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AIDS REPRESENTATION IN THE CINEMA

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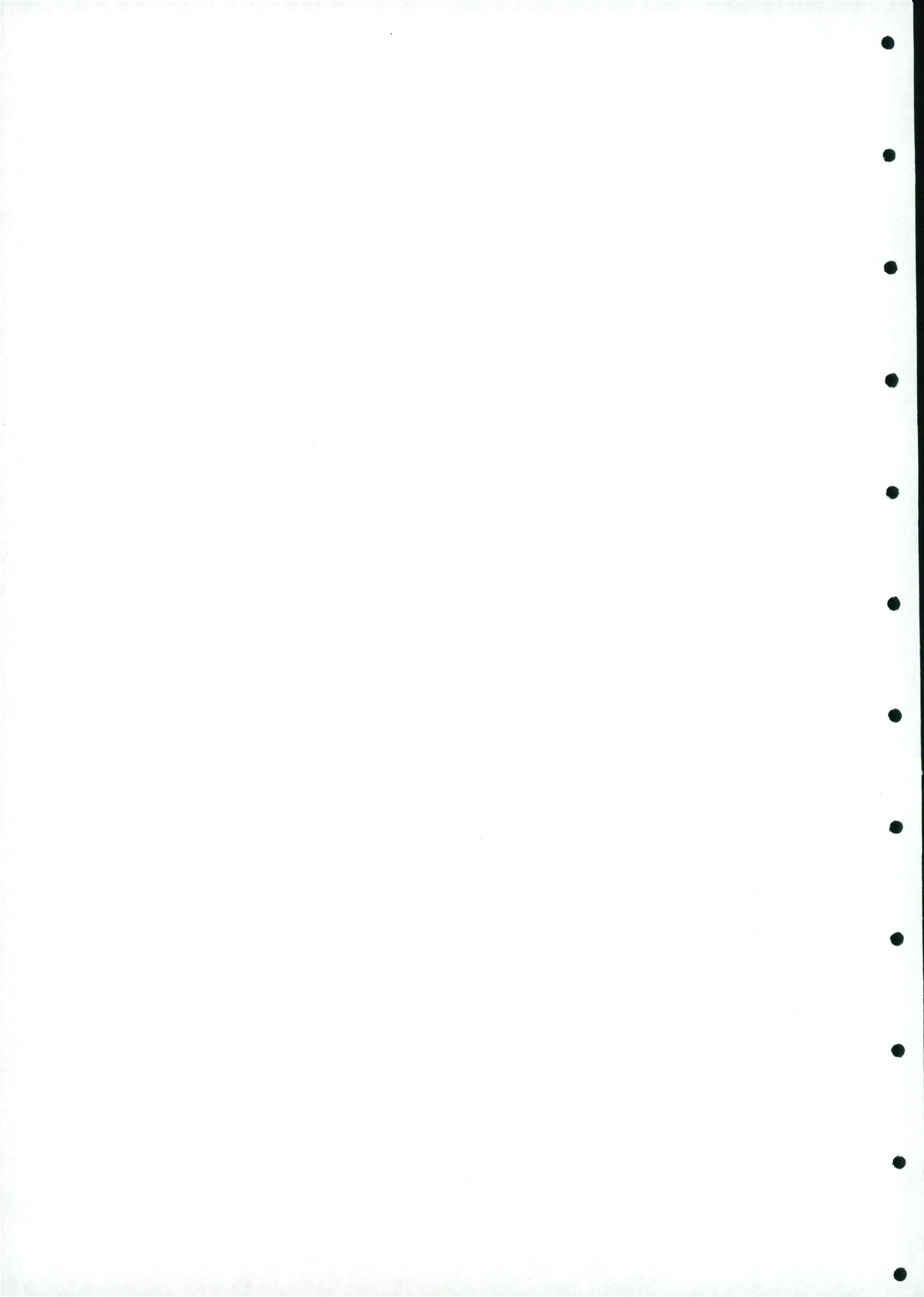
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## Introduction:

On Friday, June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1981 the American Centre for Disease Control's weekly newsletter "The Morbidity and Mortality Weekly" published an article on a mysterious new illness which appeared to be affecting the immune systems of otherwise healthy gay men in the New York and San Francisco areas. This disease initially known as GRID (Gay Related Immune Deficiency) and considered as a 'gay cancer' has since been diagnosed as AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). In 1994 Tom Hanks was awarded an Oscar for his portrayal of a gay man coming to terms with AIDS in the Hollywood movie *Philadelphia* (Demme, 1994). It can be seen as a film thirteen years in the making, from the initial media outbreak to the cultural maelstrom the disease produces today. *Philadelphia* has been described as 'bearing the burden of all the films that have not preceded it' (Taubin, 1994). As one of the more contemporary, evasive and popular of today's art-forms, it is both interesting and provocative to chart the rather turbulent relationship that exists between cinema and such a controversial and stigmatised illness as AIDS.

In considering narratives which depict or make reference to AIDS and its sufferers we must consider questions of film form (and the specific conventions of formal systems) which in turn dictate the fashion in which issues such as AIDS are dealt. Such assessment probes notions of disease representation and the specific dilemmas of mainstream narratives dealing with issues associated with profanity and deviancy. Does cinema exist merely as a form of escapist entertainment (restricted by its history) whereby any attempt at a reappraisal of society's mores is met with accusations of elitism and of alienating its audience? While it would be easy to dismiss such questions of a cinematic whole or entity as overly simplified, they do act as anchor points about which the discourse can revolve.

One must realise that cinema as a medium is an exceptionally diverse entity including virtually all work utilising moving images, from cartoons to pornography. The major schism between European and American cinema both in form and content quickly comes to the fore in any discussion of cinema as a whole. At this stage in the history of cinema there can be seen to exist two major oppositional formal systems - that of mainstream American movies, (i.e. Hollywood) and European arthouse cinema.





This 'formal system' is based on the notion of the audience reading what is essentially the patterned relationship of a long line of still photographic images in terms of an event or group of events. How these events unfold and relate to us and each other in terms of exacting an idea or emotion is both the product of and essence of film form. These formal systems not only account for how issues are represented and addressed, but also how the very issues are given significance.

This dual nature of contemporary film has led to the creation of a fixed idea of what cinema can and should show. Thus we find that a social issue like AIDS appears in Hollywood films usually in a metaphorical sense as an undercurrent of fear and paranoia, while it appears in European film as a personal issue (to be dealt with not by society, but by the sufferer). This is of course, a generalised comment but on the whole accounts for most illness representation on screen, both in Hollywood and Europe. This received inability to portray the realities of disease (specifically in Hollywood) has led to a new political, avant-garde response; the use of metaphor is obviously not strong or forceful enough for those accustomed to political activism where the messenger is always superseded by the message. Thus, we can view the use of cinema by AIDS Activists as a third (minor) formal consideration. By limiting my discussion to works created largely within the formal conventions of the American and European industries I am largely ignoring AIDS Activist work which is often video based and inaccessible to audiences outside large American cities. However in acknowledging the work of Activist artists we are forced to reassess the reaction of film-makers (who are fortunate enough to get global theatrical releases, including both independent and studio-based production) to such a frightening global epidemic and its adherent demographics.

From its initial diagnosis AIDS was regarded as a gay disease and not surprisingly existed in terms of 'queer' culture and history. It very quickly became more than a disease, with the connotations of drug-taking and gayness came the added stigma of abject social deviancy. AIDS can be seen as a natural progression in illness terms, from syphilis, leprosy, TB and cancer whose victims have had the added burden of a distinct prejudice shown to them by society due to the representation of their disease. One of the major outcomes of this misrepresentation is the inability that appears



within mainstream reporting today to deal with AIDS as a disease and not as a political, racial, discriminatory or gay issue. It is ironic that due to the misnomers, created to a large extent by the metaphoric descriptions of the disease as 'a visitation' and 'hidden evil', that its mostly through metaphor that AIDS is discussed today.

I would suggest therefore that through an examination of the representation of disease in 'mainstream' cinema coupled with an analysis of the conventions of cinematic form some explanations could be proposed for the production of the specific AIDS-related movies that exist today. I would also propose an analysis of these films in an attempt to discern the effectiveness of particular reactions to the epidemic.



## AIDS REPRESENTATION:

“This new world may be safer, told  
The dangers and diseases of the old.”

*John Donne, The First Anniversary.*

It is with this premise that much of the reporting of disease (particularly AIDS) takes place, i.e. as a sort of warning or look-out for enemies both outside and inside society. For many centuries the description of disease in the West has relied upon military metaphors of enemies to be fought by our legions of doctors and nurses. The body was considered as abnormal when in sickness, unlike Eastern thought, which recognised illness as another state the body may fall into from time to time. In the West, the health of entire communities were described as being under constant threat from outside influences such as epidemics and plagues. The “immune system is commonly described as mounting a defence or siege against the invasion of alien bodies or tumours which are fought, attacked or killed by white blood cells, drugs or surgical procedures,” (*Lupton, 1994, 61*). The use of the military metaphor is probably most prevalent today where we are constantly being attacked by new and more deadly diseases: C.J.D (mad cow disease), cancer and AIDS. The airtime and media coverage afforded these ‘new’, ‘fatal’ and ‘incurable’ diseases may be related to the commonly felt belief that by the twenty-first century all disease would be ‘defeatable’ in the First World. The fact that Africa was accused of exporting the AIDS virus furthered associations with ‘baseness’ and ‘lack of hygiene’ and may account to some extent for the prevalence of epidemic and plague analogies in the media today.

Much of this reporting is as a direct result of the metaphors used to describe disease and the diseased. One must of course recognise that while the diseased incur the stigma of the disease, so too does the disease incur the stigma of the diseased. This accounts for much of the stigma adherent to AIDS as a disease associated with abject deviancy such as acts of homosexuality, drug addiction or prostitution.



“Metaphor works by association, by comparing two non-associated entities centring on the ways in which they resemble each other, in so doing the metaphor shapes perception, identity, experience, going beyond the original association by evoking a host of multiple meanings.”

*(Clatts and Mutchler, 1989, 106)*

Thus we see that representations of AIDS as a ‘gay cancer’ are dangerous in terms of misappropriating two terms to describe a third and non-related entity, thus adding the stigmas and associations of both homosexuality and cancer to the known facts regarding AIDS - a debilitating and fatal disease spread through bodily fluids that cause a weakening of the immune system.

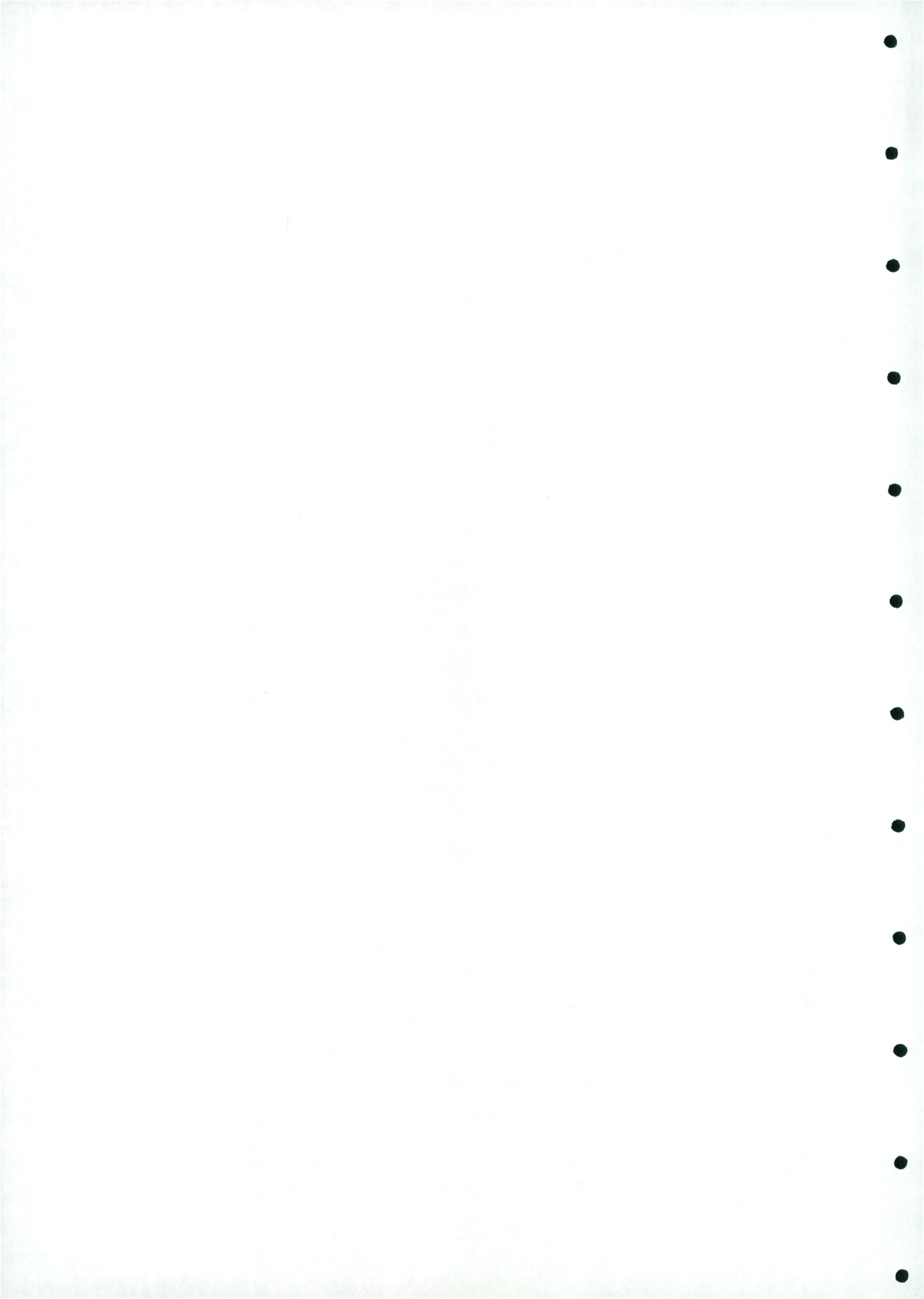
“In metaphor one has stratification of meaning in which an incongruity of sense on one level produces an influx of significance on another,” *(Lupton, 1994, 55)*. This is evident in the reporting of AIDS where as a distinct entity it travelled far beyond the known facts and became the product of the perceptions of the descriptions used. However, coupled with this misrepresentation of AIDS, there existed the already entrenched notions of disease and its specific attributes; disease has often been viewed (in the West) as a corrective or punishment and seen in providential terms. The language of disease and the diseased, often appearing as a value judgement, has a direct influence on the perceptions of the person affected and how society views them.

“To say that someone has AIDS is to say much more than that person is experiencing the progressive exposure of fragile vital organs to the ravages of common infections. It is to say that he or she is a certain type of person socially and morally defined ... the metaphoric prediction of AIDS opens a door to the dark, musty cellar of cultural associations of the profane, the defiled, the denied, the unshown, the forbidden, the feared.”

*(Lupton, 1994, 57)*

The relationship between society and the individual becomes clouded upon diagnosis of disease - and where the individual would have been judged to a large extent by their intercourse with society, there is now the added stigma associated with AIDS (notions of deviancy and profanity). So it becomes apparent that perceptions of the epidemic become inseparable from the realities of the disease, whereby those affected by AIDS now take on the stigma of the disease and the previously diseased.





Susan Sontag, (herself a cancer sufferer) describes in her book, *Illness As Metaphor* (1989, 209) “the extraordinary cultural resonance that disease has achieved in western society and whereby we understand disease solely in terms of metaphor, not only as a rhetorical device but as a vital epistemological device” (*Ibid.* 209.) She comments that AIDS has “banalised cancer and taken its mantle as the evil, invisible predator, a disease with added significance.” It appears that such significance is reserved for particular diseases such as leprosy, syphilis and AIDS. While AIDS does have added stigma associated with deviancy, it shares with cancer the notion of its being in some way self-inflicted, cancer through smoking, drinking and pent-up worries and frustrations, AIDS through deviant actions. This stigma of self-infliction has further alienated sufferers - where society does not appear to show the same pity or compassion as shown ‘innocent victims’ of disease. This attitude is evident in recent reports of American doctors refusing to treat cancer victims who smoke and in opinions of right-wing politicians. Reagan’s former speech writer wrote the following article on the self-destructive nature of the homosexual community; “The gays yearly die by their thousands of AIDS crying out in rage for medical research to save them from the consequences of their own suicidal self-indulgence.” (*Buchanon, 1989*)

The added externalised fear of AIDS as an attack from outside society may account for the perceived differentiation made between guilty and innocent victims, i.e. those who contracted the disease through blood transfusions, work, violence etc., and those regarded as deviants. It is often images of these innocent victims of the epidemic that mainstream narratives choose to show, because they prevent problems associated with depicting ‘deviants’ as anything other than criminal or evil. AIDS representation has furthered notions of the ‘other’, those not considered as of value to, or part of general society.

The fact that AIDS usually affects groups already considered as outsiders is of the essence when considering its effect and representation. The word ‘sick’ alone throws up two very distinct meanings; the sick as the unwell or ill and the sick as deprived or seedy sociopaths. Thus we see that the AIDS sufferer can be included in both definitions furthering notions of the epidemic as a visitation on the deprived. AIDS is



quite frequently discussed in terms of a punishment for unhealthy lifestyles and weakness of will.

“The comparing of AIDS to plague inspires century-old fears of incipient illness spread mysteriously and striking down large numbers of people without warning - plagues are invariably regarded as judgements on society and inevitably imputes such moralism”.

*(Sontag, 1989, 113)*

Thus we see that the metaphors used and the scare tactics employed by the media cause AIDS to exist as an imagined reality quite distinct from its actual reality in terms of affected groups.

One of the ironies evident in relation to AIDS as a gay disease centres on the new-found willingness of the media to discuss homosexuality as a real and distinct facet of our culture. The AIDS issue has acted as a unifying force amongst gay groups in terms of an increased solidarity in the face of societies underlying homophobia. The conception of society as fundamentally clean, (something quite evidently portrayed by Hollywood) but distressed by the ravages of the depraved and vice-ridden, is echoed in discussions of the ‘body politic’ as a state under attack. Such discourse serves to draw boundaries between self and other by representing the body as a nation-state which is vulnerable to attack by foreign invaders involving and resolving anxieties connected to xenophobia, invasion, control and contamination. The visualisation of the disease and diseased and the adherent stigmas of ‘the other’ help to dehumanise and exteriorise. In an attempt to reverse much of the misrepresentation of the AIDS crisis and the general prejudice felt by those affected, AIDS Activism grew in the 80s, starting in America and spreading largely to the rest of the First World. Unlike most political activism, these groups sought to convey their messages through existing cultural and artistic mediums and channels, such as painting, graphic design, video and film. However, such attempts to fight ignorance and misrepresentation appear as a small drop in the ocean in terms of the general consensus among the public regarding stigmatised disease (specifically AIDS).



As Judith Williamson observed,

“It is relatively easy to counter hysterical conservatism, it is less easy to pin down the wider sense in which AIDS takes its place within the narrative systems along whose tracks events seem to glide quite naturally, whether in news report, movie plots or everyday explanation.”

(Williamson, 89, 107).

Thus in attempting to reassess notions of AIDS and disease one is also calling into question specific fears and anxieties regarding homosexuality. Unlike the female body, the male (especially the homosexual) has rarely been the subject of the gaze. And with this new found visibility has come a highlighting of an already evident prejudice. This also emphasises the difference between media and film where homosexuality in the cinema remains largely a subject-matter for the arthouse and independents. The narratives that mainstream culture produce generally reflect prominent public opinion, thus relegating most AIDS-issue film to a gay, activist or underground source and audience. However, any Hollywood film dealing with AIDS would firstly have to confront the prevalent view of gay men as victims, carriers, deviants and ‘the other.’ Coupled with this is the issue of death - the slow, prolonged, debilitating, painful death associated with AIDS, such footage also runs the risk of accusations of dehumanising and exploiting the victim. This can be seen in relation to Activist reaction to Benetton’s use of the image of a dying AIDS victim in a recent advertising campaign. Here Benetton’s in-house designer Oliviero Toscani was strongly criticised for dehumanising a dying AIDS sufferer David Kirby in what was essentially an attention-seeking and exploitative advertising ploy.

*Longtime Companion* as activist art:

One of the first movies to deal exclusively with AIDS, Howard Rene’s American independent film *Longtime Companion* (1990) analysed some of the effects of the epidemic without being exploitative or blasé. Rene’s film charts the disease and its effect on a close-knit community of white middle-class gay men set in 80s New York. *Longtime Companion* begins with the central characters on holiday at Fire Island in 1981 and slowly chronicles the disease from its initial diagnoses to its attainment of



mythical status within the gay community. We are not presented with a central character as seen in most Hollywood narratives but rather a group of characters. This echoes the general gay perception of a collective consciousness, the notion of the AIDS epidemic as a communal rather than personal experience. The film conveys the message that the reaction of a straight community would be no different to that of the gay community - confounding notions of homosexual men as issue-ridden, political and abnormal. As Simon Watney commented on this aspect,

“In this respect the sight of ordinary lesbians or gay men getting on with our own lives, usually in a way like everybody else has a special significance in countries like Britain and the US where we’re generally regarded as strange and exotic”.

*(Watney, 1994, 207).*

Post-industrial western society has generally regarded itself as an extension of the family with the word ‘general public’ coming to represent the notion of a distinct ‘normal’ community outside of which exists the ‘other’. This view of society helps accentuate perceptions of the gay community (and other minorities) as existing outside of ‘the public’ which simply comes to represent the dominant community and its adherent opinions. The use of ‘the family’ as a means of reflecting the prevalent opinion and prejudices of the day can be traced to a narrowing of notions of ‘community’, ‘nation’ and ‘species’. As Foucault argued,

“The family becomes an instrument rather than a model: the privileged instrument for the government of the population and not the chimerical model for good government. This shift from the levels of the model to that of instrument is, I believe, absolutely fundamental and it is the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that the family appears in this dimension of instrumentality with respect to the population: hence the campaigns on morality, marriage, vaccinations, etc.”

*(Foucault, 1979, 17)*

This may help provide a fore-grounding in relation to the depiction of gay men in *Longtime Companion* as the affected rather than the infector, (i.e. malicious spreaders of disease), as members of the family rather than attackers of the family. Rene reverses prevalent (homophobic) perceptions in his depiction of the gay community as



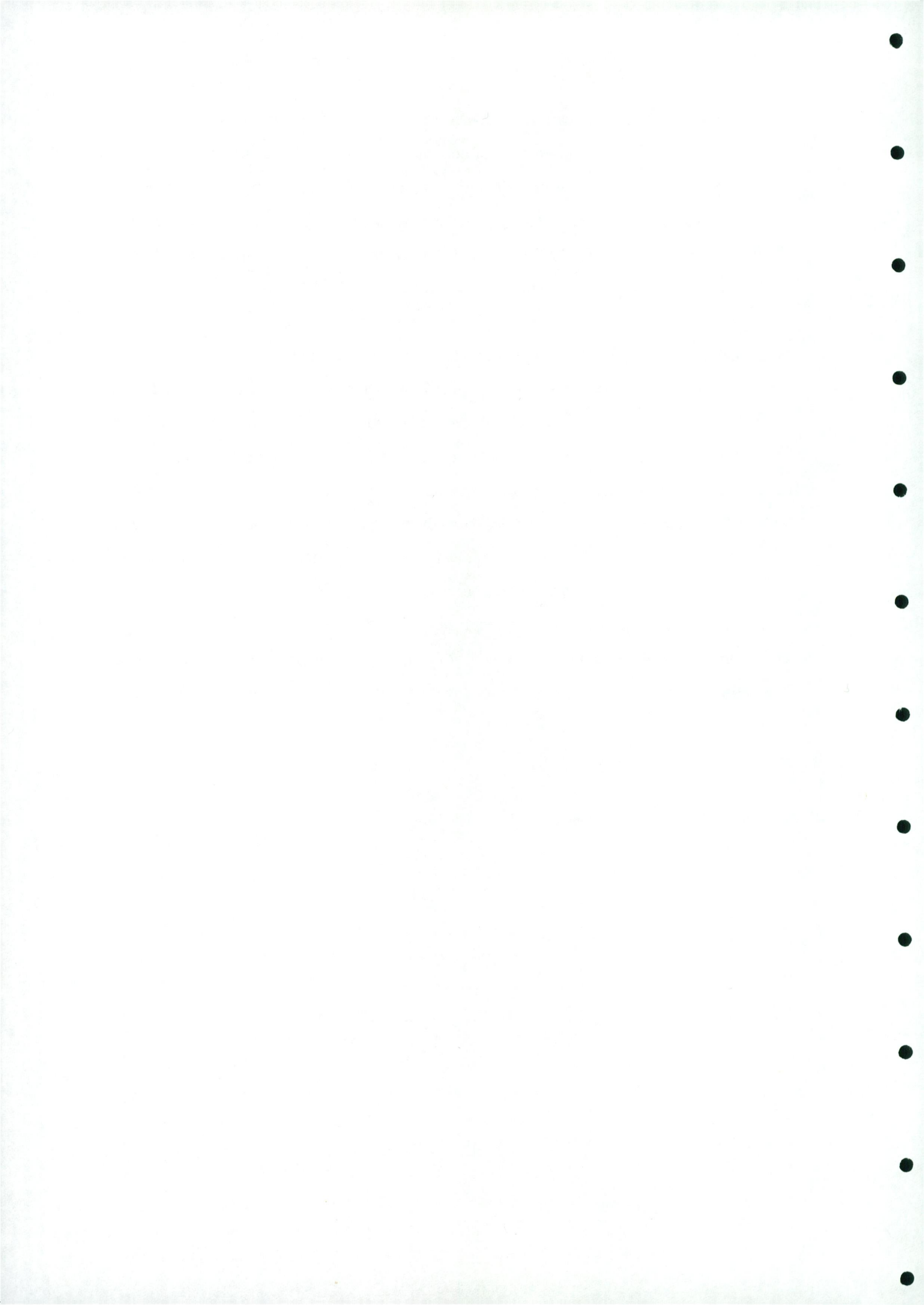


'the family' and the virus as 'the other', the notion of 'spreader' is thus made defunct. However this community which appears in *Longtime Companion* is obviously not the same as 'the family' in real or metaphorical terms. By forcing us to reconsider this group as 'a family' Rene makes the term defunct as a metaphor for 'mainstream' society. *Longtime Companion* confronts the notion of 'otherness' and 'deviancy', in its depiction of the ordinary day-to-day aspects of life within the epidemic. The characters appear as content, well-adjusted human individuals coming to terms with a new and unknown disease killing many of their partners and friends; their anger and resentment appear as a normal reaction.

As the film plots the course of AIDS from the initial infection and consequently blasé attitude of the characters to the rebirth of the entire community, we can see reactions and emotions change from ignorance to awareness to anger and to remorse. At the end, AIDS can be seen as becoming part of the protagonists' lives (as happened to most gay men in New York) with organisations such as 'ACT UP' being a focal point in their lives. The final sequence where all those who have died come streaming over the sand dunes has been criticised as a determination to have a happy ending at any cost. However, it seems a little unfeasible to consider the sight of all these 'dead' men as anything other than upsetting. As Simon Watney suggests, "the sequence works precisely on the level of its cathartic release of long pent-up emotions", (Watney, 1994, 223) which themselves are frequently in conflict. The film is shot in quasi documentary style with the year appearing on screen at the beginning of each segment. It flies in the face of most narratives on the subject with no innocent victims, but instead shows gay men as normal - placing them as the everyday rather than the more usual 'other.' Here *Longtime Companion* can be seen as "deploying one narrative in order to discredit another", 'using the narrative forms of the entertainment industry in order to call into question its own stubborn fears and prejudices" (Watney, 1994, 216). Until its release in 1990, there existed very few non-activist movies which dealt with AIDS as a subject, rather the disease was referred to briefly or in relation to 'an innocent victim', thus absolving the filmmakers of any need to deal with difficult subjects (homosexuality, death, illness etc.). One of *Longtime Companion's* attributes is its single-mindedness, rather than attempting to deal with the virus on a global or even continental scale it limits its narrative to a



discussion of the implications of AIDS for a specific gay community in New York. While it has been criticised for not addressing other topics, such as homophobia or racism, its concentration on a specific community gives it a narrative coherence and prevents it from becoming too issue-saturated or sloganing to be digested by a mainstream audience. One critic cited the lack of a safe-sex message within the movie as a cause for complaint - where presumably the makers saw the entire film as promoting safe-sex, making such specific treatment superfluous. One problem with such a critical reading of the narrative is the activists' unwillingness to compromise their message by adherence to the formal conventions of the medium. A duality can therefore clearly be seen to exist in terms of perceptions of the purpose of art dealing with AIDS, between those that view the epidemic as a contemporary subject matter (and as worthy of analysis as any contemporary concern) and those that view art as a vehicle for their propaganda on the subject. To a large extent within *Longtime Companion* the twain appear to meet, it being lauded by critics and activist commentators alike as an honest chronicle of the disease. It can be seen therefore, that *Longtime Companion's* strength lies in its reiteration of homosexuality as normality while retaining the sense of dismay, remorse and anger existing in the gay community due to the epidemic levels the disease has reached because of the uncaring policies and attitudes of government.



## The Effects Of The Formal Conventions Of European And Hollywood Cinema:

In relation to the depiction of AIDS outside Activist circles the difference between the approaches of Hollywood and European cinema becomes quite obvious. In terms of reaction, disregarding any notion of quality reporting, filmmakers lag behind creative voices in other mediums having reacted meagrely to the epidemic in comparison to the enormity of the media response. European cinema tends to deal with AIDS in terms of the body politic - the body as a distinct entity that relates to society but is not society. Thus we find films like Collard's *Savage Nights*(1994) and Beauvois' *Don't forget you're going to die* (1995), dealing with AIDS as a personal tragedy akin to anomie or disease. The issue appears as a personal dilemma to be dealt with by the protagonist. This is of course at odds with a Hollywood AIDS movie such as *Philadelphia* or an 'AIDS metaphor' movie such as *Aliens 3* where AIDS appears as a visitation on a nation - a political or social issue rather than a personal one.

Upon investigation one sees that the reason for these disparate reactions can be traced to a large extent to the formal cinematic systems to be found in the respective industries. European cinema can be seen as primarily arthouse while Hollywood encompasses most American mainstream commercial production. And while underground cinema exists in both spheres we must consider it as a distinct entity not infringing upon the dominant traditions. "Form has been described as a specific system of patterned relationships we perceive in any art-work," (*Bordwell, 1990, 40*). And while form is sometimes described as a container in which content exists, it is misleading to believe that form doesn't alter the movie's meaning.

It is necessary to give a brief history of cinematic form and its theory to show the effect on the works produced by such dualistic formal systems. Hollywood is seen as the bastion of popular culture - 'entertainment for the masses,' while European cinema is seen as being a more high brow art medium. Prior to World War I, Europe was the centre for cinematic endeavour, French production accounting for 90% of the films made in 1914. However, due to the enormous damage suffered by mainland Europe



in the war, film production dropped sharply allowing America to develop its burgeoning industry. Thus by 1928, 85% of the world's films were Hollywood productions and this was furthered again in the following years by the crippling effects on Europe of post war depression and World War II.

During the pre World War II period French cinema was viewed as an exciting new medium by artistic and intellectual communities with artists such as Jean Cocteau, Salvador Dali and the Dadaists all getting involved. Film was considered as a valid artistic medium and far more than escapist entertainment - a concept heightened by the formation of cinema clubs whose goal was "to lend a hand to all those who are struggling to evaluate the art of the moving picture above that created by businessmen" (Neale, 1981, 18). However, Hollywood's universal appeal to both the proletariat and bourgeois was something that the European industry never achieved, remaining instead a national cinema with artistic aspirations. The major stumbling block in the road to European cinema's mass popularity lay in Hollywood's monopoly and the inability or unwillingness of European cinema to compromise. Hollywood was treated with a thinly veiled contempt, seen as a business concerned only with monetary success. European cinema didn't have the same emphasis on profitability as it was so heavily supported by individual governments both as a means of control and as a source of national pride against the perceived cultural threat posed by Hollywood. "The issue of Hollywood domination of the national market came to be re-articulated within the terms provided by a specifically nationalist ideology," (Neale, 1981, 23). Thus Hollywood existed as the dominant mode with individual national attempts to realign this through a state-sponsored high-brow national art cinema. Hollywood remained the constant and dominant force in world cinema while arthouse was perceived as a more specific and colloquial 'other.' Thus European cinema can be perceived as reactive rather than proactive in its constant attempts to fill the vacuum left by Hollywood. During this period (the forties, fifties and early sixties) the studio system in Hollywood was very powerful having continually perfected the genre-based, star-studded movies that played well in America and importantly, travelled well also.





As Steven Neale observed of the period,

“Hollywood succeeded in allying proletarian and bourgeois genres with novelistic conversions of cinematic narration, thus producing a unified and unifying mode of textual address, a genuinely popular form of entertainment with a mass rather than class based audience.

(*Neale, 1981, 29*).

However due to the existence of the Hayes Code (1934 - 68) Hollywood was forced to tread a thin, moralistic line, one that never existed in Europe, allowing a more symbiotic relationship to exist between cinema and the other arts where modernism had become the order of the day.

“Conceptions of representation regarding body and sexuality that exist today in Hollywood and arthouse cinema can be seen as the ancestors to those constructed during the Hayes Code - where European cinema was seen as the nodal site of a regime of eroticisation and sexual representation.”

(*Neale, 1981, 31*).

As cinema was regarded as an art media at this time in Europe it was not strange that a polemic or *politique* was developed which espoused the belief that “certain film-makers could be viewed as auteurs - as generators or creators rather than producers of films.” (*Hayward, 1996, 9*). This ‘auteur’ theory was developed by the Cahiers du Cinema group and Andre Bazin in particular. It arose initially due to the enormous influx of American films into Europe after World War II and argued that simply because American directors had little say over any of the production process bar the staging of shots, this did not mean that they could not attain ‘auteur status’. This theory became particularly relevant in its second phase when it was taken on board by the French new-wave, specifically in films by Godard, Truffaut etc. “As Hollywood languishes, the art cinema flourishes, some of it by playing off the Hollywood of the 1940s and 50s, against the Hollywood of the 1960s.” (*Elsaesser, 1987, 165*).

However, structuralist theory of the late sixties caused conceptions of Auteurism to be redressed. Structuralism was based primarily on semiotics and specifically the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. “Saussure set out the base paradigm by which all language could be ordered and understood” (*Hayward, 1996, 350*). There was seen to exist the paradigm langue/ parole, - an overriding linguistic structure: langue, within which



variations could occur: parole. Claude Levi-Strauss' structuralism can be seen as a continuation of these theories - "his thesis was that since all cultures are the products of the human brain there must be somewhere beneath the surface, features that are common to all." (Hayward, 1996, 16). Thus structuralism could be seen as a reappraisal of modern Hollywood narratives (1960s and 70s) a revoking of auteur theory. However such strict structuralism allowed no space for audience interpretation and very little scope for the film-makers' achievements as creator. As Marcel Duchamp said, "All in all the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications" (Bordwell, 1989, 53). Here we find an obvious problem with such a total theory as structuralism which attempts to describe how a film's narrative comes about - the cultural structure upon which a film is built, but makes no effort to evaluate the way in which its meaning becomes apparent or the audiences' role in deciphering it. So structuralism's total theories could easily be refuted in terms of there not being "a general recipe by which a novel and film can be concocted to produce the "correct" emotional response. It is all a matter of context - that is, of the particular system that is each art-work's overall form." (Bordwell, 1990, 39). Thus film form came to be discussed in terms of post-structuralist, auteur-structuralism - recognising both the importance of the auteur, but also acknowledging the existence of unchanging cinematic structure upon which the art-work is built. It acknowledges that "all texts are a double articulation of discourses and non-discourses (that is, the said and the unsaid, *le dit et le non dit*),.... and was born of a mistrust for such total theory" (Hayward, 1996, 353). Upon realisation of the significance of this new wave of French, Auteur-based cinema Hollywood began to allow independent film-makers such as Scorsese, Altman, Coppola, De Palmer and Shrader work within the studio system. Hollywood and European arthouse cinema can be seen to have existed as a constant influence upon each other with Godard, Truffaut and Bresson etc. borrowing from Classic Hollywood and themselves being assimilated by American directors of the '70s such as Coppola, Scorsese and Altman.

A major point of importance is the recognition of Hollywood as a non-monolithic entity as much shaped by television and studio structure and not as a national cinema seen to exist as an 'other' to the less dominant cinematic forms.



Thus Hollywood, despite its renewal, remained within the strict boundaries of a generally non-auteur driven studio and genre-based industry. European arthouse cinema existed as a discernible entity largely as a foil to Hollywood. And just as European cinema existed as an 'other' to the dominant Hollywood from whom they could cross reference, a similar relationship existed between Hollywood and other dominant forms of mass communication (television, video etc.). Television became a major influence upon Hollywood production when it took over as a market for their movies. Such a symbiotic relationship helped foster links between Hollywood and popular culture while arthouse cinema appears to have remained unchanged despite links with television.

This assimilation of popular culture by Hollywood can be seen as an example of post-modernism as it exists today. It embodies a further rejection of high-art in favour of an emphasis on popular culture through cross-reference to television and media icons. Post-modernism can be seen as an "unidirectional reflection toward the past, preceding a conservative cultural production - that is, a mainstream cultural production" (Hayward, 1996, 269). Such a situation was embodied by the election of a former movie star, Ronald Reagan, to the White House in the '80s. Hollywood was seen as an American institution which existed to spread the 'good news' of America rather than as a questioning or subversive element. Postmodernism can be seen as being either conservative or oppositional depending upon the context in which the intertextuality exists, as parody or pastiche. According to Frederic Jameson, (1983, 113), "The post-modern does not really refer to style but to a periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of a new fuse of social life and a new economic order." Hollywood and mainstream American culture which exist within this post-modern framework can be seen generally as pastiche - self-referential to the exclusion of originality but without altering the existing works in an attempt to add to the discourse. Films such as *The Player* (Altman, 1991) or *The Brady Bunch* (Betty, 1994) are examples of this new postmodern Hollywood. Such cinema is an example of what Baudrillard describes as "this post-industrial society of spectacle that lives in the ecstasy of communication." (Bruno, 1987, 67) i.e. a self referential cinema most concerned with spectacle which panders to the audiences' wish to relate contextually to the narrative. This may account to some extent for the appropriation of icons of



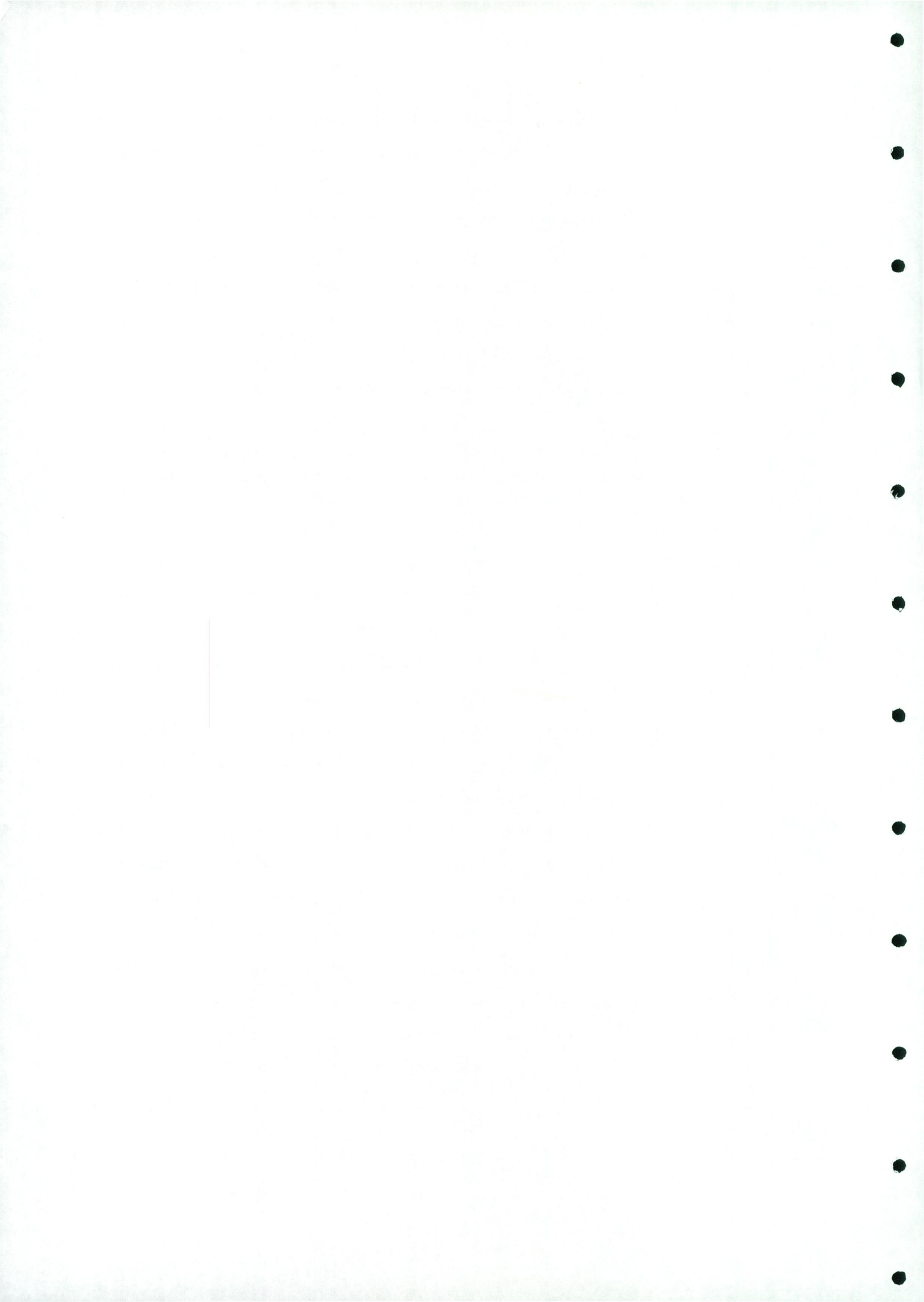
popular culture. It appears as a cinema unable to discern a future or see its past - but can only see a cinematic history which it rehashes and restates. "This cinema while so patently empty is also potentially dangerous - schizoid." (Orr, 1993, 12). Thus we get films which reuse dated and saturated genres, by-passing the need for new vehicles to enter contemporary discourse on issues of importance today. In the minority, however are films like *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino 1995) and *Short Cuts* (Altman 1992) which are examples of post-modern cinema that escapes mere pastiche and attempts a valid and contemporary reading of modern society. American cinema on the whole remains a cinema of entertainment - a self-sufficient formalism.

"What separates the two tendencies (parody and pastiche) is that oppositional postmodern aesthetic experiments with these concepts and innovates through subverting their codes, whereas the mainstream post-modern aesthetic merely replicates them."

(Hayward, 1996, 262).

Notions of subversion and opposition appear to have a greater history in European cinema where governments were seen to continue support even where films were critical of and opposition to the establishment. This European cinema, by concentrating on a more personal and individual cinematic diegesis, attempts to proffer an opinion on society as a whole through evocation of an individual case (i.e. moving from the specific to the general). European cinema therefore, often produces films which appear disjointed and one-dimensional in their appraisal of a specific point of view rather than the more co-reflective experience seen in Hollywood. European cinema can on the whole be seen as aligning itself more with its modernist forefathers such as Godard and Truffaut often distorting the boundaries that appear so obvious in Hollywood. This is not to disregard the fact that early sixties French cinema could be considered postmodern in its appropriation and reinvention of popular culture (ironically Hollywood) in its critic of contemporary French society. Paradoxically we find narratives "with a particular intertextuality that generally aligns itself with a more internalised order" (Hayward, 1996, 260) - films that exist within their own "mise-en -abime" but also allude to and reference popular culture.





This engagement with a more individualistic point of view appears in French films such as Collard's *Savage Nights* (1993) and Beauvois' *Don't forget you're going to die*, (1995) utilising existing narratives concerned with coming of age, fear of sexuality and anomie. This is in direct opposition to American AIDS films such as *Philadelphia* and *Longtime Companion*, where the issue of AIDS is aligned with collective concerns regarding politics and prejudice. Arthouse cinema can be seen as having "a different textual weight accorded the proairetic code, whose units are inscribed and articulated in a manner that tends to be distinct from that marking Hollywood films." (Neale, 13). Such films can be seen as remaining within an oppositional tradition whose perspective is delivered through a more humanist format.

We can see therefore, that the formal systems which dictate the type of movies made today are the products of their respective histories, notably classic Hollywood and European arthouse. Thus we find a self-referential European cinema marked by an emphasis on visual style and internalisation of plot, generally with a modernist treatise. Hollywood on the other hand evokes notions of a consumerist product- the work of a collective rather than a singular endeavour. One finds an emphasis on genre, coupled with spectacular visuals and effects, an institutionalised spectacle of generalised and collective concerns with epic qualities.

"If cinema has existed hitherto as an institution for the perpetuation of the novelistic then it is within the institution and space of Art Cinema that film has most closely approximated that version. Hollywood has tended to produce and reproduce the version of the genres of popular fiction. Art films are marked at a textual level by the inscription of features that function as marks of enunciation- and hence as signifiers of an authorial voice (and look)".

(Neale, 1981, 32)



## Hollywood Reaction To The Epidemic:

To be afflicted with AIDS is to align oneself with the specific characteristics associated with the disease; a disease that Hollywood narratives consistently choose to ignore. Upon completion, *Philadelphia* (Demme, 1994) was described as Hollywood's first AIDS movie, a mantle that aroused interest and expectations. The fact that the film was made at all was quite an achievement, Hollywood hardly being a bastion of socially aware or liberal executives. However, as much as *Philadelphia* exists as a watershed production, it still conforms to Hollywood's formal conventions - remaining a big budget, genre-based movie aimed at a mass market.

Hollywood's initial reaction to AIDS was to ignore it, leaving it to be chronicled by the media and independent film-makers. However, with its increased airtime and attainment of a 'cause-celeb' status it became an issue impossible to ignore. Thus we get *Philadelphia* - a Hollywood melodrama and political thriller set mainly in a courtroom, starring such luminaries as Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington. The fact that it centres around an AIDS victim seems of little importance to the plot, - it could have been any number of 'afflictions' which would attack Andrew Beckett (*Hanks*), drug abuse, homosexuality, disease, insanity etc. The story-line centres essentially around a case of discrimination and retribution.

It is quite a telling point that the film is billed as Hollywood's first AIDS movie, mainly in terms of it taking thirteen years for an issue of such importance, (receiving so much press coverage in America) to make it onto the big screen. Despite its ignoring of the disease, Hollywood invariably allowed the anxiety and fear caused to seep into its work through AIDS metaphor movies.

"With metaphors we come to understand the unknown through reference to the known, through associative relations. In this respect, metaphors function paradigmatically. That is, the unknown gets explained by being inserted into a paradigm - a framework or pattern, or in the case of cinema, an image - that is new to it, but known to us. In cinema, an image when used metaphorically functions as a substitute for the real meaning."

(*Hayward, 1996, 218*).

Thus AIDS (an unignorable social concern) has existed in a discourse of metaphors, implications and asides prior to *Philadelphia*, most notably in genre movies of horror



and science fiction. We can see that Hollywood's unwillingness to deal with the unsavoury issue of AIDS was overcome through channelling it into a less specific social anxiety.

*Philadelphia*, despite being the first mainstream Hollywood picture to deal openly with AIDS, also managed to cloud and ultimately 'sanitise' the issue by placing it within the boundaries of a courtroom drama. Beckett appears as an affluent middle-class lawyer who appeals to the audience and whose homosexuality is never emphasised or realised to the extent of prejudicing a white middle-class audience. He is not a 'loud, activist queer' prepared to put his homosexuality on the table, rather he is a wronged man, who happens to be gay, who fights the good fight against the corrupt law firm. This view of gay men as affluent and unintrusive is a common factor in *Philadelphia* and *Longtime Companion* - for which both were criticised in the gay press. In this 'sanitised' and 'watered-down' image of homosexual culture, Demme attempts to provide a positive image while also pandering to the perceived audiences' homophobia instead of challenging it. We thus get a one-dimensional view of the leading protagonist Beckett where there is virtually no physical contact with his partner Miguel, the on-screen kiss was left on the cutting-room floor along with a scene implying a shared bed. The overriding view is of a director not wishing to alienate his audience while at the same time attempting to present a 'positive image' of homosexuality - the result being a film which falls squarely between two stools - a 'nice, family movie' dealing with homosexuality and the AIDS crisis in an impersonal manner. In one particularly nauseating scene Beckett tells his gathered family that he intends suing his former employers. This is greeted with affirmations of support and unconditional love. Beckett then, in an unironic and over the top gesture, emotionally assures them that, "I love you guys" - happy families never had it so good. Thus we get a one-dimensional view of homosexuality - an appealing, affluent, white, middle-class man who presents no threat to the moral majority, confirming this Beckett thus allays the fears of the jury, "I am not political, I am just concerned with what is right". (*Philadelphia*)

Unlike Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1994), *Philadelphia* is neither threatening nor innovative in its adherence to Hollywood's formal conventions. It is a narrative in the classical



mould, unlike Demme's earlier and more challenging work, *'Silence Of The Lambs'* (1990).

In fact it has been argued that *Philadelphia* was made as an atonement for the coding of the psychopath Buffalo Bill in *Silence Of The Lamb's*, as gay (Taubin, 1994, 24). This may account to some extent for the insipid and watered-down image of homosexuality which we receive.

However one aspect of the film which must be considered as challenging is the casting of a black man, Denzel Washington in the part of Joe Miller, the average American lawyer. This is a curious facet for a movie which more often than not pulls its punches. However, the blackness of Joe comes to play an important part in the plot, Denzel Washington occupies the classic white liberal role because of the audience's inability to relate to a gay AIDS victim as a hero. Perhaps this acceptability among the audience lies in a conception of Joe as the lesser of two evils, the reliable family man who fights the good fight as opposed to the 'infected' but appealing homosexual. In fact one of the central themes of the film revolves around the relationship between Andrew and Joe, as they attempt to come to terms with their respective dilemmas while fighting the common enemy - unlawful discrimination. The film depicts Joe as the family man and workaday lawyer who, despite his personal feeling takes a case because he feels an affinity with the plaintiff. At first he turns it down but is later persuaded by his wife, who implies that the discrimination he faces for being black is not unlike the discrimination faced by Andrew for being a homosexual AIDS sufferer. He thus takes the case on moral grounds but does not reassess his own homophobia. During the trial he explains to the jury what he sees as the crux of the case, "I feel like you do (about homosexuals) but its against the law (to discriminate against them)". The film ends with Joe's homophobia unabated, Andrew wins the case but subsequently dies. Despite the case, nothing concrete seems to have changed - it is an alarming and pessimistic ending for a big-budget, Hollywood picture. This is one of the major difficulties in terms of Hollywood narratives on the epidemic- the unavoidable death that ensues coupled with mainstream societies perceptions of the disease (largely unsympathetic) making it an issue that even Hollywood finds difficult to sanitise. Such a predicament is





emphasised in the increased willingness of the studios to deal with more palatable illnesses, as seen in *Driving Miss Daisy* (Beresford, 1989) and *Rainman* (Toledo, 1989) which deal light-heartedly with Alzheimers disease and Autism respectively.

One of the reasons why this unhappy ending was sanctioned may be due the film's billing as "a court-room battle" (which was won in classic Hollywood style). However, despite this fact *Philadelphia* is essentially a political movie (emphasised by interviews given by Hanks and Demme prior to its release). It relates the story of Andrew Beckett's legal case against his former employer, the law-firm 'Wheeler & Benedick.' We do not see the personal side to Beckett's illness; the diagnosis, his coming to terms with the disease or relationship with his partner Miquel (Banderas) as opposed to European AIDS narratives, where these points are emphasised. To describe *Philadelphia* as anything other than a political tract is to ignore the very one dimensional nature of the story and the characters, who appear largely as good or bad - the evil corporate law-firm, the tough, but kind at heart hero Joe and the meek, wronged Andrew. In an age where AIDS has reached such a point of political coverage, especially in America, to view such a big budget narrative based on an AIDS sufferer as merely a court-room melodrama is almost laughable. But none the less, this is how the film was sold to American audiences with the tag-line - "No one would take on his case until one man was willing to take on the system." Despite its political nature, a risk for any Hollywood narrative, it does lack the realism and unflinching ability of Jarman's *Blue* to portray the actualities of AIDS on a day-to-day basis.

Thus it may be seen that this overtly political stance may not best suit Hollywood which more often than not is forced to retreat from unpopular or controversial themes. "As Brecht discovered during his exile in Hollywood, agit-prop is a form without honour in America. Middle brow wisdom has it that a film or a novel can take a political position only so long as no-one comes out and says what that position is." (Taubin, 1994, 24). This may point toward an explanation for Hollywood's preferred use of the metaphor, metaphorical AIDS movies are films which pertain to be about a usually hypothetical take-over (aliens, vampires, monsters etc.) but which can be read as the result of society's fears and anxieties, anxieties often fuelled by the reporting of



the virus as an invisible predator which enters society through dubious means (from Africa to the gay community and then to heterosexual society), reaffirming a fear of the invisible and deviant. This fear of the unknown is blended with specific fears of disease or plague as a visitation on society to create metaphorical embodiments such as vampires and aliens. These mainstream AIDS anxiety films utilise genres already associated with mass fear and hysteria, genres of body-horror such as science-fiction and gothicism. And while these have existed since the fifties and earlier, recent nineties' versions re-establish and give new venom to genres often considered passé. AIDS metaphor movies can be seen as vehicles for social fears considered too abject or deviant to be given open voice in mainstream narratives. The vampire and alien 'attack' movies are two specific and well documented AIDS metaphor genres with already existing connotations of bodily fluid, blood, contagion and gore encompassing fears of an 'other' - the outsider. These genres have been used in the past to encompass fears of technology, disease and nuclear power through a seemingly irrational fear of the invisible or unknown.

*Alien 3* (Fincher, 1993) is the archetypal AIDS metaphor movie - a big-budget, Hollywood genre film about an alien intruder which causes death and destruction, however its relevance to the AIDS epidemic is unignorable. We find the protagonist, Ripley (Weaver) arrive on board a floating prison cocooned inside a space capsule with two humans and a dog. We quickly learn that while the other humans have died, both she and the dog are impregnated with aliens. The prison is called Fury 161 and peopled by an all-male community of rapists, murderers and sexual offenders who, as part of their rehabilitation have taken to a fundamentalist, Christian doctrine (which encompasses celibacy). Ripley is unwanted and unwelcome but together with the inmates, she is forced to join the fight against the common evil - an analogy for society's family together with its deviant (and unwanted members) fighting the common enemy, AIDS. AIDS metaphors are abundant and easy to find in this microcosm. Unknown to Ripley and the prison inhabitants, there is another alien growing and getting larger within her own body - evoking notions of predators and a fear from within as well as from outside. There are also specific allusions to sex, drugs, homosexuality and religion. Ripley befriends the prison doctor (seen as an outsider because of his rebuttal of their religion and celibacy) whom we learn is a



homosexual and who has committed murder while high on morphine. Homosexuality is also alluded to in the sight of Ripley as a strong, shaven-headed female who wants a baby but, paradoxically gets an alien - and in the notion of a mysterious, deadly organism attaching an all-male community. In the final scene Ripley grapples the alien 'child' to her chest as she falls to her doom in the fiery furnace. This is a complicated and pessimistic gesture in terms of cinematic conventions, but as an allegory for the AIDS epidemic it can be seen in a more positive light. An allegorical reading may be that the divided come together in order to eliminate this manifestation, consequently they are successful as society is essentially good and worthy of survival, (unavoidably there are some victims who die in the process),

Similar evocations of a visitation can be read in the many vampire movies that hit the screens in the eighties and nineties from big-budget productions such as '*Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Coppola, 1995), and *Neil Jordan's Interview With The Vampire* (1995) to independent movies such as *Abel Ferrara's The Addiction* (1995). Vampire narratives can be seen as embodying fears related to blood, bodily fluid and contagion. AIDS victims often appear in the mainstream press as the living-dead - depicted as doomed and awaiting a slow death. Thus it [the vampire metaphor] can be seen as an apt vehicle for fears generated by the AIDS epidemic. "It [vampirism] was born in the early nineteenth century of a society increasingly conscious of interdependency while loosing that firm sense of fixed rightful dependency. In short, it was born of industrial capitalist democracy." (Richard Pryer, 1995, 8). Vampires also evoke fears of sexuality, specifically homosexuality - the strong prowling lesbian and the alluringly evil gay man.

Abel Ferrara's *The Addiction* combines these fears of a forceful female sexuality with fears of disease and drug addiction. Jordan's *Interview With The Vampire* is a tale of homosexual love between the two protagonists, Lewis and Lestat. It has an added interest in that it is adapted from a novel written by Anne Rice - provoked by her daughter's death as a result of Leukaemia - thus associated with a fear of disease passed by blood and death at an early age. The vampire is an outsider who feeds off society, spreading his disease - not unlike perceptions of the evil homosexual as an enemy of society's family structure. However because of Jordan's need for box-office



success he was quick to play down any homosexual implications in the run up to the film's release, this may also account for the emphasis on a female 'love interest' in the plot. Ferrara on the other hand as an independent director was only too happy to relate his movie to contemporary fears regarding the epidemic:

Q. It [*The Addiction*] also ties up with the AIDS motif common to many modern vampire movies.

A. Whenever you see blood nowadays, its a whole different thing. Vampires take on a scarier angle. Its like the vampire legend was just waiting for HIV to come along and kick it into high gear.

(*Paul Duane, 1995*)

Genres such as horror and science-fiction evoke fears of mortality, death and anxiety for the future, through an emphasis on the fragility and temporality of the body, the imminent and unforeseeable nature of death and fears of disease and violence. It is thus not surprising that such genres have been hijacked in an attempt to communicate society's anxieties regarding the AIDS epidemic.

I hope to have briefly chronicled the reaction of Hollywood to the epidemic from an initial wish to ignore the virus and its representation to an eventual acknowledgement through AIDS metaphor movies and finally through *Philadelphia*. The AIDS issue appears in Hollywood as a political subject or in a metaphorical context as a solidification of society's anxieties, without the metaphysical musings of European cinema.





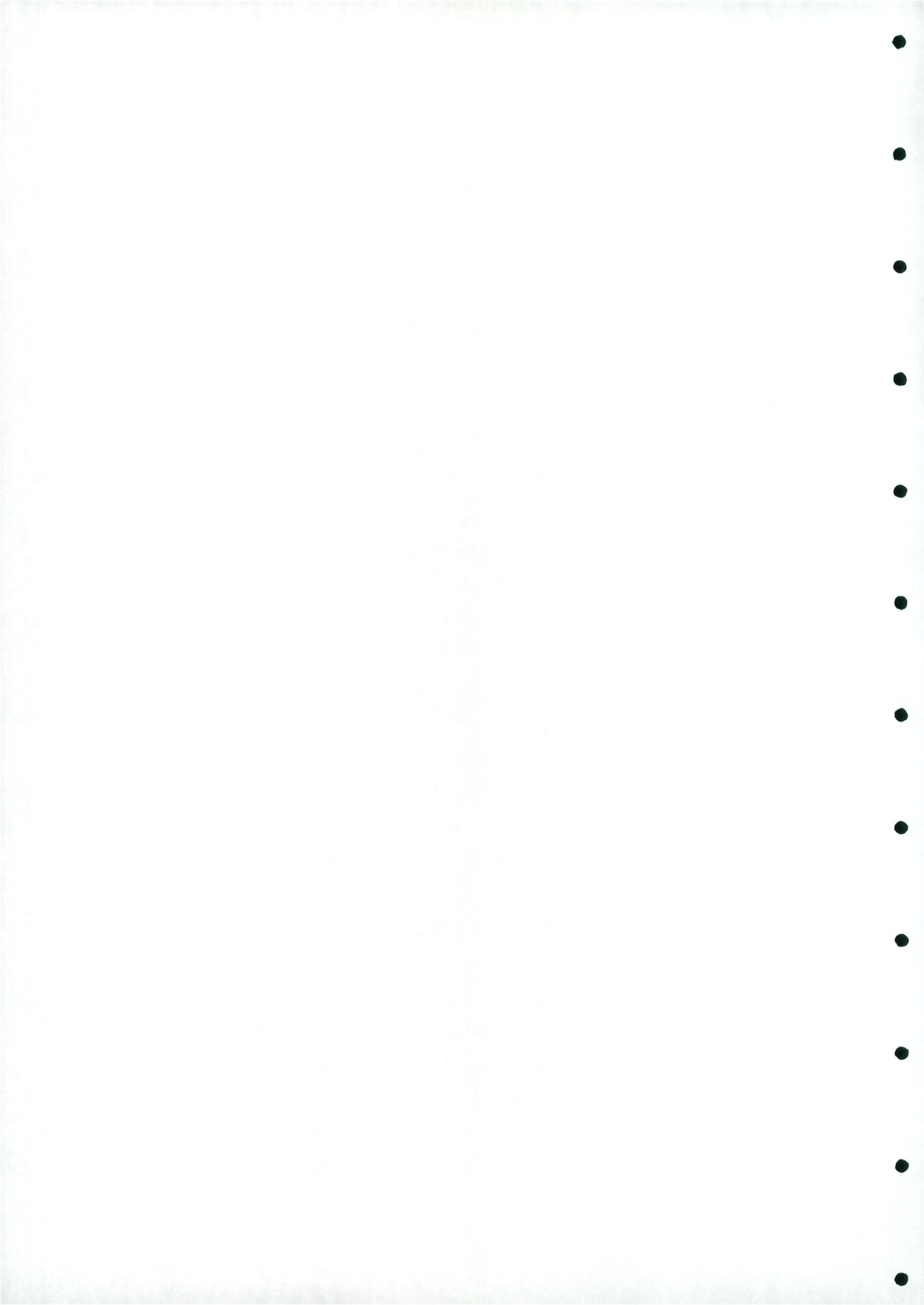
## EUROPEAN REACTION TO THE EPIDEMIC:

“You say to the boy open your eyes  
When he opens his eyes and sees the light  
You make him cry out. Saying  
Blue come forth  
Blue arise  
Blue ascend  
Blue come in.”

(*Jarman, Blue, 1993*)

Thus begins Derek Jarman’s ‘silent monochrome’, *Blue*, a film triggered by the steady decline of his sight and health due to AIDS - a cathartic look at life within the epidemic. It was made in 1993, months before his death, an autobiographical collage of aural marks on a blank, blue screen. It consists of 76 minutes of monochrome blue screen accompanied by poetry, dialogue, diegetic and non-diegetic sound with a musical score. The monochrome seems to move and change constantly as the intrinsic nature of the projected image dictates. This effect is furthered when coupled with Jarman’s aural cacophony, transforming the screen from sea to heaven, “seen without looking out a window,” to “the fathomless blue of bliss” (*Blue*).

Despite its lack of a conventional formal cinematic image *Blue* is essentially a visual film - concerned mainly with Jarman’s declining and eventually total loss of sight through two retina-damaging diseases. “The retina is destroyed though when the bleeding stops what is left of my sight might improve. I have to come to terms with blindness.” (*Jarman, Blue, 1993*). Its abstracted and blanket blue format borrows heavily from abstract painting (Jarman trained as a painter at the Slade) and gives a silent and meditative quality. It is a silence that is installed at the level of image, “a strategic silence chosen in response to the so-called pandemonium of the image” (*Drake, 1993, 40*). *Blue* can be seen as an homage to Yves Klein, described as the great master of blue, whose theories on monochrome and alchemy influenced Jarman’s work. Jarman saw the monochrome image as transcending the accepted formal image and re-evaluating cinematic notions of realism. These were notions of a cinematic language based on traditional realism - but through this monochrome the screen is re-invented as a blank canvas - not merely a receptor for the moving image. However, beyond the silence of the image the work of the aural configuration rescues



it from the potentially arid intellectualism that some overtly conceptual art suffers from.

One reason for the importance of the monochrome was Jarman's inability to show the virus - the notion of the invisibility of AIDS. In an interview he described the blue screen as being of importance in terms of portraying loss of sight, physically (through AIDS) and metaphorically (in terms of society's wish not to see the gay community - an enforced invisibility). "How are we to be perceived if we are to be perceived at all." (*Jarman, Blue, 1993*). There is also an obvious analogy between AIDS and Thatcherism (another perceived blindness of society) - a concern given voice in many of his earlier films - *The Garden (1990)*, *Jubilee (1978)* and *Last of England (1987)*. *Blue* is a film obsessed with sight as essentially it is the chronicle of a man going blind. "If I lose half my sight will my vision be halved" (*Blue*).

From an aesthetic standpoint, *Blue* is an important work in terms of creating a new set of formal possibilities; it reverses the cinematic convention of the soundtrack following the image, here the visual follows the aural. However *Blue* can also be seen in terms of a specifically British cinematic history- its socio-political realism provoking comparisons with an earlier tradition of documentary film making. As Grierson said of the documentary; "It is an essentially British development. Its characteristic was the idea of social use. If it came from England there was good reason for it." (*Charles Barr, 1986, 15*). The reality of *Blue* is autobiographical in Jarman's heartfelt sorrow and indignation as he lists the friends he has lost and narrates his own steady demise, due to the virus. "The virus rages fierce. I have no friends now who are not dead or dying. Like a blue frost it caught them. My hearts memory turns to you. David. Howard. Graham. Terry. Paul ..." (*Blue*). It is a film whose resonance lies in its autobiographical realism. It is filled with the tedious tasks of everyday life within the epidemic, the side effects of the too numerous drugs he takes, the physical suffering and loss of dignity he undergoes daily as an outpatient. Coupled with this realism are passages of imaginative verse chronicling the adventures of a boy called Blue, who appears as a vision of hope for Jarman.



“In Time  
No one will remember our work  
Our lives will pass like the traces of a cloud  
And be scattered like  
Mist that is chased by the  
Rays of the sun  
For our time is the passing of a shadow  
And our lives will run like  
Sparks through the stubble.” (*Blue*)

These abstract passages occur as moments away from the virus and the all too certain future it provides, they occur throughout the film and can be read as outbursts of metaphysical longing. Perhaps Jarman as a lapsed Christian is seeking an alternative vehicle for his hopes, the emptiness of existentialism not providing the necessary relief. However this metaphysicality is in opposition to that of Beauvois and Collard (the directors of *Don't Forget You're Going To Die* and *Savage Nights* respectively) who seek redemption through narcissism and hedonism. Jarman seems more accomplished in his attempts to look beyond romantic concepts of suicide, the early death that lies ahead providing no meaning or solace, merely a source of sorrow.

Jarman's discourse as a reflection on temporality and corporeality exists as a starkly individualistic work but without any romantic notions of fighting AIDS or of becoming an epic martyr. In one instance he refutes the metaphysical outlook of many commentators who seek a deeper meaning within the disease, “The Gautama Budda instructs me to walk away from illness. But he wasn't attached to a drip” *Blue*. The deeply self-righteous AIDS activists also incur his scorn for their impersonal politicising of the epidemic.

“I shall not win the battle against the virus - in spite of the slogans like ‘Living with AIDS’, the virus was appropriated by the well - so we have to live with AIDS while they spread the quilt for the moths of Ithaca across the wine dark sea.”

(*Blue*).

While it is undoubtedly an arthouse film it exists within the vacuum between Hollywood's overtly political reaction to AIDS and the more personal / individual emphasis given the epidemic in Europe.



“The asceticism of *Blue* appears to be a refusal of fictional melodrama and the auto-censorship inherent in demands for ‘positive images’ at the same time as constituting a ‘less is more’ volte-face when confronted with the Benetton imagery.”

(Drake, 1994, 40).

The British cultural reaction to AIDS has itself been largely politicised due to the gay community’s fervent activism. However, its AIDS related works have retained some of the metaphysical reaction more prominent in the French and Southern European response. A film like *Blue* is a good example where, Jarman manages to combine a humanist overview in a realist / documentary fashion coupled with a spirituality or metaphysical longing for understanding.

“*Blue* allows us to reappraise Anglo/American hostility to transcendence and refusal to contemplate the metaphysical needs felt by many people at the limit of human endurance”.

(Julian-Smith, 1993).

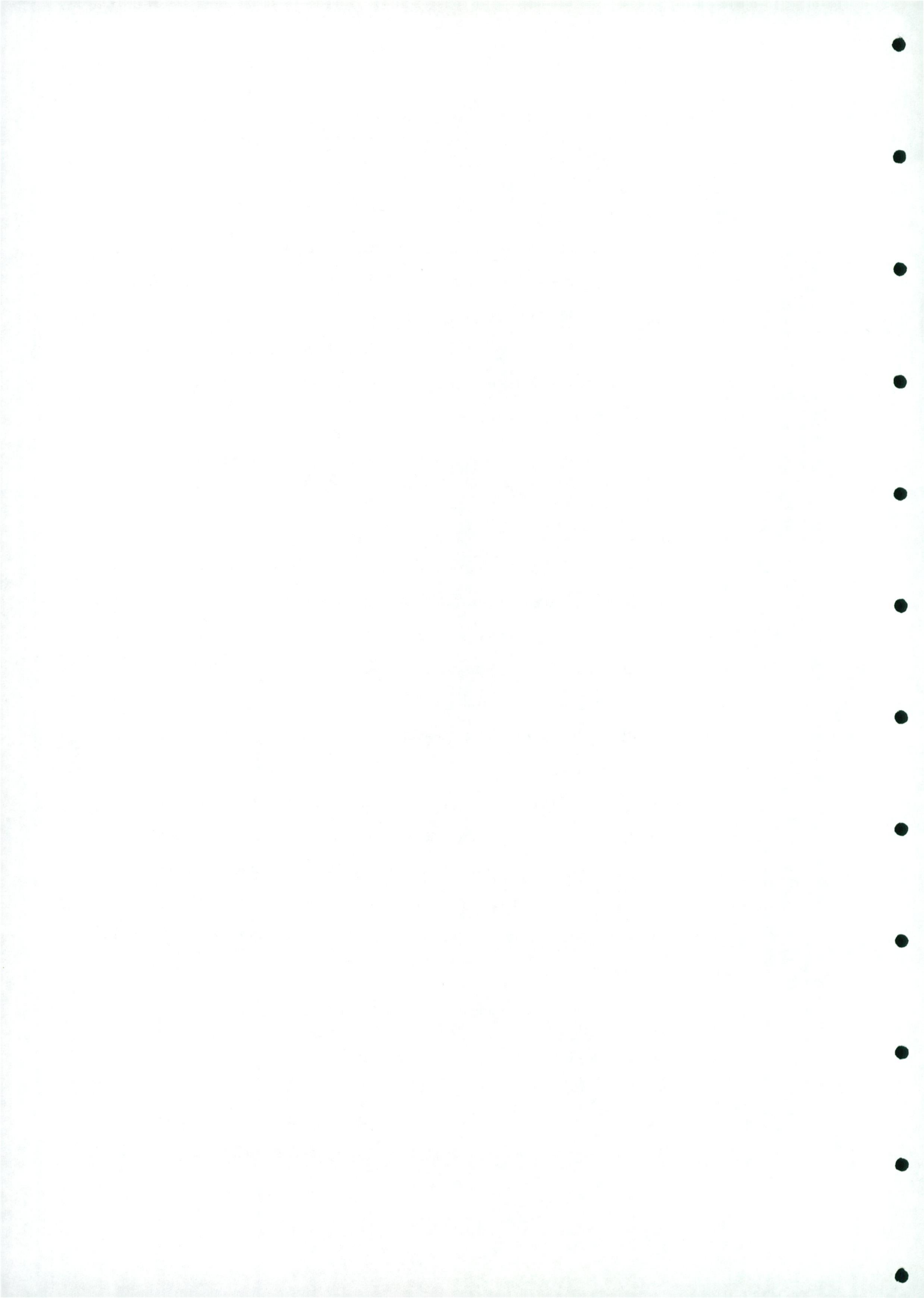
In French AIDS narratives such as Collard’s *Savage Nights*, (*Les Nuits Fauves*) we get a more glamorous portrait of a sufferer searching for meaning within the limiting nature of disease. It appears as a more emotive response than Jarman’s with the protagonist, Jean, a narcissical and unlikeable hero, blaming his disease for the problems life throws at him. Contrary to *Blue*, *Savage Nights* makes no attempt to document a life with AIDS, Jean (played by Collard) appears as physically unblemished before the camera. Together with *Don’t Forget You’re Going To Die*, (*N’Oublie Pas Que Tu Vas Mourir*), these AIDS narratives provide a more romantic and classically French reaction to the epidemic. In Beauvois’ gloomy tale references to romanticism are more overt with the depiction of the main protagonist Benois as an art scholar with a particular interest in the French Romantic painters. The film as a whole is evocative of the romantic belief in the nobility of suffering. Romanticism in France can be seen as

“more than some temporary aberration, rather it was a critical moment of reassessment, they [the romantics] revitalised a tradition and maintained its fruitfulness and validity for subsequent generations”

(Vaughan, 1984, 349).

Beauvois’ narrative is heavily endowed with this romantic spirit it, echoes the paintings of Delacroix whose work was both emotive and exotic in its hedonistic





spirit- without the moralising or religious undertones seen in the more academic art of the period. Obvious similarities exist between Beauvois' film and Delacroix's masterpiece *Le Mort de Saranapale*; which both essentially depicting the suicide of a doomed man.

“Exhibited at the Salon in 1827; it was one of the most notorious of all romantic paintings; so notorious in fact that he was warned by the government of the day not to paint anything of a similar kind again if he wish to receive any further state commissions. Vast in scale and classical in its subject-matter, *Saranapale* conformed to the format of traditional history painting. But its message was anything but heroic. It shows the ancient Assyrian King (whose name has become a byword for luxury and self-indulgence) at the end of his tyrannical rule. As his palace is broken into by insurgents he is committing suicide by having himself burned on a pyre together with his goods, slaves and concubines. Delacroix had not only chosen a subject of dubious morality. He had also represented it in a way that emphasises its senselessness and barbarism”

(Vaughan, 1984, 315).

Similarly Benoit (Beauvois) embarks upon a mission of hedonism and self-destruction upon the revelation that he is HIV positive and within this dionysian excess he attempts to discern some meaning about his imminent demise. In common with *Savage Nights* we get rather one dimensional characters seeking some metaphysical realisation through the limiting aspects of the disease. The destruction in *Don't Forget You're Going To Die* is obviously self-inflicted as Benoit undertakes a foray into drug addiction, and 'deviant' sex ending in a most 'romantic and noble' death on the killing fields of Bosnia. The homosexuality of *Don't Forget You're Going To Die* or *Savage Nights* is widely different to the queer sensibilities of *Blue* or *Longtime Companion*, here it is rather an articulation of a romantic notion of freedom; an extension of youth rebellion almost. Meanwhile Collard's protagonist is slightly more subdued in his reaction to the revelation that he is HIV positive, his despair being turned more toward his close friends Samy and Laura than himself; however within a specifically romantic rationale this is apparently acceptable. There is undoubtedly a common thread between the belief expressed in these French films regarding the nobility of despair and other cinematic versions of the outsider. There appears to be an underlying fascination with insanity and the noble hero who can't or won't relate to



society. Both Benoit and Jean (played by the directors, Beauvois and Collard respectively) are anti-social outcasts who treat society with disdain.

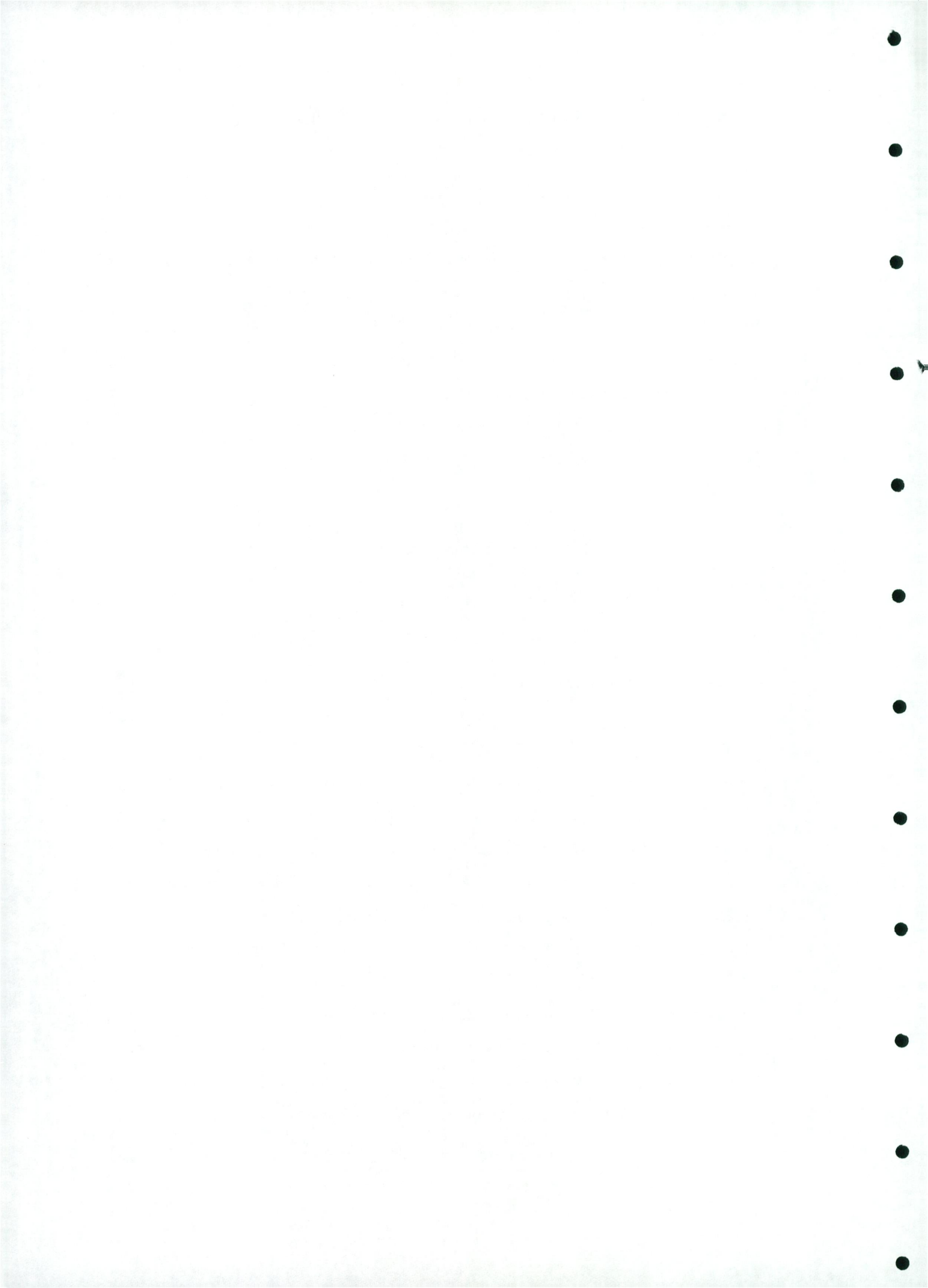
Where Benoit appears at first to be a slightly odd student wishing to avoid military service, later he becomes a suicidal and reckless shadow; similarly Jean was once the 'all male' hero with a glamorous job and good prospects but the disease forces him to introspection and cruelty. There is a similar vein running through these French films and the work of the romantic poets, notably Rimbaud, Baudelaire and Hugo, notions of the noble hero alone in a world of unexplainable pain and sorrow, acknowledging the tradition of French romanticism in both poetry and art. J.C. Ireson describes the romantic poets' belief in the tragedy of existence (a belief said to have been appropriated from Greek drama) but with the assurances of a better metaphysical alternative

“Sentiments of revolt against a fallen and suffering world countered and supposedly overwhelmed by the certitude that can be derived from the order of the universe and the magnificence of the earth and the Heavens, symbols of a higher glory”.

(*Charlton, 1984, 119*)..

Thus we see that these attempts at a metaphysical take on the AIDS epidemic exist as modernist tales of personal distress and anomie in an uncertain world, “capturing a reality of places and events that might exist without his (the filmmakers) presence”(Kolker, 1984, 190). There is certainly an acknowledgement of the Romantic poets and painters echoed in this cinema of tragedy which allows us to place these French films within that specific tradition of the tragic hero whose often reprehensible actions are excused because of a romantic belief in a metaphysical meaning within suffering. This may account for the existential fatalism of these French films, an enlightenment which is realised only through the limiting nature of AIDS.

There is a curiously common reference to Bosnia in the work of both Beauvois and Jarman. In a jarring and inconsistent ending the hero of *Don't Forget You're Going To Die*, goes to the killing fields of Bosnia where he is shot and dies. In *Blue*, Jarman equates the war in Bosnia with the conflict in his own body.



“I am sitting with some friends in this café drinking coffee served by young refugees from Bosnia. The war rages across the newspapers and through the streets of Sarajevo. What need all this news from abroad while all that concerns life or death is all transacting and at work within me”.

*(Blue)*

These references to Bosnia may be an articulation of a greater fear; for humanities future, stemming from an initial fear for self (as provoked by the diagnosis of AIDS). During the period both films were made (1993-1995) the conflict was at its peak receiving enormous airtime, consequently it can be seen as existing as much in terms of a culturally-perceived event as an actual war. It was represented like most civil war as an unnecessary and particularly vicious waste of life. Perhaps it is within this context that Bosnia appears in Jarman's narrative- where he suggests that the virus is raging like a war within, (reinforcing Sontag's belief in the importance of war as a metaphor for disease). However in Beauvois' narrative it supersedes mere metaphorical value and becomes a more distinct reality with Benoit travelling to and dying in Bosnia. There is a distinctly romantic aspect to the view of the handsome and scholarly young man dying in battle (alluding to Grecian tragedy and the war poets of World War I), better to die in glory than await the slow and drawn-out death that AIDS promises. In a metaphorical context this can be read as combining Benoit's personal anguish with that of civilisation in a situation echoing humanity's own great self-destructive tendencies.

Unlike *Blue* these French films appear to have a certain coming-of-age or enlightenment aspect with the protagonists embarking upon voyages of discovery, mobilised by a realisation of the temporality of existence. And while this may be touching in a classically French arthouse vein, it does seem rather dated and self important, particularly true of *Savage Nights* “whose code that sick people only have recourse to spirituality” (*Watney, The French Connection, 19*) appears slightly pedantic and one-dimensional in its romanticism. This too is echoed in *Don't Forget You're Going To Die* a more stark and humourless effort whose central point seems to be the importance of disease as a catalyst toward a metaphysical questioning of the notion of existence and its temporality. This spiritualism is totally at odds with the Hollywood notion of illness as a fight to be fought by the brave, as seen in



*Philadelphia*. The beauty of *Blue* lies in its combination of the metaphysical acknowledgement of the futility of fighting AIDS and its indignation at the socio-political response of society to the disease (a response that Jarman tries to transform). It is without the polarisation of either the French or Hollywood perspectives on AIDS.





## CONCLUSION:

As a social issue which combines enormous media interest with distinctly unsavoury 'deviant' connotations the coverage of the AIDS issue can be seen as a litmus test for any popular artistic medium aspiring to mirror society. Upon investigation what we discover in terms of cinema is a medium well equipped to document, educate and entertain (as seen in *Longtime Companion*) but which chooses predominantly to ignore any controversial issues. This is particularly evident in Hollywood where the only effort to deal seriously and specifically with the epidemic resulted in an uninformative, lukewarm, one-dimensional, courtroom drama. The director seemingly more interested in presenting 'a positive image' rather than forcing a reappraisal of beliefs or prejudice or providing any insight into life within the epidemic. Hollywood's prevalent attitude of seeing no evil, hearing no evil and speaking no evil has manifested itself in the creation of AIDS metaphor movies. Channelling societies anxieties (often derived from media mishandling of the epidemic) into crowd pleasing pulp movies, rather than dealing with the issues raised in an informative or provocative manner.

European reaction on the other hand consists largely of stylised and personalised accounts of the disease- offering more insight than their Hollywood counterparts but largely confining any notion of the disease to mere personal tragedy.

Thus it's fair to say that most movies made within these two industries (predominately internationally and theatrically distributed works) suffer from over-powerful formal traditions which allow little room for excursions beyond the tried and tested. It can also be seen that the particular movies made largely reflect the opinions and prejudices of their audiences allowing film-producers to ignore topics which may be considered untoward. Thus Hollywood and European arthouse cinema produce metaphorical tales of vampires and aliens and stories of personal tragedy rather than confronting underlying issues of homophobia.

As the exception which proves the rule *Blue*, is a landmark AIDS film, both innovative in subject-matter and in its disruption of formal cinematic conventions. It stands as a beacon of originality and sensitivity in a sea of meagre offerings, highlighting an intrinsically flawed reaction to the epidemic by a popular and powerful medium.



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