICTION FILMS</th>
<th>AIDS FILMS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language filled with fear of the unknown, of the alien, of the ‘other’, to produce anxiety in viewers</td>
<td>Adopting the language of science-fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Foreign and alien”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Parallels from Melodrama

**MELODRAMA: STELLA DALLAS (1937)**

- Stella is a lower-class woman who marries a wealthy businessman
- Her **socially unrefined nature/behaviour** ruins her marriage and her daughter’s life
- In the end, she launches a plan to detach herself from the refined society by allowing her daughter to leave her and her husband to remarry → **restores the patriarchal order at her personal expense**
- The failings of the ‘other’ is evident in their degree of suffering in the story plot
Parallels from Melodrama

MELODRAMA: DARK VICTORY (1939)

- Judith’s otherness stems from her **personality**: fiery, independent, undomesticated woman who does not seem to need a man
- Social expectations of a woman: needy, weak, requires support and protection from a man
- **Sacrifices her own emotional needs** (accompany on deathbed) to minimize emotionality of her death on her closest loved ones
- **Patriarchal social order is restored** as Judith (a socially constructed “deviant” woman) was **eradicated** upon death
Parallels from Melodrama

AIDS: IT’S MY PARTY (1996)

- Nick, a gay man with AIDS, learns that he has only a few more days of conscious existence.
- Decides to throw a two-day party for his family and friends.
- The party is a happy setting with jokes and fun.
- Similarly, sacrifice his own emotional needs to minimize the emotionality of his impending death for his closest loved ones.
- Eventually, Nick faces death alone.
Parallels from Melodrama

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MELODRAMA FILMS</th>
<th>AIDS FILMS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Character deviates in a readily identifiable way from the patriarchal social order</td>
<td>• Characters deviate by being infected with HIV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <em>Restores order</em> eventually in a sacrificial way, at tremendous personal expense</td>
<td>• Their ‘otherness’ only eradicated upon <em>(often selfless)</em> death</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Individuals ridding themselves of their ‘otherness’ in sacrificial and selfless ways in order to restore normalcy and/or make it easier for the ‘normal’ people.
### Difference from Melodrama

#### MELODRAMA FILMS
- Otherness of characters derive from **personality factors** (Eg: unrefined behaviour, independent spirit)
- Characters are able to eradicate their “otherness” by choice

#### AIDS FILMS
- Otherness of characters derive primarily from **HIV infection**
- Frequently associated with characters belonging to **traditionally peripheral groups** (Eg: gay community)
- Infected characters are unable to get rid of their “otherness”/disease by choice

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*Distinction demonstrates that members of stigmatized social groups must ultimately die to eradicate their deviant “otherness” so as to restore patriarchal social order*
## Parallels from Melodrama

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<th>AIDS FILMS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Protagonist is portrayed as a victim, longing for a return to the ideal where virtue triumphs over vice</td>
<td>• HIV-positive protagonist filled with nostalgia of the past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Individualised representation of otherness (as an enemy)</td>
<td>• Gay men as the ‘other’ who must be sacrificed to restore the order that existed prior to the discovery to HIV/AIDS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ‘otherness’ not as something (e.g. social issue) to be conquered together, but as an individual problem, an enemy, that can be resolved (in the case of AIDS, via death).
Approach

- Familiarity with AIDS movies
- Genre: Melodrama
- Gay men as the sacrificial other
- Representation of otherness
- Syfy
- Genre: Science fiction
- ‘Us’ vs ‘Them’ representation
Motivated

Focus

Implications

Study of AIDS Movies

“Otherness” Concept

Politics of Victim Blaming

Gay Men Representation as Primary Other

Background
Politics of Victim Blaming

Question: Under what conditions do viewers of AIDS movies
(i) resist experiencing sympathy for HIV/AIDS-infected characters
because they view them as being “the other”
(ii) be willing to experience sympathy because they view them
primarily as human beings?
“Us” VS “Them” Dichotomy

**FUNCTION: CLASSIFICATION OF AMERICANS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>US</th>
<th>THEM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NORMAL POPULATION</td>
<td>VILLAINS, THE OTHER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HETEROSEXUAL</td>
<td>GAY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIDDLE-UPPER CLASS</td>
<td>IV DRUG USERS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAMILY-CENTRED</td>
<td>PLEASURE SEEKING</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NON PLEASURE-SEEKING</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Us” VS “Them” Dichotomy

**FUNCTION: CLASSIFICATION OF AMERICANS**

**US**
- INNOCENT

**STATUS**

**THEM**
- GUILTY

**THREATENED BY**

“THEM” TRADITIONALLY EVOKED SOCIAL DISCOMFORT → SHIFTED RESPONSIBILITY OF HIV SPREAD TO THIS GROUP DUE TO THEIR “DEVIANT” BEHAVIOURS AND MARGINALIZED STATUS INSTEAD OF THE VIRUS ITSELF
Purpose of Victim Blaming

**RELIGION**
Disease as a punishment from god due to sins of infected group

**MENDING SOCIAL FABRIC**
Compensate for the general social and moral decay

**CONTROLLABILITY**
Strategy to make HIV/AIDS which is incomprehensible explainable

**SOCIAL DISTANCING**
Locate risk outside of oneself and in the “other” to achieve perceived immunity

**REDUCE PANIC**
Avoid fundamental anxiety about death from HIV/AIDS
## Historical Influences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HIV/AIDS PANDEMIC</th>
<th>EXTREME REACTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lethal</td>
<td>Social hysteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disease emerges</td>
<td>Moralistic scapegoating of certain individuals as causes of HIV/AIDS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suddenly</td>
<td>Persistent link between HIV/AIDS and gay or IV drug user deviant behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death rates from</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV/AIDS rises</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quickly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No ready explanation for disease</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Scapegoating

- Members selected: members of dominant social groups that harbour hostility or suspicion → usually social outcasts
- Significance: identification of scapegoat reflect the society’s beliefs, stereotypes and political biases at a given time
- “Scapegoats” are perceived to be “worthy” of sacrifice
- General population who do not identify with the scapegoats will have lesser fear of HIV/AIDS → assured/ calmed
Process of Victim Blaming
Analysis of how processes are presented in AIDS Movies

INNOCENT VICTIMS
• Contract HIV/AIDS entirely at fault of others
• Eg: infants of infected mothers

DIFFERENTIAL DEGREES OF INNOCENCE/ GUILT

VICTIM CONTINUUM

GUilty VICTIMS
• Contract HIV/AIDS due to “deviant” practices (intercourse, drug injection)
• Eg: gay men, IV drug users

↑SYMPATHY AT SOCIETAL LEVEL
Presentation of Victim Continuum


“…how fortunate it is that AIDS has largely been confined to members of high-risk groups and has only rarely affected innocent Americans like you and me” – *As Is* (1986)

“…son’s battle with AIDS is God’s will” – *Our Sons* (1991)

“acronym AIDS really stands for Adios, Infected Dick-suckers” – *The Living End* (1992)

Consequence: Perpetuate US- VS- THEM Dichotomy with regard to “Innocent” and “Guilt”
Presentation of Victim Continuum

**Extended trial** of closeted homosexual and vindictive communist – *Citizen Cohn* (1992)

Heterosexual male face **painful and prolonged death** due to unprotected sex with female prostitute instead of a more upstanding heterosexual female – *An Early Frost* (1985)

A gay man and IV drug user are recruited to take part in an elaborate crime because they are **socially undesirable** and hence **dispensable** individuals – *The Immortals* (1995)

**Consequence:** Imply that AIDS is a deserved punishment of individuals who freely choose to violate widely shared social and moral norms by their deviant behaviour.
Presentation of Victim Continuum

Unnecessary introduction of derogatory terms related to homosexuality (Eg: homo, queer, faggots)– *The Ryan White Story* (1989)

Two boys are accused to have crossed into a “no-homo zone” because one of them is infected with AIDS– *The Cure* (1995)

Consequence: Reinforce notions of gay men as guilty victims and others as innocent ones and maintain false sense of distancing and disease immunity
Presentation of Victim Continuum
Contrasted with Representation of AIDS with regards to Innocent Victims

- In *Kids* (1995), the character Jennie is still described to be innocent though she contract HIV through unprotected heterosexual sex.
- Innocence is determined by the fact she did not engage in what socially deemed as “deviant” behaviour (Eg: gay sex, IV drug injection).
The Way Forward for AIDS Movies

INNOCENT

GUILTY

CHANGE OF FOCUS

INVISIBLE VICTIMS

Alternative to victim blaming: Regular creation and dissemination of prosocial narratives about caring for everyone regardless of disease status.
Motivated

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Study of AIDS Movies

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“Otherness” Concept

Politics of Victim Blaming

Gay Men Representation as Primary Other
Background
Persistent Representational Link between Gay Men and AIDS

- AIDS is previously labelled as GIRD → construct of AIDS as a “gay disease”,
directly related to their deviant sexual practices.
  - Media language perpetuated this despite evidence otherwise
- The (false) notion that general public = safe, gay men = high-risk
- Stigma of AIDS linked to stigma of homosexuality
- Emphasis on lifestyle of gay rather than (risky) behaviours
- Gay men is further stigmatized and constructed as an even greater threat to
  America’s social order.
- Construct of AIDS as a gay disease persists in movies: characters with AIDS are
  more often than not represented by gay men
Opportunities for Gay Males

- Unfortunate result of social construction that AIDS is persistently linked to gay males
- Provided numerous opportunities for representation of gay men in theatres and television
- Existing potential to shape how Americans approach the topic of homosexuality and influence relationships among various social groups
- Alter and expand commonly accepted ways in which non-gays perceive and discuss status of gay men and their lives in modern American society

Question: Overall, how positively or negatively are members of gay community represented in AIDS movies?
Shortcomings for Gay Males

**Reflection**
- Merely transmitting a meaning that already exists

**Representation**
- **Active work** is done to select, present, structure and a shape a message or meaning of a particular topic
- Stem from **codes, conventions, symbols themes and visuals** movies makers choose to include

**Consequence:** Ideological guidance provided to viewers emerges out of representational power relations that place the majority of control over representation in the hands of rich, white, heterosexual males.
Positive Representations

• A small number of AIDS movies were created under the guidance of gay male directors and/or targeted largely to gay male viewers → more accurately portray realities associated with the gay male experience in modern American society
• Eg: Portray gay men in committed and monogamous relationships
• Typical positive representation: gay men as devoted, supportive, caretaking and nurturing companions to friends and lovers dying of AIDS
  – Limitation: inevitably perpetuate stereotypes of gay men linked with traditional nurturing role of women
Positive Representations

Limitations/ Barriers to Positive Representations

- Ideal representations: should present full range of choices available in homosexual expression and address HIV modes of transmission
- Institutional censorship in *An Early Frost (1985)*
  - Representation of AIDS is muted, justified in commercial terms
- Mindset persisted in the majority of AIDS movies ever since
  - *Philadelphia*
  - *Our Sons, Citizen Cohn, In the Gloaming...*

**Consequence:** Despite increase in number of gay characters represented, representational progress remains slow
### Negative Representations

**GAY MEN AS EMBARRASSMENTS TO THEIR PARENTS**

- Strained / non-existent relationships after coming out
- Dwelling on distinction between a man being ‘gay’ or being ‘normal’
- Occurs primarily between gay children and fathers or single mothers where fathers are entirely absent
- Parents are ashamed of their children sexuality

**Consequences**

- Social construction of a society where differences in sexuality are devalued
- Perpetuate heterosexism
- Stereotyping gay men as effeminate, passive and deviant
Negative Representations

GAY MEN AS SEXUALLY PROMISCUOUS INDIVIDUALS WHO IRRESPONSIBLY PUT OTHERS AT RISK

- Multiple partners
- Engage in casual/wild sex
- Spread

Consequences
- ↓Levels of social tolerance for gay men
- ↑Levels of homophobia: view gay men as life-threatening individuals
- Reinforcing inaccurate perceptions that all gay men engage in high-risk sexual behaviours
Consequences for Gay Males

**PERSISTENT REPRESENTATIONAL LINK BETWEEN GAY MEN AND AIDS**

Representations of gay males in movies indicate how they are treated in real life: *discrimination, harassment*

Generation of a *new homophobia* → harassment and violence towards gay men connected to AIDS-related fears and prejudices

Gay men blamed as the cause of the AIDS epidemic → used as an ‘evidence’ of why *homosexuality must be eradicated*

Regular representation of gay men in AIDS movies has served primarily to reinforce the social construction of AIDS as “*a universal problem perpetuated by gays*”
Consequences for Other Social Groups

Media can educate and influence viewers about HIV/AIDS

APPEALING ELEMENTS OF POPULAR CULTURE

- Pervasiveness
- Popularity
- Personal Focus
- Persuasiveness
- Passion
Consequences for Other Social Groups

**Homophily of characters**: degree to which characters are similar to viewers
- Greater homophily $\rightarrow$ greater credibility $\rightarrow$ greater chance of viewer being influenced personally

**Consequence: Physiological Boundary between Gay and Non-gay**
- False sense of security that they are not at risk so long as they stay within the straight community
- Inhibits preventive behaviours for the heterosexual community

**Discussion and Debate About Social Issues Presented**
## Consequences for Other Social Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Considerations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wrong target audience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme representations?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unnecessary inclusion of gay male characters in narratives?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other under-represented minority groups?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

• Movies (and other mass media), can portray the AIDS situation to influence the attitudes and behaviours of the general public
• Film representation of AIDS mimic that of science-fiction and melodrama films
• Politics of Victim Blaming
• Gay Men Representation as the Primary “Other”: Persistent Link
Discussion Question

Given that 15 years have passed since the study was conducted, are there any differences in media representations of HIV/AIDS now and then?

Video Link: Girl, Positive (2007)
Discussion Question

Given that the final goal of eradicating AIDS means that it has to be depicted as something undesirable and to be removed, how do you think this can be done without the negative connotations of ‘the other’?
Discussion Question

While the study conducted was on movies primarily, what do you think is the potential of other media forms (Eg: drama series) to give accurate representation of HIV/AIDS (in gay community for example)?

Video Link: How To Get Away With Murder (1x15)
Discussion Question

Regarding the AIDS situation, representing minority groups may fuel stereotypes, but not representing them may seem to be marginalizing the already isolated group of people. What do you feel about this? Is there a way to balance the two sides of representation?
Discussion Question

Do you know of any films in Singapore that represent HIV/AIDS? If no, what do you think are the reasons and barriers? Do you think Singapore media has the potential to represent local HIV/AIDS situation?

Video Links:
The Anniversary (2011) by Royston Tan
Discussion Question

When questioned with the muted representation of gay relationships in an AIDS movie *Breaking the Surface: The Greg Louganis Story*, the producer said that realistic representations of intimacy between gay men...would detract from the goal of creating “a general awareness and hopefully tolerance from those who are different”. Do you agree with him in the context of Singapore society? Do you think this can/will change in the future?