

The Philadelphia Syndrome, or an insurmountable cultural trauma Outdated mainstream visual representations of HIV in times of undetectability

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Abstract

In 1981, the first case of AIDS was diagnosed in the US. Almost forty years later, the biomedical situation of people living with HIV (PLWH) in Western countries has significantly improved, and today, PLWH have a normal lifespan with few physical comorbidities. Nevertheless, current media representations of HIV do not seem to have moved past the AIDS epidemic of the 1990s. The film Philadelphia, directed by Jonathan Demme in 1993, has had a huge cultural impact on how society perceives HIV, and many contemporary films and fiction series portraying HIV still represent the condition in the same narrative terms. This analysis sets out to define what could be referred to as the Philadelphia Syndrome, a concept intended to describe the outdated, nostalgic representations of HIV in mainstream cultural productions in the last decade, a period marked in biomedical terms by the success of antiretroviral drugs, chronification, the importance of undetectability, and the increasingly widespread use of the prophylaxis pre-exposition (PrEP). By analyzing ten mainstream blockbuster films and fiction series produced from 2013 to 2022, this study examines the main characteristics of the Philadelphia Syndrome: nostalgia and melodramatic use of the 1980s and 1990s, high stigmatization of gay sexualities, and a neglect of women with HIV.

Keywords

HIV stigma, cultural trauma, media representations, film, LGBTIQ+, health identities

Introduction

Cultural trauma and stigma in HIV identity

Since the beginning of the HIV epidemic in 1981, approximately 10,000,000 people have been diagnosed with the virus in the European Region, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). While the infection rate has declined, almost 80,000 new cases were reported in adults in Western and Central Europe in 2019, and the prevalence of HIV in Europe will continue to increase in the foreseeable future as people living with HIV (PLWH) can now expect to have a normal lifespan. In 2014, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS) and its partners launched the ambitious 90-90-90 targets strategy for 2020, as a commitment to improve access to antiretroviral therapy (ART), a life-saving treatment, a transmission prevention measure, and a human right. The first of the three targets is the successful diagnosis of 90% of all HIV-positive people; the second target involves delivering ART to 90% of those diagnosed; and finally, the third target is viral suppression for 90% of those on treatment (Levi et al., 2016). In this scenario, the fight against HIV in the 2020s has been boosted by the spread of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), a preventive treatment that blocks HIV infection in HIV-negative people, and the establishment of the “undetectable means untransmittable” paradigm, which has demonstrated that PLWH with undetectable viral loads are unable to transmit the virus and, thus, that treatment also acts as prevention (Rodger et al., 2019).

PLWH have a 29% higher risk of reduced quality of life due to associated health conditions such as cardiovascular diseases, osteoporosis, and, especially, mental health conditions. Numerous studies have assessed the impact that living with HIV has on mental health. In this regard, several systematic reviews have placed the prevalence of depression in PLWH between 30% and 34% higher than the general population, 15.8% for generalized anxiety disorder, and 7% for alcohol dependence (Anderson et al., 2020; Stangl et al., 2022). The figures are even higher for women living with HIV, a traditionally understudied group (Cook et al., 2020). There is strong empirical evidence that relates this higher prevalence of mental health conditions to the stigma and discrimination experienced by PLWH, understanding stigma in Goffman’s terms, as a “mark” that confers social devaluation (Goffman, 1963, p. 2), or the set of false beliefs and myths that associate a health condition with negative and morally reprehensible attributes. Improving the mental health of PLWH therefore necessarily implies tackling the social stigma they carry (Evans-Lacko, 2012; Ramient et al., 2019). Many of these false myths are linked to how adult PLWH interpret, deal with, and contextualize their life with HIV overall – in other words, how they negotiate HIV-related stigmas but also with being PLWH and the ways this identity develops and evolves. Many PLWH have internalized the negative societal narratives surrounding HIV. It is thus clear that negative narratives of HIV spread by the media constitute one of the structural drivers of stigma that PLWH face in their everyday lives (Farrell, 2006).

One concept that could shed light on the connections between media portrayal, stigmatization, and identity formation is “cultural trauma.” According to Alexander (2004: 12),

collective identities are constructed on cultural traumas, which are “horrendous events that leave indelible marks upon group consciousness, impacting memories forever and changing collective identities in fundamental and irrevocable ways.” The rapid expansion of the HIV epidemic in the 1980s could be described as a trauma of such huge dimensions that it has become a cultural trauma that laid the foundations of the HIV community’s collective identity. This trauma could be identified by analyzing the representations of the disease in contemporary cultural productions that may constitute an important source of stigma (Hatzenbuehler, 2016; Gailiene, 2019). Along these lines, authors such as Paula Treichler (1999, p. 142) and Avram Finkelstein (2020, p. 16), inspired by in-line classic cultural studies theories and analysis, including the analysis of popular culture by Jean Baudrillard and the coding/decoding framework by Stuart Hall, have read the AIDS crisis as a cultural construction of new forms of identity. The connection between stigma and cultural trauma can be found in the history of the HIV epidemic. HIV cultural trauma could therefore be revealed through an analysis of the representations of the disease in contemporary cultural productions and the impact they had on their audiences,

As Lupton and Tulloch (1996) explain, when PLWH describe the impact of HIV on their lives, they frequently use images taken from the media. This points to an urgent need to study how the media, and specifically cinema, has portrayed HIV so as to develop negative narratives related to the virus. In the last decade, most films that depict HIV still deal with the epidemic of the 1990s, portraying troubled characters who become emotionally detached from their friends and lovers to fight the damaging consequences of HIV infection and ultimately die in a sad ending. In fact, a significant number of the films about HIV fall into the melodrama genre, with characters who die from HIV infection or get infected by their sexual partners or lovers. These representations are frequently associated with biased and stereotyped pictures of gay love and gay sexualities that serve as moral labeling that feeds HIV-related stigmas (Attinello, 2013, p. 108; Martín Hernández, 2013, p. 123).

The observations outlined above seem to suggest that the mainstream media has the power to shape, diminish, or exacerbate the spread of stigma among the affected groups in diverse social settings. In this regard, it is important to consider that fiction may play an even more important role than non-fiction in the configuration and articulation of collective identities. In the case of fiction films, the mediation between filmmaker and spectator is enacted through narrative mechanisms designed to elicit emotions that trigger stigmas (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2009; Herrmann et al., 2018). This highlights the need for further analysis of fiction films in order to understand the relationship between identity, stigma, and health. By examining film representations and framings of traumas such as the HIV epidemic, it is possible to puzzle out the political and social implications of certain readings for specific conflicts and how they are interwoven with the construction of health identities (Kelly & Millward, 2004, p. 5). This paper therefore investigates how recent and contemporary audiovisual productions are portraying HIV lives and the narra-

tive mechanisms they use to convey HIV identities to the public in general and, to PLWH in particular, in the context of the new paradigms of widespread PrEP use and undetectability as prevention. But before exploring contemporary popular representations of HIV, an overview of the history of such representations is needed, beginning with one of the first mainstream films to portray HIV: *Philadelphia*.

Philadelphia and the ecosystem of HIV narratives

Although there were a few modest film productions in the late 1980s and early 1990s that dealt explicitly with the AIDS epidemic, *Philadelphia* (Demme, 1993), written by Ron Nyswanger and directed by Jonathan Demme, was the first blockbuster to bring the AIDS crisis into general public discourse in the context of significant institutional silence on the issue. The film represented an important milestone in the cultural history of AIDS, as it transferred the debate from activist circles to the general public, generating a meaningful wave of social awareness about the epidemic. It tells the story of a gay man, Andrew Beckett (played by Tom Hanks), who asks lawyer Joe Miller (played by Denzel Washington) to help him sue his employers, who fired him after discovering he has AIDS. The film was based on two wrongful termination lawsuits. The first was one of the first AIDS discrimination cases to progress to a public hearing. It was brought by New York attorney Geoffrey Bowers against the major international law firm Baker & McKenzie. Bowers died at 33, two months after testifying in hearings that he was fired from the firm after AIDS-related Kaposi's sarcoma lesions appeared on his face, and before the verdict in his favor was reached at the end of 1987. The second was the case of Clarence B. Cain, a Philadelphia attorney who in 1990 won a \$157,000 verdict against Hyatt Legal Services, for wrongful dismissal from his position as Philadelphia office head after Hyatt learned he had HIV, and for making no effort to accommodate his illness.

The film combines details from these two trials to offer a story set in the city of Philadelphia, with two main characters that effectively merge the two AIDS patients and the two trial lawyers. *Philadelphia* (Demme, 1993), is thus in fact more of a courtroom drama than an AIDS narrative, and the role of the hero is assigned to the lawyer rather than the plaintiff/victim. In addition, as Cartwright (2016, p. 377) explains:

Nyswanger and Demme opted to script and cast the plaintiff as a gay white man from an affluent family, like the New York lawyer Bowers, and not a gay black man from a poor family, like the Philadelphia lawyer. Cain's racial identity was thus transposed from the gay victim-protagonist to the heterosexual lawyer who represents Beckett, a figure onto whom is mapped a composite of stereotypes that match characters in neither source (the homophobic black man, the third-rate ambulance-chasing lawyer).

In an effort to bring the AIDS crisis into mainstream discourse, *Philadelphia* (Demme, 1993), thus offers a narrative focusing not on the HIV-positive population, but on the success of a lawyer in court, while at the same time resorting to highly negative racial stereo-

types. By the end of the film, while Andrew Beckett dies after a long and painful illness, Joe Miller wins the lawsuit. Miller, whose character arc has turned him from a homophobic third-rate lawyer into a sympathetic individual with a successful career, is thus portrayed as the hero of the story, whose victory against corporate power leaves the victim, Andrew Beckett, with neither voice nor representation. In addition, as Douglas Crimp (2002, p. 23) points out, *Philadelphia* (Demme, 1993), tries to de-homosexualize Beckett by creating a not-so-gay good character that demoralizes the representation of AIDS.

The huge impact that *Philadelphia* (Demme, 1993) had on its audience is undeniable, and even today, many of its scenes, especially those showing Tom Hanks's skin covered by sarcomas while testifying in court, remain iconic as part of the general ecosystem of HIV narratives (Cartwright, 2016). Nevertheless, its cultural impact is highly questionable given its focus on the straight hero, with the gay victim relegated to a secondary role. The film's influence is still visible two decades later in many contemporary productions dealing with HIV, suggesting that it may have effectively held up the evolution of HIV narratives, preventing them from keeping pace with biomedical developments. Returning to the concept of "cultural trauma" explained above, the repetition of the film's main plotline in the audiovisual productions of the last decade reflects the status of the HIV epidemic as a cultural trauma that continues to shape the collective identity – and consequently, the health identity and health outcomes – of PLWH today. The aim of this research is to develop a better understanding of the manifestation of that cultural trauma forty years after the emergence of the virus by analyzing recent blockbusters dealing with HIV. It thus takes an inductive approach to determine whether the concept "cultural trauma" can be applied to representations of HIV and, if those representations are in fact outdated, to define what can be understood as the *Philadelphia Syndrome*.

Objective and methodology

The *Philadelphia Syndrome* is a concept developed inductively to explain why, despite advances in HIV treatment and the validity of undetectability as a guarantee of untransmittability, the public conversation around HIV as depicted in contemporary fiction still feeds on the trauma of the epidemic's early years. This new concept is the product of non-systematic observation of contemporary audiovisual productions related to HIV, which this article sets out to systematize by identifying common patterns in these portrayals in order to characterize the syndrome. Productions affected by the *Philadelphia Syndrome* are generally set during the worst years of the HIV epidemic and offer a simplistic and overtly stereotypical view of men who have sex with men (MSM), neglecting women living with HIV, and sustaining a largely biased and negative picture of PLWH. This study seeks to problematize how blockbuster cinema and television fiction has portrayed PLWH and, in some cases, gay sexualities in the last decade in Western countries. It also aims to define the characteristics of the *Philadelphia Syndrome*: a metaphor coined to

explain why narrative depictions of HIV have failed to evolve since the release of the blockbuster film *Philadelphia* in 1993, and a conceptual tool for exploring the social, cultural, and political articulations that currently define HIV and the reasons why HIV narratives have not kept pace with the biomedical and social developments. Consequently, this analysis surveys the asynchronous representation of the epidemic and the way images of the 1980s and the 1990s are romanticized and evoked in the 21st century to support a portrayal still shaped by a cultural trauma.

In order to achieve this objective, this study analyzes 10 films and television series released from 2013 to 2022 that explore HIV through the optic of the 1990s. It is important to note that this study is limited to fiction narratives and does not take non-fiction productions into account. The main selection criterion for these films is that they must have been blockbusters or, in the case of series, that have enjoyed considerable domestic success within the country where they were produced or primarily released. Nevertheless, it is necessary to acknowledge that it is not easy to define what a blockbuster is. According to Cox (2014), a blockbuster is a media production created with a huge budget to appeal to a mass audience and gain big revenues for the producers. However, as video on demand (VOD) platforms have amplified their penetration into households, this definition may no longer tell us which productions receive the highest levels of audience engagement (Rubin et al., 2022) or what the key factors are for a film to be widely consumed. Beyond their economic dimension, in cultural terms, blockbusters have increasingly become considered artifacts that contribute to the construction and modeling of identities, and their analysis may offer important insights into how we perceive and define our world. Indeed, much of our shared understanding of the world is shaped by cultural assets that are predominantly English-language productions based on classical narrative paradigms and clichés (van Ginneken, 2007, p. 43).

The productions selected were found in the IMDb database (www.imdb.com) using the keywords “AIDS” and “HIV” (241 titles), then filtered with the timeframe 2013–2022 (82 titles), and eliminating short films, documentaries, and animation (leaving 22 titles). Of these 22 films, only those defined as blockbusters were selected according to criteria such as box office returns for films or domestic performance for fiction series. The first indicator defines the success of films in economic terms; the second measures the success of fiction series in domestic markets, comparing them with other fiction series within the same genre released in the same country and year. Box office data are obtained from databases such as IMDb and Box Office Mojo (www.boxofficemojo.com). In the case of domestic performance, data are obtained from Parrot Analytics (www.parrotanalytics.com). Box office success is defined as more than 1 million euros in box office returns, and domestic performance success as being higher than 70%. Table 1 summarizes the 10 productions selected, indicating their economic and cultural success, as well as identifying the characters living with HIV, their role in the film, and their gender. The narrative time

in which the story is located is also shown, although it is not a criterion for exclusion, as the final sample includes films set in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as in current times.

Table 1: List of films and fiction series analyzed and selection criteria defined. For each production, the year and country of production is given, as well as the length, box office (for films) and domestic performance (for fiction series). Regarding the plot, the decade in which the story is set, the HIV+ characters, their roles in the story, and their genders are shown.

Name	Year of production	Country	Box office/ Domestic performance	Length (in min.)	Time Story	HIV+ character	Role	Gender
<i>Dallas Buyers Club</i>	2013	US	55.7 M\$	117	Late 1980s	Ron Woodroof and Rayon	Main and secondary	Male and Female (trans)
<i>Pride</i>	2014	UK	16.7 M\$	119	1990s	Mark Ashton and Jonathan Blake	Main and Secondary	Male
<i>El Acompañante</i>	2015	Cuba	1.01M€	104	2000s	Daniel	Main	Male
<i>Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau</i>	2017	France	1.4M\$	97	2010s	Théo	Main	Male
<i>120 battement par minute</i>	2017	France	7.7 M\$	143	1990s	Jeremy, Sean and Thibault	Main and Secondary	All Male
<i>Estiu 1993</i>	2017	Spain	2 M\$	97	1990s	Frida's parents	Absent	Male and Female
<i>Bohemian Rhapsody</i>	2018	UK	910.8 M\$	134	1990s	Freddy Mercury	Main	Male
<i>Élite, season 1</i>	2018	Spain	93.9%	Approx. 60 per episode	2010s	Marina	Secondary	Female
<i>Pose, season 2</i>	2019	US	98.7%	Approx. 60 per episode	1990s	Ricky, Blanca, Pray Tell	Secondary and Main	Male and Female (trans)
<i>It's a Sin, season 1</i>	2021	UK	72.1%	Approx. 50 per episode	1990s	Colin and Ritchie	Main	Male

The method used to analyze these productions was a combination of meta-analysis of other authors' readings of these films and a close reading, a classical method in liter-

ary studies that has been used with very different frameworks, including structuralism, reader-response criticism, New Historicism, feminist criticism, deconstruction, cultural studies, ideology critique, queer theory, and others (Smith, 2016). This technique is a method widely applied within cultural studies in the context of contemporary popular culture (e.g., Brummett, 2019, p. 10; Araüna et al., 2018; Fedele & Masanet, 2021) and it has been also applied to audiovisual productions that are analyzed as texts (Masanet et al., 2022). Close reading involves a process of inductive/deductive analysis. In this study, the whole film or the season studied in each fiction series has been analyzed after a single viewing, including taking notes. Each analysis has been organized into three areas: (i) the context (historical-social setting, environments, and spaces); (ii) the storytelling (plots, characters, actions, and time structure, paying special attention to the most important narrative threads in the story, to how the main characters are identified and their actions, their objectives, and the plot resolutions); and (iii) the content and its meaning (themes, problems, and subjects, detecting the main lines of conflict in relation to the ideological code that gives coherence to the text and places it in a certain discourse). Once all ten films and fiction series were viewed and analyzed based on these three dimensions, the notes were reviewed with reference to the theoretical background and previous studies of HIV narrative, melodrama, and nostalgia, as well as feminist and queer theory. Finally, data and discussions were grouped into the three main categories of analysis that would ultimately be identified as defining the *Philadelphia Syndrome*: outdated representations and nostalgia; male sexualities; and female absence.

Results and discussion

Blockbusters prefer nostalgia: Outdated representations and absent undetectability

One of the first and most remarkable observations to emerge from the analysis of the films is that most of the narratives are set in the 1990s, especially of the films with the biggest box-office returns. Specifically, all of the films that earned more than 2 million US dollars were set in the 1980s or 1990s. *Dallas Buyers Club* (Vallée, 2013) and *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Singer, 2018) are the two most successful HIV-related films of the last decade, with earnings of 55.7 and 910 million US dollars, respectively. The first tells the story of Ron Woodroof, a straight man diagnosed with AIDS in the late 1980s who, after discovering that a physician based in Mexico can prescribe him with dideoxycytidine (ddC) and peptide T (drugs that were not yet approved by the FDA in the US), establishes a buyers club to import the drugs. Together with Rayon, an HIV-positive transgender woman addicted to cocaine, he provides the drugs to a group of members of the club while he files a lawsuit against the FDA. This film is considered an accurate depiction of HIV drug research in the 1980s (de Haan-Bochs et al., 2015), but it also constitutes meaningful evidence that HIV narratives in the 2010s were still stuck in the 1980s.

On the other hand, *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Singer, 2018), directed by Bryan Singer, is a biopic on the life of Freddy Mercury, the lead singer of the rock band *Queen*. The film made more than 900 million euros at the box office and Rami Malek won the BAFTA and the Oscar for best actor for his performance as Mercury. Again, the story is set mainly in the 1980s, beginning with the band's formation in 1970s and concluding with the Live Aid concert at Wembley Stadium in July 1985. The film links the singer's tragic fate to his hedonistic lifestyle, attributing his HIV infection to his gay promiscuity (an association that was widely criticized by film reviewers). Mercury's brilliant performance at Live Aid and his tragic end place the narrative accent on the reaction to the death of this music icon in the early 1990s, just before the opening of the Barcelona Olympic Games for which he had composed the anthem together with opera soprano Montserrat Caballé.

Both films were commercial and critical successes. And even though they were produced in the last ten years, when HIV treatments were very advanced and even the role of undetectability had been demonstrated, both stories are set in the 1980s. But these were not the only films set in those early years of the AIDS epidemic. Other films that were less commercially successful but had a big impact in the past decade deal with the same period. These include *Pride* (Warchus, 2014), written by Stephen Beresford and directed by Matthew Warchus, which tells the story of the "Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners" (LGSM) movement, an alliance of LGBT rights activists who decided to join the miner's struggle that began with a general strike in 1984 against the policies of the Thatcher government. LGSM founder Mark Ashton is depicted as a fervent activist who realizes that the police have stopped persecuting the gay movement because their attention is focused on the miners' protests. In a quest for allies, Ashton manages to convince the members of his movement to join the miners, helping them to raise funds and even confronting the police with their heavy-handed tactics against the demonstrators. This wins them the friendship and trust of the miners, who will subsequently march in London's Gay Pride parade the following year in support of their comrades in LGSM. The film portrays Jonathan Blake, the first gay man diagnosed with HIV in London, and by the end of the film, we know that Ashton has also contracted the virus, but there is no dramatic time or space to develop his personal story of living with AIDS. In this sense, the HIV narrative is mainly focused on a secondary character.

Finally, among English-language productions, we also find two highly successful fiction series that offer the same outdated representation discussed above. *Pose* (Murphy et al, 2019), created by Ryan Murphy, is a fiction series about New York City's Ballroom Scene, an LGBTQ subculture in the African-American and Latino communities in the 1980s and 1990s. Especially in its second season, it represents queer and trans people of color living with HIV/AIDS at the height of the crisis in 1987. Two of its main characters, Bianca and Pray Tell, who are very important in the first season but whose HIV status is unknown, are discovered to be HIV-positive when a secondary character, Ricky, is diagnosed with the virus. All of a sudden, the second season is framed as an HIV narrative set in the 1980s

and, as Laura Stamm (2020) suggests, “like many other mainstream media representations, *Pose* (Murphy et al, 2019) suggests that the AIDS crisis ended in 1995, that it belongs to a closed American past.” It is thus another production that draws on the nostalgia that feeds the HIV cultural trauma in the 2020s, while ignoring the fact that the cultural construction of HIV identities is a dynamic process that continues in the present.

The second example is the British fiction series *It's a Sin* (Davies and Shindler, 2021), produced in 2021. A mini-series comprising five episodes, it tells the story of a group of friends who move to London in 1981, following their lives there up to 1991. All five episodes were released to Channel 4's online streaming service, where the series was viewed in its entirety more than 6.5 million times, making it the most binge-watched show ever streamed on the platform (Harrison, 2022). *It's a Sin* (Davies and Shindler, 2021) has been applauded for its historical accuracy in representing the first cases of HIV when it could still not be diagnosed (Burke, 2021). Nevertheless, it is another blockbuster production produced in the 2020s that turns back to the past and thus fails to reflect current biomedical and social conditions of the virus, feeding instead on melancholia and nostalgia. When comparing *Pose* (Murphy et al, 2019) to *It's a Sin* (Davies and Shindler, 2021), Gabriel Duckels (2022) suggests that both are landmark examples of a new kind of AIDS melodrama, a genre of tear-jerking, mass-market AIDS narratives that have found renewed popularity due to investment in productions of queer stories of AIDS in the United Kingdom and the United States. According to the author, “if melodrama is associated with nostalgia for a time ‘before’ – a fantasy of a home always already lost – then the pre-antiretroviral, pre-PrEP, pre-gentrification, and pre-Internet settings of *It's a Sin* (Davies and Shindler, 2021) and *Pose* (Murphy et al, 2019) function as romantic spaces of innocence and embodiment.” Based on this argument, not only these fiction series, but also the rest of the blockbuster films analyzed here, form part of a nostalgic movement that is normalizing and accumulating outdated narratives that are the product of a cultural trauma still yet to be overcome.

Outside the English-speaking world, which plays a big role in the construction of shared narratives that generate and perpetuate cultural traumas, we also find a significant number of films about HIV produced in the last decade that take us back to the 1980s and 1990s. In 2017, two European films with HIV-related stories were released. *120 battements par minute [BPM (Beats per Minute)]* (Campillo, 2017), directed by Robin Campillo, tells the story of a group of ACT UP activists in Paris in the early 1990s and their direct action protests against politicians and pharmaceutical companies. The film gradually shifts from the political storyline of ACT UP's actions to the personal stories of ACT UP members, especially Sean, the film's main character and the leader of the ACT UP Parisian group, who is HIV-positive, and his lover, Nathan, who is HIV-negative. The film was awarded the Grand Prix at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival and several César awards. It has also been lauded for historicizing former anti-AIDS activists' experiences and memories and making them accessible to a broader audience beyond academic communities (Breu,

2018). The film might also reflect Monica Pearl's (2012, p. 32) suggestion that AIDS fiction may articulate mourning and melancholia in gay communities and thus portray HIV lives as redemptive of the traumatic past. But, again, it is a nostalgic story produced in the past few years yet set in the 1990s.

Also in 2017, the film *Estiu 1993* [*Summer 1993*] (Simón, 2017) was released in Spain. Directed by Carla Simón, it tells the story of Frida, a little girl who goes to live with her uncle and family after her mother dies from AIDS in 1993 (her father will also die from the disease a short time later). The film opens with the caption, "For my mother, Neus", articulating the film's autobiographical function as a recreation of Simón's own childhood and the loss of her parents from AIDS due to drug abuse when she was six (Davis, 2020). *Estiu 1993* (Simón, 2017) is one of the few examples in which an HIV narrative is told from a female perspective, although the female victim is absent. The role of female characters and the absence of female narrative perspectives of HIV is discussed below. *Estiu 1993* (Simón, 2017) offers still more evidence of the prevalence of outdated representations of HIV in contemporary cinema that characterizes the *Philadelphia Syndrome*.

Male sexualities: Straight heroes and gay clichés

As explained in the introduction, *Philadelphia* has been considered by some authors as a courtroom drama instead of an AIDS narrative, given the focus placed on the trial and thus on the lawyer, Joe Miller. According to Cartwright (2016), *Philadelphia* assigns the role of the hero to the straight character who wins the case, while relegating Andrew Beckett, the gay AIDS victim who should be at the center of the story, to a secondary role as a victim at the narrative service of the hero. This character dynamic is repeated in many of the films and fiction series analyzed in this article. For instance, *Dallas Buyers Club* (Vallée, 2013) has been criticized for its overtly heterosexual perspective (as Ron, the main character, is constantly reminding us of his heterosexuality), and especially for the narrative treatment of transgender women represented by Rayon (Ford, 2016; Copier & Steinbock, 2018). In these respects, the film aligns with *Philadelphia* in centering the narrative importance on the straight character and relegating the queer character to a secondary role as a victim who is helped and guided by the straight hero.

In the case of *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Singer, 2018), the film's huge commercial success did not prevent it from being criticized for its treatment of the singer's sexuality and its slanted view of the HIV epidemic. As McCleerey suggests (2019, p. 4), "the movie is intriguing on one level: its engagement with recent discourse on same-sex relationships in relation to heterosexual relationships, heteronormativity in particular." The new heteronormal is shown in the film in the constant conflict between Freddy Mercury's hedonistic lifestyle with other men and the constant reminder of the possibility of returning to normalcy represented by Mary, Freddy's ex-wife. In this way, although it does not explicitly portray Mercury's sexual identity, the film locates the beginning of the singer's fall at the same point as the beginning of his relationships with men, while Mary is depicted as

his salvation. The film thus locates salvation in a would-be heterosexual way of life, while placing the blame for the protagonist's infection on his gay-but-not-very-gay sexuality.

In these two examples, the two most commercially successful HIV narratives of the last decade, certain patterns from *Philadelphia* are clearly repeated. Apart from the timeframe, both *Dallas Buyers Club* (Vallée, 2013) and *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Singer, 2018) place the narrative focus on a heterosexual man (Ron Woodroof in *Dallas Buyers Club*) or an undefined figure whose potential return to heterosexuality is portrayed as a salvation (Freddie Mercury in *Bohemian Rhapsody*). This heteronormative pattern is repeated in many of the films and series already analyzed. As Gabriel Duckels (2022) observes with reference to *It's a Sin* (Davies and Shindler, 2021):

If gay male sex is represented excessively this is only to register it as an excess, framed through the laughingly incredulous but then eventually judgmental gaze of implied-straight female best friend Jill, who functions as a sort of “fag-hag” cypher for heterosexual compassion.

Evidence of this AIDS-phobic and homophobic ideology can be found in the final scene, when Ritchie, the main character, lies dying of AIDS in hospital, wondering aloud “how many boys he killed” after impulsive condomless sex.

Similar readings can be offered of the independent Cuban film *El Acompañante* [*The Companion*] (Giroud, 2016) directed by Pavel Giroud, and official submission of Cuba for the “Best Foreign Language Film” category of the 89th Academy Awards in 2017. The film tells the story of Horacio Romero, a successful Cuban boxer, who tests positive for doping. As punishment, he is sent to Los Cocos, a military sanatorium where HIV patients are confined, with permission to leave only once a week under the surveillance of so-called “companions.” Horacio is assigned as a companion to Daniel, one of the most difficult patients. Both characters are heterosexual men who fall for the same woman. In the film, gay patients are depicted as the ones who should be kept separate, and Daniel explains to Horacio that they are placed in a different hall so that they do not mix with the rest.

One film not yet examined but that deserves a discussion at this point is *Theo et Hugo dans le même bateau* [*Paris 05: 59: Theo & Hugo*] (Ducastel and Martineau, 2016), a French film directed by Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau. This film tells the story of two lovers, Theo and Hugo, who meet at a sex club called *L'Impact* in central Paris. The film begins with an explicit group sex scene lasting more than twenty minutes, in which Theo and Hugo meet in a poorly lit place crowded with naked men, and fall in love. From the outset, this suggests that the film takes a promiscuous view of gay love (Çakirlar & Needham, 2019). The lovers' romance unfolds amidst the bodies of the other men, and overwhelmed by excitement, the two make love without using condoms. Theo is HIV-positive, takes medication, and has an undetectable viral load; however, when he confesses this to Hugo, the latter is overcome with doubt and fear. It is 4:27 a.m., and the two decide to leave the club and take a long bike ride through Paris to get to know each other better.

The film *Theo et Hugo dans le même bateau* (Ducastel and Martineau, 2016) does not dwell on Hugo's doubts or on Theo's explanations. Instead, the relaxed conversation between the lovers gradually begins to dissolve the negative narratives on which Hugo has constructed his imaginary of HIV, forcing him to confront his internalized stigma. The lovers do not succumb to the simplistic dualism of the patronizing view of the HIV epidemic in the 1990s, nor do they wallow in a pain they haven't experienced to offer an outdated portrayal of HIV. However, wanting to reassure Hugo, Theo decides to accompany him to a hospital to receive post-exposure treatment, where the doctor who attends them adopts a negative, critical stance towards them. Theo has an undetectable viral load, which means it is non-communicable and cannot be transmitted to Hugo. But the doctor does not explain this, instead choosing to reproach the lovers, especially Theo, for their careless attitudes. As in the previous examples, gay sexuality in this film is aligned with promiscuity, and then blamed for the transmission of the virus, using the straight doctor as a moral reference to condemn the lovers.

Silent and dead-but-not-gone: Women and HIV explained from the outside

Philadelphia is a film about an HIV-positive man who has been discriminated against, and a male lawyer who defends him. Most of the films analyzed are about men, while HIV-positive women are almost entirely absent. Nevertheless, according to UNAIDS, 54% of all people living with HIV in the world in 2021 were women or girls. In Europe, this figure falls to 25%, meaning that women represent a quarter of all new HIV infections (UNAIDS, 2022). However, women living with HIV are all but absent from mainstream narratives, which implies that their identity formation is not being mediatized and is thus neither constructed nor contested. This makes HIV narratives yet another area in which women's representation is lagging far behind.

There are very few female characters living with HIV in the cases studied here, and all of them are in secondary roles. Two transgender women have already been mentioned: Rayon in *Dallas Buyers Club* (Vallée, 2013), and Bianca in *Pose* (Murphy et al, 2019). Rayon is portrayed by Jared Leto, who won an Oscar for his performance. As Ford (2016) points out, in his acceptance speech, Leto did not thank or acknowledge the transgender community for helping him with his development of the character, who reflects a number of stereotypes and negative tropes associated with transgender people and transwomen in particular, being depicted as a socially ostracized and marginalized person. In the case of *Pose* (Murphy et al, 2019), we discover that both Bianca and Pray Tell are living with HIV when the young boy Ricky is diagnosed. Once this is revealed, HIV becomes only important in Pray Tell's dramatic arc, while Bianca is relegated to the role of care-giver to both Ricky and Pray Tell, a task stereotypically assigned to the female in classical narratives.

In the case of the only two cis-women present in the sample analyzed, both belong to the dead-but-not-gone woman archetype. According to Dillman (2014, p. 26), dead-but-not-gone girls are the bodies of dead women that appear at the beginning of the story

and become the starting point of the narrative. They are dead girls who, in one way or another (through narrative and/or aesthetic resources), interact with living characters who look to the past and defend them or speak on their behalf. In *Estiu 1993* (Simón, 2017), Frida moves in with her Uncle Esteve and her Aunt Marga after her mother, Neus, and her father, whose name is never revealed, die from AIDS. Neus is Esteve's sister, and we only know about her through her brother's voice. Neus is already dead when the story begins, and she never speaks for herself. It is only through her brother, while he takes care of Frida, that Neus is acknowledged.

The other case of a dead-but-not-gone girl is one of the secondary characters in the only fiction series not yet analyzed. In its first season, *Élite* (Montero et al 2018), created by Carlos Montero, tells the story of three working-class friends (Samuel, Nadia, and Christian) who, after their school building collapses, are offered scholarships to Las Encinas, the most exclusive private school in Spain. As the school year progresses, and they interact with the wealthy students, they wrestle with resentment, envy, and sexual attraction. Through a series of flash-forward scenes of police interrogations, the audience is shown stories of the characters' relationships that lead to the murder of one of their schoolmates: Marina. From the beginning of season one, we know that Marina is living with HIV and that her viral load is undetectable. She even has unprotected sexual relationships with Nano, and it is made clear in the story that having an undetectable viral load means that she cannot transmit the virus—the only case out of the ten productions analyzed where this fact is properly explained (Donstrup, 2022). However, Marina is already dead in the timeframe of the series, so she is not able to explain herself. We only know about her life through the testimonies of her schoolmates. In addition, at the end of the season, we discover that Marina has been murdered by a blow to the head, revealed in an iconic scene where her head is covered in her own blood: blood that symbolically contains the virus which, despite her undetectable viral load, has led to her tragic death.

Conclusion: The *Philadelphia Syndrome*

The aim of this study has been to define what can be referred to as the *Philadelphia Syndrome*, a metaphor used to explain why narrative representations of HIV have failed to evolve since the release of the blockbuster film *Philadelphia* in 1993. If the HIV epidemic is understood as a cultural trauma in the terms outlined by Jeffrey Alexander (2004, p. 24), the *Philadelphia Syndrome* offers a conceptual tool for exploring the social, cultural, and political articulations through which HIV is currently understood and the reasons why HIV narratives have not kept pace with biomedical and social developments. The insurmountable nature of this trauma is reflected in the cultural productions of the last decade. As the current analysis has shown, HIV narratives in the 2010s and 2020s are characterized by a constant return to the 1980s and 1990s in narratives marked by nostalgia and melodrama, the repetition of clichés of gay sexualities, the constant positioning of

straight men as heroes and saviors of gay victims, and the patronizing silencing of women with HIV. These are the main characteristics that define the new concept of the *Philadelphia Syndrome*.

It must be acknowledged, however, that more work needs to be done to develop and refine the cultural dimensions of this new concept. In this sense, future studies should explore other, less prominent fiction films that have dealt with HIV in the last decade. Such studies could include the Finnish film *Tom of Finland* (2017), for example, which could be analyzed from the perspective of an archeology of the beginning of the epidemic in the 1970s. In a similar vein, the Spanish fiction series *Merlí Sapere Aude* (Montánchez, 2020) portrays Pol, a bisexual man who contracts HIV in the second season. How the narrative explores his sexuality and how he deals with the diagnosis should be further analyzed to explore whether it might constitute an alternative that moves beyond the outdated representations analyzed in this study.

This study is aligned with the objective set forth by UNAIDS to engage in further research to fight HIV and the stigma associated with it (UNAIDS, 2022). By understanding how stigmas are generated and propagated through the media, we can better identify the social factors that are hindering the quality of life for those living with HIV. In addition, all the films analyzed here contain thought-provoking material that could be used to support debates and discussions about HIV and sexual health in schools and universities. As Masanet and Dehaens (2019) suggest, we should take advantage of the critical interplay that fiction can provide to foster critical debates in classrooms and help in the fight against discrimination and the promotion of sexual and reproductive rights and sexual education.

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