

**Re-imagining HIV/AIDS: Tracing Evolving HIV/AIDS Discourses from Crisis to PrEP
Cinema**

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As pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) was introduced to pharmacological markets in 2012, a resurgence of HIV/AIDS representation in cinema occurred, beginning with the release of Jean-Marc Vallée's *Dallas Buyers Club*. Following its commercial and critical success, an increasing number of films and visual narratives depicting HIV/AIDS were and continue to be produced, their production based mainly in the anglophone world and France. These films' engagement with HIV/AIDS calls into question both mainstream and gay-male communities' relationship with HIV/AIDS, as shifting medical landscapes – the 1996 introduction of triple therapies which made HIV a manageable illness, the 2005 recommendation for broader usage of post-exposure prophylaxis, the 2012 introduction of PrEP, the 2016 birth of the Undetectable = Untransmittable (U=U) campaign, among other advances, mostly related to PrEP – have radically altered the ways in which gay male communities interact with and experience HIV/AIDS individually and community-wide. This paper aims to articulate the ways in which these medical, social, and community paradigm shifts manifest in contemporary HIV/AIDS visual narratives through the utilization of a historical framework which compares early HIV/AIDS visual narratives with contemporary ones. Among the films and visual narratives explored include *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* (Ducastel and Martineau 2016), *120 battements par minute* (Campillo 2017), and *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral* (Praunheim 1987). These comparisons function to (1) explore constructions and treatment of monogamy and promiscuity within gay-male sexual networks, and (2) understand the influence of medical

paradigms on the concept of Safer Sex and sexual risk. Together, these considerations offer a way to reassess HIV/AIDS genre cinema and elucidate the current milieu in which HIV/AIDS discourses are situated.

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1.0 Introduction: Seeing HIV/AIDS on Screen

How do we navigate a sexual culture in which a daily-taken pill threatens to replace the primacy of the condom? How unstable is a homonormativity predicated on respectability and bourgeois life when the practice of cruising finds itself revitalized in an age of digital networking? What is left to be said about AIDS when industrialized nations have transformed HIV into a chronic and untransmittable illness? These questions, and all the questions swirling around the practice of gay sex, whether in the bedroom or in the backroom, drive this project forward. As the HIV/AIDS crisis continues to transform, diminish, and seem at times on the verge of being completely submerged in the waters of the past, re-imagining what AIDS means and how it impacts gay men and their communities becomes ever more necessary.

This project aims to grapple with these questions through a close examination of gay cinema and the events, histories, and developments in which it has been produced. Rather than a series of close readings for the sake of close readings, this project opens the close reading up to the world which enables it – one cannot read for AIDS without recognizing the face of it or without being able to feel for its pulse. Among the first pulses this project considers is the places in which contemporary HIV/AIDS cinema is filmed and then exported to a global gay audience. Contemporary cinematic productions representing HIV/AIDS transcend the barriers of national cinemas, enabled by modern streaming services and a cosmopolitan gay male community which generates a rich transatlantic discourse on the subject of AIDS in the 21st century.

While recognizing the transnational reach on contemporary HIV/AIDS cinema, this project focuses on films produced in France, particularly Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau's *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* (2016) and Robin Campillo's *120 BPM* (2017), as well as Rosa von

Praunheim's German film *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral* (1986). The choice of these films to make up the corpus of this project is precise.

Regarding the French component, these films were produced after pre-exposure prophylaxis was made available in the United States as well as in Europe, and these films concern themselves with pharmacological innovations and developments which have directly impacted gay male communities' relationship with HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* in particular represents public sex and spaces which facilitate it – in the film's case, the sex club. This representation is of particular importance due to this project's explicit investment in the politics of space in relation to HIV/AIDS and the question of monogamy and promiscuity.

Regarding the German component, the utilization of Praunheim's film is one of the earliest critical representations of HIV/AIDS in cinema, and its plot, particularly its depictions of activism and the bathhouse setting, resonates with both *120 BPM* and *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*. This film also functions as a touchstone from which this project seeks to understand historical representations of HIV/AIDS. As such, *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral* is placed into dialogue with contemporary cinema to elucidate shifts in discourse and representation. \

While these films compose the core of this project, it is of importance to note that other areas of the world continue to produce HIV/AIDS media, a vast majority of it coming out of the United States through the medium of television. However, the scope of this project is limited to cinema and the unique stories told through it. This is not to say that the contributions of television are not important to contemporary discourses surrounding HIV/AIDS; series such as Ryan Murphy's *Pose* (2018-2021) and *It's a Sin* (2021) have been instrumental in revitalizing conversations in the public sphere. However, whereas these series were heavily invested in developing character arcs and capturing audience attention through narrative continuation, the

films in which I am interested relay stories and histories on a smaller temporal scale and are less interested in a certain primacy of the character as seen in television.

Returning to the scope of this project, prior to the close readings of *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*, *120 BPM*, and *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral*, this project devotes four sections to contextualizing the films. Section 2.0 is a literature review which traces the evolving scholarship on HIV/AIDS into the contemporary period and that research which directly concerns itself with the films at the core of this project. Section 3.0 is an overview of the development of gay representation in visual media in the 20th century, followed by a section 4.0 which recounts major shifts in the medical sphere, gay social life, and cinematic representation of AIDS in the 21st century.

Section 4.0 functions as foundational work within this project, enabling most profoundly the close readings of it. It focuses on the historical contours of HIV/AIDS visual narratives, tracing their development from the end of New Queer Cinema onwards: from an HIV/AIDS-Crisis Cinema to a PrEP Cinema. This trajectory is further braided with the development of medical interventions on HIV, with specific attention given to the introduction of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), the widening of access to post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), and the medical consensus that effective treatment for HIV prevents future transmission (Undetectable = Untransmittable, or U=U). The dual development of HIV/AIDS cinema and medical interventions are then reinforced by a discussion of gay male sexual networks and the platforms that enable them, tracing their development in response to medical interventions and acting as a sounding-board for understanding shifting public discourses that occur(ed) in gay male sexual networks. In its totality, the third section offers a strong base from which one can launch any inquiry on contemporary HIV/AIDS.

After the section 4.0, section 5.0 turns towards the films which concern this project, and explores the reception of the two films at the core of this project via film reviews, which are then juxtaposed against the reception of Rose von Praunheim's 1986 *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral*. Through *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral*, one can work to make comparison between the different historically predicated representations of space as well as practices which still exist in the second decade of the 21st century.

Following this project's lengthy contextualizing work, we turn towards close readings of *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* and *120 BPM*. These readings are divided into two sections, the first of which (6.0) also incorporates a reading of *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral*. Section 6.0 concerns itself with the questions of monogamy and its manifestations in both contemporary and HIV/AIDS-crisis cinema. Through the second section, the role of the bathhouse/sex club (i.e. public sex spaces) in gay male sexual networks is interrogated, with questions of their capacity to facilitate relationship- and community-building at the fore. This section furthermore explores contemporary HIV/AIDS cinema's attachment to monogamy as a relational standard and seeks to reconcile a monogamous ideal with the prevalence of promiscuity and non-monogamy within sexual networks and the spaces that host them. Finally, the second section seeks to understand sexual sociability within public sex spaces – as it is understood in the films that portray them – in light of questions of monogamy and promiscuity by analyzing manifestations of cruising among other forms of social-sexual behaviors. Together, these considerations are synthesized and situated within a homonormative ethic, relating back to post-HIV/AIDS crisis idealization of monogamy and demands for marriage within a monogamous framework.

Section 7.0 underscores the political work that contemporary HIV/AIDS cinema does in the sphere of Safer Sex and risk reduction. The condom as prophylaxis manifests cinematically as

the primary and necessary tool within Safer Sex discourses, putting the latex-oriented risk reductive labor of the films in tension with other discourses playing out outside of diegetic space which privileges and advocates for medical and drug-oriented forms of prophylaxis. This section teases out the ubiquity of the condom and its relationship with HIV in both historical and contemporary contexts. It furthermore illustrates how contemporary HIV/AIDS cinema seeks to create sexual scripts, both in public sex spaces as well as private spaces, such as the bedroom.

Together, these sections – from contextualization to close readings – trace evolving representations of the HIV/AIDS genre in cinema. These generic changes, often tied to paradigm-shifting medical innovations and their uptake by gay male communities, are articulated and situated within a larger history of HIV/AIDS and its representations. Through this project, the a new shift in the HIV/AIDS genre manifests through *120 BPM* and *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* and the unique considerations and representations produced through those films. Specifically, this genre shift prioritizes (1) representing AIDS as a product of the past (and thus something to remember/reflect on), (2) a renegotiation of monogamy and promiscuity in a post-AIDS milieu, and (3) a recommitment to Safer Sex and risk reductive strategies. These prioritizations function to remake the genre in a fashion which reflects contemporary discourses surrounding HIV/AIDS since the introduction of pre-exposure prophylaxis.

2.0 Literature Review: From Metaphor Onwards

This project is part of a larger tradition of HIV/AIDS scholarship, particularly the scholarship that concern itself with the perception of HIV/AIDS and its impacts socially and culturally on communities. What informs this project specifically is that scholarship which has grappled with and continues to grapple with making sense of HIV/AIDS, defining AIDS in a way that resists marginalization and discrimination, and what it means to live in communities defined by (or in opposition to) HIV and AIDS. This section traces this scholarship on HIV/AIDS into the 21st century, beginning broadly in its scope, until narrowing considerably in order to focus on scholarship that utilizes the primary texts that this project is also concerned with.

2.1 AIDS as Metaphor Analysis

As alluded to, the nature of AIDS was at the heart of early HIV/AIDS scholarship, directing its efforts towards AIDS and its manifestations (AIDS being a condition which visibly marks a subject, whereas HIV may not visibly affect the body). Scholars such as Susan Sontag were greatly invested in communities that operated as authorities on AIDS and how these authorities would portray and come to articulate AIDS to the public and amongst themselves. Sontag's work *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, greatly influenced by her previous scholarship on illness and metaphor more generally, argued in 1989 that, "strictly speaking, AIDS—acquired immune deficiency syndrome—is not the name of an illness at all," yet the condition, "...lends itself to being regarded as one" (16). Her work focuses on AIDS as condition as illness, and the myriad of ways it is represented

and made to be understood by the public. Specifically, Sontag relates AIDS to cancer and syphilis and the thinking that surrounds them, a relation which is quoted at length:

Thinking of syphilis as a punishment for an individual's transgression was for a long time, virtually until the disease became easily curable, not really distinct from regarding it as retribution for the licentiousness of a community-as with AIDS now, in the rich industrial countries. In contrast to cancer, understood in a modern way as a disease incurred by (and revealing of) individuals, AIDS is understood in a premodern way, as a disease incurred by people both as individuals and as members of a 'risk group'-that neutral-sounding, bureaucratic category which also revives the archaic idea of a tainted community that illness has judged. (46)

While Sontag poignantly makes visible the premodern thinking which enables representations of AIDS, she is clear to point out later in her text that, "the way in which the illness is such a perfect repository for people's most general fears about the future to some extent renders irrelevant the predictable efforts to pin the disease on a deviant group or a dark continent" (92). She continues strengthening the irrelevance by arguing that "AIDS is one of the dystopian harbingers of the global village, that future which is already here and always before us, which no one know how to refuse" (93).

Sontag's work – a work which has been deeply influential in the thinking that generated this project, particularly in terms of exploring the meaning of AIDS and its representations – ends by targeting stigma, fear, and metaphorization of AIDS, a strike against many of the meanings assigned to AIDS:

The age-old, seemingly inexorable process whereby diseases acquire meanings (by coming to stand for the deepest fears) and inflict stigma is always worth challenging, and it does

seem to have more limited credibility in the modern world, among people willing to be modern-the process is under surveillance now. With this illness, one that elicits so much guilt and shame, the effort to detach it from these meanings, these metaphors, seems particularly liberating, even consoling. But the metaphors cannot be distanced just by abstaining from them. They have to be exposed, criticized, belabored, used up. (94)

Sontag's scholarship from 1989 shares rhythms and tempos – with a productive dissonance that expands discursive capacities – with her contemporary Paula A. Treichler, whose 1987 article “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification,” also concerns itself with questions of the meaning of AIDS.

Treichler when framing her article and its importance, gestures towards Sontag and her earlier work on illness and metaphor, preemptively critiques Sontag's 1989 assertion that illness metaphors “have to be exposed, criticized, belabored, used up” (94). As Treichler argues, “no matter how much we may desire, with Susan Sontag, to resist treating illness as metaphor, illness *is* metaphor, and this semantic work – this effort to ‘make sense of’ AIDS – has to be done” (34). Evidence of the necessity of this work is Treichler understanding of AIDS as “...a nexus where multiple meanings, stories, and discourses intersect and overlap, reinforce, and subvert one another” expanding the capacity for AIDS to be read *outside of* purely institutional or authoritarian contexts, even as she reads biomedical discourses for meaning of AIDS (42). It is important, however, to note that Treichler places particular importance on the “male homosexual body” as central to these “multiple meanings,” thus recognizing the diseases inextricable relationship with gay men and their communities (42).

Treichler's recognition of these multiple meanings and the capacity for AIDS to mean anything that is generated out of discourses around it serve to empower this project in reading

AIDS in texts that have appeared in the period after post-exposure prophylaxis was made accessible to gay male sexual networks, thus destabilizing the importance of the “male homosexual body” (42) – if gay men stop dying from AIDS (a project already accomplished amongst middle class and higher gay men within the Global North) and go even further to *stop transmitting HIV* (a project underway), then what new meanings are there for AIDS? This destabilization is one that will not be limited by discourses; meaning may continue to proliferate around AIDS. This proliferation is noted by Treichler, who notes that “we inherit a series of discursive dichotomies; the discourse of AIDS attaches itself to these other systems of difference and plays itself out...” (63). Re-noted here some of those dichotomies (of which there are many) that resonate with this project and its readings: “self and not-self... active and passive, guilty and innocent, perpetrator and victim... love and death, sex and death... doctor and patient, expert and patient, doctor and expert...” and “...safe sex and bad sex, safe sex and good sex” (64). These dichotomies live on in this project, if only as pulses deep in its background, and lucidly, Treichler ends “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification” by arguing that, “we need to understand that AIDS is and will remain a provisional and deeply problematic signifier,” an argument which still holds firmly in the second decade of the 21st century. In fact, at the tail-end of the 20th, Treichler writes in “AIDS, HIV, and the Cultural Construction of Reality” of *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic* that “although it is useful to characterize AIDS and HIV as cultural constructions, this by no means liberates us from taking responsibility for the existence of a real, material world and analyzing its intersection with our conceptions and interventions” (175).

A large swath of other early HIV/AIDS scholarship follows these two scholars, Treichler and Sontag – this scholarship is preoccupied with finding, defining, resisting, and articulating meanings of AIDS. Douglas Crimp, a scholar and AIDS activist, wrote extensively on the meaning

of AIDS, often through the analysis of art or other cultural objects. His chapter “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* argues politically that “*anything said or done about AIDS that does not give precedence to the knowledge, the needs, and the demands of people living with AIDS must be condemned,*” a call to action which continues to be applicable in a moment where AIDS continues to become less prevalent in the Global North (240). In the same chapter, Crimp speaks on (un)safe sex, insisting that “we were able to invent safe sex because we have always known that sex is not, in an epidemic or not, limited to penetrative sex. Our promiscuity taught us many things, not only about the pleasures of sex, but about the great multiplicity of those pleasures” (252-253). This invention of safe sex, one predicated on the knowledges of promiscuous gay men, echoes in representations of AIDS and gay sex today – this project benefits from these recognitions while recognizing itself the radical instability of safe sex enabled by medical interventions. However, Crimp perhaps recognizes this instability itself when he declares “having adjusted our sex lives so as to protect ourselves and one another – we are now reclaiming our subjectivities, our communities, our culture . . . and our promiscuous love of sex” (270). Crimp’s specificity in writing of adjustment “so as to protect ourselves and one another,” acknowledges that safe sex is not a monolith, that it is flexible and reactive, shifting in definition in line with changing discourses of what it means to protect. This instability has already been realized, with Safer Sex and the radical notion that bareback sex can fall within Safer Sex real and powerful discourses in the 21st century.

Beyond Sontag, Treichler, and Crimp and their larger questions of culture and meaning, scholarship which has intensively read texts for meaning has also played an important role in this project through its capacity to capture how representations of AIDS in visual medias have affected how AIDS can be perceived, and how, perhaps more importantly, these representations and thus

perceptions have shifted. Scholars such as Martha Gever and her analysis of Stuart Marshall's *Bright Eyes* (1984) and Paula A. Treichler and her analysis of *An Early Frost* (1985) and *Our Sons* (1991) – all three visual media texts broadcast on television – detail the mainstream depictions of AIDS. As Gever articulates, “almost every social crisis induced or supported by the mass media... relies at least in part on a moral argument. But the battleground upon which the ‘war on AIDS’ is waged is morality itself” (187) As such, these early representations of AIDS often collapse AIDS in a moral fashion, privileging the family and its primacy, or ensuring that any gayness depicted would not stray too far from a heteronormative idealization of relationships. This scholarship, and its making visible the limitations of non-activist visual media reveals more strongly the unique and poignant nature of contemporary HIV/AIDS visual narratives.

Turning to the notion of activist visual media, scholars such as Douglas Crimp in “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism” from *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* have noted that “...there was a critical, theoretical, activist alternative to the personal, elegiac expressions that appeared to dominate the art-world response to AIDS” (15). Furthermore, Gregg Bordowitz in his “The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous” from *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video* argues that “it is recognized that video ‘is not an object, but an event,’ because its production is part of a larger effort to organize increasing numbers of people to take action” (212) and that “in particular, many AIDS media activists have organized into collectives” (216). These scholars have contributed to this project by directing us to recognize how contemporary HIV/AIDS visual media is generally *not* activist in nature, but rather follows the framework of a drama, the legacy of *An Early Frost*, though perhaps a legacy shifted to streaming platforms and instant-access content, rather than television.

At this point, engagement with HIV/AIDS scholarship shifts from early engagement with the disease to contemporary engagement with a distinct focus on scholarship which concerns itself with the primary texts of this project. Should one notice a considerable gap in reviewing and engaging with scholarship (the latest one being from 1999), there is intention behind this – as will be noted later in this project, before 2012 HIV/AIDS media focused on non-queer subjects and as such fall outside of the scope of this project’s main interest. This project’s non-analysis of these texts are thus reflected in its engagement with literature as well.

2.2 Queerness after AIDS Analysis

Switching to the contemporary scholarship on HIV/AIDS narratives, questions similar to those from the early literature of metaphor appeared to be few; questions which excavate the meaning of AIDS on a larger scale are omitted in favor of smaller, incisive questions that have less to do with AIDS and more to do with queerness. Specifically, this scholarship, rather than being located within the tradition of HIV/AIDS scholarship, is differently concerned with questions on community organizing (i.e. activism), queer futures, and the position of queer subjects in an increasingly unstable milieu – it is a scholarship of Queerness After Aids, rather than a scholarship of AIDS or HIV as cultural objects. This is not to say, however, that this scholarship is not valuable – without it I would not have asked the questions that led me to this project – but that there are moments in which this project finds itself intervening. To showcase the absence of the larger scale, I turn towards scholarship with deals with activism and resistance, a theme that runs through the scholarship, especially given Robin Campillo’s *120 BPM*, which is tied up in a fictionalized ACT UP-Paris. Scholars such as Eleri Anona Watson in her article “L’idée d’une coalition” argue that

“in the face of [ACT UP-Paris’s] failures, *120 BPM* provides an alternative and hopeful vision of a bumpy, queer coalitional relational politics in practice” (116) that, “despite their practical downfalls, Campillo’s consideration of AUP’s proposed coalition without homogenizing community nevertheless tenders a possibility, a crack in the cement, from new forms of relationality might flourish” (125). These sentiments are echoed further by Benjamin Dalton, who argues that Campillo’s film, “[mobilizes] and [assembles]... biological lifeforms which, reduced to their smallest constituent parts and residues through the violence done to them, form the mutable, plastic life force of a queer politics to come: as vulnerable as it is ineffaceable, and radically metamorphic” (205). Together these scholars construct a queer politics which becomes the concrete, cracked yet ineffaceable, metamorphic due to its aversion of homogeneity.

However, disease itself and engagement with disease is a smaller factor for Watson and Dalton; queer politics predicated on representations of activism are their concern. Scholarship that grounds disease more directly, while still operating within a framework which gestures towards activism, can be found through scholars such as Loïc Bourdeau. Bourdeau offers a unique analysis of *120 BPM*, constructing a constellation between HIV/AIDS, the COVID-19 pandemic, Campillo’s film, and activism. In his work, he critiques the comparison of HIV to COVID-19 and the prophylactic measures taken to prevent its transmission, arguing that it “[negates] the trauma of the 1980s/1990s crisis” (124). However, perhaps more poignantly, Bourdeau analyzes the presence of dust in the film, and how “Act Up-Paris members, as ‘human dust,’ unsettle or queer hierarchies of power and knowledge,” and that “...diseases, like individuals, do not operate in a cultural and political vacuum,” tying together not only the transformative power of activism, but also echoing the importance of culture, of AIDS as metaphorical, that was so prevalent in early

HIV/AIDS scholarship. This scholarship, perhaps surprisingly, does not inquire about the state of HIV/AIDS in the current period.

Whereas scholarship concerning activism presents a rich discourse that has informed what this project uniquely attends to, scholarship that grapples with other questions also provide valuable contributions to the greater project of writing about contemporary queer narratives. Scholars such as Todd Reeser read *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* as a retelling of the Orpheus myth, arguing that "...the film is not about same-sex love at all, but about seeing a queer mode of loving Orphically" (15). This mode, explains Reeser, is tied up in the backwards glance of the Orpheus myth, specifically that "it is not the case that Orpheus's backward glance ends the love story, but in a queer aesthetic, it looks toward a new utopian future and a new narrative of love" (15). This utopian future articulated by Reeser perhaps provides an *after* to this project, a way of thinking beyond HIV/AIDS, or an avenue in which to explore potentials of a post-AIDS or even post-HIV paradigm, a utopian moment that has not yet, nor may ever be realized. Furthermore, contributions made by Cüneyt Çakırlar & Gary Needham in their work "The monogamous/promiscuous optics in contemporary gay film," explore the ways in which monogamy and promiscuity are depicted within contemporary gay cinema, including *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*. In their article, they argue that Ducastel and Martineau's film is framed through a promiscuous optic that serves "to express the experience of cruising, sex, promiscuity, and sociability in ways that are dispersed and impersonal..." (Çakırlar and Needham 424). This text, while not about activism or HIV/AIDS, is of particular importance to this project, as this project argues counter to Çakırlar and Needham's reading of monogamy and promiscuity in *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*, almost to the point of inversion.

Shifting now back towards HIV/AIDS brings into focus questions of HIV in a contemporary context, thus also nearing considerations similar to this project's. Chase Ledin, in his "Retroactivism and futurity in *120 BPM* and *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*," argues that the films, "represent a desire to remake the histories of AIDS crisis for those living with and among chronic HIV infection" (180). Specifically, he argues that the films "...employ speculation to represent a chronic future and to display hope for a future after AIDS by narrating the promise of effective biomedical treatment," as well as "...[invigorate] the drive to remake life during chronic HIV and to foreground the need for sexual plurality and possibility in thinking about futures with and beyond HIV transmission" (188-189). Ledin's analyses, while compelling and ultimately operating in ways similar to my own in envisioning medical interventions, focuses on retroactivism, and the futures that it may enable. As he concludes, the films "... not only transform historical images of AIDS crisis; they produce visual futures that reclaim the social histories and pleasures that are often convoluted in the retelling and intervention of AIDS crisis" (189). However, this project remains skeptical of the futures that these films can offer which can operate *beyond* a re-reckoning with the histories of AIDS and, particularly, the reclamation of "pleasures" (189). Both films depict imagined realities in which the gay male subject is always and without respite a subject of pharmacological and public health regimes. The gay male subject must either continue operating according to the logics produced during the HIV/AIDS crisis – as Douglas Crimp noted in his 1989 essay "Mourning and Militancy," "now our untamed impulses are either proscribed once again or shielded from us by latex" (139) – or stuck in the position of being under constant medical intervention *for not having HIV* via the daily ingestion of PrEP. This position is filled with a certain irony; the drug that composes PrEP is used already as retroviral medication

for children living with HIV, and taking PrEP is ostensibly no different in terms of daily impact as one-pill antiretroviral medical regimes for adults living with HIV.

More forcefully, the futures that are being offered are either one of a pharmacological stasis which does not get the gay male subject that much farther away from the promise of chronic illness with the advent of triple therapies in 1996, or a future that still can only look backwards at a pre-AIDS gay utopia that never was, and given current medical innovations, will never be. Perhaps bizarrely, as gay men continue to adhere to PrEP as a preventative medical regime, gay men increasingly are situated as *having nothing*; in the place of absence of HIV, of being negative, of being free from the confines, and logics of neo-liberal pharmacological systems, gay men are *on* something, beholden to the neo-liberal state's benevolence to provide PrEP to communities, testing positive for – if I may invoke my own adherence to a PrEP regimen that I cannot foresee discontinuing – emtricitabine and tenofovir disoproxil fumarate. If these are the futures we are gesturing towards, the horizons we dream of crossing, they are futures that are already and increasingly precarious.

While the works discussed above have been instrumental in developing and thinking about this project there exists a great diversity of scholarship that has nonetheless been informative and valuable in developing wider discourses on *120 BPM* and *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*. This scholarship includes an exploration of Ducastel and Martineau AIDS narratives as a corpus for AIDS representation (Lagabrielle 2021), the function of nationalism and national politics within narratives (Hartford 2022), the renegotiation of death (Wingrove 2022), the relationship between dance and activism (Gledhill 2022), the ways in which dance operates politically for audiences (Pember 2022), and the construction of space within narratives (Syabana 2021).

Before moving towards the execution of this project, I make a last turn towards that scholarship which is interested in broader questions about HIV/AIDS and its current manifestations in the world. Daniel Maroun's "Forty years of HIV/AIDS narratives: what's next?" traces the history of representations of HIV/AIDS in French literature, and offers this framework for understanding its development:

- 1980s to early 90s: literature of survival, testifying to the inevitable passage of life to death; minimal treatment options;
- 1995 to mid-2000s: emergence of bareback seropositive communities, romanticizing sex and death, praising transgressive sexuality, triple therapy treatment options;
- 2005 and onward: two tendencies develop, one that memorializes and rewrites the 80s and early 90s and another that positively reframes the disease, still a chronic ailment but one that slowly distances itself from the macabre affliction it once represented. (183)

His third period is of particular interest; while literary in its scope, the concepts of memorialization, rewriting, and chronic-yet-non-macabre resonate with the current trends in visual media as well. Also striking, is Maroun's recognition of the (future) impact of PrEP ending his article with bated breath: "now that we have entered the era of PrEP and digital realities, eagerly await authors who can represent life with AIDS in this new context and future iterations of life with the disease," though perhaps it may be best said those authors who can represent life with HIV, or those authors who can represent life on PrEP (194).

The final text that is of consideration is a recent MA thesis written by Paul Edward Schoenmann. While every text discussed thus far operates within disciplines largely of the humanities in their identity, Schoenmann approaches HIV/AIDS films from a sociological perspective, seeking traces of stigma in HIV/AIDS cinema ranging from 1989 with *Longtime*

Companion to 2013 with *Dallas Buyers Club*. While his analyses show that *Dallas Buyers Club*, the most recent work he analyzes, still contains an array of stigmatizing moments – a disheartening yet valuable result that functions as a benchmark for later films – his analysis misses the massive influx of HIV/AIDS visual narratives that have been proactive in combatting stigma and offering new stories about HIV/AIDS. In a way, his work ends precisely where mine begins; *Dallas Buyers Club* is, for this project, a catalyst which enables future (with real results in 2016) representations that are of direct interest to this project. This project, while its methodology differs radically from Maroun’s has similar larger goals in mind, to understand contemporary narratives about HIV/AIDS and to see how they’ve developed, what changes have enabled representation, and what may come next.

3.0 Before the Contemporary HIV/AIDS Film: Gay Representation in the 20th Century

To bring to the fore the contributions of contemporary HIV/AIDS cinema, an understanding of the history of both mainstream and activist visual narratives is necessary. One can find early representations of gay – or, more aptly, homosexual – men during the Weimar Republic Germany with films such as *Anders als die Andern* (1919), a realization of representation that would struggle to be reproduced until far later in the 20th century. As noted by Alice Kuzniar in her chapter on Weimar gay cinema in *The Queer German Cinema*, Richard Oswald’s *Anders als die Andern*, was “a more openly gay film than would appear for decades to follow” (27). These early productions were, however, not precisely narrative dramas. This is particularly salient in Oswald’s work, “... an educational film that valiantly defended homosexual rights and pleaded for sympathy for men who, unable to alter their natures, were blackmailed” (27). Beyond this educational slant, the film extended its representation of homosexual life through its depictions of homosexual sociality and queer sociability, a cinematic choice which, “provoked the strongest condemnation among the public” (29). The film proved to be scandalous, but also a public craze, with “sold-out screenings,” and eventually drawing the ire of the Nazi regime, resulting in the destruction of nearly all copies of the film (30). Following *Anders als die Andern*, “it would be decades before homosexuality could again be invoked on the screen as directly...” (30).

To find homosexuality again, we must turn towards the Atlantic and stumble across new terminology – the word gay replacing the clinical homosexual in American contexts – and the work of Mart Crowley: *The Boys in the Band*. While first produced as a play in 1968, it was quickly adapted into a film in 1970 by William Friedkin, and has been revitalized both on and off stage, with a 2018 anniversary run of the play on stage and a 2020 film adaptation by Joe Mantello. *The*

Boys in the Band marks a new mainstreaming of gay representation and given its enduring and recent attention, has had a lasting impact on the representation of gay men on stage and on screen. Its popular attention has also garnered academic attention, with new scholarship appearing in the second decade of the 21st century. This includes an essay collection entitled *The Boys in the Band: Flashpoints of Cinema, History, and Queer Politics* published in 2016, which explores a variety of issues raised by the 1970 film, such as consciousness-raising, queer debt, the manifestations of queer love in the 60s and 70s, and masculinity as it is portrayed in the film. *The Boys in the Band*, with its embracement of promiscuity and its knowing portrayal of gay self-loathing, as well as its release at the beginning of the Gay Liberation Movement after the Stonewall Riots, launched gay representation forward onto the stage and on the silver screen.

This relationship between sexual liberation and representation comes, however, to a fade as we near the beginning of the HIV/AIDS crisis. The 1980 film *Cruising*, also directed by William Friedkin, takes cruising – a form of sexual sociability characterized by anonymous encounters in public or pseudo-private spaces and embraced by the gay male community – and turns it into a site of violence. Gary Needham, in writing on the film in “‘Cruising is a picture we sincerely wish we did not have to show,’” cites Richard Goldstein, a contributor in *Village Voice*, who harkens back to *The Boys in the Band*: “‘Friedkin’s folly has been to take the characters from *The Boys in the Band*, which he directed 10 years ago, and update their agony by dressing them in leather,’” (197). It is this supposed folly that leads to discontent amongst the gay community. It appears that queer sensibilities shifted radically since the 1970s – when the self-loathing representation found in *Boys in the Band* were seen as innovative; the film prompted protests amongst the gay community, and according to Needham, “two issues motivated [them]: the film’s negative gay representation and its potential to incite violence against gay people” (197). The film itself follows an undercover cop

attempting to solve the serial murders of gay men and was “loosely adapted from Walker’s novel and was inspired by the New York Police Department Detective Randy Jurgensen’s undercover work investigating the murder of gay men in New York’s Greenwich Village” (196). It was perceived that the film contested the freedom of the Gay Liberation Movement, with gay men depicted as part of a “netherworld,” and as “uncouth ghetto [homosexuals],” (197). By the point of *Cruising*’s release, the gay utopia envisioned out of the Movement was beginning to fade.

Shortly after cruising became deadly on screen, the beginning of the HIV/AIDS crisis began, recentering concerns about sex, sexual practices, and even cruising in gay discourses. It is also from this point that cinema began engaging (as it only could) with HIV/AIDS. It is here that we can return again to Europe, as films such as *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral* (1986) by Rosa von Praunheim among others began being produced as a response to the HIV/AIDS crisis and its impacts on the gay community. Von Praunheim is of particular interest in this first wave of HIV/AIDS cinema due to the director being, as noted by Kuzniar, “attuned to the seriousness of AIDS at an early date” (The Queer German Cinema 89). However, Europe was not otherwise silent on the issue of AIDS in its cinema, as France quickly picked up speed in its representations of HIV/AIDS beginning in the late 1980s. As noted by Todd Reeser in their book *Queer cinema in contemporary France: Five directors*, French representations of HIV/AIDS on screen include, “...the quintessential French AIDS film, Collard’s 1992 *Les Nuits fauves* (*Savage Nights*), which is based on the director’s own written account and ends in the main character Jean’s symbolic death, or Guibert’s 1992 AIDS home-made documentary *La Pudeur ou l’impudeur* (*Modesty and Shame*), which has the potential at one point to become a filmed death by suicide” (44). However, these films are not among the first that came out of France. For example, “Paul Vecchiali’s *Encore* (*Once More*) (1988), one of the very first AIDS films in French, narrates a story over time of a

man who leaves his wife, contracts HIV-AIDS, and dies in the final scene,” a thematic that is consistent with later films, as well as early HIV/AIDS film more generally (44).

The contributions made by von Praunheim through *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral* is an early example of what will become New Queer Cinema (NQC) in the early nineties; the director’s use of a non-linear plotline, a chimera-genre which combines musical with drama with mockumentary elements, and a self-awareness which makes its political weight more salient is evidence of this.

NQC was a reaction to AIDS, its incredible disruption, and the need to “provide a story to a virus that has no natural narrative” (Pearl 33). The movement “reflects rather than corrects the experience of fragmentation, disruption, unboundaried identity, incoherent narrative, and inconclusive endings,” and is “is less interested in the story – in something that renders the virus coherent – than in something that represents the experience of living with the virus” (33). In her chapter “AIDS AND NEW QUEER CINEMA” in the reader *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, Monica B. Pearl demarcates three sites of disruption that are explored by NQC and its films, namely responsibility, time, and death. Concerning responsibility, the movement “[tries] to interrogate, rewrite, and reassign responsibility... their narrative trajectory and conclusion... often are a reassignment of blame and responsibility” (29). Furthermore, NQC’s “ahistoric, non-chronological, and even sometimes anachronistic sense of time,” works to “[echo]... the way that AIDS... disrupts the story and progression of illness narrative, whereby one gets ill and dies, or ill and triumphs over death, and also disrupts, quite simply, the progression of life” (30). Finally, NQC films seeks to take control of death. Utilizing Tom Kalin’s 1992 *Swoon*, Pearl illustrates how the film, and how NQC more generally “tries to make a narrative out of, and make beautiful, what is thought of as senseless... it tries to make sense of, and aestheticise, senseless death” (31). These sites form a basis for defining NQC, and it is from this basis that one can begin to articulate the

new wave of AIDS cinema and media. While NQC proves to be a disparate and wide-ranging cinema movement, films such as John Greyson's *Zero Patience* (1993), with its non-linearity and musicality, continue the legacies of von Praunheim, bridging early HIV/AIDS cinema with the established genre form of NQC.

Gay representation in the 20th century extends back to the post-war liberality found in Weimar Germany and extends into the 21st, with telling gaps during WWII until the Gay Liberation Movement revitalized demands for representation on screen. Pre-HIV/AIDS representation generally takes on two forms: representation for educational and normalizing purposes, as seen in *Anders als die Andern*, or liberative or self-articulated, a role found in the groundbreaking *The Boys in the Band*. As we near the HIV/AIDS crisis, however, gay representation begins taking a new turn, with the gay man becoming a site for violence at the hands of others. As HIV begins cementing itself as an inescapable part of the gay community in the early 80s, this turn towards violence manifests outside of the cinema, prompting new reactions against the viral violence of AIDS and its impact on gay communities. These reactions, including early interventions by directors such as Rosa von Praunheim and later larger reactions as encapsulated by NQC, paved the way to new and shifting forms of representation during the emergent 21st century.

4.0 The WHO, Dallas Buyers Club and Grindr: Connecting Representation to Medical and Social Development in the 21st Century

As the innovative New Queer Cinema gave way to LGBTQ contributions to mainstream cinema, the expansion of genre form allowed for new communities to be represented in film. This coincided with new medical interventions on HIV, making the virus more manageable – most notably through the 1996 introduction of triple therapies. The radical representations of gay men impacted by the AIDS crisis which had been a part of NQC give way to figures such as the heterosexual couple and the child; those who did not fit the popular (and prejudiced) model of the HIV-positive figure became new faces for HIV. However, before turning to these films, it bears mentioning, at least in brief, an outlier of this shift to the non-gay subject. Specifically, the French film *Drôle de Félix* (2000) by Ducastel and Martineau offers a first glimpse at a post-AIDS cinema. As elucidated by Todd Reeser, “Félix also happens to be HIV+ and gay, with a stable partner named Daniel (Pierre-Loup Rajot), but these ethnic, sexual, and embodied elements of his subjectivity do not in general cause problems for him, remaining incidental in many ways to the narrative (with the notable exception of a racist incident early on in the film)” (*Queer cinema in contemporary France* 49). This film departs from the relative doom and gloom of early HIV/AIDS cinema, as well as the more experimental, explorative, and searching films that arose out of the NQC. Yet, the contributions and the potential offered by *Drôle de Félix* is not further sustained by the genre, as it shifted towards the non-gay subject. In fact, representations of gay male subjects actively eschewed AIDS. In a history of AIDS cinema in France, Nick Rees-Roberts notes that, “Chéreau’s *Son frère* (2004) and Ozon’s *Le Temps qui reste* (2005) both maintain a conscious silence on AIDS, toying with a possible analogy but, particularly in the case of *Son frère*, anxiously

denying its thematic presence through the over-insistent reliance on promotional material to closet the subject...” (*French Queer Cinema* 112-113). These films exemplify the non-deployment of HIV/AIDS as it concerns the gay subject and are emblematic of the new paths AIDS representation takes at the turn of the millennia.

Early films that herald this shift (before the momentous Y2K), including the 1995 films *Boys on the Side* by Herbert Ross, *The Cure* by Peter Horton, and *Kids* by Larry Clark all focus their attentions on characters who were to that point not readily associated with HIV. *Boys on the Side* sidesteps the connection between drug use and HIV and situates its HIV plotline around a woman real estate agent, Robin, who enters a lesbian relationship within the film’s duration. *The Cure* follows the friendship that develops between two boys, one of which, Dexter, is HIV-positive due to a blood transfusion, until Dexter’s death and funeral. *Kids*, on the other hand, places HIV within heterosexual, albeit promiscuous, relationships, focusing on seventeen-year-old Telly, whose goal in the film is to take girls’ virginities. Remaining unaware of his status for nearly the entirety of the film, he transmits HIV to a girl named Jennie. These films mark the beginning of a representational shift which lasted into the first decade of the 21st century. Later films continued this trend, including films concerning women and girls of color who contracted HIV, often within the context of abuse, (2007’s *Life Support* and 2009’s *Precious*), and documentary films which shed light on the HIV epidemic in Africa (2003’s *State of Denial* and 2008’s *Miss HIV*).

This period of cinematic production also aligns with a relative lack of new medical interventions on HIV and treatments for it. Triple therapy remained among the sole effective treatments for HIV, and there were no regular medical regimens that could protect against the transmission of HIV save traditional forms of prophylaxis, such as condoms. The only shift in the early 2000s came in 2005, when post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) was recommended for use

outside of occupational circumstances, widening access to those who may have been exposed to HIV outside of medical settings. PEP continued and continues, however, to only be used in emergency settings, and it is not immediately available without entering institutional settings which cater to emergency, such as an emergency rooms (it is of note that PEP is generally only effective within 72 hours after exposure). As such, there was little opportunity for change within the social milieu surrounding HIV in gay male, and even broader, communities. It was not until the 2012 approval of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) in the US as noted by the CDC (PrEP for HIV Prevention in the U.S.), the recommendation and approval for its use in the EU in 2016 through the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) (Pre-exposure prophylaxis for HIV prevention in Europe and Central Asia, 2), and the introduction of PrEP in the French medical system in January 2016 – also noted by the ECDC – (Pre-exposure prophylaxis for HIV prevention in Europe, 2) that the US and Europe saw a medical paradigm shift that radically altered the relationships that gay male communities could have with HIV. The conventional strategies of Safer Sex regimes and risk reduction that dominated sexual lifestyle and behavior discourses saw renewed skepticisms – HIV became not only manageable but now preventable through a pill-a-day medical regimen instead of through the utilization of physical prophylaxes. The primacy of the condom was destabilized, and Safer Sex regimes came to include PrEP use in their sexual strategies.

Coinciding with the US's introduction of PrEP and subsequent debates, cinematic representations of HIV/AIDS within gay male communities re-emerged with a flurry of works in 2012, including the documentaries *How to Survive a Plague* by David France and *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP* by Jim Hubbard, as well as the feature length film *Dallas Buyers Club* by Jean-Marc Vallée. While *How to Survive a Plague* and *United in Anger* proved to be influential in

their own right – *United in Anger* won Best Documentary at the Milan International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival and *How to Survive a Plague* broke ground with multiple wins in the Gay and Lesbian festival circuit, along with nominations for the Sundance Grand Jury Prize for Documentary and the Academy Award for Best Documentary – *Dallas Buyers Club* saw much greater critical success. Racking up dozens of wins in global festival circuits, culminating in 3 nominations and 3 wins at the Academy Awards, *Dallas Buyers Club*'s critical reception threw into spotlight HIV/AIDS in queer contexts. While the film ostensibly centers a white heterosexual male (played by Matthew McConaughey) in its narrative of medical negligence and the combatting of HIV/AIDS during the HIV/AIDS crisis, it invests much of its pathos and emotional power in the life and death of a trans woman (played by cis male actor Jared Leto) and the wider queer and gay communities who were in most need of HIV treatment. *Dallas Buyers Club* thus presented a new representational shift by framing gay men and trans women as victims within that historical moment. The choice of actors furthered this work of portraying queer communities as pitiable – the usage of celebrity functioned to mainstream the representation of HIV/AIDS, similar to the mainstreaming seen with *Philadelphia* and the inclusion of Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington, though *Dallas Buyers Club* is unique in its portrayal of the HIV/AIDS crisis as a historical event located in a past, rather than as a topic issue, as is done in *Philadelphia*, that specifically being discriminatory firing due to HIV status.

It is after the release of *Dallas Buyers Club* that this project locates its core corpus of films. While 2012 played a pivotal role in both the representation of HIV/AIDS in cinema and the relationship gay men could have with HIV, it is only in through increasing uptake of PrEP within gay communities and its global spread as an effective HIV-prevention tool that discourses surrounding HIV could effectively change; if 2012 recentered gay men in HIV/AIDS cinematic

representation, the years following changed the ways in which gay men, and HIV-positive gay men in particular, could be represented. Specifically, PrEP enabled the HIV-positive gay man to become a historical past, a metaphor laden with references to histories of governmental negligence, activist power, human grief and suffering, human resilience, community, and compassion. While it may be coincidental that two documentaries which explore HIV/AIDS activism from a historical perspective were released in 2012, it is less coincidental that visual narratives released afterwards continue to operate within this framework. Films such as Ryan Murphy's *The Normal Heart* (2014), which depicts the founding of Gay Men's Health Crisis and the internal politics of activism as well as community loss, and Neil Armfield's *Holding the Man* (2015), which details the effects of AIDS on an Australian couple via a flashback, place their narratives firmly in a past.

While these films were released before 2016, they operate, perhaps self-explanatorily, as a sort of transition into the narratives which appear after them. *The Normal Heart* finishes its narrative with a montage during which names are taken off of a rolodex, signifying the continuing loss of members of the gay community, along with intertitles which tell a brief history of the HIV/AIDS crisis and its extent. *Holding the Man* ends with an intertitle explaining that the film operates as a "true life story" and that the narrator/real man died 10 days after he had written it (the story of the film) down, ostensibly from AIDS. These films follow the ending structure of *Dallas Buyers Club* almost to a tee, which also ends with intertitles explaining the historical context of the film (the real man dies of AIDS seven years after his diagnosis) and noting that AZT, an antagonistic drug in the film, is later used successfully in lower dosages as a part of HIV medicine regimens. These films do not offer a future or gesture towards possibility, activist related or otherwise. Instead, they serve a sort of memorializing purpose, utilizing the strategy of naming – manifest in the rolodex, the intertitle, the "based on a true story" – in order to recognize a newly

forgettable past. It is a cinematic chant of “say their names!” after tragedy, that tragedy often being institutional neglect. *Dallas Buyers Club* rails against the “poison” that is AZT, and *The Normal Heart* is sure to show the malice and apathy of NYC officials, and *Holding the Man* turns its focus onto the homophobia and lack of support within familial relationships, while also preoccupying the last third of the film with scenes of the hospital and the inexorable progression of AIDS on the body. The films that come after it, however, are structured differently, and offer different political and social possibilities beyond memorialization and the validation of grief and community grievances.

The shift out of NQC into the first decade of the 21st century and its preoccupation with non-homosexual representations of HIV occurs in concert with a relative stagnation of medical interventions on HIV as a chronic or treatable illness. It is not until the advent of PrEP and its capacity to renew discourses surrounding HIV and its impact on gay male sexual networks –or the gay community in general – that HIV/AIDS cinema would again center gay and other queer figures. This first of these, *Dallas Buyers Club* (2012), echoes the sensibilities of HIV/AIDS cinema after the turn of the century, centering a straight man, but one who associates very closely with queer individuals living with HIV. It is not until *The Normal Heart* (2014) and *Holding the Man* (2015) that gay men are properly centered, and this cluster of films realizes its early pattern of memorialization, predicated on the potential for AIDS to become a part of history, rather than a continuing point of concern in the Global North. In other words, as medical interventions diminished the extend of AIDS in industrialized and developed nations, especially for middle class and higher white gay male communities, practices of memorialization begin being deployed in cinema, reaching their peak in the 2014 and 2015 films.

4.1 Understanding Sexual Discourse via Parallel Shifts in Medical Interventions and Gay Male Sexual Networks

The question about the significance of 2016 remains, however, unanswered in the historical arc of HIV/AIDS representation in cinema presented thus far. The following section aims to understand the trajectory of medical interventions on HIV in relation to their impacts on gay male sexual networks. As such, this section traces significant medical shifts and parallel changes made within platforms which facilitate gay male sexual networks. While not directly concerned with HIV/AIDS cinema and its analysis, this section does the work to make clearer the connections between medicine, public discourse, and cinema as a manifestation of both; this section intends to show how gay sexual representation in films from 2016 onwards are enabled by medical intervention and their uptake by gay male sexual networks.

Along with the release of *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*, a film which will prove to be of utmost importance in this work, the birth of the Undetectable = Untransmittable (U=U) campaign(s) marks 2016 as the site of another medical paradigm shift. Scientific studies that took place within the first two decades of the 21st century (and were all published in the second), pointed to the reality that people living with HIV under effective treatment are unable to transmit HIV to sexual partners (Cohen MS, Chen YQ, McCauley M, et al.; Grulich A, et al.; Rodger AJ, Cambiano V, Bruun T, et al.), effectively erasing the risk involved in serodiscordant couples. Following these studies, professional medical groups began recognizing the concept of U=U, with its core support found in the US and Europe. Notably, U=U was endorsed by the NYC Health department in 2016 as noted on their website, the CDC (in principle) via a “Dear Colleague” letter in 2017 written by Mermin and McCray, the Canadian Minister of Health in 2018 as published by the Public Health

Agency of Canada, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control in 2018 as noted in “The Benefits of HIV Treatment”, and the World Health Organization through its “Consolidated guidelines on HIV prevention, testing, treatment, service delivery and monitoring” in 2021. This broad medical consensus, which continues to solidify its place in global HIV treatment discourses, has continued to shift HIV/AIDS further into a historical past, as people living with HIV gain a renewed sense of non-pathology (unable to transmit), and people living without HIV are able to protect against transmission when engaging with sex with those who may not know their HIV status; a theoretical death knell for HIV has been medically formulated. This formulation furthermore manifests in public health discourses, with UNAIDS calling for large-scale public health action to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030, virtually ending HIV transmission in the US and Europe, and minimizing transmission in low- and middle-income countries (Fast-Track).

It is important to note that the 2016-and-onward medical paradigm shift has produced recognizable differences in the sexual lifestyle discourses, which have moved beyond the optimism that was prompted in 2012. As previously noted, 2012 saw the introduction of PrEP within gay male sexual networks, providing the potential for these networks to combat the transmission of HIV with an efficacy that overtakes that of consistent condom use. As such, 2012 marks the moment in which HIV’s status within the gay community and its sexual networks is first radically interrogated. This intervention, paired with the medical consensus of U=U in 2016, further cemented the uncertain place of HIV, and prompted even further discourse and debate on the end of transmission of HIV. These medical shifts correlate with considerable change in sexual behavior within gay male sexual networks; identifying these as lifestyle shifts, we can note that they have manifested most prominently in the online gay-dating world and the reintroduction of cruising

practices in digital formats. An understanding of these discourses and their historical shifts is furthermore integral in locating shifts within cinematic representations of HIV/AIDS.

Grindr, perhaps the largest gay dating/relationship/hook-up app, with active users throughout the US and Europe, was founded in 2009, and has continued to develop its platform since (Kindcaid). A number of developments within the app space have lent visibility to and discussion around navigating sexual activity while living with HIV, as well as sexual practices that have traditionally been constituted as high-risk behaviors that fall outside of best Safer Sex practices. In 2013, Grindr introduced “Tribes,” which allowed users to tag their profiles with a descriptor to situate themselves within a certain category of gay man – similar to the identificatory practice of being a “bear,” “otter,” “twink,” etc. (The New Grindr: Zero Feet Away). Included in these descriptors, however, was the tribe of “poz,” making visible one’s HIV status in their profile. The usage and inclusion of “poz,” however, carries different connotations than that of “HIV-positive;” while being HIV-positive is a descriptor that details the existence of a chronic condition, the utilization of the word “poz” connotes a form of community, one which embraces the state of being HIV-positive, allowing it to be integrated into one’s social and sexual identities – there even exists a magazine entitled POZ which caters exclusively to those living with or affected by HIV (Adam; NIAID; POZ). The inclusion of the tag “poz,” therefore, operates as a normalizing tool within gay sexual networks, providing a platform for individuals to seek out other poz men. It is worth noting, however, that this 2013 development was not one predicated solely on the potential for HIV to become chronic. As early as 2000, what was an underground barebacking sexual subculture that eroticized HIV became a part of wider discourse, thus enabling the expansion of this sexual niche outside of its insular roots:

The story [of barebacking] went overground in 2000 when *Libération* published a shock cover article on barebacking, tracking the development of a supposedly underground subculture of unprotected sex among HIV-positive gay men that has since expanded rapidly through widespread internet use. The notion that gay male subculture could be sexually fragmenting according to HIV-status has since been debated in relation to practices of ‘sero-sorting’ in which partners are chosen according to known or assumed sero-status. (Rees-Roberts 103)

What is clear here is gay male sexual networks’ quick adoption of and adept use of the internet to facilitate sexual activity, a reality that is confirmed through not only the history of barebacking as elucidated by Rees-Roberts, but also the continuing development and use of Grindr at the tail end of the first decade of the 21st century.

Arriving back to the history of gay-male dating apps (and thus manifestations of gay male sexual networks) and their relation to HIV/AIDS, following the introduction of tribes, Grindr expanded the platform’s potential for users to engage in sex practices which circumvent Safer Sex regimes by expanding their tagging features. In 2016, the platform began allowing users to declare their HIV status, whether they are undetectable if they are living with HIV, and whether they are on PrEP if they are HIV-negative (Tharrett). The capacity to self-disclose one’s status, as well as provide details about the medical interventions on that status, confirmed the changing relationship that gay male sexual networks have with HIV; rather than HIV being pathological, it became a note on a dating profile, a detail that is part of open sexual negotiations concerning sexual risk, safety, and comfortability – one can imagine the dynamic between a serodiscordant couple, whose anxieties are erased via their knowledge that the one living with HIV is undetectable and the HIV-negative one is on PrEP in case there would be any unforeseen complication.

Most recently, Grindr has formalized its toleration and hospitality for unprotected and Safer-Sex-complicating behaviors through its 2022 launching of “My Tags,” which allows users to tag their profiles with “kinks, hobbies, personality and more,” thus providing opportunity for users to vet profiles based on sexual and other interests (Lundberg). Users may choose from a pre-determined selection of tags, and among them one may select – alone or in combination – “Bb,” “Poz,” “Safersex,” and “Condomonly” (My Tags). These tags lend validation to risky/riskier sexual practices, as well as helps to create intra-platform sexual subcultures that prioritize bareback sex and sex amongst those living with HIV. It is of note that Grindr’s explanatory caption for “Poz” is sure to articulate: “Remember: Undetectable means untransmittable!” situating serodiscordant sex as something without risk of transmission, rather than having potential risk – it is taken as a given that people living with HIV are under effective medical care (an assumption enabled by user having the capacity to make the distinction that they are *not* undetectable).

While Grindr continues to dominate gay sexual networks, new digital platforms have tapped into niche sexual subcultures. As such, a discussion about smaller platforms, such as Sniffies, is important in understanding the effects of medical interventions of HIV. Sniffies is a digital cruising platform founded in 2018 and takes the geolocating approach of Grindr to a new extreme, placing profiles onto map-space in real time and allowing users to know exactly where other users are in relation to their own location (Murphy). Similar to Grindr, Sniffies allows users to self-disclose their HIV status and whether they are undetectable or on PrEP. The platform, however, also allows users to declare that they are looking specifically for “poz” and/or “U+,” meaning undetectable, people to have sex with. It furthermore allows users to display their protection-during-sex preference, with its options being: “bareback only,” “bareback if PrEP,” “safe only,” “bareback or safe,” and “talk first.” These options showcase the wide range of sexual-

protection discourses that are currently circulating in gay male sexual networks. The existence of Sniffies and its utilization by gay men – the platform has growing user bases throughout North America and Europe – also points towards a revitalization of cruising as a sexual lifestyle and practice, which has re-emerged, perhaps coincidentally, as the perceived threat of HIV transmission and its impact on life has continued to lessen.

Together, Grindr and its development and the founding of Sniffies both follow the contours of the shifts within HIV medical treatment and care. As interventions on HIV minimized the risks associated with the virus and its transmission, platforms which cater to gay male sexual networks have responded in kind. With the release of PrEP and the then theoretical potential to demarginalize people living with HIV within those networks, Grindr introduced a feature in 2013 allowing the user to self-identify as poz, thus making immediately visible HIV status within sexual networks. This visibility was only made more pronounced as U=U became a medical and social reality in 2016. In response, Grindr introduced the ability for users to declare their HIV status and its specificities, including whether one was undetectable for those living with HIV, or on PrEP for those who were HIV-negative. This feature also had the effect of introducing nuance to the discussion of HIV, injecting skepticism on totalizing narratives of living with HIV which enabled strict sero-sorting (the act of having sex only with those with a matching status). Most recently, Grindr has affirmed its userbase's desire to engage in unprotected sex as a sustained practiced (made equal to kink practices and personality traits) through a tagging system which features prominently on user profiles. Beyond Grindr, the platform Sniffies has developed since 2018 in order to respond to a revitalized desire to engage in cruising and other anonymous forms of sex, and its userbase continues to grow. Sniffies also features many of the same capacities to self-

identify with regard to HIV-status and its particularities, further illustrating the normalization of serodiscordance within gay male sexual networks.

These platforms, sounding boards for intra-gay-male-sexual-network discourses, resonate further with filmic representations of HIV/AIDS representation. As discourses normalize and make tolerable certain activities and lifestyles within gay male sexual networks (manifest in gay relationship/hookup platforms), cinema responded in turn with new forms of representation. The following section will explore the cinema produced in the milieu of U=U-discourse and affected gay communities through a breakdown of film reviews. Specifically, the section focuses on the responses to *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* and *120 BPM*, two texts which prove to be influential to this project, as well as within popular gay male discourses. The extent of the reach of these films is evident through even a cursory search for HIV/AIDS cinema. Both films appear in the queer-oriented *Out*'s 2016 article "30 Films About HIV and AIDS Everyone Should Watch" and *HIVPlusMag*'s same-named 2021 article. *120 BPM* appears in *ScreenRant*'s 2021 "10 Best Films That Deal With The AIDS Epidemic. These films have left traces on discourses by people affected by HIV/AIDS (*HIVPlusMag*), but also general queer and even mainstream cinema-oriented discourses. They are, so to speak, heavy hitters.

5.0 A Review of Reviews: Tracing Discourse in Film Criticism

As an overview of the mainstream reception of and discourses inspired by *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* and *120 BPM*, this consideration of film reviews immediately suggests: (1) a perception of medical interventions on HIV/AIDS as banal and readily-accessible parts of Safer Sex regimes, (2) a reliance on romance and related tropes to drive compassionate narratives, and (3) the utilization of the films as a historicizing and memorializing force. These three threads run through the media responses to these films at various degrees, though when taken as a whole, a nexus consisting of these three threads is realized. To reinforce these thematic constructions, the contemporary reviews are then juxtaposed against reviews of Rosa von Praunheim's *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral* in order to explore the historical differences in reception of HIV/AIDS and the insights these differences may provide.

Considering this compilation of sources, including mainstream American and francophone responses, as well as queer media responses which stem from queer outlets located in the UK and France, the focus of coverage of critical responses is centered on those linguistic spheres most readily engaged in HIV/AIDS discourse in their visual medias. As surveyed in the section on historical context, the anglo- and franco-phone areas of the world have contributed a bulk of the 21st century's HIV/AIDS cinema and other visual narratives. As such, the focus has narrowed here to correspond with this cinematic engagement.

In analyzing the American response, reviews from *Variety* are attended to, seeing as how both films of interest have been covered in the magazine. *Variety* has a track record with HIV/AIDS narratives which can be traced from the epidemic onward. Its review of *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* by Jay Weissberg begins as expected by recounting the sex club scene in a

rapid fashion: “In a sea of naked men, Theo (Geoffrey Couet) stands apart... [he] joins the orgy to be near Hugo; their eyes lock, and the two ditch their buddies to engage in passionate (and graphic) sex” (Weissberg). However, the vast majority of the review is spent contemplating the historical particularities of the film and current moment which enabled its creation, along with the film’s greater story about love at first sight. Notably, Weissberg notes the serodiscordance between the titular characters and then casually states that, “Theo is prescribed antiretroviral meds, with regular checkups to ensure he’s not infected,” without fanfare (of note considering that Ducastel and Martineau’s film is the first in history to give cinematic representation to the use of PEP). The crucial medical intervention, post-exposure prophylaxis, which preoccupies the middle section of the film – some combination of Théo and/or Hugo is on hospital grounds for 22 minutes and 50 second of the film’s total runtime – is given a passing reference. This lack of attention to the unique depiction of PEP antiretrovirals seems to be addressed, however later in the article. Weissberg opens a paragraph with the encouraging “On the subject of good things, it’s sobering to think that, on every level, this film couldn’t have been made 15 years ago or more,” setting up a framework to hone in on the unique position of the film. He then provides a list: “...the kind of antiretroviral medication prescribed didn’t exist then; nonjudgmental hospital staff were a rarity; kissing openly on the streets, even at nighttime, was fraught with danger” (Weissberg). Strikingly, PEP is situated as equal amongst being able to kiss in public and not facing discrimination in a medical setting; a kiss on the street corner is equated to the prescription of drugs that prevents the transmission of HIV after exposure.

Weissberg’s treatment of medical interventions on HIV/AIDS does not, however, deserve criticism for not giving PEP its due importance in the text. Rather, it is prudent to stress the *banality* of PEP and of antiretroviral medications in the 2016 context in which this film review was written.

This banality functions not as a product of ignorance or as a mischaracterization of contemporary HIV treatment. Rather, the banality of drugs such as PEP – and, self-evidently, PrEP – serves to illustrate the normalization of such interventions within gay male sexual networks. That is, the novelty of these drugs has dissipated quickly after their introduction into networks, evidenced in the casual reception of them in cinema which portrays them. In fact, this banality becomes clearer as more reviews (as analyzed in this section) also treat HIV drugs as banal parts of risk reduction strategies.

It is not overwhelmingly special or novel that Théo has access to these drugs; the frankness and lack of fanfare around PEP betrays a more general normalization and integration of the drug into common sexual discourses. The thematic Weissberg considers when explaining how “...this film couldn’t have been made 15 years ago or more,” illustrates the extent of PEP’s normalization. He dedicates a whole sentence – in a section containing only four – to the orgy scene: “First, the lengthy, graphic sex scene could never have appeared outside a porn film (Ducastel and Martineau prove that hardcore can also be essential)” (Weissberg). Even more telling is the fact that Weissberg praises the orgy before even mentioning PEP, as this sentence comes before the section’s list; group sex is more worthy of note in the hierarchy than access to transmission-preventing antiretrovirals. The banality of PEP seen in Weissberg’s review dovetails with the previously discussed rapid uptake and normalization of medical innovations within gay male sexual networks as seen on platforms such as Grindr and Sniffies. The impression continues: PEP is not special; we already know about it and use it too.

Variety’s review of *120 BPM* by Guy Lodge joins *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* in considering the historical implications of the film, even if it can’t contemplate drug regimens that became accessible after the turn of the century. In fact, the history is what preoccupies the review

in which the opening paragraph bills the film as “A rare and invaluable non-American view of the global health crisis that decimated, among others, the gay community in the looming shadow of the 21st century...” (Lodge). Lodge then discusses briefly who Campillo is before relaunching back into history by contextualizing ACT UP Paris.

The French branch of the movement founded in New York in the late 1980s, it’s a broadly accepting group on the outside — comprising AIDS victims across genders and sexualities, as well as parents and LGBT allies affected by the crisis... Beneath its right on surface, however, it’s a collective splintered by differences in principle, politics and even HIV status. (Lodge)

The review takes on the cadence of a history article, recounting ACT UP Paris, its internal divisions, and its relationship to American AIDS activism. Lodge continues utilizing the film’s plot to examine the film’s parallels with history. As he recounts, “Sean — and others whose health, like his, is in rapid decline — fear they literally don’t have time for the more diplomatic tactics of Sophie and team leader Thibault... to take hold” (Lodge). Again, the lines between ACT UP Paris, the activist organization that is still active today, and ACT UP Paris, the fictionalized and dramatized version of the real-life organization in the 90s, blur. *120 BPM* is read almost as a historical fiction in which the characters in the film resonate with the memory, action, life, suffering, and eventual death of historical members of the real ACT UP Paris. Lodge does, however, remember *120 BPM*’s position as cinema when he explains the impact of sex within the film and its relation to what histories can often be – cold, archival, and without a certain humanity. “The film’s frank, sensuous depiction of [Nathan and Sean’s] compromised but still active sex life adds visceral, tactile human stakes to ACT UP’s ideological battle...” (Lodge). The film then lends humanity to the greater project of memorializing the HIV/AIDS crisis through cinematic

representation; where documentaries can showcase the archive of media which already exists or give voice to those that are still alive and willing to speak, the dramatizations of the time period – *120 BPM* one of a number of films that do such work – provide that visceral-ness and tactility that Lodge is keen to note.

While Lodge provides a historical lens from which to read *120 BPM* and appreciates its unique character, his review is, however, relatively silent on the film’s preoccupation with medicine and future-now-past medical innovations that promised changes in the lives of those living with HIV in the early 90s. In fact, the closest Lodge gets to explaining the medical plot comes when he describes Sean’s feelings toward “ACT UP’s ineffectively moderate approach to Big Pharma’s lack of progress in developing and distributing courses of AIDS treatment” (“Film Review: ‘BPM (Beats Per Minute)’”). This relative silence conflicts with the content of the film; vast swaths of the film are dedicated to protests within and around the pharmaceutical industry as well as intra-groups discourse surrounding medicine and treatment; characters in the film literally give presentations about potential drugs as well as HIV. The film stresses a medical understanding of HIV and the therapeutic possibilities for the drug as the driver of activism in the narrative, yet they are overlooked. Lodge’s silence betrays again a certain banality surrounding HIV/AIDS treatment and medical interventions; medicine is not the interesting part of this dramatization of the HIV/AIDS crisis, it’s the depiction of sympathetic and sexually active people living (and dying) with HIV. Medicine is discussed here as another afterthought, a given that lacks novelty or intrigue.

Medicine and its banality are also thematic of the French mainstream response to *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* and *120 BPM*. In searching for French reviews, the editorial voice of *Le Monde* proved most appropriate; the newspaper has reviewed both films, and the newspaper is

a long-time editorial and newspaper authority. It's treatment of *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* capitalizes on the sex scene and the hospital post-exposure-prophylaxis-prescribing scene, focusing its review on areas of the film that *Variety* did not.

Thomas Sotinel introduces the film with a description of the sex club: “Il est beau, le lancement du bateau de Théo et Hugo. C’est un de ces vaisseaux nocturnes et parisiens, illuminé de rouge, dans la cale duquel des hommes se retrouvent pour faire l’amour... Dans cet intérieur... ils se caressent, se pénètrent,” [*It is beautiful, the launch of the boat of Theo and Hugo. It is one of those nocturnal and Parisian vessels, illuminated with red, in whose hold men meet to make love... In this interior... they caress each other, penetrate each other.*] (“« Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau »”). Sotinel’s introduction functions to romanticize the scene, a reading which contrasts significantly with Weissberg’s, who admits, “while some hetero audiences will unquestionably feel sidelined by the explicit orgy, the loss is theirs” (“Berlin Film Review: Paris 05:59”). Sotinel continues in his discussion of the sex scene, calling it “riche de toutes les possibilités,” [*rich in all possibilities*] (“« Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau »”). Sotinel’s reading gives more weight to the depiction of gay sex than does Weissberg; where Weissberg applauds the changing norms which enable this type of representation, Sotinel recognizes the narrative impact of the sex club scene, and the potentials found within the sex club. It is filled with possibility, and as the film plays out, that possibility is recognized as love at first sight.

Beyond the sex club scene, Sotinel spends the remainder of his review critiquing the film’s portrayal of the hospital and of HIV-positivity. He calls the hospital the site of “le palliatif à la négligence de Théo,” [*the palliative to the negligence of Théo*], assigning a negative blame for the film’s central conflict on the actions of Théo (“« Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau »”); they become irresponsible, things-that-he-knew-better-than-to-do, rather than naïve or inconsequential

(we later learn in the film that Hugo is undetectable). Concerning the hospital scene itself, Sotinel argues that it is “un documentaire prophylactique,” [*a prophylactic documentary*], a step towards the coldness, archival-ness, and without-a-certain-humanity-ness that *120 BPM* shies away from, as evidenced by Lodge’s critique of the film (“« Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau »”). Théo receives his antiretroviral treatment in an anticlimactic manner supported by a thorough description of the treatment regimen and the side effects of being on post-exposure-prophylaxis by a medical professional. A documentary indeed. Learning about the follow-ups that you go through feels less like narrative cinema and more an educational before-you-go-on-PEP video. Once again however, Sotinel’s reaction to the prescription of PEP betrays the banal nature of antiretrovirals and the tools gay male sexual networks have at their disposal. Antiretrovirals are boring, their representation is as bland as a documentary. As Sotinel writes, “les tentatives d’humour tombent à plat,” [the attempts at humor fall flat] (“« Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau »”).

Sotinel’s treatment of *120 BPM* is, however, more charitable. Still writing for *Le Monde*, he introduces the film by attending to the film’s special effects and its depiction of HIV via dust particles: “Ce qui semble au premier abord une métaphore funèbre... est aussi une représentation de la vie,” [*That which seems at first a funeral metaphor... is also a representation of life.*] (“« 120 battements par minute »”). Sotinel taps into what Lodge recognized also as the “visceral, tactile human stakes,” within the film (“Film Review: ‘BPM (Beats Per Minute)’”). Sotinel goes further than Lodge with sentiment, utilizing the vast majority of his review to detail the ways in which the director, Robin Campillo, breathes life into a film that is ostensibly about death. This investment manifests in the two textual asides he makes within the larger review – “la mort est dans l’air, puisque nous sommes au pic de l’épidémie de sida, au moment où la médecine n’apporte aux

malades d'autre secours que palliative," [*death is in the air, since we are at the peak of the AIDS epidemic, at the moment where medicine provides patients with no help other than palliative*], and "celle des titres électro sur lesquels on dansait alors, celle d'un cœur au bord de l'effolement," [*that of the electro titles on which we danced then, that of a heart on the verge of panic*] ("« 120 battements par minute »"). Sotinel finds life in the midst of death and is preoccupied with the work that Campillo does to imbue this period with that life. Sotinel reads the film as decidedly un-documentarian.

Ironically, Sotinel neglects to detail the intense documentary nature of the film when discussing the narrative's medical treatments – present and on the horizon – and the HIV virus itself. The humanity *120 BPM* endows its AIDS patients and activists living with HIV seems to supersede the forgettable medical narratives as work within the film. Sotinel's perhaps exaggerated preoccupation with life within the film is crystallized in the last sentence of the review, when he argues that "Ici, la fin de la vie, c'est encore la vie," [*here, the end of life, it is still life.*] ("« 120 battements par minute »"). Thus, here *120 BPM* functions to give life to those activists that died during the HIV/AIDS epidemic; it is not a documentary that recounts the names and last days of those who died, but a method to depict life while it was lived – activist, dancer, lover, and only after everything else, someone who is condemned to die.

Mainstream responses to *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* and *120 BPM* follow roughly the same contours with their foci on life and death and the past versus the present. These responses, however, have the disadvantage of being mainstream voices to an explicitly queer cinema; there is a certain distance that this position forces upon reviewers. To interrogate these responses, reviews from the *Gay Times* and *Têtu's* reviews of *120 BPM* were found to be compelling. Interviews with directors in this exploration of responses were omitted in order to limit any

directorial influences on opinion, which has consequently had the effect of limiting this discussion to *120 BPM*; the gay press favored interviews over reviews for *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*.

Starting in the Anglophone sphere, the UK-based *Gay Times* article describes *120 BPM* as “almost a companion to David France’s powerful documentary *How to Survive a Plague*, 120 Beats Per Minute” (Marshall). Its author, Brendan Marshall thus admits explicitly the historicizing work that the film is doing; where *How to Survive a Plague* (2012) is a documentary exploring ACT UP activism in New York, *120 BPM* – created four years later – is its dramatic brother, giving a story to the HIV/AIDS crisis, rather than merely a documentation and moralization as was seen in 2012. The story element is particularly evident through Marshall, echoing the sentiments that Lodge makes. Marshall, in describing the relationship between Nathan and Sean, argues that “the developing relationship between these two young men is the melancholic beating heart of the film,” staking narrative power in their love story, rather than in the activism and the activist imagery themselves; Nathan and Sean are the tools in which AIDS can be given a human face. As Marshall writes, the film is an “ultimately moving portrayal” of the HIV/AIDS crisis. Furthering the historicizing that Marshall writes up – again like Lodge – a small history lesson about ACT UP, further cementing a sort of history-educative force in contemporary public discourses on HIV/AIDS.

ACT UP was an offshoot of the advocacy group founded in New York in 1987 as a response to inaction on the AIDS crisis, working to impact the lives of people with AIDS and to bring about legislation, medical research, treatment, and policies to ultimately bring an end to the disease by mitigating the loss of health and lives. (Marshall)

Marshall’s description of ACT UP is strikingly similar to Lodge’s in form and content. Contextualizing *120 BPM* by explaining ACT UP’s NYC origins is not necessary (or even

important) to understanding the narrative within the film; only knowing ACT UP Paris would suffice in grasping the stakes of the film. However, both Marshall and Lodge seem to recognize a greater narrative at play, one that reflects on the 80s and 90s as a historical period that requires a renewed discourse and sustained memorializing practices – the uninitiated or unknowledgeable young gay man that stumbles across their reviews will learn just enough about the history of HIV/AIDS activism to picture global (Eurocentric) activism. The resonance of history is bound up in their breakdown of *120 BPM*.

The French queer press response is also cognizant of this history. *Têtu*'s Florian Ques, in his short review of the film, is sure to note that “bien qu'il demeure un récit de fiction, le film a été loué dès sa sortie pour sa reconstitution adéquate des enjeux et du climat de l'époque,” [*although it remains a fictional story, the film was praised as soon as it was released for its adequate reconstruction of the issues and the climate of the time*]. Here *120 BPM* as a potential “companion film” is shown more clearly (Marshall). The film's praise being predicated on an “adequate reconstruction” blurs the line between documentary and a narrative fictionalization, giving *120 BPM* a certain authority in creating a history of the HIV/AIDS crisis via fiction and dramatization (Ques). Moreover, Ques lends the film even more authority by asserting that “Et son visionnage s'impose pour mieux connaître notre histoire,” [*and its viewing is essential to getting to know our history better*] (“Il n'est pas trop tard pour rattraper ‘120 battements par minute’”). For Ques, *120 BPM* operates as a didactic film, reconstructing a time that is now lost in living memory (thus, its viewing is required to understand gay history) and teaching those young gay men without a working knowledge of the 80s and 90s about the activist struggles, the loss, and the grief of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Given the responses amongst varied – anglo- vs. franco-phone, mainstream vs. queer – communities, what can we make of this facet of public discourse surrounding these films? What can we extrapolate further, given the greater body of HIV/AIDS visual narratives that are being watched, talked about, and debated? From these reviews, three overarching themes manifest through their critiques and readings of *120 BPM* and *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*.

The first concerns the banality of antiretrovirals and medical interventions as it concerns HIV treatment. Most evidenced in reviews for *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*, the treatment of HIV medications is done without fanfare; they are given as an already-known aspect of sexual health/risk reduction strategies, rather than innovative, groundbreaking, or future-determining shifts. In the case of *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*, the film's implicit nods towards a post-AIDS present and a perhaps post-HIV future – recall the undetectability of Hugo and the immediate access to PEP (thus denying the virus space for successful transmission). HIV transmission is a source of anxiety, but one whose power over gay men exists only in the trauma of those still living with HIV, and the traumas of the past. Théo, the object of the film's immediate medical interventions, faces no real risk of transmission. Instead, he simply, "...is prescribed antiretroviral meds, with regular checkups to ensure he's not infected" (Weissberg). This thread of banality exposes the larger banality of these drugs and medical interventions in gay male sexual networks, in which an undetectable HIV-positive status, the nonuse of condoms, the use of PrEP, and the relative accessibility of PEP have all been normalized and integrated into mainstream bourgeois sexual networks.

The second theme is the reviews' elaboration of the narrative power of the two films, and how they operate to counteract the potential coldness, archival-ness, and without-a-certain-humanity-ness that depictions of history can have. As such, these films, and in particular *120 BPM*

give AIDS a human face. Tellingly, the human face is predicated on romance(s), which rely on tropes – love at first sight in *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* and the death of a lover in *120 BPM* – and a mainstreaming of the romantic/sexual dynamics of the couples in question. Of particular note is the turn towards monogamy in both films. By utilizing a mainstreamed romance, the films give a broader appeal and a stronger hold on audiences beyond a core of activist-oriented audience or a LGBT-themed film festival. The films’ effective use of empathy, sympathy, and narrative drama to depict the HIV/AIDS crisis reignites discourses around HIV, compelling us to revisit the crisis, our relationship to it, and the community memory of it. This renegotiation of HIV/AIDS manifests openly in the reviews; there is a preoccupation with life and the films’ capacities to depict life in spite of death, and the work of romance enables the claim, “Ici, la fin de la vie, c’est encore la vie,” [*here, the end of life, it is still life.*] (Sotinel).

The final theme is born out of the second, that being the reviews’ acceptance of these HIV/AIDS narratives as memorializing and historicizing forces. Whether it comes in the form of a short lesson detailing the history of ACT UP – as is seen through Lodge and Marshall – or direct claims of the films’ importance to understanding queer history, as seen most explicitly in Ques, but which resonates throughout all of the reviews as hand, *120 BPM* and *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* are read as texts that speak directly to history. The narrative problems of the films – being HIV-positive, seeking HIV medical interventions, being publicly gay – are all framed as things which occurred in a past or as a product *of* that past. Théo’s quest is a product of the past containing all of the activism that demanded HIV care and all of the medical interventions that have built on each other. Hugo’s status as an undetectable HIV-positive gay man is a product of that same past, but also the past of those that couldn’t reach that status before HIV became manageable. Sean and Nathan’s romance is predicated on an activist past that gave Théo and Hugo

the interventions they are so concerned with in their narratives. The reviewers of these films willingly blind themselves to the dramatization, the fictionalization, and the narrativization present in the films in order to situate them within a larger practice of memorializing the HIV/AIDS crisis and those that died during it, or creating history and filling in the gaps of community memory that have developed within gay male sexual networks. And it is these gaps that strike to the core of the reviewers' preoccupation with history. Their preoccupation brings into focus that lack of memory in public discourses and in these networks. The films then act as part of the larger community-based-and-driven archive that allow for community memory; *120 BPM* and *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* are pedagogical tools for young gay men without a living memory of AIDS – even HIV – or without gay elders that can transmit that memory to earlier gay generations.

Understanding the discourse occurring with contemporary HIV/AIDS cinema is not complete, however, without reference to the way in which film criticism handled HIV/AIDS cinema from the past, specifically cinema produced and screened during the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis. As such, we turn to Rosa von Praunheim's *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral* (1986) whose engagement with HIV/AIDS merits attention; it was explicitly political in its depictions of HIV/AIDS and challenged audiences, activists, and authorities with its satirical edge.

Vincent Canby, in his review of *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral* – the English title being *A Virus Knows No Morals* – for *The New York Times*, provides a short recapitulation of the film's plot and a blurb about Rosa von Praunheim, before asserting that the director “doesn't pretend to have answers to the questions that are raised,” and that the goal of the film “is to provoke, embarrass and enrage - to persuade people to think” (Film: ‘Virus,’ a Caustic AIDS Satire). Immediately, the reception of *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral* differs immensely from the reception of contemporary cinema; where Ducastel's, Martineau's, and Campillo's films are received as

narratives with political capacities, von Praunheim's film is deemed directly political. AIDS, the present threat that it was, is political in itself, and by provoking – through satire – the political nature of AIDS is amplified and designed to generate an emotional reaction. Indeed, Canby notes that von Praunheim "...doesn't traffic in false hopes or positive images. He deals in doom," a reference to the director's consistent utilization of HIV/AIDS within his cinema of the time (Film: 'Virus,' a Caustic AIDS Satire). The review ends with Canby describing the film as "armed camp," affirming the political impact that *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral* has (Film: 'Virus,' a Caustic AIDS Satire).

Der Spiegel's treatment of von Praunheim's film generally follows the same path, with Michael Merschmeier recounting the film's ensemble characters and their absurd positions with the film. His preoccupation with the characters, along with a general breakdown of gay politics which framed the gay liberation movement up until AIDS lasts until the end of the review, when he moves past plot summary and political quotes from von Praunheim. „Wissen wir doch: Nah beieinander liegen Komödie und Tragödie, Lachen und Weinen...“ [*We know: close together lay comedy and tragedy, laughter and tears...*] (Merschmeier). This sentiment, an acknowledgement of the severity of the HIV/AIDS crisis at the time of the film's release is only affirmed further in the last lines of the articles, in which Marschmeier writes, „Jetzt geht, leider, das Überleben vor. Und Lachen ist ja gar nicht schlecht, wenn das Lieben so gefährlich ist,“ [*Now, unfortunately, survival comes first. And laughter is not at all bad, when love is so dangerous.*] (Apokalypse Wow!). These last lines underscore the unique circumstances at hand when *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral* was released, a historical moment in which life was suddenly dangerous (if one were gay), and survival became a reality, rather than a hypothetical.

The film criticism surrounding *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral* functions almost nothing like the reviews for contemporary HIV/AIDS cinema. Where contemporary reviews offered perspectives on medicine and medical interventions (implicitly), the functions of narrative, and the historicization and memorialization of HIV/AIDS, early criticism – when straying from plot summary – settles on the vital stakes of HIV/AIDS omnipresent in any film concerning the topic. However, due largely in part to the satirical nature of von Praunheim's film, early reviews temper their somberness with humor, recognizing, as is seen in reviews for *120 BPM*, life at the end of life.

It is this connection, life at the end of life, which encapsulates the importance of understanding the impact of contemporary HIV/AIDS films on public discourse. Far from the tentative acceptance of death (and resistance against it through humor and satire), contemporary criticisms celebrate the capacity for films to renegotiate that same death; by retroactively portraying life at the end of life, *120 BPM* in particular hearkens back to that resistance and allows us to redefine a historical narrative bound up in loss as a narrative bound up in life, joy, love, and sex *in spite of* that loss. The reviews for *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* extend this sentiment into the present time, rejecting in whole life at the end of life and grounding HIV/AIDS as managed, as not being the thing that causes the end of life. This trajectory functions to enable readings of *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* and *120 BPM* as texts that renegotiate, reimagine, and rethink HIV/AIDS, readings which are predicated on a broader public discourse which does the same and which is applied to these films.

6.0 Cruising for a Boyfriend: The Slut Finds Homonormativity

With readings of *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* and *120 BPM* enabled, we turn to Ducastel's and Martineau's film to address questions of monogamy and promiscuity within the sex club space. This question is of importance in generating an understanding of public gay male sexual networks and how one may operate within them. This section first focuses on cruising and its manifestations, followed by an exploration of the shift between promiscuity and monogamy as realized in the film's sex club scene and beyond. We then turn to *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral* as a point of comparison, highlighting the unique situation that *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* operates under, with specific attention given to the sex club space and the toleration of promiscuous activity.

Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau begins with an extended sex club scene in which the titular characters, Théo and Hugo, in which the audience meets the characters. At the onset of the film, we are introduced to an unnamed man, described only as "homme au smartphone," *man with smartphone*, in film credits. His torso, rather than his face, greets us, signaling a possible erotic investment that privileges the anonymous over the identified. This possibility is affirmed as the camera pans over to a group of naked men, their faces enveloped in shadow. At the same time, the camera centers on a neon sign loudly naming the space we are in, "L'IMPACT," situating this club space in the real Parisian sex club called "L'IMPACT." The opening of the film thus constructs the circumstance of engaging in *named* space, imbued with inherent norms and ways of being and doing, yet filled with *unnamed* and *anonymous* figures within that space. This tension between the named and unnamed works illustrates one of the ways of being and doing of "L'IMPACT," specifically by articulating a type of sociality that is physically intimate, yet that does not rely on

personability. Knowledge of the body, made intelligible by the space's expectation of nakedness and its lighting which lends itself to obfuscating the face, is of greater importance than knowledge of the person, made intelligible by the face and its associated personalities, which are retrievable through future recognition of those faces encountered in the past. Put differently, the onset of the film presents the sociability found within the practice of cruising, characterized by anonymous sexual encounters in public or pseudo-public space. Cruising then facilitates transitory relationships between people without the precondition of meeting again, without the pretense of being a person outside of the cruising space itself. By centering the body rather than the face, the cruising presented in *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* permits erotic possibilities beyond the individual; the locus of desire may shift across bodies and proliferate amongst them. Within moments of the film beginning, we are situated as being within a site of cruising and are introduced to the relational expectations of it. Put differently, the film's privileging of bodies over faces enables a promiscuous engagement with the erotic scenes presented to us through the practice of cruising. The following considers the practice of cruising as it manifests in the film. Specifically, cruising comes to function not only as the framework of body and camera movement, but also the framework from which audiences are primed to engage with the film and its depictions of erotic activity.

The shifting and proliferation of desire and its associated pleasures is present throughout the initial sequence of the film, manifest in its depictions of group sex in the club. As "homme au smartphone" (from this point forward referred to as *the cruiser*) descends into the depths of the sex club, he is presented with a sea of bodies engaged in orgy, and he begins cruising. The camera shifts, framing him in a closeup as his eyes pan over the bodies before him. This is followed by a cut as the camera directs its own looking at the bodies *the cruiser* had been perusing. This

relationship continues, resulting in a shot-reverse-shot dynamic that cues us into the visual intimacies associated with cruising. One does not look at another face-to-face, instead the intimacy resembles a face-to-body relationship which disperses the act of looking amongst those bodies present in the cruising space. We are invited to peruse in the same way as *the cruiser*; each body a source of potential erotic appeal, and we are untethered to one erotic interest or one person. Enabling this mode of looking is the camera's continuous movement over bodies engaged in sex; as *the cruiser*'s look moves, so does the camera's, and thus so does ours. Even if we were so inclined to not participate in the cruising that we are thrust into, the orgies' participants complicate an audience's capacity to focus erotic desire onto one body. Their own engagement with individuals is constantly in flux. Such flux is perhaps most explicit at 02:33 in the film, as the camera focuses on what appears to be two men embraced in a kiss. However, one of them begins moving in his erotic investment, traveling in his sex. By the end of the sequence, he travels along three men, whose faces are unidentifiable through the use of shadow. This constellation of circumstances, the shot-reverse-shot dynamic constructed by *the cruiser*, the rejection of the face in favor of the body, the camera's insistence to move along and amongst bodies, and the orgy participants' continually shifting sexual and erotic partners ensure our complicity and engagement in the film's practice of cruising.

Though promiscuous relationality is similarly constructed through the sex club scene in *Théo et Hugo*, it is complicated by the introduction of a monogamous narrative structure. This complication manifests as a relational progression from the promiscuous to the monogamous. It is predicated on structural and visual changes, as well as the shifts in the way pleasure is brought about. As the scene continues, *the cruiser* lays his eyes upon a voyeur, the titular Théo, who is transfixed on two people having sex. This moment begins a relational shift from a proliferation of

bodies and their pleasure to a binary relationship of two bodies engaged in sex together. The loci of pleasure decrease, erotic possibility is collapsed into conventional erotic dimensions. The camera optics dramatically shift as well. Whereas the camera previously simulated the looking of *the cruiser* in the first part of the sex club sequence, the camera now breaks free from this relational confine. It is now capable of viewing without a guide, and the camera's freedom is affirmed as we witness *the cruiser* execute the act of cruising – attempting to caress Théo – but being rejected. *The cruiser* leaves frame, the camera panning to match his movement. The mentor which gave his crash-course in cruising disappears entirely. The viewing that occurs now is the camera's own and by extension our own. We move past complicity into action. In a certain sense, we operate as a cruising figure within the space of the film, permitting our own promiscuous viewing.

This newfound viewing freedom is spent, however, by looking at Théo, who finds himself in various sexual acts while continuing to be transfixed on the aforementioned couple, whose sex escalates in intensity from enthusiastic making out to penetration. We do not pan over bodies, there is no expansion of erotic possibilities. As the sex club scene continues, Théo escalates with his own partner, topping him in a parallel act that mimics the fucking that the couple is doing. Both Théo and his object of desire, who we will find out to be is the also titular Hugo find themselves topping someone while face-to-face with each other, configuring themselves geometrically as a pyramid. This moment offers a potential reassertion of promiscuity; there exists pleasure amongst four bodies, yet the potential is complicated by the camera's, or our, insistence on watching only Théo, Hugo, and their pleasure. In fact, the other partners are in the background, their faces are ironically obscured not because individuals do not matter, but because these people *particularly* do not matter. Only the titular two matter. It is their pleasure and their connection that we are

interested in, regardless of the others engaged in sex. This moment in the film functions as an inflection point in which binary relationality realizes itself as monogamous.

As the film progresses past this inflection point, the two kiss and look each other in the eyes; the act of open and promiscuous looking ends, the only thing they see are each other. The sex club scene then collapses into a fantasy sequence that situates Théo and Hugo in a pseudo private sphere in which they can have sex by themselves without the intrusion of another, creating an exclusive sexual partnership within a space whose sexual ethics call for inclusivity. Théo and Hugo re both bathed in white light as other sex club participants are cast away into corners, shadowed and disengaged, further highlighting the exclusion they are engaging in. After a brief sex sequence, the fantasy ends and they find themselves back in the sex club space, though they are separated from the others, their attentions only on each other.

Following the fantasy sequence, the relationship between Théo and Hugo continues to develop, and multiple intimacy-producing strategies are deployed to distinguish their sex as unique. Sexual positioning, particularly the use of the missionary position and the introduction of speech as a communicatory act function to generate forms of knowledge about the other that had previously not been produced earlier in the scene. Momentarily after the fantasy sequence, they begin engaging in penetrative missionary sex, marking the film's capitulation into monogamous relationality. At the same time, the first words of the entire film are spoken, sixteen minutes and twenty seconds into the film:

[ENGLISH SUBTITLES]

THÉO. You always keep your eyes shut?

HUGO. I'm with you. It helps me be with you.

THÉO. I want to look at you.

As the two engage in missionary sex, Théo's desire for connection moves beyond the physical and into a more abstract realm. The locus of desire is no longer one that can cross bodies but takes on an interiority; it is Hugo as a person, someone whose eyes can be gazed into, whom Théo desires, not just Hugo as a vector for physical pleasure. The act of speech therefore affirms a non-promiscuous sexual ethics that arose via the scene's earlier visual-relational shifts, the collapse of pleasure to being between two people, and the adoption of conventional erotic dynamics. Hugo's admittance that the act of non-looking is a strategy of being with Théo reciprocates the intimate relationality being constructed between them. They verbally articulate a connection that rejects a sensibility of sexual openness, and instead cements the exclusive dynamic imagined during the fantasy sequence. The speech act is furthermore a contravening of the sexual ethics of the space they are participating in. Before Théo and Hugo began fucking, all other forms of connection were done non-verbally. The act of speaking thus takes on a sort of taboo status; the recognition of the other that speech can entail complicates, and in the case of Théo and Hugo, interrupts the sexual openness that cruising in the sex club entails.

Concerning sexual positioning, the exclusive dynamic constructed between them is not only one predicated on the speech act, but also one which relies upon the configuration of bodies necessary to perform the missionary position. Only through engaging in the missionary position can Théo endeavor to gaze into Hugo's eyes; the missionary position permits an intensification of intimacy that permeates the body. The potential for exclusivity is established through the act of looking at and into each other; mutual recognition may occur, and the capacity to form a bond beyond touch-as-pleasure and touch-as-desire is created. The missionary position furthermore creates a spatial form of exclusivity that prevents the incorporation of other individuals into the sex act. One's back is turned from the potential other, you do not engage with those bodies you

cannot see. This exclusion extends to both bodies engaged in missionary, and the intensity of the exclusion increases as the position tightens and two people get closer together. This intensity peaks through the act of kissing; the back shuns the other in totality, and there exists no room for other partners. This intimacy is achieved in *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*. After speaking, the two begin to kiss again and they collapse onto each other during their sex, grasping each other until orgasm. They provide no room for another to complicate their exclusive sexual dynamic.

It is from this point, the climax of their entanglement and of their intimacy, that speech – and the knowledges and intimacies which can be produced from it – overtakes that which can be achieved through (silent) sex acts. The rest of the film’s narrative revolves around them developing their relationship over the course of the night. The film itself ends in an affirmation that their development, from finding each other amidst the sex club, leaving its basement hand-in-hand, to roaming the streets of Paris, was one that results in the founding of a relationship that can be understood as monogamous and long-term. At the end of the film, Théo and Hugo enter Théo’s apartment and Hugo initiates further erotic intimacy. This new intimacy is littered with speech. Théo discusses his fraught family situation and Hugo articulates the pleasure he derives from Théo as being something that is beyond the indiscriminate touch of the sex club; the pleasure is predicated on *Théo* being the object of his desire, it is the recognition of Théo’s person which drives Hugo’s desire. They allow themselves to be vulnerable in ways that the sex club is ill-equipped to facilitate. They are vulnerable beyond the act of fucking. This culminates in Hugo weaving a future in which after the two wait the three months and twenty-eight days to see if Théo is sero- or HIV-positive, that they will remain together.

HUGO: We’ll keep going. There’ll be no reason to stop. We’ll stay together. For a long time.

THÉO: How long?

HUGO: A long time. I don't know. Let's say... 20 years. In 20 years, we'll do so much.

They admit that in the end they'll break up, like everybody else does, but assures that it will be worth it. They then leave together as the clock turns to 6AM, a new day of them together for the foreseeable future. Thus, the monogamic foundation set during the sex club scene predicated on speech, sexual positioning, and the rejection of multiple sex partners is realized in full by the end of the film. As such, Théo and Hugo achieve the homonormative ideal of monogamy, rejecting the ethics of promiscuity that had driven them earlier in the night.

Following an articulation of the film eventual triumph of monogamy, it is appropriate to detail the day-to-day functioning and the norms of the sex club space against the depiction of it in the film. We return in this moment to my own engagement with L'IMPACT, the actual sex club that we find ourselves in *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*, and its utilization of space in constructing an ethics of promiscuity. As in the film, the lighting of L'IMPACT is adept at creating shadow, working to enhance a sense of anonymity, and obscuring one's ability to engage in recognition based on the face. Furthermore, the walking and movement between orgies and established groups performed by the film's introductory *cruiser* is ubiquitous in the sex club space. During my time in the space, I found myself noticing that the space lent itself to the creation of circuits in which people would travel. One would enter part of the space, and if it did not suit them, they would continue moving about until they found the pleasure they were looking for. Movement is essential to the space. The film perhaps waters down this aspect by situating innumerable orgies or other instances of group sex within the sex club space for the camera to look upon, though it could be imagined that everyone did in fact find the pleasure they were looking for, including Théo and Hugo, whose pleasure turned into an intimacy that launched a monogamous narrative.

Regardless, there is little question to how the sex club operates, and in the same vein, reception and critiques of sex club spaces are quick to point towards their explicitly promiscuous nature.

These critiques are not a contemporary development. Early HIV/AIDS narratives latch onto the picture of the promiscuous bathhouse and interrogate the space via that context. The early German HIV/AIDS film *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral* by Rosa von Praunheim, released in 1986, critiques the bathhouse through its depiction of it as an explicitly promiscuous and risk-laden; the bathhouse rejects a monogamous ethic in favor of a proliferation of sexual partners. This depiction offers a point of comparison between the contemporary depiction of places of public sex, one which tolerates a promiscuous ethic for the means of creating monogamous relationships, and early depictions of these sites, which situate them as problematic and potentially dangerous for their commitment to promiscuity.

Ein Virus kennt keine Moral introduces the bathhouse space through the figure of Rüdiger, the owner of the bathhouse in which a substantial portion of the film takes place. In order to accurately place the bathhouse of Praunheim's film in relation to the sex club of *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*, the baseline differences between a sex club and a bathhouse (as manifested in the two films) must be articulated. When the bathhouse first appears on the screen in *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral*, we are greeted by what appears to be a café; men smoke cigarettes, drink hot beverages – unclear on the type – and chat idly amongst themselves. This space is not, however, one merely for socialization between queer men. The men are covered only by a towel, and the camera shifts rapidly between them, capturing closeup shots of their covered groins, which are consistently being touched or caressed by themselves or by another. This part of the bathhouse then operates as a site for erotic sociability for certain, but not one for the fucking we encounter in *Théo et Hugo*. Yet, there are hints at this type of sociability in that film, though it is quickly pushed

to the side in favor of its marathon sex scene. As *Théo et Hugo* opens, *the cruiser* that introduces us to the sex club space first navigates his way through an upstairs bar in which we can glimpse a group of naked men merely discussing amongst themselves. The film glosses over this sociability, pulling focus on its intense portrayal of promiscuity and the remarkable situation that the titular characters find themselves in. This choice functions to ratchet up the transient nature of the sex club, whereas the bathhouse gestures towards the possibility of more lasting relationships predicated on socializing without fucking. The difference between these spaces then become clear – the sex club’s only purpose is to facilitate sex, while the bathhouse house offers room for more beyond the act of sex itself.

Returning to the film, within the first minute, Rüdiger, the bathhouse owner, explains his relationship the bathhouse and to sex. Rüdiger, though he has lover, cannot “love just one,” that “sex means to [him] freedom with many” (Praunheim). Immediately, Praunheim frames sex in the bathhouse as a necessarily promiscuous affair, to the point that a lover cannot propel someone to monogamy. Thus, the audience is primed to perceive the bathhouse within in the film through the same lens, reading intimacy and sexual acts as inherently promiscuous, complicating the ability to read the socializing at the beginning of the bathhouse sequence as something more than mere foreplay before moving into sex.

This framing is affirmed as the film moves past its initial pan over the bathhouse space. As the bartender/barista of the bathhouse speaks to his boss, he remarks that the day’s theme is “Buddies’ Day,” and that the patrons are “fucking their dicks off” (Praunheim). This moment functions to further downplay the lightly erotic nature of the front end of the bathhouse; one is supposed to come with someone they already know, thus explaining the social atmosphere. We are shown, however what happens in the back of the bathhouse as Rüdiger ventures past the front.

The distinction between front and back, between the erotica-but-not-too-forward and the backrooms which may be found in gay bars and other venues operates further as a metaphor for the things visible and knowable to the (general) public, and the things kept behind closed doors, only for those in the know. This notion of secrecy and hiddenness manifests as the film depicts the back of the bathhouse.

The backroom – though the space appears larger than one room – scene opens by showcasing two men grappling each other in the throes of sex, their bodies shadowed by a beaded curtain. The camera pans up and down their bodies, providing a moment of erotic viewing pleasure. The camera eventually pulls back, reveals men throughout the space, also in shadow, as they cruise the backroom. The sex is overlaid by dialogue between Rüdiger and the bartender, during which Rüdiger explains his –and his patrons’ – aversion to Safer Sex and they make a direct reference to the closure of bathhouses in San Francisco, drawing a parallel between the bathhouse in the film and the bathhouses in the United States. This reference evokes the decision of San Francisco’s Public Health Director in 1984 to shutter bathhouses and sex clubs as a response to the AIDS crisis. Specifically, the rationale for their closure was that the sites were “fostering disease and death,’ by allowing indiscriminate sexual contacts that could spread AIDS” (The New York Times). Thus, by comparing the film’s bathhouse to those in San Francisco, the nature of the bathhouse is thrown into question. Is there indiscriminate sex, and how does intimacy operate in this space? Does the bathhouse prove to be a danger to the health of its patrons? It appears, however, that Praunheim has already answered these questions by the time they arise. Rüdiger is explicit in his affirmation that the bathhouse is not for Safer Sex, and as Rüdiger explain, “we won’t let them take away the freedom we fought so hard for ten years to achieve” (Praunheim). Put differently, he is adamant in protecting the ability for anyone to have sex with however many people they desire without any

regard for the concept of Safer Sex, which at the time was not a deeply ingrained sexual ethic within queer communities.

The film's promiscuous ethic remains throughout the remainder of the film; there is no shift into monogamy or a normative configuration of relationality. In fact, three-fourths of the way into the film, Rüdiger enters a fantasy sequence in the bathhouse during a drag night which plays out Edgar Allen Poe's "The Mask of the Red Death." The fantasy sequence is, however, interrupted by a militant AIDS activist, who accuses Rüdiger of exploiting gay people for money while HIV is transmitted in the bathhouse space. This scene brings with it a moment of finality in terms of interrogating the bathhouse space. Through a rendition of "The Mask of the Red Death," Praunheim reveals in no uncertain terms the nature of the bathhouse, and the film's judgement of it. In the short story, nobles along with Prince Prospero isolate themselves in an abbey in order to escape the caused by the Red Death. While at the abbey, they party lavishly, and during a masquerade ball the Red Death appears, eventually killing Prince Prospero and the guests of the abbey. Rüdiger takes on the role of Prince Prospero, inviting people to come into the bathhouse, and evidenced through his dialogue at the beginning of the film, scoffs at any mention of Safer Sex. Rüdiger's patrons operate as the nobles parting at the masquerade ball, a parallel made all the stronger by the fantasy sequence's placement during a drag show. They also believe themselves able to escape their own Red Death, that of AIDS; they have sex indiscriminately without practicing Safer Sex. The militant AIDS activist who intervenes in the space becomes the Red Death, and he is dressed the part as well. He shatters the illusion of the bathhouse, bringing to light the irredeemable nature of the place.

Compounding the irredeemable nature of the bathhouse is the militant activist's references to the Holocaust. Following the breakdown of the fantasy sequence and his accusations against

Rüdiger, the activist compares the bathhouse to an “extermination camp” alluding to the systematic genocide of Europe’s Jews by the Nazi regime (Praunheim). The activist presses forward with his allusion, demanding that as the drag queens, which fill the space, flee the bathhouse, they leave behind all of their jewelry. This request is followed by a closeup of the activist holding out a skull mask to hold the jewelry as it quickly fills with the drag queens’ precious objects. During this sequence, he shouts out for the patrons to go faster, taking on an aggressive and pseudo-military tone. While the Holocaust reference is unmistakable as soon as he words “extermination camp” are uttered, the scene ends with one drag queen crying out “the family heirlooms,” adding a final reference to the destruction of heritage and community memory brought on by the Holocaust. Through this perhaps misguided – though validity of the film’s Holocaust comparison will not be interrogated here – comparison, the bathhouse not only is a sight of naïve revelry as constructed through “The Mask of the Red Death,” but becomes a sight of malice and intentional harm done to the gay community through the space’s promiscuous and Safer-Sex-averse ethics.

The depiction of the bathhouse space in *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral* does not stray from a condemnation of the space and its insistence on promiscuity. The site itself cannot be rehabilitated; its existence spells the doom of those that participate in it. This depiction differs greatly from that of *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*, in which the promiscuity of a sex club is portrayed only for indiscriminate sex to collapse into monogamous fantasy and the foundation of a monogamous couple. Juxtaposed together, however, and the baseline method of operating remains the same – promiscuous sex with as many people as one desires. This prompts and interrogation of the ways in which *Théo et Hugo*, and other contemporary HIV/AIDS narratives work to rehabilitate sites which facilitate promiscuity, whereas early HIV/AIDS narratives, most strongly realized in Praunheim’s film, make no attempt to redeem them.

I locate the work that *Théo et Hugo* does within the framework of homonormative politics. The space of a sex club is, by definition, an affront to homonormative politics; if the sex club facilitates the proliferation of partners, homonormativity demands one monogamous partner. If the sex club celebrates public sex, homonormativity locates sexual activity squarely in the private sphere. The film, however, does not reject the sex club outright. Instead, it offers the sex club as a starting location, a place which facilitates not only the proliferation of partners as seen amongst the majority of the club's patrons, but also the development of normative sexual relations. *Théo et Hugo* gestures towards the paradoxical monogamous possibilities of the sex club, and it latches onto this possibility and develops it throughout the film. The film does not capitulate to an outright rejection as did *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral*. Instead, *Théo et Hugo* modulates its approach to promiscuity by offering a route towards redemption, thus rehabilitating the spaces which were so deeply demonized that they were compared to Holocaust extermination camps.

What makes, however, this redemption possible? *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral*'s position on the state of sites for public sex functions within a material framework, which is different than *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*'s. The release of *Ein Virus*, 1986, corresponds to the early days of the AIDS epidemic, specifically one year before the introduction of AZT in 1987 and ten years before the introduction of triple therapies in 1996, which finally made HIV a truly manageable disease. Praunheim's film therefore reflects the reality in which AIDS patients and people with HIV had little concrete evidence that there were medical interventions on the way. The running understanding of being HIV positive was that, especially amongst the new media, HIV and AIDS was akin to "death," a "killer," and a "plague" (Jones 442). Thus, the bathhouse space was easier seen and understood as a site of death and the doom of gay men. Attempts to

redeem public sex, to make the bathhouse a site for non-transient intimacies or the development of long-term bonds, were perhaps untenable.

The medical situation that surrounds *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* is, however, vastly different from Praunheim's film. Beginning in 2012, PrEP was introduced in US markets, and was subsequently made available in France in 2017. Beginning in 2016, the concept of Undetectable = Untransmittable (U=U) arose to explain that people living with HIV while under effective medical care are unable to transmit HIV to other people. These recent medical interventions, while still a point of futurity – though which became a living present – when the film was released in 2016, allows for a reading of the film that minimizes the public health harm that sex clubs and other sites of public sex can represent. The reality is U=U is implied in *Théo et Hugo* as well; Hugo tells Théo that his viral load is undetectable, offering a gesture towards the low risk that Théo has for HIV transmission after being exposed during sex with Hugo. Together, *Théo et Hugo* can offer a redemption of the sex club space because of the end of HIV/AIDS being a death sentence.

This redemption is not, however, unconditional. In order for the sex club to become a site worth tolerating, the finding of a monogamous partner is paramount. We are not interested in the narratives of those other sex club patrons that continued in their promiscuous sex and transient relationships. We find meaning instead in those titular two which could utilize the freedom granted by the space to fall in love at first sight. It should not be lost on us that the film utilizes a fantasy sequence which literally pushes all other patrons to the far corners of the sex club, generating exclusive space that is capitalized on, making visual the idea of “having eyes for no one but you.” However, concerning *Théo et Hugo* it may be more appropriate to reframe love at first sight as love at first kiss.

It is the act of reframing, or even expansion, which best describes the film's relationship with homonormativity. Specifically, *Théo et Hugo* works to expand the limits of homonormative relationality. It takes the ideal of monogamy and expands the ways in which one can reach it. Flirting becomes a knowing look while cruising at the sex club. Courting becomes sealing the deal as you head off to have sex. It is a toleration of the once intolerable, a reinterrogation of those spaces once cast aside as for the unrespectable. The politics of homonormativity have a new playground – the cruising basement of your local sex club.

7.0 Misplaced Condoms: The Politics Safer Sex and Risk Reduction

With the concept of monogamy and promiscuity properly elucidated, questions of Safer Sex and risk reduction can be clearly articulated and explored. These discourses are intimately tied to the previous section, with many integral moments which concern risk reduction within the very same scenes that were analyzed for the purposes of asserting a monogamous/promiscuous ethic. This section first revisits *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* and the sex club scene, incorporating the condom and risk reduction into the conversation, before turning to *120 BPM*. Through these two films, this project seeks to trace discourses around Safer Sex and risk reduction, as well as articulate certain sexual scripts which are produced via these films and their investments in Safer Sex regimes.

In considering *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* and *120 BPM*, the films' insistence on detailing Safer Sex regimes and the characters adherence to (or disregard for) them are underscored. What emerges in the film is a good example of a genre pattern within a vast majority of contemporary HIV/AIDS narratives – conversations about and negotiations around Safer Sex, safe sex, risk reduction, and knowledge about risk all play a role within the narratives. This dynamic points to a greater question that is being asked in these narratives: What is the role of Safer Sex and risk reduction today? We cannot narrow this question any further, mainly due to the narratives' general silence towards specific drug regimens, such as PrEP, and current medical paradigms, such as U=U, that frame and color the broader discourses about gay sex and the shifting attitudes surrounding the role of condoms and other risk-reductive strategies. Even if we don't name PrEP, there is a general recognition that sex is changing, and it looks increasingly condomless and "risky."

While the discussion here focuses on films produced in France, this genre development goes well beyond any limited French national cinema boundaries. These implicit discussions also have a transnational/transatlantic element, with narratives ranging from Europe (including the UK) to the United States engaging in the dialogue of Safer Sex and risk reduction in a 2016-and-onwards historical framework. Television has left an enduring mark and has produced rich historical-fictionalizations and dramatizations of Safer Sex discourses during the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Russell T. Davies' *It's a Sin* (2021) in the UK preoccupies itself with the main character's, Richie's, refusal to engage in Safer Sex discourses and his eventual transmission and series-climax-marking death. *Pose* (2018-2021) by Ryan Murphy in the US has consistent storylines that concern themselves with Safer Sex and its importance during the 80s and 90s. Film is also an important medium in this discourse; film contributions often explicitly incorporate the medical underpinnings of Safer Sex. Robin Campillo's *120 BPM* (2017) documents in dramatic form the medical development in the early 90s, gesturing towards the breakthroughs that would come in 1996, and Ducastel and Martineau's *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* (2016) is unique in that it contextualizes risk reduction within the immediate medical reality in which it was produced – the interventions against HIV available in 2016. This section focuses primarily on the ways in which Safer Sex and risk reduction discourses manifest in Campillo's and Ducastel and Martineau's films. These films elucidate patterns within the greater archive of contemporary HIV/AIDS visual narratives and allow us to interrogate the role of Safer Sex and risk reductive strategies in contemporary gay male sexual networks as articulated through these films.

The best place to begin interrogation is the condom, the mainstay of Safer Sex strategies and perhaps the easiest and most widely available form of risk reduction the sexually active among us can find. Contemporary HIV/AIDS cinema follows suit, and the condom features prominently

in their own discourses. In the beginning sequence of *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*, we are greeted by the sex club, the site in which Safer Sex regimes are most adamantly preached to the naked and pleasuring masses. At first glance, there isn't a condom in sight, or rather, there isn't a penis in sight that would necessitate a condom in the first place. The film form's camera work, which situates us within the limited viewing capacity of a cruiser, first predicated on the sight of a cruising character in the film and later abstracted into a bodyless or audience-originating figure, frustrates our voyeuristic watching by hiding the foremost object of our desire in the shadows. We watch heads move, bodies react to the touches of others, and faces evoke lust and pleasure, but we are not privy to the penises that are central to this phallo-centric place, spare a few moments that pass as quickly as they come. This frustrated viewing, is, however, subject to a sudden shift. The camera cuts to Hugo and his pre-Théo sex partner and we are met with the film's first extended shot of a penis seven minutes and nine seconds into the film. It is shot at an angle that strays from the formal pattern which the camera adhered to prior to the cut, and which will re-adhere to after this formally disruptive interlude (until the scene's later fantasy sequence). Thus, this cut, taking us out of the formal rhythms established throughout the sex-club sequence and prompts us to pay closer attention to the content of the shot; disruption snaps us out of the lull of consuming pleasurable bodies and re-engages possible critical viewing.

While formal disruption plays a role in placing significance on this scene, it is the *penis* itself that is of importance. The first extended shot is spent watching Hugo rolling on a condom in preparation for penetrating his partner. Instead of being met with full-lighted pornography to compensate for the film's teasing of fully perceptible sex, we are instead met with what is perhaps the most unsexy part of sex – the application of the condom, a step often overlooked or completely omitted in pornography. Why invest in the condom? The condom appears to be undoubtedly

important. The film disrupts its formal work, and it complicates what has previously been nearly unending shots of pleasure, specifically pleasure that reads as unmediated and free from outside concern; the sex club reads as somewhat utopic in its liberated sexuality. The sudden, extended, deliberate meditation on the condom demands interrogation. Its shiny latex is at odds with the deep and warm reds that dominate the palette of the scene, and its demand for form – tube, tight, unmoving, closed-off – bumps up against the scene’s fluidity and constant flux. The condom is then not shocking (How can a condom be shocking after 40 years of its demanded use for *every sex act every time?*), but questionable. This meditation gives mediation to the previously unmediated.

Let us return to the suddenly-condomed penis. What does it do? As expected, Hugo penetrates his partner. It is in this moment that the connections between space and penis and condom are concretized. The film’s demand for the condom to be seen in a space which complicates the act of seeing in the first place, and its immediate use to mediate intercourse, specifically anal intercourse, the “riskiest” of intercourses within public health discourses, situates the space in a particular way. The sex club space becomes an adherent to Safer Sex regimes; the condom is used here. This moment further serves then to complicate the presumptions associated with the sex club space, which are implicitly affirmed by the film up to this formal and textual disruption. Safe sex is not something we expect from the promiscuous and no-holds-barred atmosphere of the sex club; the condom seems an afterthought, a regret at the clinic down the line, or even an anomaly. Yet, *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* turns this afterthought into a necessity; the patrons here use condoms and use them effectively – *we’ll even show it to you*. The film eschews growing apathetic attitudes towards risk reduction within gay male sexual networks by visually advocating for condom use in sites within which these networks gather.

The condom at this point reveals itself as integral to conversations about Safer Sex and risk reduction. As we have seen, the condom demands both time and space; it takes up the screen, interrupting formal flow and centering itself as an object for viewing and for considering. Specifically, at this point in the analysis, the narrative insertion of the condom posits a specific way to have sex in the public sexual space found within *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* – sex club sex is latex. However, while the film’s investment in the condom posits a need to consider similar non-cinematic spaces that inspire the setting of the film. For example, L’Impact, the sex club of the film, operates as an actual sex club within Parisian gay male sexual networks. The influence of this space of those who wish to engage (or do engage) in public sex and its associated subcultures is critical to articulating the broader politics of the condom and Safer Sex.

The sex club L’Impact plays an important role within real world gay male sexual networks, a point that further contextualizes the explicit condom use in *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* and its potential impact on the social imaginaries surrounding and the sexual mores and norms within the sex club space. L’Impact has an international reputation that belies its discreet appearance on the street. The website itself has pages in French, English, and Spanish, catering to a linguistically diverse clientele which extends beyond not only the confines of Paris, but also those of metropolitan France. This investment in a non-French clientele is even more apparent in L’Impact’s recruitment efforts. In March of 2022, on a website snapshot accessed via the Wayback Machine, L’IMPACT included a recruitment ad seeking an English-speaking member for their team (L’Impact).

L’Impact’s capacity to welcome diverse clientele is greater than venues like it in Paris. Smaller sex clubs such as XKBoys in the eleventh arrondissement have a website only in French. Larger and more well-known clubs, such as Sun City Sauna, Krash Bar, and Full Metal have sites

which have only French and English pages. An exception seems to be SecteurX, whose site has French, English, and German pages. This is all to say that L'Impact works to offer service to the most possible people they can, and whose reach extends past most other sex clubs in the Parisian area.

The linguistic reach of L'Impact supports its wider popularity within global gay male sexual networks that target Parisian sex clubs for sexual tourism. On anglophone gay tourism sites such as GayCities and misterb&b, L'Impact appears second in their lists of Parisian sex clubs (Paris Bathhouses & Sex Clubs 2023; Paris Sex Clubs & Gay Cruising Guide). On the site stylized as travelgay, L'Impact is a "4 Star Winner" of the "2018 Audience Awards" and a "3 Star Winner" for the 2019 and 2020 renditions of the same award (Travel Gay). Searching on US Google (as of February 7, 2023), entering both "l'impact paris" and "l'impact paris gay sex club" gets hits which reference the film on the set of sites which appear. The pervasiveness of L'Impact within these networks give the sex club a measure of power over how sex clubs are perceived to operate; L'Impact can function as a trendsetter and as a baseline from which people can generate their expectations. The sex club's popularity and weight within the social-sexual consciousness of gay men engaging in public sex venues gives renewed significance of condom use within *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*.

Through an exploration of public gay sex subcultures and the venues which facilitate them, the influence of L'Impact on gay male sexual networks is more thoroughly grasped. The site's prevalence within gay sexual tourism makes the sex club a heavy weight in defining the Parisian public sex community, and thus gives further sway over its treatment of the condom. From this contextualization of the potential impact of L'Impact, we can turn back to the film and thus the resulting impact of its condom.

When Hugo rolls on the condom, exhibiting best practices – we can even see the empty tip leaving space for the future ejaculation which is promised – the film speaks through the space of L'Impact. It articulates without speaking that while when one enters the sex club space, they can expect a never-ending proliferation of sexual partners and the possibilities of limitless pleasure, penetrative sex is something that is mediated by the condom. The limitlessness has its limits, and that limit is set where the threat of STD transmission is involved. This limitation is not, however, a blanket risk reductive measure ubiquitous within the entirety of the sex club space and during every form of sexual contact. Throughout the scene, patrons have oral sex without a second guess; Théo himself receives oral sex from a number of partners, yet he isn't wearing a condom during any of those moments. It is only when he finds himself about to top a partner that he puts on a condom, and we watch him roll on a condom and apply lube in another extended condom-use affirming scene. This distinction is essential in considering the importance of HIV in relation to other STDs. HIV isn't transmittable via oral sex under regular conditions, as noted by the CDC in the US and Sida Info Service in France (*La fellation, est-ce que c'est un risque ?*; *Ways HIV Can Be Transmitted*). Thus, the condom in *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* gains even greater clarity in the public health/Safer Sex labor it is engaging in through this moment within the sex club scene; the condom is there to prevent against the transmission of HIV and thus we wear condoms when engaging in sexual acts in which HIV may be transmitted. L'Impact situates itself as a site in which people adhere to Safer Sex logics, which demand risk reduction from the outset, though it relaxes its adherence concerning oral sex, perhaps in recognition of the near absolute rejection of condom use during oral sex within gay male sexual networks.

The exigence for condom use extends beyond the visual language provided during the sex club scene in the film. As Théo and Hugo exit the sex club together, thus setting off their odyssey

around Paris, they discuss the sex they had and its meaning. As they bike, Théo reveals to Hugo that “[he’d] never done that before. It was [his] first time like that” (Ducastel and Martineau). He then continues, referencing a boyfriend, and casually mentions, “of course we didn’t bother” (Ducastel and Martineau). He even argues that the sex that they had together was somehow “better even. Don’t you think?” (Ducastel and Martineau). It is at this point that suspicion begins to complicate what we had previously seen; Théo’s language echoes that of someone who forgoes or had forgone condom use due to an established intimacy with a partner predicated on trust. This suspicion is voiced by Hugo who asks accusingly, “you mean you fucked me without a rubber?” (Ducastel and Martineau). In this moment, the condom becomes again the preoccupation of the film due to its now sudden retroactive absence.

This absence is implicitly affirmed by Théo through his silence, and Hugo presses on, cajoling him because, “you know sex clubs,” implying that the space is one which requires such preventative measures, or pay the price of transmission. And it is then in this liminal space between protection and non-protection, condom and bareback, transmission and non-transmission, health and non-health that *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*’s investment in Safer Sex and risk reductionist regimes transcend the condom and its primacy. This transcendence, which will take the form of contemporary medical interventions, make the film unique amongst its fellow HIV/AIDS narratives, is enabled in part by the film’s temporal framing being the present day. Other, even more recent narratives such as *Pose* and *It’s a Sin* either spend their discourses solely on condom as prevention or end their narratives – as *Pose* does – by introducing the miracle that is HIV-managing drugs and the hope that came along with it. Other narratives more deeply invested in medical discourses surrounding HIV treatment such as *120 BPM*, which showcases the introduction of new medications and interventions, still rely on the preventative power of the

condom – the film’s promise of the future nevertheless ends in the deaths of those central to the plot who have HIV.

Through *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*, the condom realizes itself as a focal point of contemporary HIV/AIDS cinema. The extent of its importance goes so far as to disrupt form during the film’s extended sex club scene, forcing consideration of its proper wear, use, and function. What makes the condom more extraordinary in the film is the insistence for its presence in the sex club space to begin with, a space in which the primacy of the condom is often subverted or ignored entirely in favor of unprotected or bareback sexual behavior. As such, *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* engages in norm-producing labor that inserts regular and consistent condom use in public sex spaces, influencing the understanding of how one functions within sex club spaces – the utilization of the infamous L’Impact sex club, which operates in Paris and is a common site for sexual tourism, only strengthens the political work done by the film. However, the condom’s importance is not confined to the sex club space, but extends outside of it, generating discourses about the transmission, safety, and risk reduction through its potential absence, thus even further cementing the condom’s role in mediating sexual activity in the film and, ostensibly, within gay male sexual networks.

While Ducastel and Martineau’s film provides is exemplary in articulating the importance of the condom in contemporary HIV/AIDS cinema, other films within the genre also depend on it to contextualize their sexual politics. As such, we turn to these other narratives, specifically *120 BPM*, in order to elucidate the depth of discourse that surrounds condoms throughout contemporary HIV/AIDS narratives; before we can begin to contemplate forsaking the condom, we need to understand the importance of the condom within other filmic contexts.

During the second club scene in *120 BPM*, Sean and Nathan begin dancing together, and the scene blurs as they get closer, transitioning into Sean's bedroom as they disrobe. Belt buckles come undone amongst the discarding of clothes, bodies are craftily spot lit against the dark set, and heavy breathing dominates the scene; everything reads as if we are about to witness the film's first sex scene. This witnessing is on the verge of realization – Nathan kisses down Sean's body – before it is disrupted with force when Sean asks if they can use a condom for oral sex. The two begin negotiating condom use: When Sean asserts that he prefers condoms, Nathan asks pointedly, “prefer or want?” (Campillo). Sean responds by arguing that not using one is dangerous, only for Nathan to demure, “It's not too risky” (Campillo). Sean remains firm, and Nathan relents, the negotiation ending with condom use. The beginning of this scene, the thoughtless can't-get-undressed-fast-enough energy interrupted by the question of the condom, which then segues into a resumption of sex – now mediated by the condom and inflected by rational processing – sparks inquiry into sexual ethics and the conversations surrounding sex, especially Safer Sex and risk reduction methods.

The conversation between Nathan and Sean mirrors rather exactly contemporary conversations around condom use; the utilization of terms such as “preference” and “risky” echo the typed messages on hook up and dating apps which dominate the sex and dating scenes. It is easy to forget that Nathan and Sean are operating under completely different historical circumstance than what gay male sexual networks are today. While Nathan and Sean have sex, HIV and AIDS is an omnipresent force; Sean is living with HIV, and Nathan is HIV-negative. There are no treatments to make HIV manageable or undetectable, meaning that sex carries with it a risk that, for the characters in the film, means life or death. What this scene offers, therefore, is not just a moment of similarity that spans generations, but also an enabling of rethinking

questions about risk; if we are having the same conversations now, as we were back then, how have the stakes changed, and how do we grapple with those changes?

Campillo brings the question of the condom to the forefront of this rethinking, by averting the film's general preoccupation with the pharmaceutical industry and medical interventions, and situating sex, risk, intimacy, and pleasure in the private space of a bedroom and the tools a bedroom provides. This scene therefore operates to make sex a non-activist and de-politicized (in the performative sense) act, allowing it to flourish without the weight of activism and the heat of politics; Safer Sex negotiations become just as normalized and banal in the context of the HIV/AIDS crisis as those negotiations are now. What we are left with – and thus to rethink – is the urgency that is part and parcel of that very banality, and what, if any urgency is rooted in our continuing discourses on Safer Sex. In the pseudo-historical timeline of *120 BPM*, it is through activist and public health labor, in an attempt to save lives, that gives public conversations around Safer Sex the urgency required to turn them banal in the bedroom. Put differently, because gay male sexual networks – of which Nathan and Sean are both part of – are bombarded by public health advocacy (or are part of that advocacy themselves), individual conversations about individual condom use are already part of sexual vocabularies and sexual scripts.

Furthermore, what Campillo details in this scene is the script itself, and the fluidity of sexual encounters with regard to risk reductive practices. This fluidity becomes clear as the two have oral sex and Nathan eventually asks Sean to stop giving him fellatio, because he "...can't with a condom" (Campillo). Fluidity here is marked by individual choice, further depoliticizing the during-the-HIV/AIDS-crisis political act of wearing a condom for each and every sexual act; the deference the two show each other concerning the condom removes the condom from the political realm to the private realm. Yet even in fluidity, a script is offered through that deference.

When Nathan insists his inability to have sex with a condom, the two simply stop having sex without anger or resentment; the condom and its safety is given privilege over the pleasure promised by sex, and Nathan recognizes the boundaries that Sean set at the beginning of the sexual encounter.

From this point, *120 BPM* grapples with a depoliticized sphere of condom use, one that is influenced by public health advocacy (whose advice is often cast as rational and reason-based, and thus also depoliticized to a certain degree), but which gives agency to potential condom-wearing individuals. Through its offering of a sexual script that takes into account individual choice, along with the fluidity in consent and comfortability surrounding condom use, the film functions, however, to take the depoliticized private sphere and re-politicize (for the audience watching) condom-use in the private sphere by making visible and audible those negotiations behind closed doors.

Returning to the concept of script, *120 BPM* functions to not only depict HIV/AIDS-crisis-era discourses surrounding risk reduction, but also develop those scripts to reframe the risk of HIV transmission and insert it into contemporary discourses. As such, the film functions like *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*. Like that film, visual witnessing is integral in *120 BPM* for its norm-producing work – we witness Nathan putting a condom on Sean just offscreen, and watch Sean tie a used condom off after sex. However, Campillo’s film also incorporates speech into its script, adding complexity to the sexual script of Safer Sex which goes beyond the implicit codes of conduct as seen in the sex club space. In this way, the film’s intervention on discourses around safer sex diverges significantly from *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*. Whereas Ducastel and Martineau’s film invests in visual storytelling to advocate for condom use in the sex club space as an unspoken norm, Campillo’s route frames risk reduction as an interlude between foreplay and

“risky” sexual activity. It is speech that dictates the norms of the individual sex act here, speech which is influenced by the predominant risk reductive strategies which permeate Nathan and Sean – but also contemporary gay men’s own – sex lives.

120 BPM and *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*, while operating in vastly different sexual spaces, create sexual scripts which advocate for incredibly similar conduct; the only difference may be that *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* allows for unprotected oral sex. These sexual scripts furthermore mirror the type of conversations (or interactions) that are prominent contemporary sexual risk reductive discourse. *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* embraces the non-verbal communicative strategies of the sex club and portrays condom use as the unspoken rule (the implicit consent of the space excludes unprotected sex) and *120 BPM* reorients the script for bedroom or non-public settings.

8.0 Conclusion: After the Silver Screen

This project has attempted to answer a myriad of questions concerning HIV/AIDS as it exists in the 21st century. Ranging from the notion of monogamy to the prevalence of condoms, crucial inquiries into the current state of gay male sexual networks have been explored through Ducastel and Martineau's *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* (2016) and Robin Campillo's *120 BPM* (2016), with Rosa von Praunheim's *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral* (1986) as a historical touchstone for comparison.

This project began by providing a breadth of contextualization in order to frame these films historically, culturally, and socially, given the massive and systemic changes in medicine and social networking. Of particular importance was the rise of PrEP and incredibly effective HIV treatments leading to the adoption of U=U discourses which foretold (and foretell) an end to both AIDS and HIV. Developing in concert with these medical developments have been various social networks which cater to gay men and their sexual desires, including Grindr, one of the most popular gay dating apps, and Sniffies, a relatively new and rapidly growing app designed to enable cruising. Together, these two strands of development, medicine and the social, have radically altered how gay men approach HIV and AIDS, manifest in a growing toleration and embrace of seropositivity in sexual partners and a revitalization of cruising and other sexual practices that were problematized during the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 80s and 90s. It is from these paradigm shifts that the rest of the project found its footing.

In order to elucidate how these shifts have manifested in public discourses, the project turned to film reviews which critiques all three of the films of which this project consisted. These reviews revealed the banal nature of medicine in relation to HIV/AIDS, affirming the social

shifts that were visible on gay dating/hookup networks and its discourses. The reviews also made clear the memorializing labor of *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* and *120 BPM*, a memorialization which nods to the diminishing impacts of HIV/AIDS as illness on gay male communities and their sexual networks, as well as the gradual making-invisible of HIV made possible through effective antiretroviral treatments and U=U.

Following these contextualizations, the project turned to close readings of the films, beginning with the question of monogamy and promiscuity. Through *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau*, the space of the sex club and the practice of cruising was identified as enabling promiscuity, while other forms of intimate contact, including sex within private (even if fantastical in nature) space and the utilization of speech enable monogamy. This section also explored the politics of monogamy and its relationship to gay male sexual networks. This exploration noted the film's adherence to a homonormative relationship structure, privileging monogamy over promiscuity through the narrative that the film provides.

Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau was then juxtaposed against *Ein Virus kennt keine Moral* with specific attention given to the film's representation of the bathhouse space and its treatment of monogamy. Through this comparison, it was elucidated that contemporary films such as *Théo et Hugo*, while privileging monogamy, do not swear off of promiscuity and the spaces which facilitate it entirely, but rather tolerate them for as means to a monogamous end. This is a radical shift from Praunheim's film, which views public sex spaces and promiscuity as means towards an end which can only be death, thus underscoring the impact of medical developments over the decades.

After the project's exploration of monogamy, it turned towards Safer Sex and condom use through both *Théo et Hugo* and *120 BPM*. Specifically, this section worked to recognize the

films' investment in Safer Sex and condom use, manifest through their insistence on making the condom and its application visible, as well as through complex and extended conversations concerning habitual condom use when engaging in gay sex. More specifically, the films reject barebacking as an acceptable and safe form of sex, regardless of the medical advancements which have made unstable the primacy of the condom.

This project has resisted thus far in theorizing a future in light of these paradigm shifts and the making invisible of HIV, and it will continue to do so. The goal here, since its inception, was to grapple with questions of meaning and impact, not on futures and the unknown. However, the hesitation to gesture towards a future is not only due to scope and an artificial limitation placed upon this project and the potential work it can do. Instead, to gesture towards a future of PrEP is to always gesture towards a future beholden to a medical establishment, one predicated on the goodwill of those who declare in their interests to protect the health of those in the margins. There is not yet a pathway to center the potentially HIV positive subject, especially if that subject is a gay man; their fate is always subject to the power of the majority who for now tolerates queer sexualities, but who has the power to shift back into a homophobic milieu – a shift we are perhaps seeing occur now in 2023. This project does not gesture towards a future because the future it may gesture towards is no future which promises liberation. Until medical innovation may provide a vaccine or a cure for HIV, the future will never be one that allows full and utter agency to the potentially HIV positive subject.

Instead, this project remains in the present, in the massive medical and social changes which have enabled a return to some forms of gay sexual expression that were suppressed during the HIV/AIDS crisis, and thus a return to a proliferation of pleasures. In doing so, this project has also shown how contemporary HIV/AIDS genre cinema reflects these changes, its generic

representations and prioritizations shifting in line with medical interventions and gay male communities' reaction to those interventions. While not utopic in its vision, nor looking towards a future by, of, and for those who were most affected by HIV, this project luxuriates in pleasure, whether it be a homonormative pleasure with its roots in a sex club rendezvous, or whether it is in a backroom with a stranger whose face you'll never remember (with a condom in tow). If pleasure is the present, then pleasure will certainly be the future, even if it is not a future necessarily without the specter of HIV/AIDS hanging over us.

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