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The Hollywood Triangle

AIDS, Media, and Celebrity Culture

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Abstract

The AIDS epidemic has always been closely connected to media representation, particularly with regard to the identification of AIDS as a gay problem, which the press established from the beginning. This equivalence heavily affected how AIDS would be perceived in popular culture. This article analyzes the dynamics governing a less investigated aspect of this intersection between AIDS and popular culture, that is, the triangle of 1950s Hollywood stars at the center of the mainstream narrative of the AIDS epidemic: Ronald Reagan, who held office during the worst years of the crisis, Rock Hudson, whose death in 1985 caused a shift in the visibility of the disease, and Elizabeth Taylor, who rapidly became the world's best-known AIDS activist. While queer artists and activists did most of the heavy lifting (and of the suffering) when it comes to AIDS, this triangle of Hollywood stars managed to frame most of the mainstream narrative reaching those not directly affected, as their fame fed America's interest in the epidemic. The article focuses on the dynamics at work that allowed the different aspects of American popular culture, mainly 1950s themes and anxieties surrounding sexuality and the Cold War, to intersect with AIDS media representation. Investigating the Hollywood triangle Taylor-Hudson-Reagan, the article highlights the discrepancies between the mainstream narrative and the underground queer narratives of the time, revealing how this tension shaped AIDS as the first pop culture epidemic.

1. Introduction

Ever since its explosion in the United States in 1981, the AIDS epidemic has been closely connected to media portrayal. From the very beginning, when most of the information about it was unknown, the way in which the virus was framed by government and press alike set the stage for how AIDS would be perceived by the general public. As the world recently had the chance to witness again in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, the identification of a contagious illness with a specific community cannot have but harmful consequences.

In the case of AIDS, multiple elements contributed to how the epidemic was portrayed in the media and, consequently, how it was viewed by the public. One of these elements was the

intersection between the epidemic and the Hollywood star system, which will be the focus of this article. As many scholars have found, the way the virus was discussed by institutions and media has had a defining impact on the history of the epidemic (see Altman 1986, 12-21, and Alwood 1996, 215-19). A less investigated aspect of this intersection between AIDS and popular culture is represented by the triangle of 1950s Hollywood stars at the center of the mainstream narrative surrounding AIDS: Ronald Reagan, who was in office during the worst years of the crisis, Rock Hudson, whose death caused a shift in the visibility of the disease, and Elizabeth Taylor, who devoted herself to activism after the explosion of the epidemic. Patrick Higgins has noted that "few industries have the power to influence social attitudes and shape human identity as much as 'the entertainment industry,' which has grown to occupy such a dominant position in modern culture" (1993, 241). In the context of entertainment, P. David Marshall argues how "celebrity status also confers on the person a certain discursive power: within society, the celebrity is a voice above others, a voice that is channeled into the media systems as being legitimately significant" (2014, xlviii). With these concepts in mind, this analysis will focus on the cultural dynamics surrounding the Taylor-Hudson-Reagan triangle.

The concept of spectacle was an integral part of America's public life in the 1980s, after Reagan started his administration in 1981: the new president's previous career in show business heavily influenced the way in which he approached political rhetoric. On the one hand, his training as an actor proved useful in his presentation and delivery.[1] On the other, Hollywood-evoking tones started to appear in his rhetoric, particularly regarding the Cold War.[2] Guy Debord described spectacle as something that "presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a *means of unification*. […] [I]t is in reality the domain of delusion and false consciousness: the unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of universal separation" (2005, 7). As we will see, the intersection of spectacle and polarization is a crucial element of the context in which AIDS emerged.

AIDS was identified with the gay community ever since its first official acknowledgment. On June 5, 1981, the Center for Disease Control issued a *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* about a rare form of pneumonia of unknown causes found in five gay men who had all died. The

[1] Barbara Ehrenreich suggested that Republicans had won the White House "on the strength, aptly enough, of a professional actor's performance" (1990, 9).

[2] Alan Nadel argues that "Reaganism is a phenomenon from long ago in a galaxy far, far away that, despite its extraterrestrial (that is, cinematic) origins, was able to snatch the body politic of the United States by reconnecting the umbilical cord of its national imaginary to the bipolar global-political antipathies of the 1950s. An important aspect of that alien seduction is that Reaganism found a story able to serve, as had the conquest of the West through the early 1960s, as an informing narrative for American identity" (2012, Chap. 8). Among the most notable examples, Reagan simplified the communication on the Cold War by evoking doom, describing the USSR as the 'evil empire' and naming his Strategic Defense Initiative the 'Star Wars Program.'

report noted that "the fact that these patients were all homosexuals suggests an association between some aspect of a homosexual lifestyle […] and *Pneumocystis* pneumonia."[3] A few weeks later, the first acknowledgement of the virus in the mainstream press with the infamous *New York Times* article "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals" permanently established the association of the disease with homosexuality, as well as the lethal consequences this perception of AIDS would have. Until the summer of 1982, when the denomination 'AIDS' was accepted, the disease was known as 'GRID' (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency). This characterization made people think that AIDS could not spread to the general population, and became an excuse for institutions not to fund medical research.

Above all, AIDS and homosexuality were to be dismissed and not discussed.[4] The approach of the institutions to the epidemic was mirrored by the approach adopted by the press. Moreover, once it was discovered, the mode of contagion allowed the idea that people got infected through some fault of their own, by performing what were characterized as 'immoral acts': either sexual intercourse (and, even worse, same-sex sexual intercourse), or consumption of intravenous drugs. Of the two, gay sex was the one people recurred to the most in order to underline how guilty behavior had led to sickness and death. Because AIDS was hitting the gay community, in the early years it was considerably neglected by the media: "most editors at newspapers nationwide did not consider gay deaths news" (Alwood 1996, 219). Moreover, once information became available, the press would not delve into life-saving medical details because it entailed discussing gay sex explicitly.[5] Thus, in its first few years AIDS received practically no attention in mainstream media. Things changed drastically in the summer of 1985.

[3] *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 5 June 1981.

[4] This attitude became painfully clear in the fall of 1982, when journalist Lester Kinsolving asked the first question about AIDS at a White House press briefing only to be laughed at by press secretary Larry Speakes and the rest of the press core. The instance would repeat itself several times throughout the first Reagan term, and is symbolic of the entire administration's approach to the epidemic. Compared with similar occurrences of multiple deaths for unknown causes during that time, like the outbreak of Legionnaires' disease in 1976 (29 deaths) and the Tylenol poisonings in 1982 (7 deaths), the difference in the response both in media coverage and allocated government funding is astonishing. This lack of response and reaction from both the press and the authorities could only be understood, then, as "willful negligence" (Bronski 2011, Ch. 10).

[5] After it was discovered that unprotected sex, and unprotected anal sex in particular, was the most dangerous mode of contagion, it would have been necessary for journalists to be specific in order to provide good medical information: "to explain AIDS transmission, words like 'semen' and 'penis' and 'vagina' were absolutely essential" (Kinsella 1989, 3) but, in general, the "mainstream media were reticent about reporting health stories that involved sexual activity" (Alwood 1996, 220) or that involved homosexuality, so discussing gay sex in relation to health issues was considered unacceptable. This brought a tendency to use euphemisms and generalizations, the most common being the expression 'bodily fluids,' which suggested that AIDS could be transmitted through sweat, a kiss, or a sneeze. Therefore, this use of language contributed to the already consolidated image of gay men as 'untouchables' during the Eighties, and it fed into the existing misinformation about the epidemic.

2. The death of Rock Hudson and the Hollywood triangle

After public speculation about his health due to a public appearance in which he looked very thin and emaciated, actor Rock Hudson publicly collapsed in Paris in July 1985. One of the biggest names in films in the 1950s and a personal friend of the Reagans, Hudson was a closeted gay man. He had been diagnosed with AIDS the previous year, and was in Paris to receive treatments unavailable in the United States. Throughout his career, Hudson had gone to great lengths to hide the fact that he was gay – including a brief marriage in the 1950s. As the media attention did not diminish, after being hospitalized the actor made his diagnosis public on July 25th. At that time, to admit to having contracted HIV effectively meant coming out of the closet too. The announcement caused a revolution in how AIDS was treated in the American press. The number of AIDS stories in American papers "jumped by an estimated 270 percent in the final six months of 1985" (Alwood 1996, 234). On October 2nd, 1985, Hudson died. His diagnosis represented a cultural shift of incalculable magnitude in the public discourse surrounding AIDS and, by extension, homosexuality.

In part, Hudson's death caused so much stir because he was the first famous person to publicly admit he had AIDS. As we will see in the next paragraph, another element has to do with what he, specifically, represented in American culture. There is, however, an additional layer to this aspect: Hudson's diagnosis placed him on one vertex of a triangle embodying 1950s Hollywood culture. Reagan, an actor in the 1950s who had been elected president "on a platform that called for a return to the values of the fifties" (Kinsella 1989, 16), occupies the second vertex. On the third vertex is the star who devoted the last thirty years of her life to fighting AIDS: Elizabeth Taylor. While the impact of Hudson's diagnosis has been investigated by scholars, the cultural implications of this Taylor-Hudson-Reagan triangle have not. This dynamic is not a trivial one: Graeme Turner has acknowledged that "as the media play an ever more active role in the production of identity; […] and as celebrity becomes an increasingly common component of media content; it is not surprising that celebrity should become one of the primary locations where the news and entertainment media participate in the construction of cultural identity" (2014, 114). We will see how media and popular culture played a crucial role in establishing the way in which America would deal with AIDS.

3. 1950s masculinity

The ethos of the 1950s was at the center of this dynamic. The decade had been assimilated in popular culture "as an era of American global dominance, personal security, and economic prosperity" (Marcus 2004, 2). In particular, with Reagan's election the 1950s achieved the status Daniel Marcus has called "national memory" (2004, 4). The 1950s were also a time that

celebrated the nuclear family, where masculinity played a central social role. On the big screen, there were two main archetypes of masculinity: the rugged outsider, represented by Brando or Dean, and the conformist, reassuring masculinity embodied by Hudson. In this sense, Hudson did not only represent a Hollywood celebrity, but was a specific incarnation of masculine Americanness.[6] His diagnosis, and the relative implied admission of homosexuality, could not but threaten this ideal of masculinity as a central value in American culture.

The fact that Hudson represented a synthesis of traditional American masculinity prompted the conclusion that as a gay man he had operated an infiltration of sorts in American mainstream culture. This concept had heavy implications in Cold War times: from a political as well as cultural standpoint, "when it came to the Cold War, the 1980s were like the 1950s redux" (Belletto 2018, 310), which had consequences for the perception of homosexuality. The Lavender Scare had been an important aspect of McCarthyism, and its echoes could be felt in the context of the epidemic: as Jacqueline Foertsch has remarked, "both communists and gay men (even most of those who are HIV-positive) move relatively inscrutably through the 'general population'" (2001, 17). The commonalities between the two eras are difficult to dismiss, particularly the theme of the invisibility of an infectious enemy (see Foertsch 2001, 18).

After Hudson made his diagnosis public, many newspapers discussed the event framing it in a homophobic light of deceit (see Watney 1987, 87), as if his decision of being closeted was a fraud perpetrated on the American public. Richard Dyer noted that "the reasons it had been impossible to figure that Rock was 'a homosexual' were revealed by a predictable vocabulary. Rock could not be gay because, on the one hand, he was 'virile,' 'muscular,' 'square-jawed,' 'masculine,' and, on the other, he was 'nice,' 'good,' 'likeable'" (2002, 159), thus equating homosexuality with weakness and deception. The theme of infiltration is described by several critics: while Dyer remarks that "just as Rock deceived women sexually, so gay men have infiltrated a deadly disease on the world through their sexuality" (2002, 159-162), Frank Rich notes that "in the summer of 1985 we had to accept the fact that many of our fundamental, conventional images of heterosexuality were instilled in us (and not for the first time) by a homosexual" (1987, 100). The discovery of Hudson's diagnosis framed homosexuals as

[6] Frank Rich has described the 1950s comedies with Rock Hudson and Doris Day as "an initiation to heterosexuality" (1987, 99). Hudson's case also echoes Debord's argument that "stars – spectacular representations of living human beings – project this general banality into images of permitted roles. As specialists of *apparent life*, stars serve as superficial objects that people can identify with in order to compensate for the fragmented productive specializations that they actually live. […] The agent of the spectacle who is put on stage as a star is the opposite of an individual; he is clearly the enemy of his own individuality as of the individuality of others. Entering the spectacle as a model to be identified with, he renounces all autonomous qualities in order to identify himself with the general law of obedience to the succession of things" (2005, 29).

duplicitous individuals, while questioning an important tenet in the construction of American masculinity.

The perceived deception contained in Hudson's diagnosis had complex consequences. The common knowledge surrounding Hudson is that he had "put a human face" on the epidemic. David France went as far as calling him the "sacrificial lamb" (1985, 12), because the public reaction to his diagnosis automatically included an obsessive interest in the actor's private life. However, this dynamic implied that, if Hudson represented ordinary Americans, no one was safe from the virus.[7] Of course, Richard Meyer notes, "implicit in the notion that Rock Hudson gave 'AIDS a face everyone could recognize' is the unrecognizability, and in a sense, the un-reality of the 12,000 faces and bodies already diagnosed with AIDS in this nation by 1985, and the 6,000 faces and bodies already dead from it" (1988, 274-275). The hypocrisy implicit in this equivalence, however, was scarcely considered. Hudson's diagnosis meant more attention paid to AIDS, but at the same time brought a feeling of homophobic paranoia over America, moving from disregard to fear.

In this landscape of 1950s signifiers, the figure of Reagan played an essential role. The fact that his acting career had taken place between the 1940s and 1950s evoked the comforting, post-war era in which the country was at the apex of its political and economic power.[8] In a way, Reagan and Hudson represented different embodiments of the same idea of masculinity. A return to this era, thus, was "inseparable from a cultural mandate to restate, and at times legally reinforce, traditional attitudes about sexuality" (Bronski 2011, Ch. 10) in the 1980s. Being identified as gay, for example, could still get someone fired. In show business, even flamboyant figures like Elton John and Liberace were not out of the closet.[9] Years into the epidemic, Reagan himself made statements such as "we will resist the efforts of some to obtain government endorsement of homosexuality" (qtd in *The New York Times*, 18 August 1984). As president, he did not even utter the word 'AIDS' in public until September of 1985. The combination of these conservative values regarding sexuality and the media culture of a country that had, in fact, gone through the sexual revolution made the 1980s a time in which the tabloids still held bigoted views on homosexuality but felt free, for instance, to discuss the hidden or suspect orientation of individuals – a lethal combination in a time of collective paranoia.

The fact that newspapers discussed AIDS more after Hudson's diagnosis had mixed consequences. On the one hand, the epidemic finally reached mainstream media and could not

[7] A famous example of this paranoia in the American public after Hudson's diagnosis is represented by "the continuous replay of his on-screen kiss with Linda Evans on *Dynasty*, which the tabloids claimed had exposed her to HIV" (Finkelstein 2018, 114).
[8] In this perspective, it is interesting to consider Sparling's reflection that "the problem with glorifying the 1950s is that it belies the truth about the era in favor of the Hollywood version of it" (2018, 247).
[9] In fact, Liberace would remain in the closet all his life, dying of AIDS in 1987.

be ignored any more. There was visible change in the language gradually used to discuss the disease, including more specific medical information. On the other hand, this attention both reinforced the equivalence AIDS = gay, and "became the occasion for speculation about Hudson's sexuality and for a prurient interest in gay subculture" (Brandt 1988, 154). Therefore, a lot of the attention paid to AIDS was not concerned with the facts of the epidemic, but with speculation on people's sexuality. Critic Douglas Crimp suggested that "what constituted a story for the media was only scandal itself: a famous movie star simultaneously revealed to be gay and to be dying of AIDS" (1987, 241). The fact that the virus was mostly hitting young men also meant the images associated with the epidemic represented a tragic and, at the same time, compelling spectacle. Debord notes that "the spectacle is not a collection of images, it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (2005, 7). In this sense, phenomena such as the before-and-after picture treatment was not a prerogative of Rock Hudson, or of celebrities.[10] The curiosity in how one had gotten infected also became a trope in American culture, later propagated by Hollywood movies. The prejudice that if homosexuality was a choice, then AIDS must have been one as well was pervasive.[11]

4. Lights: 'Bitch, do something'

Rock Hudson's diagnosis was not the only factor that increased the attention media paid to AIDS in the mid-1980s. Roughly in the same period, Elizabeth Taylor became involved in AIDS activism. Her engagement grew stronger following Hudson's diagnosis. One of Hollywood's brightest stars in the 1950s and 1960s, Taylor had reduced her acting roles in the 1980s. As discussed above, AIDS was not a popular cause, or a subject people wanted to be associated with. Taylor's presence lent visibility to the fight against the epidemic and helped to reframe the public discourse around it. Dyer notes that "whereas other stars may stand for types of people, Taylor stands for the type 'star' – the most expensive, the most beautiful, and the most married and divorced, being in the world. Her love life plus her sheer expensiveness are what make her interesting, not her similarity to you or me" (1998, 43). Taylor also had an established

[10] The now debunked 'patient zero' theory became for a time source of interest for the American public: handsome Canadian steward Gaetan Dugas, who had sexual contacts with several of the first people to die of AIDS, and who had died in March of 1984, was repeatedly featured in the press as some sort of captivating villain who had intentionally infected dozens of men.

[11] In this sense, the creation of the category of 'innocent victims' (mainly referring to children but also people who had had blood transfusions, thus suggesting the existence of 'guilty victims') was infuriating to people in the gay community. The symbol of the innocent victims became Ryan White, a young boy who had gotten infected through a blood transfusion and became the poster child of the disease. Despite the climate of the time, White never thought of himself as an 'innocent victim,' declaring himself to be just like anyone else who had contracted AIDS, including gay people (see Witchel 1992). White's story was also followed by the national papers until his death in 1990.

kinship with gay men starting from the 1950s,[12] thanks to her starring in works such as Tennessee Williams film adaptations and her personal friendships with closeted co-stars such as James Dean, Montgomery Clift, and Hudson himself.

The relevance of the concept of celebrity in a context as fraught as the one of the AIDS epidemic may seem a trivial matter. It is indisputable, however, that dynamics surrounding celebrity played a key role in how American culture absorbed the subject of AIDS. In his seminal work on celebrity and movie stars, Richard Dyer argued that "stars articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society; that is, they express the particular notion we hold of the person, of the 'individual'. […] They articulate both the promise and the difficulty that the notion of individuality presents for all of us who live by it" (2004, 7). Therefore, there is an identification between who is chosen as a star and why, and a people's idea of themselves. In this sense, the public perception of Rock Hudson before his diagnosis is a good example.

Following the progress in media and technology, studies on celebrity have evolved significantly. Starting from the 1990s, "the relationship between celebrities and national identity […] receded from consideration to some extent" (Turner 2014, 116). The 1980s were a time in which social media, reality shows and even the internet were not part of the dynamic, and the idea of a movie star was in many ways closer to what it was in the 1950s than to what it would be in the 1990s. In the 1980s, stars still "represent[ed] typical ways of behaving, feeling and thinking in contemporary society, ways that have been socially, culturally, historically constructed. Much of the ideological investment of the star phenomenon is in the stars seen as individuals, their qualities seen as natural" (Dyer 2004, 15-16). The distinction between public persona and private person was sharper but unacknowledged, as stars were seen as interpretations of Americanness.

Richard Dyer had outlined the role of stars in culture arguing that "stars are also embodiments of the social categories in which people are placed and through which they have to make sense of their lives, and indeed through which we make our lives – categories of class, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and so on. And all of these typical, common ideas, that have the feeling of being the air that you breathe, just the way things are, have their own histories, their own peculiarities of social construction" (2004, 16). There is, thus, a negotiation of sorts that takes place between the star and the culture in which they exist. Marshall has described people's relation to celebrity as "a dynamic system of interpellation in which we see certain kinds [of] individuality as normatively centered and reject others" (2014, 65). As aforementioned, the kind of individuality embodied by Hudson in the 1950s celebrated

[12] In his book *Gay Icons*, scholar Georges-Claude Guilbert states: "Elizabeth Taylor was a total fag hag: that is documented" (2018, 172).

heteronormativity and rejected his identity as a gay man. The effect of the public acknowledgement of his diagnosis, therefore, meant a rejection of the relation outlined by Marshall, a change in the negotiated terms between Hudson and the American public.

5. Different audiences

Hudson's biographer Mark Griffin has noted that, once Hudson made his diagnosis public, suddenly "everyone knew someone who had AIDS" (2018, intr.). Coherent to his image of ideal heteronormative American male, Rock Hudson was not an activist. Despite this, he had time to acknowledge his role in the history of the epidemic. At the first Commitment to Life dinner, organized by Taylor a few weeks before he passed away, the actor made his presence felt with a written statement:

> People have told me that the disclosure that I have been diagnosed as having Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome helped to make this evening a success, and that it will raise in excess of one million dollars to help against the battle of AIDS. I have also been told the media coverage of my own situation has brought enormous international attention to the gravity of this disease in all areas of humanity, and is leading to more research, more contribution of funds, and a better understanding of the disease than ever before. I am not happy that I am sick. I am not happy that I have AIDS. But if that is helping others, I can at least know that my own misfortune has had some positive worth. Thank you, Elizabeth. Thank you to all my friends who are attending this evening, and to thousands who have sent their prayers, their thoughts, their love, their wishes, their support. (Schwarz 2023)[13]

In popular culture, the impact of Hudson's diagnosis would obfuscate his film work. In queer culture, however, his presence was already interpreted differently.

Rumors surrounding Hudson's sexuality had been around Hollywood since the 1950s. According to San Francisco-based author Armistead Maupin, Hudson spent time at the city bathhouses (see Maupin 2017, 217) – so his homosexuality was never really a complete secret. In 1982, three years before Hudson's diagnosis was made public, Maupin included a not-too-obscure portrayal of Hudson in the third novel of his series *Tales of the City*: Michael Tolliver, the book's most prominent gay character, is brought as a guest to the house of an old-Hollywood star. The actor is never named, and appears in the book as _____ _____, but it is unmistakably Rock Hudson: for instance, the chapter "The Castle," in which Michael arrives at his mansion, is a reference to the nickname of Hudson's villa in Beverly Hills. The novel includes passages in which Maupin makes fun of Hudson's 1950s image and the rumors surrounding it:

> said Mary Ann, 'but, you mean _____ _____ is gay?'

[13] The dinner was held in Los Angeles on September 19th, 1985, and "raised $1.3 million – more money in one night than the CDC had spent on the epidemic in its entire first year" (Lord 2013, 162).

> 'As the proverbial goose,' said Michael. 'Hell,' said Brian, sawing off a chunk of pot roast. 'Even I knew that. Remember that story about his gay wedding to _____ _____ back about …?'
> … 'Well, I always thought it was just some sort of … bad joke.'
> 'It was a bad joke," said Michael. (1982, 40)

Maupin also includes passages that characterize Hudson both as someone comfortable in his identity and as a man struggling with the idea of publicly discussing his sexuality. In the same chapter, _____ _____ welcomes Michael, who doesn't know anyone at the party, by saying: "'Here's a handy guideline,' grinned_____. 'The blonds are all named Scott. The brunettes are all named Grant. Now you know everybody. Except me. I'm_____.'" (1982, 83). A couple of pages later, the pair discusses living as an out gay person:

> 'I'm afraid I don't understand that. […] Why some people make such a big deal out of being gay.'
> Michael hesitated. He'd heard this line countless times before, usually from older gay men like _____ who had suffered silently for years while other people made a big deal out of their homosexuality. (1982, 84)

Maupin's portrayal shows the significance of Hudson's figure in queer culture even before the AIDS epidemic. The struggle with oppression and acceptance, which would become a central part of AIDS activism in the late 1980s, is presented by Maupin on a collective level by employing the figure of a well-known movie star.

As mentioned above, Elizabeth Taylor's camaraderie with gay men has been an established fact since the 1950s. M.G. Lord, author of the book *The Accidental Feminist*, claims that "stars create a brand. And the Taylor brand deserves credit for its under-the-radar challenge to traditional attitudes" (2013, 1-2). There is merit to this argument: Taylor was a Hollywood insider, but her image has always been far from traditional. Having started her career as a child, Taylor lived her tumultuous life in public: the multiple marriages, the tragedies, the scandals, the illnesses, the condemnation by the Vatican. In this context, Taylor's relationship with sexuality never reflected normativity, both when it came to her own, as a woman, and to other people's, for example gay men. In her book Lord quotes Michael Gottlieb, the first physician to identify AIDS in 1981 and one of the most prominent doctors working on the epidemic, as saying that "the cause needed 'a woman at the pinnacle' […] . Because openly gay men are not given the respect that they are due. And if a straight man speaks up on a gay issue, his orientation becomes suspect. Elizabeth was perfect for the role. And I think she knew that" (2013, 160). In her capacity as a movie star, Taylor used her non-normativity to serve the cause.

Dyer connected Taylor's kinship with gay men to her activist fervor and its public implications:

> No star, though, has quite put themselves on the line in support of an initially despised cause as did Elizabeth Taylor with AIDS-related work. What's more, the power of this work springs from the very nature of stardom, not just in the sense of lending a famous name to a cause, but in the way it seems to be a transmutation of the personal into the public. Taylor's AIDS work is widely taken to spring from her loyal and abiding friendship with gay men […] . This is the saintliness of the devotion of friendship lived out publicly, starrily, as a courageous commitment to an unpopular cause. (2022, 112)

Taylor used her star power in public and in private for the AIDS cause. While she was among the very first public figures to lend her name and face to the fight against the epidemic, she also privately lobbied Washington politicians (whom she knew personally as the ex-wife of senator John Warner) and the president himself, whom she had known since his days as an actor. Taylor's relationship with both Ronald and Nancy Reagan brought the president to give his first speech on AIDS at a fundraising dinner for amfAR, the non-profit that Taylor had founded with Dr. Mathilde Krim. The fact that Reagan had waited until 1987 to give his first speech on AIDS was infuriating to gay activists, who booed him repeatedly as he called for initiatives such as mandatory testing. In the speech, activist playwright Larry Kramer bitterly noted, "he did not use the word 'gay' or 'homosexual' once" (1989, 159). Taylor had managed to get him there, but not to shift his positions.

Similarly to Hudson, Taylor also made appearances in the gay literature of the time. In her case, her involvement with AIDS stood beside her image as a movie star and a gay icon. The most significant appearance is perhaps in John Weir's 1989 book *The Irreversible Decline of Eddie Socket*. The novel is set in New York and portrays the struggles of the gay community against AIDS. Towards the end of the novel, the character of Saul, exhausted by all the death that has been surrounding him for so long, has an imaginary meeting with Taylor on the bus:

> "I'm sorry about your friend," she says, reading my thoughts, taking my hand.
> I start to cry. I cry and cry and cry. Elizabeth Taylor takes my head into her arms and presses it to her bosom. I'm vaguely aware that I'm getting snot all over her Technicolor breasts, but it doesn't matter, not to her, she's real. She holds me, and rocks me.
> "Saul," she says. "Oh, Saul. Oh, dear Saul."
> She holds me for a long time, I rest my head on her breasts and cry a long, long time. She strokes my hair. I look up into her beautiful eyes, and I say, "I want to be the color of your eyes." She giggles lightly and says, "It's contact lenses." (1989, 242)

The way Weir uses Taylor's image combines the traits that made her an icon: her violet eyes, her presence as a saint of sorts, to echo Dyer's definition, and also the ironic gaze that characterizes many Hollywood gay icons.

In both the literary examples presented above, it is important to notice the ironic tone with which the authors featured a Hollywood personality in a queer narrative. Maupin's portrayal of Hudson was written before AIDS, which allowed the author to describe him in a way that, so to speak, winks at the reader. Queer writers during this time explicitly addressed queer audiences, who immediately recognized Hudson in _____ _____. The character is not ridiculed, but there is an underlining humorous tone in the idea that queer readers are in on something the mainstream public does not see.[14] Conversely, Weir is writing at the end of the first decade of the epidemic. His book is decidedly darker than Maupin's. Taylor is one of many references to old Hollywood in the novel, but is given more prominence: her imaginary conversation with Saul lasts a few pages. On the one hand, Weir plays with the camp references permeating his book. On the other, he acknowledges Taylor's new role as protector of gay men with bitter irony in the reckoning that Hollywood stars were necessary for the gay community to be recognized by the government and the media. At the end of the passage Saul reflects on nostalgia, which his mind expresses with 1950s Hollywood faces from Taylor to Doris Day and Nancy Reagan. He wonders, "if nostalgia is a longing for the past that never was, what is it when you miss the future that will never be?" (1989, 243), thus evoking the deathly effect 1950s nostalgia was having on the gay community in the 1980s.

6. Visuals

AIDS has been a visual affair ever since its appearance. The first identifiable symptoms were pneumonia and the Kaposi's Sarcoma lesions, the purple spots that would become the symbol of the epidemic. KS lesions would be immortalized by photographers. They would also become the unmistakable signifier for AIDS on the big screen: as perhaps most prominently exemplified by Jonathan Demme's 1993 film *Philadelphia,* if a purple spot appeared, it was not necessary to add anything else. The way in which KS lesions appear in movies has little to do with the real symptomatology of AIDS, but that is not the point. The symbol is what matters, and as a symbol they contributed to construct AIDS in popular culture. Crimp has observed that "cultural conventions rigidly dictate what can and will be said about AIDS. And these cultural conventions exist everywhere the epidemic is constructed: in newspaper stories and magazine articles, in television documentaries and fiction films, in political debate and health-care policy, in scientific research, in art, in activism, and in sexuality. The way AIDS is understood is in large measure predetermined by the forms these discourses take" (1987, 245). Whether in the press, the arts or on the big screen, these forms have largely been visual ones.

[14] Vito Russo has eloquently written on this subject when it comes to cinema in his groundbreaking book *The Celluloid Closet*, in which he also analyzes the queer layers in the depiction of masculinity of Hudson's films from the 1950s.

Besides popular culture, the visual presence of AIDS has been prominent in the arts and activism alike – which is to say, these two spheres worked together. AIDS activism was organized around performative protests, producing images so powerful that they still appear in contemporary depictions of that time – for example, the die-ins at public buildings or the wrapping of the house of Republican Senator Jesse Helms in a giant condom, both referenced in the series *Pose* (see season 2, episodes 1 and 7). ACT UP, the organization behind these initiatives, strongly believed in the power of visual imagery and for that purpose had fruitful collaborations with artists, most notably with the collective Gran Fury. Commenting on AIDS-inspired art, Crimp observed that "art *does* have the power to save lives […]. But if we are to do this, we will have to abandon the idealist conception of art. We don't need a cultural renaissance; we need cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS. We don't need to transcend the epidemic; we need to end it" (1987, 7). His description captures well the purpose behind works such as *Let the Record Show…*, an installation set up by Gran Fury in a window of the New Museum in New York in 1987 which portrayed Reagan and other conservatives with the background of the Nuremberg trials.

The epidemic's presence in the mainstream follows a general tendency of the time: Quentin Miller notes that the 1980s were "marked not only by a turn toward popular culture, but to the stories of representatives of marginalized people" (2018, 5). The intersection of AIDS with popular culture became more and more present: the best example is represented by Keith Haring, who combined queer and AIDS themes with a pop commercial approach – for example producing t-shirts. One of these, incidentally, would be worn by British actor Ian McKellen, who is gay, in a photoshoot with Elizabeth Taylor in the late 1980s. It is important to point out that activist AIDS artists generally did not engage with the mainstream narrative or the Hollywood triangle (with the exception of Reagan in his institutional capacity), focusing instead on queer and explicitly political themes. As Turner notes, however, celebrity is a form of power with "an increasing purchase on our experience of everyday life and [with] implication in the construction and definitions of cultural identity" (2014, 24). Hence, I would suggest that AIDS artists still felt the influence of how the mainstream treated the epidemic. The tensions between the celebrity-framed mainstream narrative and the visual, performative underground production is what made AIDS, so to speak, a pop culture epidemic, as pop culture represented the vocabulary through which AIDS existed in American culture.

7. Conclusions

Jacqueline Foertsch argues that the Cold War was not only "*fought* with language but for the most part it was *created out of* [language]" (2001, 14), drawing a parallel with the public

perception of AIDS. I would argue that, beside language, images (including Hollywood images) also represent a crucial portion of how AIDS was constructed in American culture. While queer artists and activists did most of the heavy lifting (and of the suffering) when it comes to AIDS, the Taylor-Hudson-Reagan triangle managed to frame most of the mainstream narrative reaching those not directly affected, as their fame fed America's interest in the epidemic. The history of the gay community was permanently changed by AIDS: "both the stigma and the respectability of homosexuals" (Altman 1988, 313) seem to have been heightened by the epidemic. The names of Rock Hudson, Ronald Reagan or Elizabeth Taylor may still be the ones that come to mind first when a person not well versed in queer culture hears the word 'AIDS.' But under those three celluloid faces, there is a world to be discovered.

Bionote

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