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**The 1980s AIDS Crisis
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HIV does not make people dangerous to know,

So you can shake their hands and give them a hug:

Heaven knows they need it.

Lady Diana Spencer

Education, awareness and prevention are the keys,

but stigmatization and exclusion from family

is what makes people suffer most

Ralph Fiennes

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	8
INTRODUCTION	10
CHAPTER 1. AIDS IN THE 1980S AND ITS CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS	15
1.1 Susan Sontag and the concept of stigma	15
1.2 Stigma in early AIDS movies.....	19
CHAPTER 2. 1985: AIDS AND THE AMERICAN FAMILY	23
2.1 Introduction.....	23
2.2 Conservatism and the New Right’s vision in 1985	24
2.3 The debunking of conservatism and the movie’s message.....	30
2.4 New ways of representing the crisis	35
CHAPTER 3. <i>THE NORMAL HEART</i>: AIDS, GMHC, ACT UP THEN AND NOW	39
3.1 Introduction.....	39
3.2 Stigma in New York and the first AIDS associations	40
3.3 Aids Activism Today	47
3.4 The importance of <i>The Normal Heart</i>	53
CHAPTER 4. <i>DALLAS BUYERS CLUB</i>: RON WOODROOF AND HIS LEGACY	57
4.1 Introduction.....	57
4.2 Ron Woodroof and the Rise of Buyers Clubs	58
4.3 Aids in the South and Buyers Clubs’ importance in the post Woodroof’s Era	63

CHAPTER 5. <i>PRECIOUS AND POSE: AIDS AND ETHNIC MINORITIES</i>	69
5.1 Introduction.....	69
5.2 <i>Precious</i> : AIDS in the African American community	70
5.3 Minorities in <i>Pose</i>	81
CONCLUSION.....	86
BIBLIOGRAPHY	91
WEBLIOGRAPHY.....	91

ABSTRACT

The following work deals with the representation of the 1980s AIDS crisis in 21st century American cinema. Chapter 1 introduces the concept of “stigma” as theorized by Susan Sontag in *AIDS and Its metaphors* (1989). Stigma negatively contributed to the reception and treatment of the disease, which was considered an issue of just some minorities and thus ignored by the government and the institutions of the 1980s. I will use the concept in order to analyze the early representation of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s AIDS movies such as *An Early Frost* (1985). Chapter 2 is devoted to analyzing AIDS as it affected family life in the 1980s in Yen Tan’s movie *1985*, where in the middle of the crisis, a young man comes back home for Christmas and has to reveal to his family that he is sick and that very probably this will be the last holiday he can spend with them. This movie portrays, a traditional and conservative American family of the 1980s while gradually debunking their conservatism and promote the idea of a more open-minded and modern family. Chapter 3 is devoted to movie *The Normal Heart* (2014) and analyzes GMHC and ACT UP, the first American movements that dealt with the AIDS crisis back in the 1980s. This movie depicts the serious crisis in New York during the epidemic outbreak, observing also, how stigma was widely widespread and how difficult it was for those first movements to handle such a huge problem without any help from the institutions of the City. Chapter 4 focuses on the movie *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013) and the difficulty of AIDS victims to get drugs and support in the South, due to a strong and widespread stigma. This movie represents the last few years of the life of Ron Woodroof, a Texan man who decided to open a Club to help the AIDS victims to get some drugs from foreign countries such as Japan and the Netherlands. Although these drugs were not approved in the US, they could be a relief for the diseased at the time, when FDA was slow to respond to the crisis. In this movie, the theme of AIDS-phobia in the South is also important and still relevant today, as the situation has not changed much. Finally, Chapter 5 is dedicated to *Precious* (2009) and

to the TV series *Pose*. These two are important because they consider the precarious situation of minorities at the time and make the viewer reflect on today's situation that, unfortunately has not changed much, with still numerous people affected by the disease. African Americans, in particular, were and are still the most affected group in American society, due once more to stigma and other problems related to it.

INTRODUCTION

Almost forty years have passed since the first documented cases of AIDS in the U.S. It was 1981 when *The New York Times* reported the news of a rare cancer seen in 41 homosexuals, which hit above all in New York and California. Even though at the beginning this illness killed only few people, some years later it would become one of the most severe plagues worldwide. It is estimated that only in the U.S., 692,790¹ people have died of AIDS since the epidemic outbreak. Recently, in 2017, the number of newly infected amounted to 38,500², and it is likely that more than a million Americans are still living with HIV today. Even though the number of deaths has considerably decreased since the 1980s thanks to medical research and the creation of new drugs, the illness is still far from being erased. AIDS does not kill only homosexuals, bisexuals and drug users, as was believed in 1981, but also heterosexual men, heterosexual women, hemophiliacs, teenagers and children too. The illness has not just provoked physical pain but has also resulted in an outburst of social discrimination cases in the US. This was just the last of a series of problems that American society was undergoing in that period. The 1970s, which were the years of cultural minorities' battles, ended with the loss of the Vietnam war and the inability of president Carter to face the growing internal inflation. Not only this, but a continuous fear and rage against the Soviet Union were to be found among both the government and the citizens. All these problems led to the election in 1980 of president Ronald Reagan, supporter of the republicans and conservative in his political ideals. President Reagan is known for trying to solve the early 1980s economic crisis, for fiercely struggling against the U.S. number one enemy USSR and for trying to reinstate confidence and hope among Americans, after the general weakness felt at the end of the 1970s. However, Reagan is

¹ Mark Cichocki. "How many people have died of AIDS?" www.verywellhealth.com. [Accessed 6/10/2019]

² KFF.com "THE HIV/AIDS Epidemic in the United States: The basics" www.kff.org. [Accessed 6/10/2019]

also known for his blindness towards cultural minorities' issues and above all for his refusal to deal with the AIDS crisis at least until 1987, the year in which he first talked about AIDS publicly. Reagan's favorite class of Americans was male white Anglo-Saxons and he fought for the return of the traditional 1950s-style American family where the father was the breadwinner and the mother was the keeper of the house. Not only Reagan, but also American men who were worried by the rise of feminism, and many religious groups who saw the sixties and the seventies as a dramatic period of changes and loss of morality, were hoping for a return of the traditional values before the last two decades upheavals. The prejudiced conservatives stigmatized the sick, considering them responsible for their own illness as a result of a life of excess and immoral behaviors and their illness was seen as God's punishment. This environment was the one that AIDS sick people had to face. AIDS made a somehow belated appearance in Hollywood in the early 1990s with the film *Philadelphia* (1993), the story of a lawyer who sued his company for having fired him, after discovering his disease. Until that moment, only a few films on the subject had appeared on U.S. television, such as *Buddies* and *An Early Frost* (both in 1985). As Kylo-Patrick Hart observes in his book *The AIDS Movie: Representing a Pandemic in Film and Television*, from 1990 to at least 2000 many examples of AIDS movie were produced and most of them deal with homosexuality and AIDS, showing the prejudice of AIDS as a gay-related illness, a conviction shared by many at the beginning of the plague. Little space was reserved for representing other categories of victims such as women, traditional families, racial minorities and especially children. After this 15-year attention, films which represent HIV and AIDS decreased, clearly due to the reduction of deaths owing to the appearance of new drugs. However, a number of films have appeared in the last decade which has focused on representing aspects of the early AIDS period, in the 1980s and 1990s, that had previously been ignored. Among these aspects we find a new assessment of the role of AIDS activism, of racial minorities' precarious situation, and of the dimensions of stigmatization—something that is relevant in the US of today, in an era that in many ways seems politically similar to the 1980s. In this thesis, these aspects will be analyzed through four films and a series, all

recently made but set in the 1980s. These films show how AIDS entered in the U.S. families and how people reacted to a blind and deaf government, asking for more attention to the illness and creating new associations to help the diseased and struggle against stigmatization. Besides this, the movies tackle how people tried to manage the crisis looking for non-traditional or unapproved cures and how hard AIDS affected minorities. The first chapter will be devoted to studying the independent film *1985* (2018) by Yen Tan, which presents the story of a young gay man who comes back home and has to deal AIDS with his parents and younger brother. This film well represents the experience of AIDS in a traditional American family and how the family behaves in a more modern and open-minded way to the young boy's disease. The second chapter will be dedicated to the HBO movie *The Normal Heart* (2014) by Ryan Murphy, based on Larry Kramer's eponymous play. This movie pictures Kramer's struggle against AIDS and the creation of GMHC (Gay Men's Health Crisis), the first group to help AIDS sufferers and his later leaving it and creating ACT UP, for accusing the organization of being too soft with the government. These groups are still active today and try to do their best to raise awareness on many different issues that are still widespread in the country. The third part will focus on *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013) by Jean-Marc Vallée, which represents the life of Ron Woodroof, a heterosexual man who caught AIDS by having a sexual encounter with a drug-addicted woman and tried hard to help AIDS sufferers getting pills that were either still illegal or unapproved in the U.S. In this movie, the transformation of the main character from a homophobe into a more open-minded person and his activism are widely pictured and very thought-provoking. The last part of the thesis will deal with AIDS and racial minorities in 1980s U.S. through the analysis of the movie *Precious* (2009) by Lee Daniels, an independent film based on Sapphire's novel *Push*. This film deals with an African American young girl and her social problems of domestic violence, abuse, illiteracy, and illness. The recent TV series *Pose* will be also be analyzed; set almost in the same period and place as *Precious*, it well represents the hardships of both African-Americans and Latinos in the 1980s New York, among which: poverty, racism and the

AIDS crisis. Racial minorities, in fact, were and still are the ones who have to carry the highest burden concerning the rate of AIDS sufferers and the huge number of deaths every year.

CHAPTER 1

AIDS IN THE 1980s AND ITS CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS

1.1 Susan Sontag and the concept of stigma

In the 1980s, AIDS was not just as any normal disease, it was seen as a plague, as the one that hit Europe in the 17th century. This was due, not only to the huge amount of people who fell ill in a short period of time, but also to the series of attributes and prejudices linked to it. Susan Sontag in her *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989) showed how a series of metaphors had been related to the illness, such as military ones, and how this process had resulted in a growing stigmatization of the victims. According to Sontag:

Disease is seen as an invasion of alien organisms, to which the body responds by its own military operations, such as the mobilizing of immunological "defenses," and medicine is "aggressive," as in the language of most chemotherapies. The grosser metaphor survives in public health education, where disease is regularly described as invading the society, and efforts to reduce mortality from a given disease are called a fight, a struggle, a war³.

Of course, if the disease itself is seen as a kind of enemy to fight in order to defeat it, a bad light is cast even to patients suffering from such a condition. Sontag describes such a phenomenon in a very accurate way: "The metaphor implements the way particularly dreaded diseases are envisaged as an alien 'other', as enemies are in modern war; and the move from the demonization of the illness to the attribution of fault to the patient is an inevitable one, no matter if patients are thought of as victims⁴." To explain how certain diseases are more stigmatized than others, Sontag presents her

³ Susan Sontag, *Aids and Its metaphors*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989, p.9.

⁴ Ibid.

experience as a cancer patient. As a matter of fact, both AIDS and cancer patients suffered from a kind of discrimination due to the attributes linked to them. Cancer was considered a diminution of the self, it was seen as the disease of the inexpressive and the repressed. AIDS, differently from cancer was even more attacked, because it is not linked to the repressed but was the result of an addiction to illegal drugs and uncontrolled sexual behaviors: “The sexual transmission of this illness, considered by most people as a calamity one brings on oneself, is judged more harshly than other means-especially since AIDS is understood as a disease not only of sexual excess but of perversity⁵.” Sontag lingers on explaining why she claims AIDS was a plague, pointing out that it was common since the ancient time to identify some diseases, such as the bubonic plague as God punishment, for a community’s immoral behaviors and this mechanism continued also in the 20th century, first with cancer and later with AIDS. Clearly, by stating so, she wants to underline the new right and conservative ideologies which were deemed responsible for the discrimination of the victims. She then goes on to observe that AIDS was so stigmatized because unlike polio, for instance, it affected the whole body and even face, which was considered one of the Greek symbol for moral purity. The difference between stigmatized illnesses and less stigmatized ones as polio, lies in the fact that polio does not hit face but just the legs and above all, the fact that polio was considered a children’s illness and thus was not charged with moral attributes. Not only this, but AIDS was becoming for Sontag, a world paranoia. This response was fueled by the US government, slow in both Reagan and Bush era, to respond to the crisis, by journalism and the official press which turned a blind eye to the situation; *The New York Times* (which will be analyzed later on) and in general, all media contributed somehow to widen the issue or worse to ignore it. Interesting, is the idea of the AIDS fear linked to the conservative politics, which Sontag understands as a Kulturkampf against the 1960s and 1970s new liberal rights and tendencies. Those years were famous for the countercultural movements lead by minorities that until that moment had not had the same rights as the “cultural majorities”. However, many conservatives hoped for the 1950s

⁵ Ibid.

traditional values to return. Thus, AIDS was accepted positively by those disgusted by the previous decades' social changes and was seen as the punishment of God on a society that, according to them, was not following His rule anymore:

AIDS is a punishment for deviant sex [...] Even more important is the utility of AIDS in pursuing one of the main activities of the so-called neoconservatives; the kulturkampf against all is called the 1960. A whole politics of 'the will'- of the intolerance and paranoia, of fear of political weakness- has fastened on the disease.⁶

Another fundamental element spotted by Sontag, which would be considered by many other AIDS experts, was the concept of social death caused by the disease. Sontag claimed that very frequently an HIV-positive person starts to be stigmatized and ostracized even before developing the "full-blown" disease. Thus, this person loses his job and his place in the society, and gets sometimes mistreated by doctors when trying to be cured. Hence, this person somehow dies socially even before dying biologically. These are her exact words to describe the phenomenon: "AIDS, in which people are understood as ill before they are ill; which produces a seemingly innumerable array of symptom-illnesses; for which there are only palliatives; and which brings to many a social death that precedes the physical one⁷". The AIDS stigma described by Sontag, resurfaces in a 2005 article by UNAIDS where a list of the features is attached:

- Health-care services: reduced standard of care, denial of access to care and treatment, HIV testing without consent, breaches of confidentiality including identifying someone as HIV-positive to relatives and outside agencies, negative attitudes and degrading practices by health-care workers.
- Workplace: denial of employment based on HIV-positive status, compulsory HIV testing, exclusion of HIV-positive individuals from pension schemes or medical benefits.

⁶ Ibid, p.30.

⁷ Ibid, p.34.

- Schools: denial of entry to HIV-affected children, or dismissal of teachers.
- Prisons: mandatory segregation of HIV-positive individuals, exclusion from collective activities.⁸

These were, in fact, the main characteristics of the AIDS crisis that afflicted the 1980s, and even later on. For instance, the reduced health-care services due to the fear and inability to face the new disease and the workplace problems are represented in many AIDS movies. In *Philadelphia*, for example, Andrew Beckett, an accomplished lawyer, is helped by another lawyer Joe Miller to sue the company Andrew was working for, having fired him without a clear reason and even in hospital the personnel showed a clear prejudice for his condition. This is clearly just one case but it represents very well the 1980s fear and stigma related to the workplace. Another famous episode, linked to the third point above listed, that is school, is Ryan White's case. White was a young hemophiliac who fell ill due to a tainted blood transfusion. Despite his innocence, he was sent away from his school and was helped in his protest against stigma and discrimination by important celebrities including Michael Jackson. One final element Sontag presents in her work is the connection between AIDS, nuclear weapons and Cold War. According to Stephen Jay Gould's idea, reported by Sontag, "AIDS pandemic may rank with nuclear weaponry as the greatest danger of our era⁹." Gould and Sontag were not the only two experts uniting the two phenomena. Even Jacqueline Foertsch in her book *Enemies Within*, talks about the two concepts as intertwined between them. She claimed that communist fear after WW-2, that is to say at the beginning of Cold War, is similar to AIDS sufferers' fear in the last decade of the war. This fear of the red, unknown communist who may hide everywhere and who is seen by certain political figures such as McCarty as an enemy to be found and eradicated, mirrors somehow the phobia against the AIDS carriers who were

⁸ Peter Aggleton. "HIV-Related Stigma, Discrimination and Human Rights Violations." www.data.unaids.org [Accessed 08/05/2019]

⁹ *Aids and its metaphors*, p.86.

identified with the gay community, in spite of AIDS being an almost completely heterosexual disease elsewhere, as in Africa. As stated above, this idea would be the stronghold of many religious and non-religious conservative groups, and this phobia which became even hysteria, would be spawned also by American institutions throughout the 1980s and the first part of the 1990s. As Foertsch notes in her book:

The cold war spawned a plague not of communism or of bomb-related illness, but of paranoia, xenophobia, and red-baiting which took on witch-hunt proportions. Likewise, the AIDS era will be remembered not for its epidemic of HIV but for its plague of homophobia, germophobia, racism and classism.¹⁰

1.2 Stigma in early AIDS movies

As stated above, the general climate during the 1980s and then in 1990s in the U.S. society was of fear and stigma towards this rather unknown disease. The two very first movies dealing with the disease were 1985 *Buddies* and *An Early Frost*. In the latter, in particular, the concept of stigma is twofold. First, stigma is represented by Michael Pierson's family that finds it difficult to accept his disease and tries not to have contacts with him. His father, who represents the traditional conservative man, does not even want to talk to him and similarly, his sister, who is pregnant, is scared of being transmitted the disease and thus avoids every contact with him. Not only here, but later on in the movie, when Michael is severely ill and the ambulance is called, the emergency personnel shows stigma towards him, refusing to take him to hospital owing to his disease. However, this stigma is not only represented towards Michael but also towards other AIDS patients in the same hospital. Victor, for example, soon dies and all his belongings are thrown away by a

¹⁰ Jacqueline Foertsch. *Enemies within: The Cold War and The AIDS Crisis in Literature, Film and Culture*. University of Illinois, 2001, p.9.

nurse, who is scared that they may be contaminated and may allow the virus to spread in the hospital. Not only here, but Stigma is also shown in 1991 *Our Sons*. Luanne, the mother of a sick man called Donald, finds it hard to accept his son's disease and is helped by Audrey, the wealthy mother of his boyfriend James, to overcome her fears and accept his condition, so as she can stay close to his son during his suffering and his last days of life. In this movie, stigma is well-represented in the beginning when James reveals his mother that Luanne thinks that his son's disease represents God's will for his deviant behaviors, idea shared by many at the time and also explained by Sontag in her book. Another movie where stigma is very well-presented is *And The Band Played On*, based on Randy Shilts' homonym book. In this movie, the epidemiologist Don Francis tries to do his best to discover the HIV virus and to find a cure to it but he is continually denied funding and help by the American government, which as stated above, seemed not interested in the matter and just relied on Dr. Gallo, the controversial doctor deemed responsible for individuating the HIV virus at the same time as Luc Montagnier's French team. This movie, in fact, is a very good example of the crisis outbreak, the medical hardships to find this new disease cause and the negative impact that both the government and the media provided to the illness, leading to an increase in the degree of discrimination and phobia. Besides this, *The Ryan White Story* is itself a clear example of AIDS phobia. In the movie, as in his real life, White was a young hemophiliac who needed continuous blood transfusions to stay alive. As in the first part of the 1980s the blood was not obviously checked for HIV virus, White received one tainted blood transfusion and as a result, contracted AIDS. Despite it was generally asserted that AIDS could not be transmitted without fluids contacts, Ryan was kicked out of his school, for fear he might contaminate other classmates. While he was still alive, he struggled against AIDS fear, along with other famous celebrities such as Elton John and Michael Jackson and after his death in 1990, the Ryan White program to help people with HIV and AIDS was founded and still exists today. Stories similar to White's one were extremely frequent at the time and a similar situation is presented in the film *Go Towards the Light*, where the Madison family has to face their son's Ben disease and the many

discriminations that their child runs into, both in hospital, where he is quarantined and at school, where he is excluded for his state of health. As far as children are concerned, another example of phobia is depicted in *A Place for Annie*, where the nurse Susan takes care and adopts a baby diagnosed with HIV called Annie, abandoned by her natural mother at the hospital and unwanted by several foster families for her frail health. Later on in the movie, her mother will reappear to claim her daughter but as she is sick too, she will leave the little Annie with Susan who, at the end, will discover that Annie actually tests negative. As far as heterosexual victims of AIDS suffering from homophobia are concerned, the Ventola family in *And Then There Was One* is a clear example. Roxy and Vinnie, a real couple, tried many times to have a natural son and on not managing, they decided to try an artificial implantation, finally succeeding in having Lorrie. However, they soon discovered they were all HIV positive and they had to handle their difficult situation within the society they were surrounded by. In the movie, they are ostracized and rejected by their friends that on discovering their disease try to avoid them or pretend not to see them at a party where they meet. What is interesting about this story is After Vinnie and Lorrie's deaths in 1991, Roxy became one of the most influential woman activist to struggle against AIDS hysteria in the first part of 1990s. Along with her, Alison Gertz too, the protagonist of *Something to Live For*, a young heterosexual woman who caught HIV due to just a one-night stand, suffered from stigma by the hospital personnel who thought she was a drug-addicted, since there were just a few cases of straight non-toxic women with the disease in the country. Undoubtedly, though, the most famous example of AIDS fear and stigma is pictured in 1993 Hollywood *Philadelphia* starring Tom Hanks, Denzel Washington and Antonio Banderas. Here, the stigma is actually twofold. First, there is the initial fear and denial of Joseph Miller (Washington) to accept Beckett's lawsuit because of its difficulty to be won and the fact that Miller is scared by Beckett for his and his family health security. Not only this, but Stigma appears especially with Beckett's employers, who are the real reason why the trial begins. In fact, as they discover that he is sick, they decide to fire him, making up the excuse that he has become imprecise and careless in his job. This was and is still illegal and in the end, the

lawsuit is won by Beckett, who unfortunately dies soon after. All the elements of Stigma described also by Sontag, Foertsch and many other AIDS-related figures such as Altman, as well as having been important in AIDS movie in the 1980s and 1990s, are central in all the AIDS movies of the 21st century examined in the present thesis, where this AIDS phobia is once more one of the main features. Many times in these movies, the characters sometimes real, sometimes fictionalized, find themselves having to face their disease with their families, in their workplaces, and sometimes with the medical facilities, they have to get in contact with. My intention is to observe how these characters move in the AIDS-phobic American society of the 1980s and how their situations are interpreted today by directors, protagonists, and viewers.

CHAPTER 2

1985: AIDS AND THE AMERICAN FAMILY

2.1 Introduction

During the 80's and 90's many American families had to face the plight of AIDS. Someone lost a son or a daughter, someone lost a mother or father and at times, whole families were swept away by one of the worst illnesses of the end of the century. American cinema, both independent and (starting from the 1990s), mainstream, tackled the issue from different points of view, sometimes including stories of families unrelated to homosexuality and drugs. Some examples are: *And Then There Was One*, a movie that tells the story of the Ventola family and *A Mother's Prayer*, the story of a mother who discovers her illness and has to start to face it with his little child, who will later be adopted by a foster family. However, most of the movies about AIDS deal with traditional American families who have to face their sons' unknown homosexuality and the fact that they are sick and about to die. Normally, these sons return home after a long period away from home and have to face AIDS with their families, who usually find it difficult to accept it. Some examples are: *An Early Frost*, the very first movie in 1985 that deals with the new disease, and later on, *Our Sons* and then *In the Gloaming*, where the representation of the difficult relationship between a gay man and the whole family is central. The theme of the relationship between a gay and ill son and his traditional, conservative family during the 1980s, is also present in a very recent movie called *1985*. This independent movie, made in 2018 by the Malaysian director Yen Tan, goes back to the 1980s, the most critical period for AIDS victims and tells the story of Adrian, a young man who comes back home to celebrate Christmas holidays and apparently, to tell his parents and little brother he is about to die. This movie is full of elements which makes today's viewer reflect on the

problems of being ill at the time and unlike other films that deal with the same themes, it has a more educative and hopeful ending. This happens with Adrian's parents opening and his final message to his younger brother Andrew who is a fundamental link of the past with the present. In what follows, I analyze Adrian's and Andrew's family, observing how Tan portrays them in a ordinary way almost until the end, where the family is pictured in a completely different fashion, even clashing with the first representation. The relationship between the brothers and how the AIDS issue is also tackled, will be fundamental to understand the message of the movie and his relevance to our contemporary period. The concept of stigma and AIDS-phobia, appearing in several AIDS movies set in the 1980s has much to say about today.

2.2 Conservatism and the New Right's vision in 1985

On coming back home in Texas after 3 years, Adrian the protagonist of this movie, re-enters in contact with the environment he had left behind three years before to take up a new job in New York. His mother Eileen, a typical housewife of the 1980s and his father Dale, a mechanic, from the very first moment, appear to fit well in the conservative environment they live in, down in Texas. Their life is almost completely devoted to working and praying and is shut up to the new consumer society, which was at its apex at the time. This is pictured many times in the film. In one of the first scenes, the whole family is seen praying before having lunch and it is Lester, the patriarch, who is responsible for this entire situation. Not only is their strong religiousness portrayed here, but even later, when the family is shown at church for Christmas mass and Eileen is pictured praying alone in her bedroom. Clearly, Dale and Eileen are representatives of the 1980s conservative ideology called the New Right. As Thompson observes: "This New Right politics, or neo-conservatism, was new in several important ways that would help reshape the political landscape of American Republicanism and American society and culture more generally." And he adds: "At the forefront of this new social movement were a variety of often diverse Protestant and Catholic religious

groups. As Michael Lienesch has shown, the revival of religious organizations in the late 1970s and 1980s was the next peak in a cycle of rise and fall for the Christian Right in the US¹¹.” As a result, the two parents are represented as being part of that group who was disgusted by the 1960s and 1970s cultural changes and hoped for the return of the 1950s traditional values, seeing such an opportunity under Reagan’s administration. This strong religious presence within the family is also shown in an enigmatic scene where Lester and Adrian are having breakfast and are listening to a Christian radio, very probably a form of radioevangelism. In the program, everything different and far from Church and Christ’s doctrine is harshly condemned. The speaker David Hawitt talks about the lie of Santa Claus, and how it has become more important than Christ in Christmas celebration and adds that the society of the time is full of lies. He, then, talks about the importance of the Church as a symbol of truth and states that when one is not in contact with the Church is surrounded by many lies. The last thing he remembers is John Gospel 8:32, where Jesus states that truth will set people free. As already anticipated, all this represents the importance of both televangelism and the radio one, which was in clear contrast with all the new cultural movements. As Thompson declares:

It is in this tradition of right-wing extremism that the televangelists followed in the 1980s, as television evangelists like Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Bakker, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell and Oral Roberts revived the role of the preacher as a media phenomenon and used their own media organizations not only to raise huge sums of money but also to preach about moral issues around which the New Right coalesced: abortion, homosexuality and AIDS, sex education and pornography.¹²

Clearly, here the first example of social stigma is represented, that is to say, the Stigma linked to media:

¹¹ Graham Thompson. *American culture in the 80s*. Edinburgh University Press, 2007

¹² *Ibid*, p. 57

The treatment of AIDS in news accounts, documentaries, television responds, socially and politically, to the pandemic. Media representations have shaped the social processes and semantics underlying all aspects of the pandemic, including conceptions of risk, vulnerability, drug use, and sexuality; accordingly, these representations have had a direct bearing on the already complex relationships within and between various social groups.¹³

And he concludes:

Media representations of AIDS provide ideological guidance to American audience members; as such, the codes, conventions, symbols, and visuals they offer contribute significantly to the social construction of the pandemic and to the social ramifications of that construction¹⁴.

As a result, Adrian as he is sick and gay, is considered by radioangelism and by media in general, as the dangerous “Other”, the one that does not fit in society and while listening to this words, Adrian looks extremely upset and worried, so much so that even her mother notices it and asks him if he is fine. To strengthen such a scene, the camera switches to the house garden where Lester, the Christian patriarch, grabs the newspaper close to a giant wooden nativity that is set near the house entrance. Very different from their parents are Adrian and Andrew that embrace the cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s and well-fit the consumer culture of the 1980s, obviously clashing with their parents’ viewpoints. This fracture is particularly represented in a scene where Adrian goes to wake up his brother and finds him listening to Madonna’s Tapes with his walkman. Andrew reveals his brother to have bought them without his father’s permission and that his father has thrown almost all of them away, after finding them in his backpack. Not only this, but he tells him that his father has also torn off his Bryan Adams Poster. Andrew is not the only example of this, but their neighbor Mr. Thompson has also suffered from this drastic situation. Andrew states

¹³ Kylo-Patrick Hart. *The AIDS Movie: Representing a Pandemic in Film and Television*, Routledge, 2000, pp. 18-19

¹⁴ Ibid.

that Thompson had the greatest collection of tapes in the village and was forced to burn them all under pastor's John directions. These situations, which seem strange for today viewers, were common at the time within conservative environments, due to the New Right's opposition to "secular music". This phenomenon is very well explained by Thompson:

Religious and conservative groups also made numerous forays into the field of culture.

In 1986, Jimmy Swaggart accused rock music of breeding 'adultery, alcoholism, drug abuse, necrophilia, bestiality and you name it' and in response Wal-Mart, temporarily at least, removed potentially offensive albums and magazines such as Rolling Stone from its displays. Popular music, because it was directly marketed so explicitly to young consumers, became the subject of several campaigns. Chief amongst these was the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC).

Formed in 1985 by several wives of congressmen, the group published a list of songs dubbed the 'Filthy Fifteen' because of the subject matter of their lyrics which focused on sex, violence, drugs or the occult. Surprisingly, the list included Cyndi Lauper's 'She Bop' (1983), Sheena Easton's 'Sugar Walls' (1984) and Madonna's 'Dress You Up' (1985) along with a group of more predictable material from heavy-metal bands such as the British group Def Leppard and American bands Venom, W.A.S.P and Twisted Sister¹⁵.

Thus, it is easily understandable why Dale has decided to destroy Andrew's tapes of Madonna. On the contrary, the singer is appreciated by both brothers and Adrian tells Andrew that thanks to his friend Leo, he had even participated in her Radio City Music Hall concert in New York. Madonna as well as being considered the 1980s symbol of transgression and freedom, she was: "an icon in the gay community and she cemented this position by speaking out about the need for money for AIDS research¹⁶." In fact, on July 13, 1987, at New York's Madison Square Garden, she made a concert aimed at raising funds for AIDS research. The ticket cost 1000 dollars, and everyone was given a

¹⁵ Graham Thompson. *American culture in the 80*. Edinburgh University Press. 2007, p.18

¹⁶ Ibid.

leaflet describing the symptoms of the disease and the right behaviors to avoid it. Not only concerts, but Madonna was the protagonist of many slogans and ads to raise awareness towards the problem and to teach the precautions to take to avoid the spread. Another fundamental scene where the parents' opposition to secular music is depicted, is when during Christmas' gift-giving Andrew is given some religious tapes suggested by Pastor John, that according to his parents, were the same as the ones he was listening to but as stated by Dale: "without filthy lyrics". To this, follows another scene where the brothers' complicity is evident and this is when Adrian donates a 100-dollar voucher, clearly hiding from his parents, to buy whatever tapes he wants. Besides his brother Andrew, another important character in the movie is Carly, Adrian's former girlfriend. He meets her in Dallas, in the night club she is working for as a performer. Very thought-provoking is Carly's monologue at the club, where she makes irony on her being teased for her Korean origins: "My name is Carly, but my Korean name is Jeong Ki-bum Choi. Growing up in school, I didn't think I was any different from any of the other students until one day, in grade 6, in history class we were learning about WW II and Madeleine, the most popular in the school, stands up and points at me calling me dirty Jap. It's racist. You know, I'm Korean-American and very proud and thought it was important to tell her. So, the next day I went to school with a Korean garb and kicked her ass. There was a difference between a dirty Jap and a motherfucking Gook." This part in the movie is devoted to analyzing racism, an issue that has always existed in American society against ethnic minorities and to tackle the problem of Stigma. Despite all the cultural movements of the end of the 1960s and 1970s, racism and homophobia still persisted in the 1980s and were particularly rooted in the south. In an interview made by Eldredge, Jamie Chung, the actress playing Carly, explained the purpose of such a character:

The role of Carly was unique for me. I was lucky to grow up in San Francisco where there was this huge Asian community. But ["1985" writer-director] Yen Tan grew up in Texas where the

film is set and told me, “Listen, it was hard being Asian in Texas.” He felt like an outcast.

That’s why Carly and Adrian bond so well. They’re both outcasts in a way.¹⁷

However, Carly does not represent just Asian American as a minority but according to Yen Tan is also: “a collage of these men I talked to during my [insurance] days.¹⁸ A lot of them were from the south, or they were born and raised in this very specific kind of Texas environment.” As a matter of fact, Yen Tan reveals he was inspired for the film by many of the ill people he met while working for an insurance company, the first job after graduation. This is how Tan describes it:

I was revisiting a lot of these open-ended conversations that I had with a lot of men living with HIV and AIDS. This was around '97 when I graduated from college. I worked for an insurance company that did a lot of viatical settlements. It was one of those booming industries where a lot of people would come in and have the option to sell their life insurance policies to a third party.¹⁹

And adds: “I noticed there was a common thread of secrecy in their stories. There was always a sense of people in their family not knowing what’s going on with them, not knowing they’re gay or they had HIV/AIDS.²⁰” Thus, Carly is somehow an alter ego of Adrian. Both of them represent minorities at the time, either ethnical or sexual, both were teased somehow in their life and both hide secrets from their families about their styles of life. As Adrian hides he is gay and sick with AIDS, Carly hides her parents she works in a night club and finally, both tried to get away from their parents, apparently due to their strict mentalities. It is this similarity, which makes it possible for Adrian to tell her about his disease and to ask her to be the messenger for telling such thing his

¹⁷ Richard Eldredge. “A Journey of Love and Loss: Jamie Chung Discusses Her New Film 1985”, www.eldredgeatl.com [Accessed 06/12/2019]

¹⁸ David Raddish. “Director Yen Tan talks his film 1985 and why we should never forget the horror of AIDS”, www.queerty.com [Accessed 07/12/2019]

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Kurt Osenlund. “1985: The Story of a Man With AIDS Who Makes a Final Return to His Conservative Family Home.” www.out.com [Accessed 11/08/2019]

little brother Andrew. It is with her that Adrian finds the courage to tell his story about his real life in New York and his neighborhood. Through their conversation, it is revealed that Adrian was fired from his job at the Ad Company and is working in a restaurant barely making ends meet, and besides this, he is living in a “crappy neighborhood” as he cannot afford a better dwelling. Thus, the first part of *1985*, represents a climate where stigma, phobia and conservatism are present in many aspects of both Adrian’s family and life, a representation that mirrors the one of many victims at the time and which is also the one represented in Sontag book’s *AIDS And its Metaphors*. This first part, in fact, as stated above, represents a condition similar to other movies such as *An Early Frost* or *In the Gloaming*, where this phobia and difficulty of the protagonist to relate to their families are always a central point in the narration. However, as will be shown in the next paragraph, this situation gradually improves in the last part of the film until reaching a point where the parents show themselves as being more understanding and opened to Adrian’s condition.

2.3 The debunking of conservatism and the movie’s message

The representation of the 1980s as pervaded by stigma and conservatism have is central in the movie. However, there are two or three scenes in which the director decides to debunk this traditional view of the decade. In the scene where Adrian comes back home after quarrelling with Carly, Adrian’s mother Eileen is sleeping in his bed and when he goes to his bedroom he finds her lying there. At this point, Adrian feels sick and his mother prepares him a hot bath as she used to do when he was little. Here, the mother who has been pictured as conservative and submissive, reveals him that she didn’t vote for Reagan in 1984. Instead, she chose the democrat Mondale due to his nuclear freeze policy and above all, for the Equal Rights Amendment. In addition to this, she explains to his son that she does not want to pass for a “Bumpkin”, that is to say, a simple person without a personal opinion of the world. On the contrary, she wants to be “a well-informed citizen” with her own viewpoint. Not only at this point, but also at the end of the movie, she appears smarter

than at the beginning. In fact, when she accompanies her son to the airport the day he has to come back to New York, on greeting him she states: “You don’t have to tell me until you are ready and I’ll try to be ready too.” As a result, very differently from what one would expect, she understands what is happening very well and she is ready to help him with his disease. Something similar also happens with his father Dale, even if at the beginning the father was a little more reluctant to it. In the whole movie, Dale has been represented as not understanding or being skeptical of several ideas or ways of living of Adrian. For instance, he doesn’t understand how Adrian and his friends could live together and is also skeptical about Adrian’s job promotion. One evening, though, the two meet in their garden and for the first time, they drink a beer together. While they are drinking, Dale asks him: “why did leave our house so early?” and adds: “were you running away from something?” To this, Adrian clearly answers denying having run away from anything. After this, Dale starts talking first about Andrew, telling Adrian he is worried about his weakness and then, he talks about his own strength and reliability both at home and back in Vietnam. These themes seem to be related once more to the New Right, as the concept of strength and masculinity were fundamental at the time and in opposition to 1960s and 1970s weakness. In fact, this idea is represented in many different films of the era and as Thompson points out through Ransome’s words:

The response in the 1980s to this fear was the construction of a manliness that not only reasserted a sense of cultural and social authority, but that was also hypermasculine. Action-movie heroes were a staple of the decade. The two most successful were Sylvester Stallone, who continued his Rocky movies – Rocky III (1982), Rocky IV (1985) –while also portraying one of the decade’s most recognizable film roles, John Rambo in First Blood (1982), Rambo: First Blood Part II (1985) and Rambo III (1988), and Arnold Schwarzenegger, who found Hollywood fame with performances that utilized his bodybuilding past in films such as Conan

the Barbarian (1982), Conan the Destroyer (1984), Terminator (1984), Commando (1985), The Running Man (1987) and Predator (1987).²¹

However, all this discourse, which at the beginning seems just another representation of Dale's New Right ideas, is explained later on. Dale tells Adrian that one day he wanted to have lunch with him and as a result, he went to N.Y. and found him hugged with another man at the entrance of his flat. At the beginning, he didn't believe that it was true but later on, he returned and he really convinced himself it was true. Not only this, but his father tells him he called his job to talk to him but they told him he didn't work for them anymore. Despite all this, differently from other films back in the 1980s, his father is still open to his son. He tells him he can still count on him and if he needs help, he is still ready to aid him. Clearly, all this is very surprising, as the viewer would expect an exaggerated reaction after seeing how he has behaved through most of the film. This process of opening and the turning point from the first impression to a new one, were really wanted by Tan who points out: "The intent was to set up the family in a seemingly archetypal away, then gradually peel each character's layers to reveal who they are over the course of the story. This is the way I wanted to present these people²²." As a result, in the end, both of the parents appear to be more understanding and open-minded than at the beginning. This is shown also in the very last scene where Eileen, coming back home by car, switches the radio on and on listening to the condemnations of radiovangelism, decides to switch it off, utterly disgusted by what she hears. Very similarly, Dale while he is at work, decides to finally put on his son's jacket, the one he didn't want at the beginning, thus underlining once more his acceptance of his sick son's condition. However, the most important and thought-provoking scene in the movie is the one of the tape which Adrian leaves to his brother Andrew, before coming back to New York. In this tape, Adrian says: "Andrew I want you to take the tape as long as possible. I think you might need to listen to this

²¹ Graham Thompson. *American culture in the 80s*. Edinburgh University Press. 2007, p. 124

²² Jennie Kermode. "Home for Christmas", www.eyeforfilm.co.uk [Accessed 06/14/2019]

again in the future. It might make more sense when you are older. You are gonna have some tough days, days where you'll feel that everything sucks and you don't want to go out of bed, days where you gonna feel like you just don't belong. I have had a lot of these days and I want you to know, you are not the only one who feels the way you do. There is a whole world out there for someone like you. I promise you are not as different as you think you are. And mum and dad might not get it and your friends either. And someone might say awful things because they don't get it. But I get it. And I know you are gonna learn to be happy, with who you are. You might have to go to another place, as I did and there, you might find the right person. People just like me and you. I'm proud you are my brother." This message to the younger brother has many different aims in the movie. The first is the embodiment of the director Tan with the younger brother, in order to observe and tackle the disease from the point of view of a pre-teen who lived in the 1980s. As Tan explains:

Having the brother was a way to look into the possibilities of what that means if say, your interpretation of the film was that the brother was gay, of what does having an older brother who is gay means for him as he grows up. That was an angle that I specifically wanted to tackle, because I felt like the younger brother is essentially my experience of growing up, and what AIDs meant to me from the point when I was a kid to when I became an adult and learning that it's two different things, and there's a distinction that you can be gay without being weighed down by the baggage of the epidemic.²³

Another fundamental message is the connection between the 1980s and today's situation. Yen Tan with the movie, wants either to remember a generation that is now completely lost or to analyze today legacy left by AIDS victims to the 21st Century. According to the director: "[The film] is my attempt to give voice to people who couldn't share their stories because they died. Also, on the most personal note, I can make when it comes to this story, *1985* is actually my attempt at going back in

²³ Alex Lines. "Melbourne Queer Film Festival 2019: Interview With 1985 Director Yen Tan", www.filminquiry.com [Accessed 06/15/2019]

time to tell myself as a boy growing up where I was deeply closeted and deeply alone”²⁴. In addition to this, concerning the legacy that the film wants to provide to today viewers, Yen Tan claims:

At the end, when Cory’s character leaves the tape message for him, it’s the part of the film where I’m tying the past and present. That’s the takeaway from all the horrible things of the 80’s and 90’s: ultimately all the good things we have today, all the progress that’s been made – marriage equality, treatments and whatnot – all came from this very specific point in the history of AIDs activism of the 80’s, a lot of the privileges that we have today came from these bad days²⁵.

As a result, besides his personal situation, Tan wants to underline how thanks to the struggle and death of these people, today people can live a better life and have access to rights and cures, which were not possible back in the 1980s due, as was noticed, both to stigma and lack of proper attention to the issue. These themes of AIDS activism and the situation of medical research on AIDS drugs will be analyzed more in depth in the following two chapters devoted to *The Normal Heart* and *Dallas Buyers Club*, two fundamental movies to understand how certain groups actively reacted to the indifference related to the disease and how the medical centers handled this new epidemic. The final aim of this movie, which is also the most important one, is to raise the viewers’ awareness of the fact that despite new drugs were discovered, HIV has not still disappeared. Instead, it is still an illness which affects thousands of people in the US and worldwide and still causes social problems of phobia and Stigma, as happened in the 1980s. In fact, according to Tan:

²⁴ David Raddish. “Director Yen Tan talks his film 1985 and why we should never forget the horror of AIDS”, www.queerty.com [Accessed 06/15/2019]

²⁵ Ibid.

AIDS hasn't suddenly vanished in the age of Prep, and AIDS stigma is still a very real thing. HIV stigma is still a real thing. This whole idea of "Why this film now?" is an interesting question, but at the same time, at all of our screenings, I've had conversations with many different people, and so many parallels have been drawn from the past to the present by the audiences themselves. And it can only be a good thing for people who didn't know much about what happened back then. This can provoke them to look into it or read more about this part of history²⁶.

As a result, the movie was made not only to pay homage to the victims back in the 1980s, but also to teach younger viewers, who didn't live in that decade, the hardships and struggles to handle such a grave disease, which is not over yet.

2.4 New ways of representing the crisis

The way AIDS is represented in the movie is very different from many other similar films. In fact, the words HIV and AIDS are never pronounced, neither at the beginning when Adrian comes back home and talks to his mother, nor when he phones his friends to wonder about his friend Georgie, and nor in the end when he reveals Carly his illness. The explanation for this choice is given by Yen Tan in a recent interview for Melbourne Queer festival:

It's definitely deliberate, because 1985 was the year where President Reagan said AIDs for the first time. It was something in the zeitgeist for a couple of years but never talked about publicly, so I think not saying the words HIV, AIDs or gay in the film was very appropriate because I think that's the kind of world it was. Those words were just so taboo, with such a deep-rooted sense of stigma.²⁷

²⁶ Kurt Osenlund. "1985: The Story of a Man With AIDS Who Makes His Final Return to His Conservative Home", www.out.com [Accessed 06/15/2019]

²⁷ Alex Lines. "Melbourne Queer Film Festival 2019: Interview With 1985 Director Yen Tan", www.filminquiry.com [Accessed 06/15/2019]

Thus even through the choice of the language, the theme of stigma and phobia are conveyed, as well as being represented first within the family and then within the workplace. Besides all this, what also strikes the viewer is the idea of making it in black and white, which are not the colors the viewer would expect for a movie set in the 1980s. The eighties, in fact, are remembered in a nostalgic way for their neon lights, their particular clothes, their economic wellness, and their many opportunities to have fun. Clearly, the choice of the melancholic, old-fashioned black and white seems rather puzzling at the beginning, but then, even this feature is clarified by the director:

I love that black and white evokes the period, yet looks timeless. It's not what we associate the Eighties with, but it feels like the right aesthetic given how many people who were impacted by the epidemic remembers those days in a very stark way. Black and white also narrows our visual focus on the characters; we didn't want to make a film where nostalgia was emphasized on the wardrobe, décor, etc. One of the films we used as an inspiration was Ken Loach's *Looks & Smiles*, which was also set in the Eighties²⁸.

Hence, the aim of using black and white instead of neon-like colors is the one of not conveying any sense of nostalgia, theme tackled by many other movies, but the idea of conveying a sad tone that might represent the feelings of the 1980s victims. Clearly, this choice was not easy as it was more difficult to raise money and to get support to shoot the movie and according to Tan, this situation is somehow similar to the condition of the sick in the 1980's:

[...] we didn't make the easiest kind of film, not only because of the subject matter, but also aesthetically black and white so it wasn't really an enticing package for people to want to put money into. A good thing is that we did it for very little money, with very limited resources; thankfully we got a really good cast so it all came together. In a way that was in the spirit of the

²⁸ Jennie Kermode. "Home for Christmas", www.eyeforfilm.co.uk [Accessed 06/14/2019]

film – living with HIV/AIDs in the 80’s you’re not getting enough support – you’re not getting enough of anything, making the film was like that too, which had a sense of poeticalness to it²⁹.

All in all, as it has been observed so far, *1985* is a very well-made film. It arises many themes and issues of the 1980s, such as the opposition of a more conservative ideology to a more progressive one and the hardships and challenges of two diverse generations to meet and find something in common. However, not only this, in this film, the relationship between two young brothers is analyzed. Adrian represents the sick people dead in the 1980s and Andrew, who is much younger, through the message given by his brother, reaches out to more recent generations. Not only homosexuality and conservative families, but for the first time in AIDS filmography, racism is tackled with Carly, who is the first Asian-American appearing in this kind of movie. What is even more important is that Carly doesn’t represent a secondary character. Instead, she is charged with the responsibility of telling Andrew about his brother’s death and she acts very bravely even to the racist accusations of which she is victim. This climate was typical in the South back in the 1980s, but as will be shown in *Dallas Buyers Club*, racism and Stigma are still present today. Finally, what is also worth mentioning is the difference between *1985* and other movies dealing with AIDS back in the 1980s. *An Early Frost*, for instance, has a rather similar plot but in the end, Michael doesn’t solve out his conflicts with his mother Kate and father Nick, who for the whole movie, are hostile to his son and his boyfriend. It’s only Michael’s grandmother, who has lost his husband because of cancer, another highly stigmatized disease, who understands and tries to help her grandson to face the illness. As Hard states in his book *The AIDS Movie: Representing a Pandemic in Film and Television*: “Peter returns immediately to the couple’s gay ghetto in Chicago; Michael follows just days later, with his parents making no mention of their door being open to him should he need any

²⁹ Ibid.

assistance during his battle with AIDS³⁰.” This, once again, mirrors the conservative way of the period and the custom of representing the sick as “Other” or “outcast” within the society. However, if this still appears in the first part of *1985*, the final part of the movie does not represent closure but openness and acceptance.

³⁰ Kylo-Patrick Hart. *The AIDS movie: Representing a Pandemic in Film and Television*, Routledge, 2000

CHAPTER 3

THE NORMAL HEART: AIDS, GMHC, ACT UP THEN AND NOW

3.1 Introduction

Unlike the previous chapter focused on the “private” experience of AIDS in a traditional and conservative family, the present chapter deals with the “public” experience of the AIDS crisis of the middle 1980s. From the early 1980s to the 1990s, AIDS killed million people in the U.S. and around the world and the three cities that were hit most were New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. New York, in particular, is where Ryan Murphy’s movie *The Normal Heart* (2014) is set. This movie is based on the activist Larry Kramer’s eponymous play, which was represented for the first time in 1985 in the midst of the AIDS crisis. Both the play and the movie, represent New York during the outbreak of the crisis in 1981 and, the numerous problems related to the individuation of the virus, but above all, the hardships that the first ill people had to face either in the hospitals or in society, as stigmatization and AIDS-phobia were present in every aspect of their daily life. In this movie all the manifestations of stigmatization in that period are tackled: in particular in relation to the media and *The New York Times* silencing the death of so many people; in the medical facilities, where doctors and nurses where either scared or powerless against the disease. Not only this, but the indifference of New York Mayor Ed Koch and his entourage and of the government of Ronald Reagan, is central in several moments within the movie and helps understand the difficulties of the first groups who supported AIDS victims in such a hard climate. In this chapter, in particular, AIDS stigma will be analyzed with reference to Larry Kramer (or Ned in the movie) and GMHC, the first organization which deals with the epidemic and with the difficult medical environment presented through Dr. Brookner’s eyes. In addition to this, part of the chapter will be devoted to analyzing the reluctant responses of the American government at the time, a

theme that seems to have resurfaced a couple of years ago with the election of President Trump and a kind of return to towards the 1980s. In relation to this, I will also discuss the birth and development of GMHC and later of ACT UP, their struggles from the 1980s and 1990s to the present fights against Trump's anti-AIDS measures.

3.2 Stigma in New York and the first AIDS associations

The phobia and indifference were, according to Sontag and other authors, the worst problem in the 1980s society. They undoubtedly led to a series of delays in dealing with the disease and created numerous difficulties to the victims, but also to associations such as GMHC that copes with such an issue. In the movie, stigma can be found in relation to many different spheres in society such as the press, the media, the medical structures but also and most importantly, the administration of New York and of the country. This is carried out through different characters in Ryan Murphy's movie. The health system is analyzed through Dr. Emma Brookner, played by Julia Roberts who embodies Kramer's friend Dr. Linda Laubestein. Emma is one of the few doctors who wants to treat AIDS patients and to understand what causes the disease and how it can be healed. She visits Ned and many of his friends, and tries to encourage him to tell people to be careful about the disease and to avoid casual sex. This idea is shared by Ned, who dismisses the idea of having many partners at the same time, but it is not shared by other gays, such as his friend Marcus, who considers this a limitation and an attack to the struggles for the sexual freedom of 1960s and 1970s. In the movie, stigma is represented through Emma in different occasions. For example, one day she accompanies Ned to the ward where she works and shows him the difficult situations in which she has to take care of her patients. The patients are quarantined in a shabby part of the hospital, far from the rest of the structures and people have to wear special masks to get in touch with them. Not only this, but most of the times patients are totally neglected by the personnel, such as in the case when Emma has to personally bring them some cold food, as the nurses refuse to do it. Not only the nurses, but

also the repairman avoids the patients when Emma asks him to fix the TV of one of their rooms. The answer of the man to Emma's request is very harsh: "I don't want to go over there because I don't want to get the fag disease." At this, Emma starts shouting, obliging him to go inside and repair it. This is clearly one important example of the repulsion to the disease, a reaction that was extremely common at the time. However, this is not the only case of stigma related to Emma, later on in the movie, when she asks the government funds for her research and for her treating her patients, she is denied them because she is considered imprecise and unfocused in her request. This is actually not true as she demonstrates that she had applied for funds two years before and hadn't received any kind of attention from the government. What makes her even angrier is the fact that the government had given three million dollars to investigate seven deaths caused by Tylenol, a drug used for curing fever and headache and refused to fund her AIDS research, which was far more serious. In the whole movie, Emma is pictured as an extremely determined woman, with the precise aim of curing people, just like her real life model Linda Laubenstein. Doctor Laubenstein: "suffered from severe asthma and weakness from childhood polio, an illness that required three major operations and left her a paraplegic at the age of 5³¹." However according to his colleague Jeffrey B. Greene:

[She was] the ultimate AIDS physician. Despite her handicap, she met patients in the emergency room in the middle of the night and even made house calls, using her motorized wheelchair and public buses. She was sicker than most of her patients but didn't let it stop her³².

Kramer too, who was a close friend to her and shared many of her viewpoints, remembers her in a very positive way for what she did for her patients in the 1980s: "She is incredibly important in the

³¹ Bruce Lambert. "Linda Laubenstein, 45, Physician And Leader in Detection of AIDS." www.nytimes.com. Accessed 09/07/2019

³² Ibid.

history of AIDS, a genuine pioneer and a real fighter for what she believed.”³³ Not only is stigma presented in relation to the health system, but it also appears as a restraint for the activity of GMHC. In the movie, in particular, the stigma linked to the government is one fundamental feature. There are several scenes where Ned tries to arrange meetings with Mayor Koch’s administration but he is continually denied or the meetings end up being canceled. This clearly represents Koch’s lack of interest in a disease that hit thousands of people only in New York. However, this deafness is not only represented in relation to Koch’s but also to President Reagan. In a scene, Ned is invited to talk to Reagan’s assistants at the White House about the issue of AIDS, and once more he is denied support as one assistant tells him that there are not enough heterosexual people suffering from such a disease. All this indifference towards the problem enrages Ned, so much so that he even appears on a television program and openly accuses the American government to conspire against the disease. Clearly, Ned (the alter ego of Kramer) is always represented as very angry and firm in his ideas about an AIDS conspiracy and many times, and he even quarrels with the other members of GMHC, who prefer a softer strategy. That will determine his expulsion from the group in 1983. Talking about the government of that period Kramer, states: “We didn't exist. Ronald Reagan didn't say the word 'AIDS' until 1987³⁴. I've tried desperately to get a meeting in the White House.” And he added:

Adolf Reagan, yes, [was] responsible for the death of more gay people than anybody in the world, than Hitler. I believe it, and I can't see why people challenge me when I say these things. He's that much a beloved asshole. This is the worst disaster in history that you're talking about. You cannot talk about it calmly, and any of your people who talk about it calmly, you shouldn't listen to; you really shouldn't.³⁵

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ PBS. Frontline: the age of Aids. “Interview with Larry Kramer.” www.pbs.org. [Accessed 07/09/2019]

³⁵ Ibid.

Another form of stigma represented both in Kramer's play and in the movie, the one related to the media and in particular to *The New York Times* case. In fact, when Ned goes to *The New York Times* headquarters to see if he can convince the paper to talk about the problem, he meets Felix Turner who tells him that he would like to speak about the AIDS problem, but he is not allowed to. Besides, he also reveals that in the few articles that he was able to write about models and nightlife, he was forced not to use the word "gay" but he had to disguise it in other ways. This strategy was actually adopted by the newspaper at the time. As Natalie Kitroeff observes: "many employees felt that A.M. 'Abe' Rosenthal, the paper's editor, was homophobic", reflecting on internal battles over the use of terms like "admitted homosexuals"³⁶. In relation to this, *The Times* took a long time to talk about AIDS on page 1. As stated by John Koblin: "Roughly 700 editions of the paper had come and gone before AIDS, quickly turning into a full-fledged crisis, had earned a spot on Page One. It was never lost on AIDS activists just how vital the paper was — and for how long it did not pay serious attention to the disease."³⁷ And he adds:

By the time *The Times* did give AIDS front-page attention, it did so with a bit of a stiff arm. Though public health officials were now going on the record to discuss the disease's devastation, there was reluctance to discuss whom it affected most. In that first front-page story, it took seven paragraphs — which appeared after the jump, or inside the paper — to mention how hard it was hitting gay men.³⁸

Clearly, this idea of lack of attention of the paper was also noted by many GMHC and ACT UP activists such as the Kramer and Peter Staley themselves. As far as the excuses made up by *The Times* are concerned, Kramer claims: "These excuses were sort of namby-pamby. Anyway, it's hard to accept them when you realize how many millions are dead from a plague that

³⁶ Nick Duffy. "New York Times addresses Its shameful coverage during AIDS crisis"
www.pinknews.co.uk [Accessed 10/07/2019]

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

The Times wouldn't warn the world about.³⁹ Very similarly, Staley reflects on how *The Times* devoted much attention to diseases that hit fewer people and how it shadowed AIDS:

An outbreak of Legionnaire's disease in 1976 elicited 62 stories from the *Times* in the space of two months, of which 11 made the front page. "Legionnaire's killed 29 people. AIDS killed 6,000 people before the *Times* gave it front page coverage," he wrote. "Imagine if the *Times* had put AIDS on the front page 11 times in 1981. How would that have changed the course of the epidemic? How many lives would have been saved⁴⁰?"

Only in 2018, almost 40 years later, did *The Times* devote a whole article to somehow apologize for its mistakes and silence and to present the real dynamics behind its reluctance to speak about it. Many of the journalists who were part of the paper back then participated in the project and explained the director's opposition to dealing with this issue. The presence of stigma in relation to the press is represented through Ned's brother Ben, a rich lawyer who at the beginning, refuses to fund his brother's Ned organization to help the diseased. This difficult relationship between brothers reflects Kramer's actual relationship with his brother Arthur, who was a famous lawyer in New York and Paris, perfectly fitting in the 1980s American establishment. Ben finds it difficult to accept his brother's project and above all, his difference. In an article by *Playbill*, it is even revealed that Arthur sent his brother to a psychiatrist to solve his identity problems:

Playwright Kramer had much material to draw on in depicting the complicated relationship. Arthur, nine years older than Larry, basically raised his brother. But when, while in college, Larry confessed his homosexuality to his brother, Arthur hired a psychiatrist to cure him. In the 1980's, wrote the *Times*, Larry asked his brother to take on Gay Men's Health Crisis, the

³⁹ David Artavia. "The New York Times Apologizes For Ignoring AIDS." www.hivplusmag.com. [Accessed 07/10/2019]

⁴⁰ Aaron Hicklin. "When New York Times Says Sorry." www.out.com . [Accessed 07/10/2019]

nonprofit organization he helped found, as a client. Arthur dodged the issue and when Larry managed to get another partner at the firm to take GMHC on, a rift grew between the siblings⁴¹.

This difficult relationship between the brothers, however, slightly improves in the end of the movie where Ben accepts to finance Ned's organization, as did Arthur with Kramer:

The two brothers' relationship softened in later years. Mr. Kramer's relationship with his brother caused him to become an advocate for various gay causes. In 2001, Mr. Kramer gave Yale University a \$1 million grant to create the Larry Kramer Initiative for Lesbian and Gay Studies. And his law firm has played a role in marriage rights for gay couples⁴².

Finally, the movie also represents the stigma against the organization such as GMHC, founded by Kramer, Paul Popham (Bruce), who was the first director of the organization and particularly towards McFarlane (Tommy), who was the creator of GMHC's hotline for AIDS sufferers. The organization, in fact, finds it difficult to raise funds for helping the diseased and Tommy is even stopped and beaten on the way to the organization headquarters. Tommy in particular, who was a close friend to Ned even after leaving GMHC, is the one who really cares about sick people's precarious condition and accuses institutions not to care about the problem. In the movie, Tommy states: "We are losing an entire generation of young men; choreographers, playwrights, dancers, actors. Why are they letting us die? Why are they not helping us?" This scene makes the viewer reflect on the severity of the disease and represents Rodger McFarlane's real thoughts. In a *New York Times* article written in December 1983, McFarlane talks about AIDS victims and GMHC in this way:

"AIDS pointed up the inequitable status of gays," said Rodger McFarlane, the group's 28-year-old director. "We were forced to take care of ourselves because we learned that if you have certain diseases, certain life styles, you can't expect the same services as other parts of society."

⁴¹ Robert Simson. "Arthur Kramer, Brother of Larry Kramer depicted in *Normal Heart*, dead at 81." www.playbill.com . [Accessed 07/11/2019]

⁴² Ibid.

"It's ugly work," Mr. McFarlane said. "When persons with AIDS come to us, their lives are shattered and their heads are twisted. They've just been given the devastating news that they have a disease that's probably fatal with a stigma the size of Manhattan attached to it." "They've usually been fired from their jobs and kicked out of their apartments," he added⁴³.

McFarlane was extremely active on his struggle against stigma and careful about the sick's needs and thus is praised by Kramer for his activism and attention to the issue both in the first period of the crisis and later on too. In relation to this Kramer states: "McFarlane built it [the hotline] from nothing to great prominence, like he did with each organization he worked with." And he adds: "I believe he did more for the gay world than any single person has ever done before⁴⁴." To conclude, *The Normal Heart* represents stigma through different characters and in different situations. First, in relation to the health system through Emma/Linda and her difficulties to treat the ill and to do fundraising. Then, it is shown as referred to Mayor Ed Koch's administration in New York and through Reagan's presidency. Clearly, these attitude were undoubtedly the major cause of the spread of AIDS phobia and indifference during the 1980s. In addition, stigma is represented in relation to media and in particular to *The New York Times* and its refusal to treat the disease, leading to an increase instead of a decrease in the number of deaths. On a more personal sphere, stigma is analyzed referring to Kramer's difficult relationship with his brother Arthur, and his refusal, at least at the beginning, to help him finance the organization. Finally, stigma has been considered in relation to GMHC and its members and in particular with reference to Rodger McFarlane and his activity of promotion of AIDS activism.

⁴³ Maureen Dowd. "For Victims of AIDS, Support in a Lonely Siege" www.nytimes.com . [Accessed 07/12/2019]

⁴⁴ Ibid.

3.3 Aids Activism Today

The Normal Heart ends in 1983 with the expulsion of Ned from GMHC, due to his clashes with many ideas and ways of operating of several members of the organization. On the one hand, Kramer did not approve the organization's too soft ways to protest against the government and the health system's indifference to the crisis while on the other, the members of GMHC did not appreciate Kramer's hard way and his direct attack to the institutions. Not only this, but in the organization, there were different ways of dealing with the problem. In the movie, before the final clash is shown, Ned is seen struggling with Marcus, who accuses him of being too aggressive, and of threatening the liberal ideas, for which many people struggled back in the 1960s and 1970s. However, this is not entirely accurate from a historical viewpoint, as what really bothered Kramer was the fact that, after having founded the group, he became excluded from some decisions and, above all, from some meetings that the organization held with important political figures. Kramer presents his contrasts with the group in the following way: "That organization was me, morning, noon and night. I worked for that organization, and when I finally was able to arrange our first meeting with Mayor Koch, the board of directors, my friends that I formed, wouldn't take me to the mayor, and I said, If you won't take me, I quit, and so⁴⁵..." Despite the end of his work for GMHC, Kramer's struggle for AIDS did not end that year. A few years later in 1987, he would found ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), a group devoted to continuing the protest against the slowness of government and pharmaceutical companies, but in a more aggressive way. Aggressiveness and disorder have always been part of Kramer's strategy to raise awareness on the issue of AIDS stigma. The same Kramer, in an article for *The New York Times*, claims: "I was trying to make people united and angry." And He adds: "I was known as the angriest man in the world, mainly because I discovered that anger got you further than being nice. And when we started to break through in the media, I

⁴⁵ PBS. Frontline: the age of Aids. "Interview with Larry Kramer" www.pbs.org. [Accessed 07/09/2019]

was better TV than someone who was nice.⁴⁶” This idea was also confirmed by Dr. Anthony Fauci, who was the head of the National Institute of Infectious Diseases: “He was fearless,” Dr. Fauci said. “He scared people. He angered a lot of people. But his heart was always in the right place, and he always wanted to do things for the good of his people⁴⁷. Among many manifestations, ACT UP is known for his protest against FDA (Food and Drug Administration) and for forcing its closure on October 11, 1988, due to the high prices of AIDS drugs. Not only it, but the group is also known for the incursion at General Post Office with the slogan “silence=death” on April 1987. This slogan was invented in 1985 by six men: Avram Finkelstein, Jorge Soccarás, Oliver Johnston, Chris Lione, Charles Kreloff and Brian Howar and it was made up of a pink triangle, that reminds the one used by Hitler in the concentration camps during Nazi period, (and therefore compared American government of the time with the Nazi one in the 1940s⁴⁸) ACT UP also organized a meeting to protest against the Catholic Church in 1989 and against Bishop Joseph O’Connor’s opposition to safe-sex policies and objection to abortion. Several people entered St. Patrick church and started accusing the Bishop of being insensitive to the disease and the issues related to it⁴⁹. Not only in the 1980s, but ACT UP was particularly active in 1990s. For instance, in the Day of Desperation against the Gulf war, and particularly to the huge amount of money spent for war, which could have been employed for the AIDS crisis, at the time in which the sick doubled the victims of the Vietnam War⁵⁰. The 1990s were years of great riots for ACT UP that had to struggle first with Bush’s lack of attention to the problem and the spread of the disease until 1996, when the first antiretroviral drugs were discovered. Despite the division between ACT UP N.Y. and ACT UP San Francisco in the 1990s, the organization has continued to struggle against AIDS-related issues until today. For example, over the last few years, a greater number of revolts have taken place, particularly from

⁴⁶ John Leland. “Twilight of a Difficult Man: Larry Kramer and the Birth of Early Activism” www.nytimes.com [Accessed 10/09/2019]

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Poz.com. “How Silence= Death Became a Rallying cry for ACT UP” www.Poz.com [Accessed 10/09/2019]

⁴⁹ John Departe. “111 Held in St. Patrick’s AIDS protest” www.nytimes.com. [Accessed 10/10/2019]

⁵⁰ ACT UP NEW YORK. “Day of desperation.” www.Actupny.org [Accessed 10/10/2019]

Trump's run for election as president in 2016 and for his anti-AIDS vision, at the beginning of his administration. As far as the issue of the AIDS crisis is concerned, President Trump has demonstrated different positions throughout his administration. At the beginning, he clearly opposed to AIDS victims and associations that have tried to deal with the problem. In 2017, he announced a severe cut to HIV and AIDS programs of research including Ryan White program and in 2018, showing his homophobia and stigma, he fired two Air Force members for their HIV-positive status⁵¹. As a result of this, ACT UP and many other organization, started to fight again as they did in the 1980s and 1990s. Referring to Trump, ACT UP states:

As we are entering the fourth decade of the crisis and close to 30 years later after this action, our community continues to fight our aggressors and oppressors against the fight against HIV. It's important to familiarize ourselves with who has fought with us, and who has fought against us — in other words, “know your scumbags⁵².”

Thus, Trump is considered as uninterested as Reagan in the crisis and above all, the minorities sick with the disease. Trump was harshly contested and called “Greedy Monster” by ACT UP also in the 1980s, precisely on October 31st, 1989 because he asked and was allowed a 6.2 million tax abetment to build Trump Tower, money that according to ACT UP could have been used for the HIV homeless people⁵³. Today, after almost 40 years almost nothing seems to have changed for ACT UP members. Trump is still following his interests and HIV sick people are more and more marginalized. However, recently Trump's attention to the AIDS crisis seems to have changed. On February 5th 2019 State of Union he declared: “In recent years we have made remarkable progress in the fight against HIV and AIDS. Scientific breakthroughs have brought a once-distant dream within reach.” And added: "My budget will ask Democrats and Republicans to make the needed commitment to eliminate the HIV epidemic in the United States within 10 years. Together, we will

⁵¹ ACT UP NY. “Donald Trump Doesn't Care About HIV.” Advocate, www.advocate.com [Accessed 10/10/2019]

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

defeat AIDS in America⁵⁴. Not only in that occasion, but also in June in Orlando and in August in Cincinnati he stated almost the same things: “we will come up with the cures to many, many problems, to many, many diseases — including cancer and would eradicate AIDS in America⁵⁵.”

Trump’s project on how he intends to definitively solve the problem is explained by Dr. Fauci:

Trump's plan will fund programs in geographic hot spots, data to identify and track the spread of HIV, and the creation of local efforts in targeted areas to expand HIV prevention and treatment."What's new about this is the laser focus of multi-agencies synergizing together on those areas." And adds: "So this is something that has not been done before. We have certainly discussed this type of approach, but this is the first time we've had a multi-agency approach where the individual agencies will be working very closely together,⁵⁶"

As a result, a sort of collaboration within different agencies to identify HIV hot spots is the strategy that Trump wants to pursue in order to end the epidemic. This new attention to HIV and AIDS has surprised and shocked many people at the time. Dr. Brett Giroir of HHS (Department of Health and Human Services) claims that this is an incredibly positive perspective for the future of the disease and that he is already at work for accomplishing this purpose. However, many doctors and AIDS activists are rather skeptical about Trump’s statements. Dr. Barbot, (New York City health Commissioner), for instance, affirms that:

President Trump's pledge to end the HIV epidemic within 10 years is encouraging, but it is difficult to reconcile this statement with his administration's systematic assault on the HIV community -- including undermining access to affordable health insurance and HIV drugs); cutting funds for HIV research; and attacking LGBTQ+ people.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Jacqueline Howard. “Trump’s plan to end America’s HIV epidemic by 2030, explained” CNN health, www.edition.cnn.com [Accessed 09/15/2019]

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

This idea is shared also by Nancy Pelosi, Democrat Speaker of the House of Representatives, who about Trump's declaration thinks: "The president call for ending HIV transmission in America is interesting, but if he is serious about ending the HIV/AIDS crisis, he must end his assault on health care and the dignity of the LGBTQ community⁵⁸." As stated by these two authoritative women and as previously observed, the first part of his legislature was based on racism, homophobia and opposition to any kind of minority and this seems also the case now. Thus, it seems difficult to believe that he will keep his promises. Skeptical and rather enraged are both GMHC and ACT UP, which find this claim difficult to fulfill under Trump's administration and within today's social panorama. According to Kelsey Louie, a member of GMHC:

If President Trump is serious about ending the AIDS epidemic in the United States by 2030, his Administration needs to follow the data on a larger scale and both enact and support policies consistent with our shared goal. The data tell us many things—one of the most important being that access to regular, quality health care is critical. More people—and more people who are at high risk of HIV infection, including many at-risk populations the President has routinely denigrated—need access to this kind of care. They need access to every prevention tool we have in our arsenal, especially PrEP. And, if they're living with HIV, they need access to medication they can afford to suppress their viral load so that they can get healthy and not pass on the virus. So, President Trump: Are you willing to commit to this strategy? Can you follow the evidence despite your history of ignoring science? Can you work with organizations that represent some of the most marginalized groups in America? Can you work with Congress to keep provisions of the Affordable Care Act and other health programs that cover the kinds of medications people need to get and stay healthy? We're skeptical. But, in the interest of our mission, we want to believe this is possible. GMHC has been fighting the AIDS epidemic and saving lives for more than 35 years. We're ready to work with the President to help him achieve his goal to

⁵⁸ Jeffrey J. Iovannone. "Donald Trump Doesn't Give a Fuck About Ending The HIV/AIDS Epidemic" www.medium.com [Accessed 10/12/2019]

end AIDS by 2030. But we know, based on our experience, that he's not going to be able to keep his pledge if he doesn't follow the data, trust the science, display compassion for the most at-risk populations, and set aside many of the prejudices he has inflamed since taking office⁵⁹.

Very similar to GMHC response is ACT UP reaction to Trump's promise: "The Trump Administration does not have a history of advocating for people living with HIV, but we do⁶⁰." Hence, it provides some key points to take into account, if the administration really wants to end AIDS, it should be:

- Stopping the criminalization of those living with HIV (29 states have HIV-specific criminalization laws)
- Abolishing ICE (13 HIV+ immigrants have died in ICE detention since 2002; Kaniab Satkunes-Waran, Simon Reyes-Altimirano, Carlos Menez-Bacca, Sergio Jimenez-Rojo, Adetunji Popoola, Jose Rangel Rodriguez, Mauro Romero, Yvel Fils-Aime, Guido Neborough, Samou Fankeu, Roxsana Hernandez, Victoria Arrellano, and Hector Mosley)
- Increasing housing protections and HOPWA (Housing Opportunities for Persons With AIDS) funding for people living with HIV
- Having the administration repeal SESTA/FOSTA, and increase protections of sex workers.
- Increasing employment protections for individuals living with HIV.
- Having the U.S. expand healthcare for all including medicare and medicaid expansion, a universal plan to rollout PrEP and PEP access.
- A federal rollout of U=U (Undetectable = Untransmittable) education and funding⁶¹

According to both the organizations and AIDS experts, what appears to be fundamental in order to put an end to HIV/AIDS, is an increasing attention to the needs and problems of the most

⁵⁹ Kesley Louie. "GMHC's Response to President Donald Trump's State of the Union Pledge to End AIDS in the United States by 2030" GMHC, www.gmhc.org [Accessed 10/15/2019]

⁶⁰ ACT UP NY. "Donald Trump Doesn't Care About HIV." Advocate, www.advocate.com [Accessed 10/10/2019]

⁶¹ Ibid.

stigmatized and marginalized groups and a better distribution of drugs such as PrEP, still very expensive and inaccessible to many people. Clearly, to end this crisis a great deal of work has still to be done by the different organizations and the U.S. government and many of the measures to take, are undoubtedly against Trump's principles. As a result, it is normal for many people not to fully believe in Trump's promise. Even Larry Kramer, the historic member of both GMHC and ACT UP is skeptical about it, and in relation to Trump claims:

“Neither [Trump and Regan] have/had any concern for public health.” “The dismantling of the system started under Reagan. Trump's just the latest in a long line of its executioners.” “Most of us don't know what to do. He [Trump] is successfully barricading every avenue of help and progress⁶².”

3.4 The importance of *The Normal Heart*

After analyzing the dynamics of the movie and the importance of activism back in the 1980s and in the present time, this short paragraph is devoted to the history and making of the film and the opinions of both the director Ryan Murphy and the actors who played a role in it. First of all, it is important to notice how the movie itself, became a victim of the very stigma that it portrays, and that has been tackled in the previous paragraphs. Kramer's play *The Normal Heart* appeared in 1985, in an extremely critical period for the sick. In the following year 1986, the actress and director Barbra Streisand bought the rights to produce the movie, which should have been released by 1987. However, due to the fact that the theme was a sort of taboo, she could not find the money for a feature film and she resorted to making a TV movie. However, even on this occasion, she was not able to produce it either because Kramer did not approve the many changes she wanted to make. Kramer accused her of lacking real interest in the movie as he wrote in a mail to the actress after

⁶² Rick Berke. “At 83, AIDS activist Larry Kramer isn't done ripping into his foes in pharma, FDA, NiH.” Stat, www.statnews.com [Accessed 10/10/2019]

Murphy's release: "You did not have quite the same burning passion to make it as you always claim⁶³". In the end, in 2009, after 30 years Kramer bought the rights for the movie, promising Kramer to keep to his play as much as possible and finally in 2014 he succeeded in releasing it with Kramer's approval. In relation to this, Murphy states: "It really was a movie about prejudice and civil rights. He [Kramer] wanted young people to see it. And he really got me stoked. And I took it very seriously because it was the work of his life⁶⁴." As far as the importance of such a movie for today's viewers, almost the same ideas are shared by Matt Bomer, one of the main characters in the movie:

Plays like this, and *Destiny of Me*, and *Angels in America*, even Brecht and Shaw, are the reason I became an actor. They changed my point of view, they educated me, and changed the way I look at the world. So to get to be a part of something like this, that's so much bigger than who you are as an actor, you sorta just want to step out of the way and serve the story as best as you can and hope that people watch it. Because I think it does have political influence and even more importantly these people need to be remembered. And these events need to be remembered, so when this does happen again, which is inevitable, we're able to more compassionate, humane human beings to each other⁶⁵.

And he adds:

I think that this movie will be incredibly powerful or influential for many generations. I think it's gonna be therapeutic for one generation. I think it's gonna be clarifying for my generation who came onto the scene going "What happened here?" This is like, we're dealing with war widows but nobody knew there was a war going on. I think it will be clarifying for my generation and hopefully really educational for the younger generation. And I don't fault the

⁶³ Gregg Kilday. "Barbra Streisand on the Normal Heart: I tried very hard to get it made." www.hollywoodreporter.com [Accessed 10/12/2019]

⁶⁴ Gregg Kilday. "The Normal Heart's 30-Year Journey From Barbra Streisand to Ryan Murphy" www.hollywoodreporter.com [Accessed 10/12/2019]

⁶⁵ Ibid.

younger generation for not knowing, because we need stories like this to keep reminding us what happened⁶⁶.

As has been observed by Bomer, this movie is a testimony for two generations because it represents the pain and the difficulties that millions of people had to suffer in the 1980s and is important for the new generations because thanks to it, young men may know what happened and are more ready to face other issues that may happen in the community now and in the future. Clearly, this movie is also an example of LGBT's community struggle for their rights and for a better future. As Bomer claims about Kramer and other activists:

We need to remember these people and recognize that we stand on their shoulders to have a lot of the rights we have today. It's not like the right for gay people to marry has just happened. These are our Martin Luther King. These are the people who stood up at a time when it was not popular to do so and spoke up and unified us.⁶⁷

To sum up, even if this movie took long to be shot and released due to many different issues, it succeeded in representing a difficult period of the AIDS crisis, which to some extent, continues nowadays with Trump's stigma towards the disease and the victims of it. Not only this, but it also manages to represent the effort of AIDS activists as Larry Kramer back then and somehow today too. To conclude, Kramer showed his approval for Murphy's work and revealed that he is working on a sequel based on his play "The Destiny of Me", whose protagonist is once more Ned Weeks: "I've been very happy. I thought the cast was superb, and HBO has got to be the most wonderful

⁶⁶ Casey Cipriani. "Matt Bomer Reveals How 'The Normal Heart' Saved His Life." www.indiewire.com [Accessed 07/12/2019]

⁶⁷ Richard Lawson. "Matt Bomer on reactions to *The Normal Heart*." www.vanityfair.com [Accessed 07/10/2019]

producers in the world. I think it's the fifth most-successful movie they had last year, and they commissioned the sequel, which I'm now in the process of writing.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Ramin Setoodeh. "Larry Kramer Breaks Silence About 'Normal Heart' Sequel" www.variety.com . [Accessed 07/13/2019]

CHAPTER 4

DALLAS BUYERS CLUB: RON WOODROOF AND HIS LEGACY

4.1 Introduction

Dallas Buyers Club (2013) is based on the last few years of Ron Woodroof's life and his activity of smuggling unapproved drugs from foreign countries, in order to give hope to AIDS victims who suffered from the slowness and indifference of US medical organizations such as the FDA. What is well-represented in the movie are phobia and hysteria against the diseased, and the ignorance related to the first period of the AIDS crisis. This can be seen in Woodroof's transformation from a homophobe to an ambassador and helper of the victims and his friends' phobia both against him and Rayon, the transsexual with whom he cooperates in the movie to get the drugs from Mexico, Japan, and The Netherlands. At the time, this AIDS-phobia was widespread in the whole country but was particularly rooted in Southern states such as Texas. This problem, however, as will be shown in this chapter, is still strong today in the south, which is also the part of the US where most of the HIV contagions are still reported. In addition to the high rate of contagions, the southern states are also the ones where the highest amount of ill people have still difficulties in receiving proper cares and attention. The first part of this chapter will be devoted to analyzing Woodroof's foundation of the Dallas Buyers Club and the importance of his smuggling medications for many diseased, in order to give them one last hope in spite of their difficult conditions. The theme of stigma and phobia will be also analyzed either in relation to Woodroof himself and his gradual change through the movie or in relation to his friends and the fictional character of Rayon. The end of the chapter will discuss how this stigma continues in the South and how the southern states are trying to solve the problem with specific programs and policies. In the end, Woodroof's legacy will be taken into account

considering the new wave of online buyer clubs, which still provide sick people with unapproved, alternative or expensive HIV and Hepatitis drugs, such as PrEp.

4.2 Ron Woodroof and the Rise of Buyers Clubs

Ron Woodroof was an actual Texan who lived the 1980s AIDS crisis and through his Buyers Club, helped many people to get AIDS unapproved drugs in an age where little had been discovered about the disease and the only drug deployed was AZT. The movie, directed by the Canadian Jean-Marc Vallée, opens in the year 1986, when Woodroof, a rather rude electrician, feels sick and is admitted to Dallas' hospital. Soon, he receives from Dr. Saks and Dr. Sevard the news that he has AIDS and at the beginning, Woodroof reacts negatively to it and aggressively denies having "Rock Hudson's" disease, because as was common at the time, he considers it just a disease of homosexuals. In the whole movie, in fact, as happened in the other movies already analyzed, the themes of homophobia and AIDS hysteria are tackled through different points of view. As just pointed out, the first example of stigma is presented in the very beginning, when Woodroof discovers his disease and gets mad at Saks' diagnosis, and later on, he also rejects his illness with his friends, particularly with TJ, with whom he will have a conflicting relationship. In this scene, Ron is represented with TJ and two girls and they discuss the impossibility of having the disease, which according to him could not have hit him, because he had not had encounters with men. Ron's initial homophobia is also stressed in an article by Forrest Wickman about Craig Borten, the person who interviewed Woodroof before the making the movie: "during Borten's three days of interviews with him, Woodroof introduced another woman as a girlfriend, repeatedly said homophobic and racist things⁶⁹." Despite this, as will be shown later on, Woodroof's reaction to the disease and to the sick will gradually change both through the movie and also in his real life. From 1986 to 1988, Woodroof's health worsened and in that year he founded *Dallas Buyers Club*. According to Sean

⁶⁹ Forrest Wickman. "Was the Hero of Dallas Buyers Club actually Bisexual?" www.slate.com [Accessed 10/10/2019]

Philpott: “his disease was relatively advanced at the time of the diagnosis, so he was precluded from enrolling in a clinical trial of AZT for safety reasons, and he was largely abandoned by his friend and family because of the shame of having a gay disease. But he chose to fight rather than succumb to a then untreatable illness⁷⁰.” Clearly, the aim of the club was to provide AIDS sufferers, who had no medicine available, with some drugs, which even if not miraculous, could be a relief for patients otherwise living an extremely dramatic situation of abandonment and desperation. This is how Sean Philpott described Woodroof’s activity:

[He] began to self-treat using unapproved and illicitly obtained antiviral medications. Soon, he and his colleagues are routinely travelling to Mexico, Japan, Israel and the Netherlands to purchase antiviral drugs and treatments that were not approved or available for use in the United States. They begin providing these drugs to those living with HIV/AIDS – primarily members of stigmatised communities like gay men and drug users.⁷¹

This project continued almost until Ron’s death in 1992, due to AIDS complications. As Larry Kramer, Ron struggled hard against those institutions which did not do anything for the diseased, and in 1990 he even sued FDA for not letting him import some drugs from Denmark. As Sean Philpott stated:

Ron Woodroof also (albeit unsuccessfully) took the FDA to court to force them to allow the importation of the experimental HIV inhibitor Peptide T from Denmark. In doing so, he became part of a larger movement in which community-based organizations and activists began to set their own agenda for biomedical research and treatment⁷².

⁷⁰ Sean Philpott. “How The Dallas Buyers Club changed HIV treatment in the US.” www.theconversation.com [Accessed 10/16/2019]

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

Clearly, this smuggling unapproved drugs, was not approved by many doctors because they were afraid that these underground activities could harm the patient's health. In the movie, this is the case of Dr. Eve Saks, who clearly mirrors 1980s medical establishment and that opposes to those alternative ways, almost until the end. According to Borten, the characters of Dr. Saks and Dr. Sevard have been specially created in order to represent two traditional reactions to the disease, different from Ron's. However, it is through Eve, who is constantly in touch with both attitudes that the official and underground worlds are tackled and sometimes also intertwines: "Eve was created because we were able to present an alternate point of view with her and use her as a conduit to show both sides of the coin⁷³." Many were, in fact, the doctors who opposed to this sell of drugs, and the same FDA, as stated above, fiercely opposed to the activities of these organizations. According to Doctor Hannah Dorf in "Managing your own survival: Buyers Clubs in the AIDS epidemic": "[Doctors] did not want their patients to medicate without professional supervision⁷⁴." Not only this, but there was preoccupation among doctors about the safety of those alternative medications, which, however, as showed in the movie, were actually tested before being commercialized. Dorf also explained:

Drugs obtained by buyers clubs were first sent to labs to test for purity and analysis. The clubs wanted to ensure they were providing quality products that were not tainted with any unwanted ingredients. While the drugs provided by the Buyers clubs were not regulated by an authority such as the FDA, the drugs still underwent screening because the clubs wanted to provide safe products to their members⁷⁵.

⁷³ Scott Myers. "Go Into the Story interview." www.gointothestory.blcklst.com [Accessed 12/10/2019]

⁷⁴ Hannah Dorf. "Managing your own survival: Buyers Clubs in the AIDS epidemic." Health and medicine in American history. www.lewiscar.sites.grinnell.edu [Accessed 08/12/2019]

⁷⁵ Ibid.

Despite the overt opposition to these practices, there were some doctors who even indirectly, relied on these organizations to help their patients. As told by Christopher Harris, a sick man who relied on Atlanta Buyers Club, another important organization at the time:

A physician assistant told me there were some new drugs that might help, but they weren't available because the FDA had not yet approved them. He told me there was a place in town to get the drugs, but he couldn't say where. On his way out of the office, he told me that he had dropped a slip of paper."I said, 'No, I didn't.' He said, 'Yeah you did.' And I looked down. There was a piece of paper he had thrown across the desk. And I picked it up, and it was a phone number.⁷⁶"

As a matter of fact, Dallas Buyers Club was only one of a series of clubs devoted to helping people at the time. As Hannah Dorf claimed in “Managing your own survival”:

There were buyers clubs in Dallas, Ft. Lauderdale, New York City, San Francisco, and many more cities. Each had thousands of members. The clubs were technically independent from one another but would aid each other in circulation of product or inform each other on sources to obtain products. The Ft. Lauderdale Principles was an ethical code established by the Ft. Lauderdale buyers club, including a requirement to provide products at the “lowest possible cost”. Most clubs subscribed to this ethical code, making the primary goal of these buyers clubs not to be profit, but rather providing potentially life-saving services to their members⁷⁷.

Another important character in the movie is Rayon, the transsexual with whom Ron cooperates to coordinate the Buyers Club. This character did not actually exist in the real club but was invented in order to tackle (and in a way to try to solve/exorcize) hysteria and phobia, which were widespread

⁷⁶ Bonshahi, Kerrie Hillman. “How a Slip of Paper Impacted an AIDS diagnosis” www.npr.org [Accessed 10/13/2019]

⁷⁷Hannah Dorf. “Managing your own survival: Buyers Clubs in the AIDS epidemic.” *Health and medicine in American history*. www.lewiscar.sites.grinnell.edu [Accessed 08/12/2019]

in the 1980s. As was previously pointed out, the representation of phobia pervades the whole movie. It can be seen in the very beginning after Ron had been diagnosed with the disease with his hysterical reaction against the doctors, and later on in his being fired from his job as an electrician. Then, it can be seen when Ron's friends refuse to meet and speak to him in the bar where they usually meet for gambling and when they vandalize his house writing offensive words on the walls. However, it is through the very presence of Rayon that the theme is analyzed more in depth. At the beginning of the film, Ron despises her and does not seem willing to cooperate in dealing with the club. Nevertheless, he gradually gets to know her, and treats her increasingly better, until in the enigmatic scene of the supermarket, he even defends her from his former friends' TJ phobia. In this scene, Ron and Rayon are seen together in a supermarket and there they meet TJ, who at the beginning pretends not to see them. After a while, however, Ron greets him and thus, TJ is forced to speak to them. Ron introduces Rayon to TJ but as he is scared to get the disease, he does not want to shake hands with her. Thus, Ron with his typical violent behaviors obliges TJ to talk to her, even if he appears visibly disgusted to do that. At any rate, this is an incredible step forward for Ron, who at the beginning was depicted in a similar way to TJ. According to screenwriters Melisa Wallack and Craig Borten, this scene was especially created in order: "to help convey Woodroof's gradual acceptance of a subculture he had dismissed."⁷⁸ Thus, Rayon was based on the accounts of various AIDS sufferers, in order to analyze stigma and to try to reduce it throughout the whole movie. Even Jared Leto, who plays this very part, underlined her importance, not as a stereotype, but as a true person: "she was a composite, but for me now she's a real person. When I read the script, the first thought that came to mind is there is an opportunity here to bring to life someone. I think in film this kind of role is usually a stereotype or a cliché"⁷⁹." The importance of this character

⁷⁸ Steven McElroy. "For 25 days, transsexual to core" The New York Times. www.nytimes.com [Accessed 09/08/2019]

⁷⁹ Susan Wloszczyna "Jered Leto talks about his later transformation in 'Dallas Buyers Club'" www.rogerebert.com [Accessed 08/13/2019]

is also stressed by Borten who affirms: “Yes [Woodroof was] homophobic—yes, his arc is real yet told in a dramatic way for the film and conveyed through his relationship through Rayon which is a composite character. Yes, the [Dallas club] and his diagnosis changed him⁸⁰.” This different behavior in the last period of Ron’s life, where his phobia seemed to have disappeared in favor of a more collaborative and understanding person was noticed by Bill Minutaglio, who was one of the last journalist to see him alive: “He didn’t express any animosity to gay customers or the gay community,” says Minutaglio. “He didn’t express any homophobia that I can remember, and if he had I’m almost certain I’d have put it in my story. In a way I think it’d have been an odd juxtaposition that would have made the story more interesting.⁸¹” As a result, as in his real life, also in the movie Ron’s hysteric attitude against the disease and the sick gradually improves, becoming acceptance and help instead of rejection and fear. The concept of stigma will also be analyzed in the next paragraph in relation to the present, as the situation of phobia that Woodroof lived in the 1980s and beginning of 1990s seems to be still widespread in the southern states. In relation to this, new programs to contrast the phenomenon have been recently created in order to finally defeat this very serious problem which worsens the condition of many diseased people. Not only this, but a modern version of the Buyers clubs are still operative on the internet and still provides HIV and Hepatitis positive patients with expensive or alternative drugs such as PrEp, from other countries all over the world.

4.3 Aids in the South and Buyers Clubs’ importance in the post Woodroof’s Era

What is interesting about the Buyers Clubs is that they didn’t die with Woodroof, but they still exist today, despite many new drugs have been discovered and AIDS is no longer necessarily a mortal

⁸⁰ Forrest Wickman. “Was the Hero of Dallas Buyers Club actually Bisexual?” www.slate.com [Accessed 10/10/2019]

⁸¹ Alex Hannaford. “Dallas Buyers Club: The not-so-straight truth.” [The telegraph, www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk) [Accessed 10/12/2019]

disease. The clubs do not just help provide AIDS patients with new and too costly drugs, but they help to find new drugs for others serious diseases such as hepatitis C. What is more, not only do they exist in the US, but they have spread in many countries and can be found today all over the world. According to Ben Hirschler: “Frustrated by the high price of antiviral drugs, thousands of patients from London to Moscow to Sydney are turning to a new wave of online ‘buyers clubs’ to get cheap generic medicines to cure hepatitis C and protect against HIV infection.⁸²” But what is stunning, is that the drugs provided by the clubs today, can be as effective and safe as the ones circulating in the traditional market: “While regulators warn that buying drugs online is risky, scientific data presented at a recent medical conference suggest that treatment arranged through buyers club can be just as effective as through conventional channels.⁸³” As a result, as Hirschler stated, the legacy of Dallas Buyers Club is still strong today: “Like Ron Woodroof with the 1980s AIDS patients in the movie ‘Dallas Buyers Club’, the sponsors of today’s drug clubs aim to help patients who can’t get the drugs they want through local healthcare systems by bringing in medicines from abroad⁸⁴. Not only is *Dallas Buyers Clubs* important for this, but also because, as pointed out before, it reflects on AIDS stigma in Texas, an issue which in 2019 is still very common. According to Rachel Taube and Michael Marks of Texas standard, Texas has the fourth highest rate of HIV and AIDS in the country. In a report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: “A majority of the 86,000 Texans with these conditions live in urban areas, where there’s better access to medical care and a greater chance of avoiding the stigma that can come with a positive diagnosis⁸⁵.” However, the great hysteria of the 1980s still continues in many Texan small cities. A woman interviewed in Texas Standard claimed: “I hate to say this but, it’s still like

⁸² Ben Hirschler. “Buyers clubs for cheaper drugs help fight hepatitis and HIV.” Reuters. www.reuters.com [Accessed 08/14/2019]

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Marks, Taube Rachel “Rural Texans With HIV Or AIDS Face Stigma, And Limited Care Options.” Texas Standard, www.texasstandard.org [Accessed 08/14/2019]

we're stuck in 1969 or we're still stuck in the 1970s or 1980s. This is 2018 and people still out here still feel like, oh, if you give that person a hug you're gonna catch AIDS⁸⁶." According to the article, people in Texas are still scared to be tested for fear of being positive and having to suffer from such a stigma. This is supported even by Sylvester Turner and Katy Caldwell in *The Texas Tribune*: "[...] solutions are only possible if significant attention is paid to what is going on outside. Day-to-day realities —poverty, racism, machismo, language barriers, poor education, stigma and homophobia — prevent folks from seeking HIV treatment and prevention.⁸⁷" Luckily, recently some measures have been taken to reduce either stigma or the high rate of HIV sufferers:

Thanks to a generous grant from the Ford Foundation and AIDS United, Legacy Community Health, working closely with more than 50 community leaders and elected officials, has developed a new report, "Roadmap to Ending the HIV Epidemic in Houston," that provides a comprehensive strategy to cut new infections in half over five years. Houston is the only Texas City to join the ranks of a distinguished group — Atlanta, San Francisco, New York — that have already begun tackling, with impressive results, their own HIV challenges. The report relays the conventional steps for HIV reduction from a medical perspective, from increasing testing — people living with HIV must first know if they have it to do something about it — to expanding the market for the daily pill, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), that is more than 90 percent effective in preventing the virus⁸⁸.

Not only journalists and experts talk about the problems that HIV is still creating in the US, and particularly in Texas, but also two members of the cast of *Dallas Buyers Club*, that is to say Jennifer Garner and Jared Leto, discuss the problem and the importance of the topic of such a movie. Garner, for instance, in an interview by Matt Josh claimed:

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Caldwell, Turner Sylvester. "Texas' new frontier for HIV/AIDS." *The Texas Tribune*, www.tribtalk.org [Accessed 08/14/2019]

⁸⁸ Ibid.

I was fascinated by the topic though and not that long ago I lost a very dear friend to AIDS, so I am aware that it is still very much a disease that is in the world. I feel that this movie is part of putting it back in peoples' conversations and putting education back in the forefront, which is where it needs to be. Because the numbers are on the rise, it's not a disease that has gone away; people have a false sense of security about it. It is really important that we still talk about prevention of AIDS, and HIV. What I really loved was this arc that my character went through, from being very black and white and a very cognitive thinker to someone who reacts with her heart and is more of a healer than anything else.⁸⁹

As a result, the actress is well aware of the relevance of the theme treated and underlines the importance of such role and topic even related to her personal experience. Not only her, but Leto too, in an interview with Susan Wloszczyna pointed out that:

There is a great lesson learned here. [There is] a reminder in this film. That the impossible is possible. And a small group of people can do really amazing things. And it is interesting to go back in time and remember when AIDS was a death sentence. As far as the character goes, I hope people get to know someone and they have a little more understanding and empathy⁹⁰

In addition to them, also the director Vallée and the protagonist McConaughey agreed with the importance and the challenges of making this movie, and the great results it has reached. McConaughey, after winning the Oscar for the best protagonist, stated that they had just ended a long journey for a movie, which as *The Normal Heart (2014)*, was not easy to make. These are his precise words: "No one wanted to make this film," he told *Parade.com* backstage. "It got turned

⁸⁹ Matt Joseph. "Roundtable interview with Jennifer Garner on Dallas Buyers Club." We got this covered, www.wegotthiscovered.com [Accessed 08/16/2019]

⁹⁰ Susan Wloszczyna. "Jared Leto talks about his latest transformation in Dallas Buyers Club." www.rogerebert.com [Accessed 08/16/2019]

down 137 times. So after we took it on, getting it done seemed like an accomplishment⁹¹.” This is confirmed also by Craig Borten, who in an interview for *Medium.com* told that the movie was bought by different studios including Universal and Columbia, and many actors should have played in it, such as Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise but nobody succeeded to shoot it until 2013⁹². Thus, they showed once again, how much stigma existed against this kind of disease and as in the case of *The Normal Heart (2014)*, how movies themselves can suffer from the same stigma that they try to represent.

⁹¹ Jeanne Wolf. “Oscar Winner Matthew McConaughey: Nobody Wanted to make Dallas Buyers Club.” www.parade.com [Accessed 11/19/2019]

⁹² Scott Myers. “Go Into the Story interview.” www.gointothestory.blcklst.com [Accessed 12/10/2019]

CHAPTER 5

PRECIOUS AND POSE: AIDS AND ETHNIC MINORITIES

5.1 Introduction

The last chapter of this work will focus on the most AIDS-Affected ethnic group in the United States: African Americans. From the beginning of the epidemics in 1981, over 250.000 ⁹³African Americans have died from this disease, and today the amount of people who get sick is still very high. After almost 40 years, in 2019, blacks are still the most affected group in American society and among them, women appear to be still the most hit, followed by African American gays and Latino gays and women. The situation of African American victims has largely been ignored either inside the community, where AIDS-phobia is extremely widespread, or by white media and press. The presence of AIDS in the African American community has been utterly forgotten in US cinema, both in the 1980s and 1990s, only to be tackled for the first time in 2009 with Lee Daniels' *Precious*. This movie is taken from Sapphire's novel *Push*, and analyzes the condition of a teen girl called Precious, who lives in the 1980s Harlem, in a condition of poverty, lack of education and perpetual violence caused both by her father who rapes her and impregnates her twice and by her mother who always beats her and is accomplice to his husband for the girl's unhappiness and difficulties. Besides all this, she has to face AIDS due to his father violence and the continuing rejection of different institutions to take care of her situation. Only Miss Weiss played by Mariah Carey and Miss Rain, interpreted by Paula Patton, will help her to deal with her situation and to try to improve her condition. This movie is fundamental for the representation of AIDS within the African American condition at the time, but even today, as the African American AIDS situation

⁹³ The Black AIDS institute. "The History of the AIDS epidemic in Black America." www.archive.blackaids.or [Accessed 11/04/2019]

has not changed much. The final part of this chapter will be dedicated to a recent series titled *Pose*, directed by Ryan Murphy, and set in almost the same time and places as *Precious*. This series, also deals with the difficult situation of African Americans and Latinos living with HIV in the 1980s through the representation of New York's ball culture scene.

5.2 *Precious*: AIDS in the African American community

Before *Precious* was released, AIDS movies rarely featured an African American as a protagonist. An exception was Whoopi Goldberg in *Boys on the Side* (1995), who played the part of Jane DeLuca, a black lesbian blues singer working and living in New York. In the movie, Jane starts a journey by car with two white women Holly and Robin, in order to help the latter, who is sick with AIDS, to have some fun in her last adventure before she dies. In this movie, however, it is still a white character, Robin, who is sick. Very different is the case in Daniel's movie *Precious*, where the main character is African American and HIV positive and has to deal with many problems that affect her and the environment where she lives. Clareece Jones, a 16-year-old teen, suffers from different issues at time: She is abused by her mother Mary, who is unemployed and poor, and receives money from the welfare to raise her daughter. Mary, in the whole movie, is shown as extremely wicked. She continuously shouts at Clareece, she beats her many times and she forces her to do the chores as a slave, while she spends the whole day lying on a couch smoking and drinking. Besides this, *Precious* is also victim of violence of her father's, who does not appear in the movie save for brief flashbacks when she is cooking dinner for her mother and remembers being raped by him. *Precious*, as a result of her father's violence, gives birth to two children. The first is Mongo which stands for Mongoloid, as the little child suffers from Down syndrome. This child is despised by Mary and she uses her to continue receiving money from the welfare in order not to look for a serious job. In a scene, Mary is seen offending little Mongo just before the social worker arrives at her home to verify if everything is fine with the family, but also after the visit she mistreats the

child literally throwing her on the couch and stating that she cannot stand her and that situation anymore. As far as Precious' second son Abdul is concerned, at the beginning of the movie, he is not born yet but she is already pregnant with him. What will be showed later on in the movie is that, unfortunately, Clareece's father Carl has given her AIDS too, another severe issue with which she will have to deal with through the movie. However, before this, she has to solve her problems at school. There, she is bullied by several classmates who call her "whale" because of her obesity. This obesity is due once more to her mother Mary, who forces her to eat what she does not want to and even though she is not hungry. In addition to this, the school principal decides to suspend her from school since she is waiting for a baby for the second time at the age of 16 and does not want to tell her the reason why she is pregnant once more. Not only is Clareece bullied at school, but also after school when she comes back home when a group of teenagers under the effects of smoke and drugs offend and throw her to the street's pavement. Bullying, addiction, violence, as well as illiteracy, were typical in Harlem in the 1980s, a neighborhood who suffered from extreme poverty, and that had a very high amount of people sick with AIDS. According to Open.edu:

Cramped in, bitterly poor - generally, unemployment rates in Harlem would be double the general rate across New York - Harlem was an unhealthy place to live. A 1990 study suggested life expectancy for a 15 year-old female resident of Harlem would be roughly on a par with a that of a fifteen year-old girl living in India. She'd have about a 65% chance of surviving to 65 - while a black man would have about a 37% chance of making it to the same age, on a par with an Angolan male. As with other areas of deprivation and desperation, crime and drug abuse took a hold; at the same time, Harlem was the focus of a vibrant black culture and a strong religious life⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Open. Edu "A brief History of Harlem." [www. Open.edu.com](http://www.Open.edu.com) [Accessed 11/10/2019]

After being expelled from her school, even with great difficulty due to her mother's strong opposition to education, Precious takes up a new alternative school devoted to young girls who have a problematic adolescence. Here, Clareece meets Miss Rain, a young and caring teacher who loves helping her students to improve their situation. It is Miss Rain who will help Precious to learn to read and to write but also to deal with her difficult situation. She suggests writing about herself, her thoughts, her problems and be more self-confident. Miss Rain will help and stay close to her during the birth of Abdul, while she cannot attend school, and later on, she will host her when she flees from her mother's house when nobody else wants to really help her and also when she discovers that she is sick. In addition to a gradual improvement in her education at school, she also improves her social relationships. From being bullied by her mates she gradually starts to make new friends with the girls in her new school. They begin to hang out together and do shopping and they will also go and see her at the hospital when she gives birth to her second son Abdul. It is through them that Precious starts to have a family and to find some light in all her darkness. Not only this, but she starts to be more self-confident as she wants to take care of her two children despite everybody suggests giving them to adoption. In the last part of the movie Precious learns to accept her condition and tries to solve her problems. She no longer daydreams to be a star, white, slim, and famous but she is resolute to live her life as she is. As a matter of fact, in the first part Clareece continually daydreams in order to escape reality and to try to build a shield against the hard condition in which she lives. This mechanism is typical in these cases and in psychology is defined as a mechanism of defense from a harsh reality and a painful life. As Sigmund Freud noted: "Defense mechanisms are psychological strategies that are unconsciously used to protect a person from anxiety arising from unacceptable thoughts or feelings."⁹⁵ This mechanism, used by Precious many times in the first part of the movie, is explained even by Saul McLeod:

⁹⁵ Saul McLeod "Defense Mechanism." [Www. Simplypsychology.com](http://www.simplypsychology.com) [Accessed 11/10/2019]

We use defense mechanisms to protect ourselves from feelings of anxiety or guilt, which arise because we feel threatened, or because our id or superego becomes too demanding. Defense mechanisms operate at an unconscious level and help ward off unpleasant feelings (i.e., anxiety) or make good things feel better for the individual. Ego-defense mechanisms are natural and normal. When they get out of proportion (i.e., used with frequency), neuroses develop, such as anxiety states, phobias, obsessions, or hysteria⁹⁶.

This phobia of the mother and the whole world that surrounds her, no longer exists at the end, when she confronts her for the last time. Mary, in fact, after Precious' escape from her house, asks the social worker Miss Weiss to talk to her. During this conversation, she reveals her that her father is dead of AIDS and the viewer understands that Mary too might be infected. Despite this, she does not say sorry for how she behaved. Instead, she claims her and the children back so as she can still get the money from the social services. Not only this, but through Miss Weiss' questions, it is revealed that her mother knew about her husband's violence towards Precious and she let him continue as a punishment because, according to her, Precious had stolen her husband. This clearly cannot be accepted by Clareece, who brings her children with her and goes away in order to start a new life. This scene is extremely important because here Precious finds hope, and becomes more mature and powerful than before. This hope and power are observed both by Lee Daniels but also and most importantly by Sapphire, the novel writer. According to Daniels:

When I read the book it was a part of my DNA, I felt very strongly that this story needed to be shared, I could smell the room that Mary was in, I could smell the wallpaper, I could smell the cockroach spray, I could smell the pigs feet. I could feel the texture of the couch. The words

⁹⁶ Ibid.

jumped off of the page. And, they were a part of my spirit. I understood it...the whole magic of it, you know. The hope. Most people read it and they think it is X-rated. But I saw hope in it⁹⁷.

Similar to Lee Daniels is Sapphire's reaction to her novel:

People ask me: is it a story about obesity, abuse or race? Actually, what it's really about is the transformative power of literacy. At the end of the film, *Precious* is still black, still poor and still fat but what's changed is that she can read and write and has begun to re-invent herself. She has left her abusive home environment, and has gone from feeling stupid and worthless to embracing a positive vision of her future.⁹⁸

Clearly, this movie is important because it represents the situation of African American diseased people and the issue that surrounds them. African American community was hit extremely hard by the disease and women especially, were the ones who suffered most. "The CDC reports that, as of December 1988, African Americans make up half the AIDS cases ever reported among women. The cumulative incidence of AIDS between 1981 and 1988 is more than 13 times higher among black women and about 10 times higher among Hispanic women than among white women⁹⁹." Not only this, but Gavett also stated that by 1993: "HIV becomes the leading cause of death for African American men between ages 25-44, and the second leading cause of death for African American women in the same age range¹⁰⁰." Unfortunately, the situation for African Americans and above all Black women would worsen in the 1990s and at the beginning of the 21st century too, without any improvement of the problem. In relation to this, Gavett observed that: "In 2004, HIV becomes the leading cause of death for black women aged 25–34 years and the third leading cause of death for

⁹⁷ Emil Wilbekin "Director Lee Daniels Talks About Making *Precious*." www.essence.com [Accessed 11/10/2019]

⁹⁸ Standard.co.Uk "How author created film character *Precious* through her own sexual abuse." www.standard.co.uk [Accessed 11/10/2019]

⁹⁹ Gretchen Gavett. "Timeline: 30 years of AIDS in Black America." www.pbs.org [Accessed 11/10/2019]

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

black women aged 35–44 years. By 2005, the rate of AIDS diagnoses for black women becomes 20 times that of the rate for white women¹⁰¹.” However, even in the last few years, the situation for this group has not improved much either for women or for gay Black Americans. According to Thurka Sangaramoorthy:

The face of HIV in the United States has long been white gay men, even though the epidemic has had a devastating and disproportionate impact on African-American communities. This is especially true among women; 60 percent of newly diagnosed cases of HIV in women in 2017 were African-American. Yet, African-American women’s voices are notoriously absent from the national discourse on HIV.

And she added:

Treatments to help people who are HIV-positive manage their illness and survive into older age have improved greatly, yet the unique health needs of African-American women living and aging with HIV – estimated at about 140,000 – are often ignored. While many are actively taking medication and receiving care, some do not know their HIV status. After diagnosis, many have difficulties managing their HIV, which can contribute to their other health challenges. [...] Despite comprising only 12 percent of the overall U.S. population, African-Americans represent 43 percent of all persons with newly diagnosed HIV and 42 percent of all people living with HIV. African-Americans living with HIV are nearly 10 times more likely to be diagnosed with AIDS and over six times more likely to die of complications of AIDS than their white counterparts.¹⁰²

As a result, what can be observed is that HIV is still a severe problem in the community today and in almost 40 years the amount of diseased has only decreased by 12%. This is clearly due to stigma that in the community is very high. As in the white community, the AIDS-phobia was extremely

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Thurka Sangaramoorthy “African-American women with HIV often overlooked, under-supported.” [www. theconversation.com](http://www.theconversation.com) [Accessed 11/12/2019]

widespread in the 1980s, but unlike the white community, this situation has not improved much.

According to Ian Landau:

Many local and national leaders failed to respond, despite the fact that AIDS was wreaking havoc throughout black communities. HIV-AIDS was just one of a long list of vital issues for black leaders to tackle, including education, housing and jobs. Other leaders were ignorant of the problem. "I think we thought about AIDS as affecting only white people, and then only white gay people, and there were no black gay people," recalls Julian Bond, veteran 1960s civil rights activist, Georgia state representative, and chairman emeritus of the NAACP. Even the traditional bulwark of social support and activism in the African-American community, the black church, has done little to address the AIDS crisis. In "Endgame," Phil Wilson, president and CEO of the Black AIDS Institute, recalls an eye-opening moment while he was addressing the Black Ministerial Alliance about AIDS. One minister jumped up and shouted, "We're not going to let them blame this one on us." The frantic desire that AIDS not become another "black problem" in the eyes of American society has severely hampered prevention and treatment efforts, Wilson says.¹⁰³

Thus, according to Richard Wolitski, Director of the Office of HIV/AIDS and Infectious Disease Policy in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in order to reduce the crisis and bring it to an end, a strong program of information and prevention against stigma must be carried out within the community:

We need healthcare providers to enhance efforts to reduce missed opportunities for HIV testing and prevention counseling or linkage to HIV care and to embrace strategies to identify and re-engage those who have fallen out of care. And community-based organizations, faith communities, families, and networks of friends can all help combat the HIV-related stigma that keeps too many from seeking testing or remaining in HIV care. With all we know now about

¹⁰³ Ian Landau "Aids in Black America." www.everydayhealth.com [Accessed 11/12/2019]

how to prevent and treat it, HIV should not be stigmatized. Instead, we all need to mobilize to embrace those at risk or living with HIV and support their efforts to remain healthy.¹⁰⁴

Another fundamental element in relation to the themes of AIDS and violence is that the novel is based partially on Sapphire's experience as a teacher, her having sick and problematic students and also her being mistreated by her father while she was a teen. This is how she explained the origin of *Precious*:

[...] The story is not autobiographical, she says. The level of abuse I suffered is not nearly as extreme as in the book, and there is no character in the story, not even the teacher, who is based on me." Rather, Precious is a composite character, she says, created from the real-life stories she encountered while teaching for seven years, from 1987 to 1993, in an adult-literacy programme in Harlem. "I had a 32-year-old student who one day announced that she had to leave class early to pick up her 20-year-old Down's syndrome daughter. I sort of reeled, thinking I'd heard wrong, and when I asked again how old her daughter was, she told the class: I had a baby by my father when I was 12'. "I'd never heard anything like it. This woman was black, slim and HIV-positive. But to create my character, Precious [who also has a Down's syndrome baby at 12 and is also HIV-positive], I mixed her with my other students, including a teenager who was profoundly obese and illiterate, and who more physically embodies the character Precious you see on the screen.¹⁰⁵

And in relation to her father, she claims: "I never forgot the pain and confusion at having a father who was supposed to protect me but who abused and physically hit me instead. I was the second of four children, and he would beat us and make us rewash all the dishes if they didn't come up to his obsessive-compulsive standards."¹⁰⁶ One last point that is worth considering is how the actors of *Precious* are active in their lives in relation to AIDS prevention, fundraising and information. The

¹⁰⁴ Richard Wolitski " HIV in the African American Community: Progress, But Our Work is Far From Over." www.hiv.gov [Accessed 11/12/2019]

¹⁰⁵ Standard.co.Uk " How author created film character Precious through her own sexual abuse." www.standard.co.uk [Accessed 11/10/2019]

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

first to be active in the AIDS fundraising and in many AIDS initiatives is the very protagonist Gabourey Sibide, who among all took part in the 2018 Black AIDS Institute gala. In this, she stated: “The rent you pay to live on the planet is our service to others. I want to bring dignity and humanity to every character even if they don’t represent me,” explained the actress. It’s my duty to shine a light and focus on those who aren’t getting it and I plan to do that... as an actress who’s played a character with HIV¹⁰⁷.” She thus showed her attention and commitment to the AIDS cause both in her job as an actor and with her participation in the gala in order to raise money for the African American community. Another actress in the movie committed in the AIDS cause is Mo’Nique, the wicked mother of Precious. Although Mo’ Nique in the movie is represented as a brutal and uncaring woman, she actually gives much importance to the topic as she lost an uncle and a friend due to the disease. In relation to this, she stated: “I watched my friend really suffer in silence.” “While people with other illnesses, such as cancer, diabetes and heart disease, feel free to discuss their health status without judgment, people like Charisse often feel that they must keep their illness a secret, Mo’Nique says¹⁰⁸.” As with Charisse, Mo’Nique observed that there is still much stigma in relation to this disease and this is true also in her own family. As a matter of fact, when her uncle died her grandmother refused to tell anybody about the disease and preferred telling that he had just a kidney failure. From the time her friend Charisse died in 2002, Mo’Nique has been extremely active in many fundraising and prevention campaigns. According to the Black AIDS Institute:

[She] partnered with Essence magazine and the Black AIDS Institute to raise funds and awareness through subscriptions. She and her television show also participated in media giant Viacom’s company-wide campaign to raise AIDS awareness. In addition, she has appeared in

¹⁰⁷ Sade Spence “Jussie Smollett, Gabourey Sibide And More attend Black AIDS Institute Gala.” www.hellobeautiful.com [Accessed 11/12/2019]

¹⁰⁸ The Black AIDS Institute “Mo’Nique Shows the Power of Speaking Up to Shatter Stigma.” www.blackaids.org [Accessed 11/12/2019]

the nationwide PSA campaign, No Excuses, and has been active in BET's Rap-It-Up. Mo'Nique has also donated the proceeds from a number of her performances to AIDS organizations¹⁰⁹.

The actress observed many times that still today: "there is no other disease that we treat that way," "It's still looked upon like it's a sin, so a lot of our brothers and sisters die in silence¹¹⁰." Thus, in order to reduce the problem, she suggests that African Americans speak about it and consider AIDS not as a sin but as any other disease: "As Black women and as a community, we need to start speaking up and speaking out on HIV/AIDS," says Mo'Nique. "The disease has no face and does not discriminate. You can be any age, make any amount of money, have an extremely successful career, look gorgeous and still contract HIV and die." And she added: "I look at AIDS like any other disease," says Mo'Nique, who's passionate about viewing HIV/AIDS without judgment. "It's like a cancer. It's like diabetes or leukemia. Some believe the myths about AIDS, like, 'you got AIDS, you must be a whore or gay or use drugs.' Some of those things happen, but you might also happen to be a cool sister who got with the wrong man who wasn't honest.¹¹¹" Not only this, but Mo'Nique's responses on how she would like the situation of the disease to be in her sons' generation is extremely positive and hopeful and does not leave any space to stigma or phobia: "I would like to see them live in a world without judgment. I would like to see my kids grow up in a world where everybody says 'how are you doing' and means it, where everybody's valued, no matter if they're Black or gay or fat or HIV-positive or what. If you took time out to see the beauty inside you, you'd see nothing but beauty in this world."¹¹² Beside Sibide and Mo'Nique, also the director Lee Daniels was and is still active in several AIDS campaigns and in the struggle against the disease. Back in the 1980s he had a nursing agency where he took care of many diseased people who were totally ignored by any other institution:

¹⁰⁹ The Black AIDS Institute "Mo'Nique." www.blackaids.org [Accessed 11/12/2019]

¹¹⁰ The Black AIDS Institute "Mo'Nique Shows the Power of Speaking Up to Shatter Stigma." www.blackaids.org [Accessed 11/12/2019]

¹¹¹ The Black AIDS Institute "Mo'Nique." www.blackaids.org [Accessed 11/12/2019]

¹¹² Ibid.

People know me as Lee Daniels the filmmaker. But they don't really know of my early beginnings when I had a nursing agency prior to that, as I was directing theater," says Daniels, 56. "I had the first nursing agency under contract with AIDS Project Los Angeles over 30 years ago. I had people taking care of people with HIV because people didn't want to touch them. So I lived on the front line. That's a whole different life and something I'm really proud of."¹¹³

In addition to this, he even collaborated with GMHC, the very first organization to deal with the victims back in the 1980s and there he met and collaborated even with many other African American women. Thus, with *Precious*, he wanted to raise attention on the disease, which was only represented and thought of only as a white or gay plague: "I wanted people to understand that it wasn't just a gay man's disease, but it was an epidemic that affected the African American community in a very big way—way beyond the gay sphere¹¹⁴." To conclude, what is also important to observe about Lee Daniels, is his reaction to the present Trump's administration in relation to the disease, a reaction that has been extremely controversial, with Trump promising to end the epidemic by 2030. If he had hope in Obama's anti-AIDS policies, he is utterly scared about Trump's reaction and does not think that the epidemic will end so soon. However, he does not give up his fight and his activist task and encourage people to continue their struggle against the ones who want to hinder AIDS activism. In relation to this, in an interview for The Black AIDS Institute he stated:

"It has been a very long time since I felt that scary feeling where OMG I'm looking over my shoulder and wondering what are we going to do?" "If you had asked me prior to Trump's election, I would have said yes we could have ended AIDS in my lifetime. But I don't believe that's going to happen now," he says. "I think we're going to go backwards now. And that's a travesty. And it cracks my heart. But, now is not the time to give up. Now is the time to step up. Now is the time to speak out. Now is the time to resist. Now is the time to become activists and advocates—in the streets, in the boardrooms, in the halls of power, on the printed page, on the

¹¹³ The Black AIDS Institute "Heroes in the Struggle: Lee Daniels" www.blackaids.org [Accessed 11/12/2019]

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

stage, on the screen, and on the small screen. People need to volunteer. We need to contribute our talent, our wisdom, and our dollars. For example, one of my priorities is raising money for the Black AIDS Institute. No matter who we are or where we are, we have to do our part¹¹⁵.”

5.3 Minorities in *Pose*

To conclude the analysis of AIDS and cultural minorities, this brief paragraph is devoted to the TV series *Pose*, which very recently has raised interest in this delicate question once more. This series appeared for the first time in 2018 and due to his success, a new season was released in 2019. The series is set in New York, and especially in the first season the contrast between the white rich part, the yuppies of Trump Tower and the black poor one of Harlem is extremely strong. However, it is the poor community to be widely analyzed in *Pose*. In particular, American cultural minorities are tackled through the ballroom culture, which appeared and developed during the 80s and continued in the 90s under the influx of different singers among which Madonna with her *Vogue*. This community of the ballrooms was made of poor or problematic young Latinos and African-Americans, who usually deprived of their family and money and frequently homeless, found protection and help for their condition in different ballrooms called ‘Houses’. The underground world of ballroom from which director Ryan Murphy took inspiration, is well represented in 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning* by Jennie Livingston. In this as well as in *Pose*, different themes related to this world such as: racism, homophobia and the plight of AIDS, are widely observed. In *Pose*, there are undoubtedly many characters through which these issues are represented. The first and the most important is Blanca Evangelista, a trans woman who after being diagnosed AIDS founds her own ‘House’ called House of Evangelista, where she is a master for the young dancers of her school. Blanca is a clear example of one of the many Latinos who were sick at the time. As a matter of fact, according to CDC: “Since the beginning of the epidemic, more than 85,000

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

Hispanics with AIDS have died,” and “although historically, the number of new infections among Latinos has been lower than that of whites and blacks, Latinos continue to bear a disproportionate burden of the HIV epidemic. Hispanics represent approximately 16 percent of the U.S. population and account for an estimated 18 percent of those living with HIV. Among Hispanics/Latinos, gay and bisexual men are the most affected¹¹⁶.” As well as being a master, Blanca is a sort of mother to them. This is evident with Demon, a young black boy who is thrown out of his house by his conservative, homophobic family and is accepted by Blanca in her house, saving him from the dangers of the street. Blanca is HIV positive from the very first episode, but her health worsens in the second season, where in the first episode, nurse Kubrak warns her that her T cells have dropped under 200 and her HIV has become AIDS. This episode whose name is “Acting Up” is fundamental in the series in relation to the disease and AIDS activism. From the very beginning, Blanca and Pray Tell, a friend of Blanca who is also sick, go to pay homage at the AIDS victims on Hart’s Island, a place where AIDS victims unclaimed by their parents were buried in mass. Even here, the victims are quarantined as in the hospitals because they are thought to be still infected and possible AIDS carriers. Thus, from the very beginning of the episode and then in the whole series, the disease is one of the most important elements of analysis for Murphy, who already gave importance to this theme in *The Normal Heart* (2014). Several are, in fact, the themes shared with that movie, among which AIDS activism, that is widely analyzed in different situations. It is through the nurse Judy Kubrak, for instance, that Pray Tell and Blanca take up ACT UP, the group founded by Larry Kramer. Not only Blanca and Tell, but also Demon and Angel will take part in the organization and will participate in the protests organized by the group. In *Pose*, in particular, the protest of Saint Patrick’s Cathedral is represented. This protest, as already observed, took place in 1989, due to Bisoph O’ Connor’s opposition to AIDS and its victims. There, numerous activists entered the Cathedral and lay down on the floor to protest. As far as Judy is concerned, she is not only

¹¹⁶ CDC “30 Years of HIV in Hispanic/Latino Communities: A timeline.” www.cdc.gov [Accessed 11/13/2019]

important for introducing Tell and Blanca in ACT UP but also because she helps Blanca to get AZT, a very expensive medicine at the time that she could not afford. Here, a mechanism that was not discussed before in any movie is presented, that is to say, the medicine redistribution. AZT, in fact, at the time cost 10.000 dollars a year, and AIDS minorities could not afford to buy it. Therefore, there were some white diseased who when they died, donated their leftovers and these were redistributed to poor people by several doctors and nurses such as in the case of Judy. Another important figure related to the disease in the movie is undoubtedly Pray Tell, who is somehow an alter ego of Blanca. Pray Tell as Blanca, is strongly involved in the ball culture and as Blanca is extremely active and careful about the AIDS cause and the ‘children’ of the House of Evangelista. He lost his lover Costas in season one and even before his death, he usually organizes an annual cabaret to raise awareness on the theme of AIDS. Not only this, but he wants all the dancers of the House to take part in the ACT UP meetings and protests, and gets really angry when Elektra refuses to take part in the Cathedral die-in, accusing her of not actively participating in the community. *Pose* is important because it gives voice to those minorities such as Black Americans and Latinos, the most hit by the virus, that have been ignored for many years and observes their participation in activist groups such as ACT UP. Co-director Steven Canal said: “The community was being eviscerated by HIV, and the government just wasn’t stepping in to provide any resource¹¹⁷.” And added:

It was really important for us to highlight that where we are at present with HIV — we have PrEP and we have the cocktail, and HIV is no longer a death sentence — there was a long road to getting to that place,” Canals says. “This was the hard-fought battle that ACT UP and the community were at the center of, and that battle was fought alone. There were no allies at the time. It really was just the community out there on the front lines by themselves¹¹⁸.

¹¹⁷ Benjamin Lindsay “*Pose* Isn’t Just Giving an AIDS History Lesson.” www.vulture.com [Accessed 11/13/2019]

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

The importance of *Pose* in relation to AIDS activism is also stated by Lady J, the series writer who is still an ACT UP activist:

For so long, communities of color and trans women especially have been neglected in the history of HIV/AIDS activism, she says. “Since our show is focused on the ballroom community — queer people of color, trans women of color — it just seemed like the perfect fit. It seemed like we owed it to history. We wanted to uncover once and for all the truth of our history and of our community’s history¹¹⁹.”

What is also fundamental to point out is that, as already told with *Precious*, still today there are many people suffering from the disease and there are still many disparities among black and white sick people. Not only this but as already pointed out in *The Normal Heart*, the government reaction is similar to the one of the 1980s and stigma is still extremely widespread. This is confirmed again by Lady J:

There are a lot of parallels to today’s political landscape from our show’s period, says writer and producer Our Lady J. People certainly feel powerless about the government; there is overt racism, homophobia, and transphobia coming from the highest office, and we need to remember that we have power in our voice¹²⁰.

In conclusion, it goes without saying that all these themes are fundamental for the director Murphy who had already analyzed them and is already at work to create the third season of *Pose*: “I was interested in the idea of a community in crisis and under siege,” says Murphy. “The medications that have helped stop the plague, the holocaust, came out in 1996, so I hope to end the show right as that happened, to really show the decimation of a world¹²¹.”

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Jane Mulkerrens “I made gay sidekicks the leads’: how Ryan Murphy changed TV forever.” www.theguardian.com [Accessed 11/13/2019]

CONCLUSION

The following work has been devoted to analyzing the 1980s representation of the AIDS crisis in contemporary American Cinema. That period was extremely critical for Americans as that new disease was unknown and killed thousands of people in different cities among which New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco. Despite killing a huge amount of people, the disease was also stigmatized, as it happened for the bubonic plague in ancient times. This happened because, at the beginning, it seemed to hit just some minorities and not the whole society. Thus, people at the time had to suffer twice, either for their disease or for the AIDS-phobia that was incredibly widespread within American society. This disease was considered, in fact, by many a God's punishment for some people's immoral behaviors or just the right reward for defeating the traditional American society of the 1950s. In relation to this American government at the time, did not behave differently from the rest of the society, ignoring the disease or working slowly to solve it, as in the case of some pharmaceutical companies such as the FDA. In this thesis, in particular, these issues typical of the 1980s but which sometimes are also valid today, are tackled through four movies and a TV series. These movies are: *1985*, *The Normal Heart*, *Dallas Buyers Club*, *Precious* and the TV series *Pose*. The first chapter is an overview of the problems that are usually presented in AIDS movies such as stigma, a theme widely discussed in 1989 by Susan Sontag in her book *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. In this book, Sontag shows why AIDS was so stigmatized and AIDS victims so ostracized, differently from other very serious diseases in the 20th century. In addition to this, chapter one presents how AIDS was traditionally pictured in the 1980s and 1990s movies like: *An Early Frost* (1985), *Buddies* (1985) and *Longtime Companion* (1990). After this introductory chapter, the attention shifts to the first 21st-century movie analyzed: *1985* by Yen Tan. This movie

represents an American traditional and conservative family of the 1980s who has to deal with his son's unknown disease. The mother and the father are pictured as extremely religious and their styles of life are totally in line with the New Right's manners. As a result, the viewer would expect a dramatic reaction to their son's disease such as happened in *An Early Frost*, where the protagonist is not helped with it and has a difficult relationship with his family. However, Tan decides to represent a more modern and understanding family. He slowly transforms his traditional family in a more open-minded one, and even the protagonist's father, a war veteran, accepts his son's disease and tries to help him, offering his personal support. Chapter 3 is dedicated, instead, to tackling a topic that was not enough presented in 1980s and 1990s AIDS movies, that is to say, AIDS activism. This movie pictures the formation of the first AIDS group which supported the victims when no drug was available and when nobody else seemed to pay attention to the problem. This film is taken by Kramer's eponymous theatre play *The Normal Heart*, which observes the many challenges and issues that this group had to face at the time. In the movie as in the play, many of the characters were real as Doctor Emma whose real name was Linda Laubenstein or Tommy who represented activist Rodger McFarlane. Almost all the characters in the movie were extremely active in their life and their aim was to try to treat or to help the diseased. Obviously, the very protagonist Ned, also pictures a real person, Larry Kramer, a famous activist who founded GMHC and later on ACT UP, known for many different protests, sit-ins and also St. Patrick's die-in in 1989. This movie is also important because it can be linked to today's period of Trump's administration, which is not different from Reagan's one. In fact, during the last few years, these groups have organized new protests to accuse Trump's indifference or anti-AIDS maneuvers, as a huge cut in the disease funds. Only recently, the President has promised that he will do something for reducing new contagions and victims, but even now, AIDS experts are reluctant to believe him as he is not doing anything in that direction. The work then proceeds in chapter 4 with Jean-Marc Vallée's *Dallas Buyers Club*. This film is based partially on the true story of Ron Woodroof, a Texan man sick with AIDS who became an activist too. Woodroof was diagnosed with the disease

at the end of the 1980s and at the beginning, he did not accept it, accusing the Doctors of lying and even threatening them. Soon, as the symptoms became evident, he accepted his disease and enrolled in the AZT program, but due to his precarious health state, he was not accepted. Thus, Woodroof decided to put up the Dallas Buyers Club, which provided sick people with alternative or unapproved drugs from other countries such as Mexico, Japan and the Netherlands. Although these drugs didn't cure the victims of the disease, they were a sort of relief for them who otherwise had no other means to get them. This movie is also important because, through the fictional character of Rayon, it pictures Ron's transformation from a homophobe to a more understanding and helpful person, a very important sign of the debunking of stigma, recurrent also in the previous movies. In the end, chapter 5 analyzes the situation of AIDS minorities at the time. As pointed out in the last chapter, the minorities were the ones who were most hit by the disease and the ones less considered either by the government or by the AIDS filmography. In this chapter, the conditions of minorities are tackled through Daniels' *Precious* and Murphy's TV series *Pose*. Both of them are based in the same period and in the poorest neighborhoods of New York and both analyze how a series of social problems such as poverty, racism and stigma contributed to the high AIDS spread at the time. *Precious* is a young teen who is victim of violence by both her parents. She is left pregnant twice by her father who gives her the disease too. At school, she does not learn anything and is bullied by her mates for her weight. When she is excluded from her school, she takes up a new alternative course that will help her to deal with her problems and through Miss Rain, to handle her disease too. In the end, she finds the courage to escape from her wicked mother and to try to build a life on her own, for the little time she has still to live. *Pose* too presents a similar situation, where African Americans and Latinos living in precarious conditions of poverty and domestic abuse, find refuge in the underground ball culture. This is the case of Blanca, who suffers from AIDS and despite this, founds her own 'house' to help other people such as Demon to outlive his family's expulsion from home and literally to avoid the dangers of the street. In *Pose*, Murphy gives importance once more to the theme of activism, which is represented through Blanca and Prey Tell participation in ACT

UP, and through Nurse Judy Kubrak, who introduces them to the group and devotes much time in redistributing AZT to the minorities who could not afford it. In conclusion, it is fundamental to point out that even though today new drugs exist, the AIDS crisis has not finished yet. In the southern states, for instance, as well as in the black community the crisis is almost as severe as it was back in the 1980s and much has still to be done for the reduction of this issue, from different institutions and groups at the same time. US government should be more aware of all this and actively participate in the programs to lower and eventually erase this disease. At the same time, activism should continue his campaign of information and fundraising, in order to prevent new infections and prevents stigma, an issue that contributed and still contributes to worsening the disease, allows its spread and prevents people from seeking help and support for their harsh condition.

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