

Singin' in the Scourge: Two AIDS Musicals, Two Political and Cultural Contexts

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ABSTRACT

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A comparative analysis of two very different filmic texts, this thesis examines both the disparities and similarities between John Greyson's *Zero Patience* (1993) and Chris Columbus's *Rent* (2005). Both musicals set during the height of the AIDS epidemic, these texts are emblematic of the diverging cultural responses of Canada (*Patience*) and the United States (*Rent*) to HIV/AIDS. This project extrapolates on these incongruent socio-cultural and socio-historical responses through an autobiographical lens and a methodology focused on the adaptation of source texts in each case (respectively *And the Band Played On* [1987] and *Scènes de la vie de bohème* [1888]) and on the genre dynamics of the musical, while similarly assessing the filmmakers' accountability in their representations of the scourge. Persisting into its fourth decade, the pandemic is rarely depicted in contemporary arts and cultural products; this omission and the consequences of such are furthermore addressed through this investigation.

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INTRODUCTION: AIDS, NATIONALITY AND THE MUSICAL GENRE

Perpetually referred to as the virus that came out of nowhere to ravage gay communities, injection drug users (IDU's), haemophiliacs and the impoverished continent of Africa, HIV/AIDS has yet to be halted. Though hopes for inoculation prevail, countless are still living with and dying from this relentless virulent syndrome,¹ to excerpt a famous expression from late AIDS activist and film historian Vito Russo. Indeed, the AIDS virus has been the cause of more fear, concern and widespread panic than any other single medical disaster in the 20th century.²

The epidemic has compelled communities to collaborate in resistance efforts, while other, right-leaning groups nevertheless regard the syndrome as the work of a higher power with a malicious intent to exterminate. Service organizations and researchers continuously struggle to maintain funding while front line workers are faced with the bleak reality that infection rates among youth are once again on the rise. Representations of those living with HIV/AIDS in the media persist in being inaccurate or nonexistent. As confirmed by the VIHsibilité Project, Peoples Living with HIV and AIDS (PHAs) “rarely appear in mass media, but when they do their representation is informed by a relative invisibility.”³ Consequently, HIV stigma and ignorance continue to abound as the scourge persists into its fourth decade.

¹ Russo, Vito. “Why We Fight.” ACT UP Demonstration, Albany, New York. 9 May 1988. <<http://www.actupny.org/documents/whfight.html>>.

² Feldman, Douglas A., and Julia Wang Miller, Ed. *The AIDS Crisis: A Documentary History*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998, p. xxv.

³ Mensah, MN, et al. “*The VIHsibilite Project*: HIV-positive people in the Québec press and community responses.” *AIDS Care* 20.5 (May 2008): 596-600.

Contextualization of HIV/AIDS Epidemic

The 1996 introduction of protease inhibitors to be utilized in combination with antiretroviral therapies changed the contemporary face of HIV treatment; “in basic terms, protease inhibitors...block the action of protease, an enzyme that...HIV...needs to reproduce.”⁴ HIV thus became a chronic, manageable condition for those privileged enough to have access to and financial assistance for the costly medications. The realities of HIV treatment and consequently AIDS changed significantly; a death sentence was no longer certain upon diagnosis.

Prior to the introduction of combination therapies, however, futures for PHAs⁵ were unpromising. The early 1990s, in particular, were an exhausted time at the end of a period when communities were truly beginning to witness the callousness of the virus; attempts to overlook the epidemic’s enormity were hopeless. Douglas Crimp writes of the early 90s, “AIDS became an increasingly unbearable and therefore more deeply repressed topic.”⁶

Indeed, though politicians and government bodies had finally begun to acknowledge the realities of the crisis, issues such as stigma, intolerance, and naivety persisted. Societies and subcultures were living in a constant state of paranoia and anxiety. Crimp speculates that camps who rejected the existence of the virus were acting as such out of fear or the denial that the virus could or would strike within their given

⁴ Nicholson, Joe. “Fighting AIDS: Wonder of Life After AIDS,” *New York Daily News* 25 Aug. 1996: 16-17. In Feldman, Douglas A., and Julia Wang Miller, Ed. *The AIDS Crisis: A Documentary History*, p. 38.

⁵ Formerly referred to as People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLHAs) or People with AIDS (PWAs)

⁶ Crimp, Douglas. “Melancholia and Moralism: An Introduction.” *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002, p. 17.

population.⁷ Similarly, those who did subscribe to the notion of AIDS as a verifiable crisis were oftentimes faced with the “ostensible relief of turning away” after becoming aware of the enormity and despondency associated with it.⁸

In 1993, the first full-length musical feature by Toronto-based political filmmaker John Greyson confronted these issues in a decisive way. With *Zero Patience*, Greyson sought to vindicate French-Canadian flight attendant Gaétan Dugas, accredited with being almost solely responsible for the spread of the AIDS virus in North America on account of Randy Shilts’s blockbuster journalistic text, *And the Band Played On* (1987). Dugas’s story acted as a pretext for addressing the issues that brought upon such despondency in the early years of the epidemic.

Greyson’s musical adaptation, taking thus upon itself the duty of exonerating our fellow Canadian while similarly addressing the nonsensical societal disregard for HIV/AIDS, offered a unique illustration of cinematic responsibility and timeliness unlike any production Canadian filmmaking had seen the likes of before. Through the financial assistance of Telefilm Canada and the Ontario Film Development Corporation, *Patience* defied the typical Canadian filmmaking standard with its postmodern methods and musical format.

A wholly underdeveloped genre of Canadian film, musicals have been undertaken by only a select few brave native filmmakers. *Patience* falls within a tradition of one-off musicals within domestic, English-language film history.⁹ And although he could be said

⁷ Ibid, p. 9.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Waugh, Thomas. “Anti-Retroviral: ‘A Test of Who We Are’.” *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006, p. 290.

to have been anticipated by Richard Benner's musical film hit *Outrageous!* (1977), Greyson's musicality is a genuine prototype for his own and other subsequent Canadian filmic works.

With an unquestionably longer history than Canadian filmmaking, American cinema has itself experienced a degree of variance in terms of diverging levels of studio backing. The end of the 20th century saw a fairly significant convergence between Hollywood and independent filmmaking in the context of the American film industry.

David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson state of American filmmaking in this period, "many of the most thrilling Hollywood films were being created by a robust new generation ... these directors were reshaping the formal and stylistic conventions of the classical cinema while also making their innovations accessible to a broad audience."¹⁰ Independent filmmakers of the likes of Steven Soderberg, Kevin Smith and Quentin Tarantino brought an intelligent variation to the somewhat generic Hollywood standard that had been fashioned out of Hollywood during the 1980s and early-to-mid 1990s.

A new paradigm had thus been set by this fresh breed of American filmmakers, in addition to a power shift to "major-independent" studios such as Miramax and New Line, as investigated by Justin Wyatt. A home for more experimental fare, "this movement towards the major independent as a market force constitutes a key shift in the industrial parameters of independent film, studio moviemaking and the New Hollywood."¹¹

¹⁰ Bordwell, David, and Kristen Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 2001, p. 425.

¹¹ Wyatt, Justin. "The Formation of the 'Major Independent': Miramax, New Line and the New Hollywood." *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*. Eds. Steve Neale and Murray Smith. New York: Routledge, 1998, p. 87.

These distinctive new forces in the forefront of American feature film production thus embraced and fostered new and inventive methods of filmmaking and these respected financial/production houses were more inclined to take monetary gambles—gambles that would have formerly been expected of European filmic fare, or indeed, Canadian filmmaking, as exhibited through *Zero Patience*.

The Resurgent Musical Genre: What the Doctor Ordered for HIV/AIDS

In an effort to maximize their profits and compete with the major independents, studio chiefs desperately sought their own brand of new and original filmmaking strategies and visionaries. For example, 20th Century Fox found a promising approach in acclaimed Australian filmmaker Baz Luhrmann. Anxious to produce filmic products that could compete with the hit-making vehicles of the major independents, Fox handed Luhrmann money and power with the hopes for cinematic glory with his adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996). Received warmly by critics and moviegoers, Fox thus saw plenty of promise and optimism in their Australian protégé.

In the summer of 2001, another ambitious Fox and Luhrmann collaboration changed the composition of American filmmaking for the impending future through its resuscitation of musicality; Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge* opened to massive critical admiration and audience turnout. The final instalment of his red curtain trilogy, *Moulin Rouge* defied the musical standard with its somewhat experimental narrative and subsequently brought revenue back to the so-called "lifeless" musical genre. As John

Kenneth Muir suggests, “a viewing of *Moulin Rouge* engages every faculty it can sink its hooks into: the eye, the ears, the heart, and most importantly the brain.”¹²

Luhrmann’s film brought a decidedly new element to the genre infamously recognized for its passive embracing of song-and-dance, and it’s unforeseen success at the box office set the standard for a revival of the musical filmic format, albeit one that required more active audience participation and engagement. Combined with the respectable (if not slightly disappointing) monetary achievements of Alan Parker’s Broadway adaptation *Evita* (1996), studios once again felt secure in infusing financing into this newly sharpened and germane variety of melodic films.¹³

In the second edition of her seminal text *The Hollywood Musical*, Jane Feuer indicates that a trend towards the resurgence of the Hollywood musical in fact commenced with a selection of teen musicals released in the 1980s. Albeit box office failures, Feuer believes that these musicals intended for teenage audiences returned the genre to its infancy,¹⁴ thus paving the way for the likes of *Evita* and *Moulin Rouge*. Feuer further asserts that this shift was the result of changing industry and audience standards.¹⁵

In accordance with Feuer’s contention, the reinvention of the Hollywood musical at the end of the 20th century was undoubtedly correlated with an evolved social and political context. Filmgoers were looking for a more sophisticated form of escapism, as

¹² Muir, John Kenneth. “From *Evita* to *Moulin Rouge*: 1996-2001.” *Singing a New Tune: The Rebirth of the Modern Film Musical from ‘Evita’ to ‘De-Lovely’ and Beyond*. New York: Applause, 2005, p. 179.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Feuer, Jane. *The Hollywood Musical: Second Edition*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993, p. 129-130.

¹⁵ Ibid.

opposed to the somewhat utopian passive viewership (as exemplified by the lengthy run and financial triumph of 1990s Walt Disney animated musicals such as *Beauty and the Beast* [1991]) that had previously accompanied musical film going.¹⁶ Emerging from a period of right-wing politics compounded with the threat of a newfound immunodeficiency virus, North American spectators were looking for a sharp vehicle of diversion that transcended that which came before it.

The postmodern approach to the musical genre as utilized in *Moulin Rouge* was precisely what audiences had been yearning for. Hollywood finally came to the realization that audiences were willing to pay for an updated take on a dated genre—a fact that was confirmed by the reception of the film adaptation of the stage play *Chicago* (2002). Audiences embraced the self-reflexive aspects of these musical releases, particularly the gracefully inventive and fresh transition to musical numbers.

Feuer elaborates, “self-reflexive musicals are modernist in that they systematically deconstruct those very elements that give the genre its regularity.”¹⁷ Thus, these films’ awareness of their very constructedness, as exhibited through the use of fluid musical sequences, made this new batch of musicals a welcome and apparently overdue box office staple.

Filmmakers, however, quickly appeared to have lost their originality in respects to clever and self-reflectively aware musical narrative strategies. By the time Chris Columbus released his film adaptation of the highly successful stage play *Rent* (2005), originality seemed to have been spread thinly indeed. As Muir determines, “film gets

¹⁶ Dyer, Richard. “Entertainment and Utopia.” *Entertainment Only*. New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 17-34. [*Movie* (London), no. 24, 1977.]

¹⁷ Feuer, p. 126.

inside of things and this can be a blessing and a difficulty, because in the end, in real life, people don't stop to sing to one another."¹⁸ With *Rent*, the creative and newly postmodern approach to bridging¹⁹ between dialogue and song had once again been seemingly discarded as the originality of this fresh batch of musicals seemed to have abruptly dissipated.

Columbus instead produces an almost purely Hollywood-ized representation of the stage play, complete with conventionally constructed over-the-top musical numbers and self-serious performances—working in stark opposition to Greyson's *Patience* which subscribes to a campier and more non-figurative perspective. Discounting the trend that had been reignited for him, Columbus essentially returns to the classical Hollywood musical structure with his adaptation of a text that was so catalytic of HIV/AIDS awareness and community stigma management during its twelve-year Broadway run (1996-2008).

Columbus's delicate subject matter begged for more imaginative and edgy consideration. The urgency and rawness of the original Broadway staging of *Rent* vanished somewhere in the adaptation process; its political consciousness is all but gone. As Crimp asserts, "contingency of political investment is the necessary condition of all art, one that traditionalist notions of art ... work to conceal."²⁰ Columbus seemingly violates this principle by essentially concealing the political essence of Jonathan Larson's enormously influential show and initiating the trend of returning the genre to a more

¹⁸ Muir, "From *Evita* to *Moulin Rouge*: 1996-2001," p. 104.

¹⁹ Bridging is the act of transitioning between a musical's dialogue and a musical or fantastical sequence, which Feuer and others see as a symptomatic site of innovation or conventionality in the musical.

²⁰ Crimp, "Melancholia and Moralism: An Introduction," p. 25.

traditional format and social discourse, effectively heralding the end of Hollywood's brief interval of imaginative, independently-produced postmodern musicals

By comparison, Greyson's film is a *very* politically conscious, self-reflexive, and non-traditional endeavour; the very act of adapting Shilts's text is a politically charged and imaginative gesture. Intent on prompting advocacy within the gay community, *Zero Patience* addresses the mistreatment of a Canadian comrade while similarly injecting a critique of such subjects as government, society and most importantly, sexuality. Greyson uses Dugas's narrative to personify the sombre societal indifference expressed towards PHAs and the neglect of the epidemic from North American authorities. Greyson's use of the musical format effectively helps direct and articulate his frustrations and annoyances regarding this unresponsiveness towards a primarily homosexual viewing audience.

Ultimately, theatrical and filmic representations lack an ability to convey the prolonged struggles of peoples struggling with not only their mortality but also the monotonous labours of subsisting itself. As poet Mark Doty implies in his moving memoir *Heaven's Coast* (1996), "we're raised on film, and movies leave out the continuous, getting-from-here-to-there tissue of experience that holds the heightened moments of life together. All we need, as an audience, are essential gestures."²¹ Having cared for his lover during his struggle with AIDS, which he chronicles in the text, Doty possesses first-hand experience of the devastating effects of the virus.

The filmmaker's/adapter's responsibility to empathetically and originally represent PHAs is thus called into question and becomes an imperative problematic to explore. As Kylo-Patrick R. Hart indicates:

²¹ Doty, Mark. *Heaven's Coast*. Toronto: Harper Collins, 1996, p. 139.

Experts on AIDS emphasize that because different audience members bring diverse personal histories and expectations to the viewing of any message about AIDS, offerings that contain multifaceted viewer appeals while simultaneously communicating information about HIV/AIDS hold the greatest potential to help change both the attitudes and the behaviours fostering the spread of HIV.²²

The loose adaptation and appropriation of *And the Band Played On* and *La Bohème* (the source text for both adaptations of *Rent*) as musicals is thus an intriguing issue to explore. The act of creating a fresh text in the spirit of an existing product (appropriation) versus the feat of explicitly re-visiting and honouring a creative artefact (adaptation) is thus an essential problematic to survey in this thesis.

Song-and-dance in combination with the thematic of the AIDS virus is an odd combination, and one that this thesis similarly intends to investigate. An exploration of the duty of the filmmakers (and the original *Rent* playwright Larson) to approach these projects and assess their subsequent political, moral and cultural responsibility in such an endeavour in two different historical and cultural settings will lead to understanding the diverging social and national responses to the pandemic.

Methodology

A textual and contextual analysis, this investigation essentially aims to unpack how *Rent* and *Zero Patience* were used as musical cinematic vehicles to comment on and process the HIV/AIDS epidemic and to assess their ultimate successes or failures as such. The United States and Canada are decidedly very different cultures, and I will relay the

²² Hart, Kylo-Patrick R. *The AIDS Movie: Representing a Pandemic in Film and Television*. New York: The Haworth Press, 2000, p.85.

political responses of the two countries and the effects of this difference on these two cultural products and artistic statements.

Through use of personal interviews with the likes of original *Rent* Broadway cast member Anthony Rapp, *Rent* screenwriter/adaptor Stephen Chbosky, and *Patience*'s auteur John Greyson, I intend to assess the social responsibility of these artists to provide dependable and accurate interpretations of the epidemic.

The present chapter, "Introduction: AIDS, Nationality and the Musical Genre," in addition to laying out the problematic of my project, will provide a survey of scholarly sources with a similar research thematic. Also, I will propose my research question and elaborate on the reasoning for my interest in this topic.

Chapter II, "*Rent* Stage Play and *Zero Patience*: Different Contexts," is devoted to addressing the various production conditions from which these two products emerge and to studying their respective source products and their practice of adapting and/or appropriating these texts. Furthermore, I will engage with some of the songs used and relate them to one another.

Chapter III, "*Rent* Film and *Zero Patience*: Different Effects," will then address the issues related to the delayed cinematic rendering of *Rent* and the national influences that helped inflect the production of both Columbus and Greyson's films. This chapter will also engage with the notion of stigma in regards to homosexuality and HIV/AIDS and the effects of this on contemporary culture in general and these films's encounter with their audiences in particular.

My conclusion will wrap up the investigation through providing an updated context of the epidemic through an assessment of recent arts/cultural responses to the

epidemic. This chapter will also pose questions for additional research to be conducted in a more comprehensive format.

From the outset, I should speak to the fact that my writing style is fairly eclectic, inspired by Greyson's own scholarly prose. For example, Greyson utilizes autobiography throughout his 2010 MA thesis "PILS SLIP: The making & unmaking of a doc-op about AIDS Activism (or, How do we sing about AIDS?)," and in his earlier articles, "Still Searching" (1992), and "Strategic Compromises: AIDS and Alternative Video Practices" (1990)—I, too, will use a first-person perspective throughout the introduction and conclusion of this project.

Relying on more conventional, "impersonal" scholarly methods throughout the two central chapters, I seek to explore the genre dynamics of the musical while surveying the source texts of the two films under investigation, borrowing from adaptation theory. I will also engage with various queer theorists, but moving back beyond the advent of queer theory in the 1990s, I also am indebted to "gay lib" criticism of the 1970s, which sought to hold artists accountable for "positive images" of homosexuality. Later, ACT UP appealed for similar values in early images of PHAs. As Douglas Crimp explores in "Portraits of People with AIDS," photographer Nicholas Nixon's 1988 exhibition at the MOMA entitled "Pictures of People" was denounced by ACT UP on account of its representation of PHAs as being frail and lonely victims.²³

I plan to evoke and renew this line of criticism as I attempt to assess the accountability of both Columbus and Greyson in providing accurate, informed and ethical representation of PHAs; this notion of the "positive image" is vital to both audiences'

²³ Crimp, "Portraits of People with AIDS," p. 87. [*Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Gary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992).]

ability to empathize with PHAs and their engagement with the ongoing epidemic.

Essentially, I plan to glean how these representations may contribute to or hinder the empowerment of PHAs and if they may facilitate original discussion or strategy through which to engage with HIV/AIDS.

Using this diverse range of methodologies and styles, this project aspires to reflect productively on two cinematic texts that sing [in] the scourge.

Literature Survey

Documentation of the respective local HIV/AIDS community movements in the U.S. and Canada is bountiful. The *ACT UP Documents* (including Jon Greenberg's "Act UP Explained" from 1992 and Vito Russo's "Why We Fight" from 1988) and the *ACT Documents* found on their respective websites are an array of historical and contextual writings and speeches from the two organisations' more-than twenty-year history.

Likewise, the Gay Men's Health Crisis and People with AIDS sites are primary sources that promote their ongoing values and mission statements while summarizing their services offered.

The Canadian AIDS Society and AIDS Action websites are first-rate tools for gauging public policy on the AIDS epidemic and the respective North American national HIV/AIDS agendas. Pertinent to the exploration of the reaction of service organisations and advocates to the virus/syndrome in New York City and Toronto, these websites are essential resources for assessing the initial and continued community, municipal, and national responses to the scourge.

Somewhat more dated writings on the epidemic include: David E. Roger's 1992 editorial, "Report Card on Our National Response to the AIDS Epidemic—Some A's, Too Many D's," initially published in the *American Journal of Public Health*; Marlene Cimons's "U.S. Approves Sale of AZT to AIDS Patients" published on 21 March 1987 in the *Los Angeles Times*; and RO Valdiserri's 2006 piece "HIV/AIDS in Historical Profile" documenting the first 25 years of the crisis and found in *Dawning Answers: How the HIV/AIDS Epidemic Has Helped to Strengthen Public Health*; each serve as important testaments to the assorted contexts in which they were researched and written. A collection of informative documentation from various stages of the response, Douglas A. Feldman and Julia Wang Miller's *The AIDS Crisis: a Documentary History* (1998) is a similarly superb volume for attaining data and historical perspective.

Scholarly treatments of AIDS media cultures and politics are Douglas Crimp's *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (2002; the chapters explored were originally published around the time of *Zero Patience* and the stage play *Rent*: "Randy Shilts's Miserable Failure" [1997]; "De-Moralizing Representations of AIDS" [1994], "Portraits of People with AIDS" [1992]), a seminal collection of his writings and speeches on everything from cultural activism to the representation of HIV/AIDS in film and television, as is Paula Treichler's 1987 article entitled "AIDS, Homophobia, and the Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification" from Crimp's equally important anthology *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (1988). Crimp is typically inclined to write in the first person and add personal anecdotes to his writings and is another model for me. A highly influential and respected scholar and critic, Crimp's text is important for gauging social perspective on the scourge.

Kylo-Patrick R. Hart's *The AIDS Movie: Representing a Pandemic in Film and Television* (2000), Rob Baker's *The Art of AIDS* (1994), and Thomas Waugh's chapter "Anti-Retroviral: A Test of Who We Are" from 2006 are thorough analyses of filmic texts engaging with HIV/AIDS and released through the American and Canadian film and television industries. Each is written with a somewhat melancholic, autobiographical tone while proving abundantly descriptive of the various texts with which they engage. Though Hart's text highly concentrates on mainstream Hollywood offerings, Waugh's chapter provides a worthy antithesis through his survey of more independent and Canadian fare.

For useful and meticulous analysis of the American and Canadian film industries, consultation of Christopher E. Gittings's *Canadian National Cinema: Ideology, Difference and Representation* (2001), Katherine Monk's *Weird Sex and Snowshoes and other Canadian Film Phenomena* (2002), and Bordwell and Thompson's *Film Art: an Introduction* (9th edition published in 2009) have proven valuable for their exploration of applicable historical and cultural influences in their countries.

A more concentrated perspective on American filmmaking trends, Justin Wyatt's 1998 article "The Formation of the 'Major Independent': Miramax, New Line and the New Hollywood" is a key survey of the U.S. industry shift in the 90s to major independent studios which ultimately saw a significant impact on the resurgence of the musical genre. Manjunath Pendakur's *Canadian Dreams and American Control: The Political Economy of the Canadian Film Industry* (1990) provides a Canadian perspective on the American monopolization of Canadian filmmaking as he surveys the economical and circumstantial factors that contributed to the American dominance on Canadian

filmmaking and answers the question of why domestic films like *Zero Patience* ultimately have such a minor impact on a global discursive landscape.

Pertinent to my interest in the backdrop of New York and Toronto in my corpus, an investigation of the representation of cities on film can be yielded through Stephen Barber's *Projected Cities* (2002). Found in *Cities and Cinema* (2008), Barbara Mennel's "The City as Queer Playground" and Matthew Hays's "Where is Here? Here is Queer: Four Defining Bent Moments in Toronto Films," published in the 2009 anthology *Toronto on Film*, are similarly vital contemporary sources for assessing the depiction of queer communities in their pertaining urban spaces. Additionally, Thomas Waugh's "Fairy Tales of Two Cities: or Queer Nation(s)—National Cinema(s)" from 2001, is an exemplary text that engages in an investigation of national and urban spatializations of queer representation.

The literature specifically focused on my two films is plentiful in the case of *Zero Patience* but surprisingly scarce in the case of the film adaptation of *Rent*, which remains unexamined by serious scholars. Richard Dellamora's 1995 article "John Greyson's *Zero Patience* in the Canadian Firmament: Cultural Practice/Cultural Studies," Roger Hallas's "The Genealogical Pedagogy of John Greyson's *Zero Patience*," (2003) and *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image* (2009), are highly practical secondary sources through which to explore Greyson's social critique of the response to the AIDS pandemic while similarly exploring his underlying motives. Additionally, Matthew Hays's recent interview with Greyson from 2007, "John Greyson: Activist with a Movie Camera," explores in great detail Greyson's forthright practice throughout his filmography. Published in *The Velvet Light Trap*, John L. Cagle surveys Greyson's

musical selections in his 1995 article “Tell the Story of my Life...: The Making of Meaning, ‘Monsters’, and Music in John Greyson’s *Zero Patience*.”

Two exemplary scholarly sources investigate melodrama and the representation of the male body: Peter Lehman’s “Crying Over the Melodramatic Penis: Melodrama and Male Nudity in Films of the 90s” (2001) and Thomas Waugh’s “Erotic Self-Images in the Gay Male AIDS Melodrama” (1988, 1992). While Lehman’s text is useful for assessing the context for the representation of male nudity in 90s melodramas, Waugh’s article goes more in depth to extrapolate on the thematic of AIDS in gay-oriented melodrama and the cause and effect of these depictions.

Highly useful primary sources, Greyson’s writings are useful for assessing his proclivity for activism and his disappointments with the global AIDS filmic catalogue entitled “Strategic Compromises: AIDS and Alternative Video Practices” (1990) and “Still Searching” (1992). “Parma Violets and Wayland Flowers,” also from 1992, is an informative article authored by Greyson, articulating his astute approach to film production complete with a mock screenplay that is the prototype for what would eventually become the narrative of *Zero Patience*.

Both *Zero Patience* and *Rent* have a source text that either inspired or stirred Greyson and Larson respectively to write and produce their respective musicals. Greyson was so offended by Randy Shilts’s insinuation that a French-Canadian flight attendant singularly brought HIV/AIDS to North America in *And the Band Played On* (1987) that he was stimulated to produce *Patience*. Likewise, Larson allegedly found inspiration in Henry Murger’s 1888 novel *Bohemians of the Latin Quarter (La Bohème)* and Sarah Schulman’s novel *People in Trouble* (1991), though he failed to acknowledge her text’s

apparent narrative contributions/correlations to *Rent*. Schulman was so aggravated by Larson's alleged plagiarism that she wrote a non-fiction response in 1998 entitled *Stagestruck: Theatre, AIDS, and Marketing of Gay America* in an attempt to reclaim her property. Larson's book, *Rent: the Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical* (1996), remains on the market to this day.

To effectively acknowledge issues of adaptation pertaining to *Patience* and *Rent*, it's imperative to look at scholarly sources on adaptation including the abundant *Novel to Film* (1998) by Brian McFarlane in which he explores adapting stage plays and Robert Stam's "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation," which can be found in James Naremore's seminal compilation *Film Adaptation* (2000). Julie Sanders directly engages with definitions and examples of *Adaptation and Appropriation* in her text from 2005 of the same name while Peter Dickinson's 2007 book *Screening Gender, Framing Genre* partakes in an original investigation of the adaptation of Canadian literature to film through a gender-centric methodology. Other relevant genre analysis includes Linda Williams's surveys of the American melodramatic genre and its evolution in "Melodrama Revisited" (1998) in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*.

Thorough examinations of the resurgence of the musical genre are conducted by John Kenneth Muir and Jane Feuer; Muir investigates the history of musical film and its apparent rebirth in *Singing a New Tune: The Rebirth of the Modern Film Musical from 'Evita' to 'De-Lovely' and Beyond* (2005). Jane Feuer sets the bar high for musical film analyses in her seminal text *The Hollywood Musical: Second Edition* (1993) which engages in discussion of shifting trends while supplying textual analyses. Feuer's text is essential for gauging the avenues and contexts through which modern musical films are

enabled to exist. For information on the Broadway staging of *Rent* and its significance within the contemporary American musical theatre canon, two valuable texts both explore the show's affect: Scott Warfield's "From *Hair* to *Rent*: is 'rock' a four-letter word on Broadway?" found in *The Cambridge Companion to Musicals* (2002) and Scott Miller's "*Rent*" in *Rebels with Applause: Broadway's Groundbreaking Musicals* (2001).

Matthew Christen Tift engages in a survey of the canon of musical representations of HIV/AIDS in his 2008 dissertation entitled "Musical AIDS: Music, Musicians, and the Cultural Construction of HIV/AIDS in the United States." Tift similarly engages with American scholars Douglas Crimp, Susan Sontag, and Paula Treichler before narrowing his focus on three specific musical offerings—John Corigliano's "Symphony no. 1" (1989), TLC's "Waterfalls" (1994), and Red Hot Organization's *America Is Dying Slowly* (1996) album. Tift ultimately indicts a lack of engagement from the music industry in the response to the epidemic.

An extremely moving and worthwhile memoir, Mark Doty's *Heaven's Coast* (1997) is a first-hand account of the suffering and anguish HIV/AIDS can bestow on an individual front. Doty poetically engages with his audience in the name of his dearly departed partner Wally in this essential text for ascertaining the sheer complexity of the grieving process.

Establishment of Research Question

Authored by an individual living with HIV, the purpose of this thesis is ultimately to assess how the cinematic renderings of *Zero Patience* and *Rent* have intersected with the stigma and ignorance surrounding this obstinate crisis. As a PHA, I furthermore seek

to assess the responsibility of the filmmaker and/or adapter in their contributions in relation to the overwhelming and persisting ignorance and negligence around the virus from North American societal and governmental bodies.

Essentially, my aim is to hypothesize how these two arts/cultural representations of HIV/AIDS, *Zero Patience* and *Rent*, have assisted either the spread or our coping with this relentless scourge. Additionally, an assessment of how New York City and Toronto have engaged with the syndrome at a municipal level is essential to measuring this socio-cultural discrepancy. Finally, I wish to explore how my life, those of my friends both living with and affected by HIV/AIDS, and of countless others, could have been affected by alternative representation.

To find these answers, I will address the following questions: what impact have two AIDS musicals from two urban epicentres and two different periods had, cultural and political, on their social environments and on individual lives? Can comparing such different cultural products illuminate my concerns about the ethical responsibility of filmmakers and the larger relation of cinema to societal issues?

RENT STAGE PLAY AND ZERO PATIENCE: DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

The creative act of appropriating and/or documenting a medical catastrophe such as HIV/AIDS—one that has occasioned copious amounts of death and suffering—is an indisputably bold one. One is not only taking upon themselves the great responsibility—ethical, artistic, and political—of speaking for those who have been affected by the scourge, but they are also adding to the chronology of the epidemic and to how audiences base their assumptions and/or judgments regarding it. A failed representation, therefore, could act to further stigmatize PHAs—even a Hollywood big budget flop or an art cinema hit with limited circulation within a minor national cinema.

Intent on combating this stigma, organizations whose efforts were concentrated exclusively on providing support to those affected by the epidemic were and persist to be pertinent to the lives of PHAs. In North America, various such groups were established almost instantaneously in the early 1980s to assist those in need. Their task, however, would not be without results. As Crimp asserts:

The ignorance and confusion enforced by government and the dominant media; the disenfranchisement and immiseration of many of the people thus far hardest hit by AIDS; and the psychic resistance to confronting sex, disease, and death in a society where those subjects are largely taboo—all of these conditions must be faced by anyone doing work on AIDS.²⁴

²⁴ Ibid, p. 39.

Establishment of Local Responses to Epidemic

In New York City and Toronto, arguably the two most affected locales of their respective countries, vigorous and resilient AIDS service organizations (ASO's) were established with the intent to fight: notably, the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) and ACT UP in New York, and Toronto's AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT) and Toronto People with AIDS Foundation (PWA). Additionally, AIDS Action of the United States and the Canadian AIDS Society were established as umbrella organizations for their municipal affiliates and sought to combat the epidemic on a national level.

Each with the objective to provide either emotional or financial, and at times radical political support for affected people, these groups were also seminal in creating an awareness of the epidemic and attempting to provoke greater consideration from their respective governments.

These groups were almost exclusively initiated by gay men, who had most seen the ominous effects of the virus in sick and dying friends and partners. Consequently, gay communities were forced to undergo "rapid social and political change"²⁵ as a form of defence and survival. Fresh from the successes of the gay liberation movements of the 1970s, groups of homosexual men felt obliged to take action. As a result, gays and lesbians set a paradigm for HIV/AIDS support services, through which they informed not only themselves but also countless other communities and cultures worldwide.²⁶

²⁵ Feldman, Douglas A., and Julia Wang Miller, Ed. *The AIDS Crisis: A Documentary History*, p. xxxiii.

²⁶ Kübler-Ross, Elizabeth. *AIDS: The Ultimate Challenge*. New York: Macmillan, 1987. In Feldman, Douglas A., and Julia Wang Miller, Ed. *The AIDS Crisis: A Documentary History*, p. 85.

Founded by six gallant gay men in 1981 to combat the virus that was seemingly victimizing their community,²⁷ the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) was vital in their attempts to create initial awareness and education surrounding the pandemic. While the Reagan administration and Ed Koch, mayor of New York at the time of outbreak, were paying no heed to the affliction, GMHC were doing all they could to hinder mounting transmission rates. As their mandate addresses, "we believe we can end the epidemic by addressing the underlying causes, shifting cultural beliefs and promoting smart behaviours that empower a healthy life for all of us."²⁸ Indeed, their humanitarian approach and unyielding care for the gay community later expanded to other affected minority populations, assists and prevails in creating a consciousness that seemingly few were and even still are willing to coordinate.

The most influential of such groups, ACT UP/New York, an acronym for AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, was established with the intent to provoke action. During its heyday in the early 1990s, co-founder Larry Kramer estimates that the organization's membership (inclusive of membership in its national subsidiaries) was approximately ten thousand people.²⁹ As outspoken member Jon Greenberg explains, ACT UP "is a diverse, non-partisan group united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis. We meet with government and health officials; we research and distribute the latest medical information; we protest and demonstrate. WE ARE NOT SILENT."³⁰ Arguably

²⁷ "About Us." *Gay Men's Health Crisis* online. <<http://www.gmhc.org/about-us>>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Kramer, Larry. Interview with Sarah Schulman and Jim Hubbard. *ACTUP Oral History Project*. February 16, 2005. MIX: The New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival. <<http://www.actuporalhistory.org>>.

³⁰ Greenberg, Jon. "ACT UP Explained." 1992. <<http://www.actupny.org/documents/greenbergAU.html>>.

the foremost North American direct action advocacy group working in the milieu of the virus/syndrome, ACT UP established itself on the front lines of the struggle.

Their neighbours to the North, the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT) has been providing support services to people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS in Toronto since 1983. Their vision maintaining them as “a leader in developing and delivering programs and services that contribute to achieving a world without HIV/AIDS,”³¹ ACT was on the vanguard of Toronto and Canada’s response to the epidemic. Continuing to provide services to all affected communities, ACT operates with a client-centered focus and through a mission statement that is unparalleled in HIV/AIDS work throughout Ontario.

Finally, a somewhat counterpart organization to ACT, the Toronto People With AIDS Foundation (PWA) provides its clients with more applied support services such as food distribution programs and social activities. PWA “exists to promote the health and well-being of all people living with HIV/AIDS by providing accessible, direct and practical support services.”³² PWA’s events have long been a staple in the Toronto HIV/AIDS community and their financial assistance programs are highly regarded for their aid in managing the monetary debts and hardships brought on by antiretroviral drug therapies.

Parallel public sector organizations, AIDS Action and the Canadian AIDS Society (CAS) represent their respective HIV/AIDS organizations and responses. Government funds are placed in the hands of these organizations and they subsequently

³¹ “ACT Mission, Vision and Values.” *AIDS Committee of Toronto* online. <<http://www.actoronto.org/home.nsf/pages/actmission>>.

³² “Toronto People With AIDS Foundation.” *Toronto People With AIDS Foundation* online. <<http://www.pwatoronto.org/english/main.php>>.

allocate this funding to their individual umbrella ASO's. Headquartered in their respective capital cities, AIDS Action and CAS share an aim to advocate for and mobilize the affected communities within their borders and maintain a national agenda for HIV/AIDS combat.³³ These organizations are essential to upholding nationalized representation for those living with and affected by this pitiless plague.

The national responses from the United States and Canada, however, have partly differed; Canada has relied heavily on the U.S. to set the standard with their administrative response to the epidemic. Clinical drug trials have historically been rooted in America while Canada observes from the sidelines waiting for permission to endorse and put into practice regimens and treatments.

Moreover, the Republican American government, under the helm of President Reagan, was vehemently criticized on account of its prolonged inaction in the face of the continued spread and overwhelming stigma towards the syndrome. David E. Rogers identifies the state response under the Reagan administration, "We have failed to develop an overarching, well-articulated national plan for dealing with the epidemic ... [and] have allowed arguments about taste or morality or propriety to block the delivery of potentially lifesaving information and devices."³⁴ The moral code of the American government, and subsequently the Canadian one under the right wing leadership of Brian Mulroney, are thus held accountable indefinitely for the successive evolution and prolongation of the

³³ "Core Beliefs and Values," *Canadian AIDS Society* online.
<<http://www.cdnaids.ca/web/casmisc.nsf/cl/cas-gen-0050>>; "About AIDS Action," *AIDS Action* online.
<<http://www.aidsaction.org/about-aids-action-mainmenu-187>>.

³⁴ Rogers, David. E. "Report Card on Our National Response to the AIDS Epidemic—Some A's, Too Many D's," *American Journal of Public Health* 82.4 (April 1992): 522–524.

crisis. The U.S. even imposed a punitive travel ban on those infected with HIV/AIDS until 2010, which Canada mercifully *did not* apply to visitors or immigrants.

On a purely documentary level, *Patience* offers a matter-of-fact narrative full of ACT-like community organizations and activist discourses, whereas *Rent*'s characters no doubt complain about government action but seemingly know little and care little about GMHC-style community resources and ACT UP-inspired activist solutions.

Comparative Analysis of Canadian and American Film Industries

Often viewed as culturally and politically one-and-the-same by international onlookers, Canada and the United States have nonetheless undergone diverging societal responses not only to the HIV/AIDS epidemic but also everywhere from cultural difference to the cinema. Canada is reputed to embrace other backgrounds and cultures while the U.S. prefers for its immigrant communities to assimilate that which is set before them. This societal difference can likewise be seen through the arts cultures of the two nations: the U.S. observes a somewhat generic Hollywood standard through the majority of its filmic output, while Canada expresses its creative heritage through limited means of regulation or standardization and through more diverse, often experimental, filmic fare.

American and Canadian film couldn't be more unlike one another in their representational and distribution patterns: while mainstream American film production relies heavily on either studio or independent financing, Canadian filmmakers are forced to rely upon governmental grants in their quest to produce filmic works. Furthermore, a history of American monopolization of North American theatrical distribution chains

shows a vast obstacle to the prospect of revenue from Canadian features.³⁵ Essentially, American filmmaking strives for monetary gain, while Canadian film production aims to express cultural heritage.

This discrepancy can surely be attributed to such distinct factors as population dynamics and national economies; one thing is certain, however, American films are considerably more profitable and influential internationally speaking. Due to broader festival circulation, a world-renowned star system, and vast amounts of financing invested in their filmic exports, American filmmaking is simply more dominant and globally significant.

Typically considered submissive and overshadowed by our neighbours to the south, Canada is not renowned for our cultural practice, primarily on account of a lack of exposure. Katherine Monk declares, “tripping over language barriers and a tense history of conflicted cultures, we opted for silence—and that silence, or that perceived lack of identity, is precisely what defines us as a culture, as a nation and as a people. We are, in a sense, what we are not.”³⁶ Canada/Canadian culture is thus equated with being submissive to domineering American influence, and our so-called compliance with this dominance stifles any lasting presence in the international filmmaking forum.³⁷

A product of the Canadian filmmaking industry and largely funded through public agencies, *Patience* was thus subject to much less pressure and censorship than *Rent*; Greyson was therefore more able to be risqué in his subject matter. Produced by a mini-

³⁵ Pendakur, Manjunath. *Canadian Dreams and American Control: The Political Economy of the Canadian Film Industry*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990, p. 16.

³⁶ Monk, Katherine. *Weird Sex and Snowshoes and other Canadian Film Phenomena*. Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 2001, p. 91.

³⁷ This investigation is inclusive of English Canada texts—Québec films are outside the scope of this examination

major studio (Revolution Studios), Columbus's film was placed under great pressure to perform respectably at the box office and conform to standard. Furthermore, Columbus was subject to greater degrees of restriction in terms of *Rent*'s subject matter and content. The context of the Canadian and U.S. film industries is thus crucial to understanding the environments and circumstances through which these products were shaped.

Source Materials and their Adaptation

Zero Patience and *Rent* thus came to be produced through decidedly different contexts, paths and stimuli. John Greyson initially took upon himself the duty of exonerating the reputation of a fellow Canadian while Jonathan Larson was interested in documenting the realities of living in New York City's East Village at the end of the 1980s—highlighting artists' lives, homelessness, and the AIDS crisis.³⁸

Greyson was distressed by Randy Shilts's insinuation in *And the Band Played On* that flight attendant Gaétan Dugas was the Patient Zero responsible for the North American spread of the AIDS virus; he thus set about vindicating Dugas's integrity through *Patience*.³⁹ Continuing where Greyson left off with his "Fake Video Script," published within the article "Parma Violets for Wayland Flowers," Sir Richard Francis Burton and the fictional Aschenbach from Thomas Mann's *A Death in Venice* (later appropriated in Greyson's own 1987 faux music video *The ADS Epidemic*) find themselves accosted by the CBC in an attempt to acquire their cooperation for a TV

³⁸ "No Day But Today." *Rent*. Dir. Chris Columbus. 2005. DVD. Columbia Pictures, 2006.

³⁹ Cagle, Robert L. "Tell the Story of my Life...: The Making of Meaning, 'Monsters', and Music in John Greyson's *Zero Patience*." *Velvet Light Trap* (Spring 1995): 69.

special entitled *AIDS: Culture and Nature*. Greyson attests that the farcical video script was the initial draft of the ideas that would become *Patience*.⁴⁰

Greyson's objective was to essentially produce the film as an anti-*And the Band Played On*,⁴¹ actively articulating evidence about Dugas that Shilts's text blatantly ignores. As Roger Hallas asserts, "the film simultaneously challenges Shilts's specific claims in the book and critiques the very historiography on which it is grounded."⁴² Greyson was interested in exposing the fallacies that Shilts had all but originated by appropriating the infamous Patient Zero character in a fictional and farcical manner so as to call certain attention to the myth and the book's inaccuracies. As Hallas communicates, Greyson was also keen on critiquing the socio-cultural context and circumstances that encircled the HIV/AIDS epidemic.⁴³

Already in 1990, Greyson deemed Shilts's text "an extremely egotistical and partisan version of the epidemic's history,"⁴⁴ thus already revealing his anticipation of appropriating Shilts's Patient Zero theory. Greyson felt an obligation not only to speak for Dugas's integrity, but also to artistically advocate on behalf of everyone affected by the epidemic; Greyson was resolute on reclaiming the honour that he believed Shilts's sanitized version had denied PHAs. In doing so, Greyson was developing an artistic project that would epitomize the Canadian national response to the epidemic, one that

⁴⁰ Greyson, John. Personal Interview. 3 May. 2010.

⁴¹ Hays, Matthew. "John Greyson: Activist with a Movie Camera." *The View from Here: Conversations with Gay and Lesbian Filmmakers*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2007, p. 154.

⁴² Hallas, Roger. "The Genealogical Pedagogy of John Greyson's *Zero Patience*." *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 12.1 (Spring 2003):

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Greyson, John. "Strategic Compromises: AIDS and Alternative Video Practices." *Reimagining America: The Arts of Social Change*. Eds. Craig Little and Mark O'Brien. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990, p. 60-74.

would retain a place in queer history for the impending future. Greyson actively queers Canadian representation⁴⁵ and in doing so he exercises his skills in forthright advocacy.

In stark contrast, *Rent* came to fruition in an attempt to recognize the acquaintances playwright Jonathan Larson lost to AIDS and to pay homage to their legacies.⁴⁶ Additionally, Larson considered *Rent* a palate through which to finally broach the thematic of AIDS in a mainstream forum in an attempt to promote prevention and awareness.⁴⁷ Larson thus set upon writing a musical in collaboration with his writing partner Billy Aronson who suggested appropriating Giacomo Puccini's opera *La bohème* while updating it for the milieu of the AIDS epidemic.⁴⁸

Larson was enthused by Aronson's proposal, though they parted ways shortly thereafter and Larson selected instead to appropriate Henry Murger's source novel *Scènes de la vie de bohème* which Puccini himself adapted.⁴⁹ In opposition to Puccini's opera, Murger's book is a testament to a very progressive type of culture for the 1830s, laced with sexual humour and innuendo. Similarly, Larson felt he could inject his personal lived experience into the project as he himself professed to be living as a starving bohemian artist.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Dellamora, Richard. "John Greyson's *Zero Patience* in the Canadian Firmament: Cultural Practice/Cultural Studies." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 64 Fall. 1995: 526.

⁴⁶ "No Day But Today," *Rent*, 2006.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Miller, Scott. "Rent." *Rebels with Applause: Broadway's Groundbreaking Musicals*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001, p. 188.

Appropriation: Theory and Practice

As Julie Sanders articulates in her text *Adaptation and Appropriation*, there is a fine line between the act of appropriation and downright plagiarism.⁵¹ Sanders discusses how appropriations can range from being shadowy and inexplicit to a quite literal lifting of material from a source text.⁵² In contrast to an act of adaptation, Sanders asserts, “appropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain.”⁵³ To appropriate is thus to be informed by an existing source, albeit with purpose to create a wholly new piece of property in the spirit of the existing cultural discourse or product. Adaptation, on the other hand, is the act of honouring and refurbishing a pre-existing product and creating a new text with the same fundamental story and characteristics.

Sarah Schulman maintains in her text *Stagestruck: Theatre, AIDS and the Marketing of Gay America* that Larson crossed the boundary between appropriation and plagiarism, which she supports with her contention that Larson was known for an inability to write character and story.⁵⁴ In fact, Schulman asserts that Larson plagiarised ample of her 1990 novel *People in Trouble*. Schulman asserts:

Basically, *Rent* had two plots: the straight half was from Puccini, and the gay half was from me. Whereas my story of the love triangle was told from the lesbian’s point of view, Larson had turned the perspective so that the same triangle with the same plot points was being told from the straight man’s point of view. While

⁵¹ Sanders, Julie. *Adaptation and Appropriation*. New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 32.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Schulman, Sarah. *Stagestruck: theatre, AIDS and the Marketing of Gay America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998, p. 30.

relying on my work for structure and content, he had transformed it into a dominant-culture piece by removing the lesbian authorial voice.⁵⁵

Schulman maintains that Larson sought to appropriate a key plot point of her novel while filtering it through a heteronormative lens. In her view, Larson's appropriation not only crosses the line into an act of plagiarism, but *Rent* is in fact a misinformed reproduction of *Trouble*. Unfortunately, Larson succumbed to an aortic aneurism on the eve of the show's premiere at the New York Theatre Workshop on 25 January 1996, presumably never having the chance to wholly allocate recognition of his sources or to be aware of the show's enormous potential.

As Schulman attests, Larson used her book as a source material only after making it suitable for a commercial audience through the act of shifting the authorial voice to a heterosexual male character as opposed to Schulman's initially lesbian protagonist. *Trouble* depicts the distressed relationship of Kate and Peter who, similar to *Rent*'s characters, are artists residing in the East Village of New York City. A forthright young AIDS activist named Molly enters Kate's life and they proceed to engage in an affair against the backdrop of the AIDS crisis. Similarly, *Rent*'s heterosexual protagonist Mark (who assumes the authorial voice) is grieving over the loss of ex-girlfriend Maureen to Joanne, an outspoken public-sector lawyer. If Larson indeed lifted this plot point from *Trouble*, he seemingly did so as a strategy of appropriation for a mainstream, gentrified audience, as Schulman maintains.

Larson overtly appropriates *Scènes de la vie de bohème* as he transports the rudimentary personalities and names of Murger's characters to an unspecified time in the

⁵⁵. Ibid, p. 13.

late 1980s East Village of New York City. Setting his narrative around the year 1830, Murger describes *Scènes* as, “only a series of social studies, the heroes of which belong to a class badly judged till now, whose greatest crime is lack of order, and who can even plead in excuse that this very lack of order is a necessity of the life they lead.”⁵⁶

Larson’s decision to appropriate *Trouble* (if we credit Schulman’s claims) and *Scènes* at the peak of the AIDS crisis is an imperative facet to explore in order to gauge an understanding of *Rent* as a social critique of the American response to the epidemic—however inaccurate or misled Larson may have been in this endeavour. Likewise, Greyson’s ambition to appropriate Shilts’s Patient Zero myth is essential to assessing the Canadian response to the crisis, which Greyson implements through radical queering of the material.

In stark contrast to Larson, Greyson is bold enough to privilege the predominantly queer role in the response to the virus/syndrome. Having actively assumed a position on the front lines of the Canadian response, Greyson bore witness to the seminal role that queer men and women assumed at the outset of the scourge.⁵⁷ As acclaimed arts critic and AIDS theorist Douglas Crimp ironically offers, “AIDS saved gay men.”⁵⁸ Through this proclamation, Crimp merely attempts to indicate the paradox whereby homosexual men were obligated to morally mature and join efforts to endorse more responsible pleasure-seeking.

⁵⁶ Murger, Henry. *Bohemians of the Latin Quarter*. Charleston, SC: Bibliobazaar, 2009, p. 52. [Vizetelly & Co. (London), 1888].

⁵⁷ Cagle, Robert L. “Tell the Story of my Life...: The Making of Meaning, ‘Monsters’, and Music in John Greyson’s *Zero Patience*.” 69.

⁵⁸ Crimp, “Melancholia and Moralism: An Introduction,” p. 5.

Did Larson compromise the lesbian authorial voice from Schulman's novel in favour of the heterosexual male character Mark—thus privileging heteronormativity? Pragmatically speaking, Larson may have felt obliged to shift the authorial voice as a way of ensuring distribution in a largely homophobic, right-leaning society. One can thus attribute Larson's resolution to alter *Trouble's* homosexual authorial vantage point to his intent to provoke awareness among a more mainstream audience. A self-proclaimed heterosexual male, Larson was merely attempting to subject middle and upper-class American audiences to HIV/AIDS through an accessible forum; judging by the global success of the play, one would have a hard time proving Larson unsuccessful in this feat.

American novelist and theorist Susan Sontag demands that AIDS become a mainstream social problem as opposed to a primarily fringe one. Sontag suggests the need for “making AIDS everyone's problem and therefore a subject on which everyone needs to be educated, charge the anti-liberal AIDS mythologists, subverts our understanding of the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’.”⁵⁹ Larson's appropriation is in harmony with Sontag's assertion—the act of creating *Rent* through a decidedly heteronormative predilection is his attempt to challenge audiences (both American and universal) to empathize with PHAs however they are most comfortable. Albeit problematic, Larson's success in exposing audiences (symbolically) to the virus/syndrome and broaching a discussion around HIV/AIDS is laudable and noteworthy.

North of the border, Greyson does not feel that he must restrain any candour about the epidemic for a majority audience; in fact, Greyson produces his text in sheer

⁵⁹ Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*. New York: Picador, 1989, p. 153.

opposition to heterosexual culture. Unconcerned with a straight viewing audience, Greyson articulates his outlook on AIDS through a highly queered lens and methodology.

An ample document of the AIDS epidemic in the United States up to 1987, Shilts's book is irrefutably a comprehensive investigation of the devastation of the early period of the syndrome. Shilts spares no detail from the record of events that he asserts originated the scourge and indeed shaped the extensive predicament it remains today. As Shilts insists in the "Notes on Sources" section, "this book is a work of journalism. There has been no fictionalization."⁶⁰

As Shilts offers, "according to one story, one tryst of Gaétan's was so furious when he heard that Gaétan had AIDS that he tracked the former airline steward down to confront him. By the time they were done talking, Gaétan had charmed the man back into bed."⁶¹ Dugas is thus depicted as a predator conscious of his serostatus and willingly engaging in high-risk sexual activities despite cautionary warnings from the CDC that AIDS could be spread through the exchange of sexual fluids. The difficulty of his assertion, however, is that it is at odds with other accounts of Dugas's life.

Shilts thus conceived the contentious Patient Zero myth and his publishers, St. Martin's, readily relayed this misconception to countless numbers of readers, many of whom came to equate homosexuality and AIDS with the so-called dubious actions of Dugas.⁶² With *Patience*, Greyson was merely attempting to do his part to vindicate queers worldwide and to assure them that they are not depraved and malicious peoples—

⁶⁰ Shilts, Randy. *And the Band Played On: Politics, People and the AIDS Epidemic*. 20th Anniversary Ed. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2008. [New York: St. Martin's, 1987]

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Crimp, "Randy Shilts's Miserable Failure," p. 124. [*A Queer World: The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Martin Duberman. (New York: New York University Press, 1997).]

that there is no shame in being homosexual or a PHA, despite Shilts's tainted representation.⁶³ Greyson transports a caricature originated for an American "trade paperback" audience and counter-intuitively appropriates him for global queer culture.

In contrast, Larson's objective with *Rent*, according to the film's screenwriter Stephen Chbosky, was to enable American society to develop a partiality for PHAs and to love oneself if you happened to be afflicted.⁶⁴ Whether Larson lifted pieces of Schulman's story is perhaps never ascertainable, but she too endorses these sentiments. Schulman writes of gay society, "each one of us has defined our lives by love and sexuality—the two greatest possibilities. We have all recognized these truths in the face of great denial."⁶⁵

Patience and *Rent* thus coincide in their ambition to endorse self-love despite contradicting milieus, and in spite of obstacles such as the AIDS epidemic and subsequent stigma and discrimination. AIDS and HIV-stricken individuals are disposed to vulnerability; their ability to love themselves regardless of circumstances is a verifiable form of transcending that which society seemingly endorses. Thus, in their own respects, Greyson and Larson's appropriations are exemplary models for the representation of PHAs and the accessibility of audiences to characters who are PHAs. Despite accusations that Larson's text is overtly heteronormative, his intent to depict those afflicted with the virus as being self-assured and socially relevant is nonetheless admirable.

There have persistently been antipathetic connotations from society toward those afflicted with HIV and AIDS. Sontag concedes that AIDS is, "a disease incurred by

⁶³ Ironically, Shilts himself was a seropositive gay male who succumbed to complications from HIV in 1994

⁶⁴ Chbosky, Stephen. Personal Telephone Interview. 16 April. 2010.

⁶⁵ Schulman, Sarah. *People in Trouble*. Toronto, Penguin Group, 1990, p. 118.

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.”⁶⁶ Greyson and Larson’s resolution to depict MSM (men-who-have-sex-with-men) and IDU (injection drug users), and their subsequent efforts at appropriation are acts they are entitled to as artists; furthermore, they embark on these endeavours in the name of inspiring advocacy. They essentially utilize these pre-existing texts to articulate a fresh perspective on the crisis.

The fact that these two artists selected to appropriate (Schulman’s assertion notwithstanding) rather than to simply adapt that which was set before them is a crucial component of their creative authority. There exist a handful of examples of appropriation in the AIDS filmic canon, as there are similarly a number of adaptations; specific mainstream examples include adaptations of Michael Cunningham novels *A Home at the End of the World* (2004) and *The Hours* (2002). Similarly, Tony Kushner’s Pulitzer Prize winning play *Angels in America* was adapted as an HBO mini-series in 2003, ten years following a television adaptation of *And the Band Played On* for the same network.

Roger Spottiswoode’s adaptation of *And the Band Played On* was received to mixed reviews following its original broadcast in September of 1993. Tony Scott of *Variety* proclaimed the adaptation to be unfaltering in its transference of the raw emotions of Shilts’s book to the screen,⁶⁷ while Paula Treichler noted the explicit absence

⁶⁶ Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor & AIDS and Its Metaphors*. New York: Picador, 2001, p. 134.

⁶⁷ Scott, Tony. “And the Band Played On.” Rev. of *And the Band Played On*, dir. Roger Spottiswoode. *Variety Online* 29 August 1993. <<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117901186?refcatid=32>>.

of gay sexuality in the film while identifying how it was emblematic of the sheer complexity of the epidemic. As Treichler states:

In Hollywood, as in news, science, and life, the representation and interpretation of reality are never entirely straightforward. Responses so far to *And the Band Played On* also suggest that the movie, like the AIDS epidemic itself, serves as a Rorschach, which viewers, and reviewers, watch through the lens they are accustomed to. Hence even as it is being created, the historical record is destined to remain a site of contestation.⁶⁸

Naturally, the rights to a film adaptation of *Rent* were acquired shortly after the show's triumphant opening and purchased by none other than Robert De Niro's production company, Tribeca. Though Spike Lee was initially committed to direct the adaptation, he dropped out of the project after budgetary concerns stemmed from the studio.⁶⁹

Ironically, Chris Columbus's adaptation could be accused of being too faithful to Larson's source text. Though Columbus was adamant about translating the material to the "real world,"⁷⁰ his adaptation would have undoubtedly benefited from the act of appropriation as opposed to an almost literal transportation of the material from stage to screen. Had Columbus followed the example set by Greyson with *Patience* and borrowed the essence of Larson's text while similarly implementing an historical and contextual renovation to the material, allegations of misrepresenting the context of the epidemic to a decidedly different socio-cultural audience would likely be unfounded.

⁶⁸ Treichler, Paula. "Playing it Safe." Rev. of *And the Band Played On*, dir. Roger Spottiswoode. *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 19 (Summer 1994): 455-458.

⁶⁹ Rapp, Anthony. Personal Interview. 21 January. 2010.

⁷⁰ *Rent*. Dir. Chris Columbus. 2005. DVD. Columbia Pictures, 2006.

When asked why he and Columbus did not select to commence the film with a title indicating the year, screenwriter Stephen Chbosky quite literally states that the responsibility should have been on Larson to establish the year and context, not the filmmakers.⁷¹ Columbus and Chbosky unknowingly produce a period piece, yet fail to acknowledge as much to the viewing audience or take accountability for this.

Though referring to the adaptation of more dated and thus more respectable literary sources, adaptation theorist Robert Stam asserts, “the greater the lapse in time, the less reverence toward the source text and the more likely the reinterpretation through the values of the present.”⁷² Moderately taken out of context, Stams’s contention could undoubtedly be applied to the film adaptation of *Rent*. Columbus and Chbosky, however, neglect to reinterpret Larson’s material through a more modernized lens corresponding to an evolved context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Adaptation theorist Brian McFarlane identifies plenty of faults in fidelity criticism and at the same time recognizes the difficulty of attempting to maintain fidelity in a novel-to-film adaptation. McFarlane believes that the scriptwriter must strive to maintain the essence and spirit of the source text, yet nonetheless recognize the variances and disparities between the two media.⁷³ In his view, it is essential for the adapter to respect and adhere to the notion that he/she is creating an entirely new and individual cultural product, and that it must stand independently from the viewer’s reliance on a familiarity with the source text.

⁷¹ Chbosky, Stephen. Personal Telephone Interview. 16 April. 2010.

⁷² Stam, Robert. “Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation.” *Film Adaptation*. Ed. James Naremore. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000, p. 57.

⁷³ McFarlane, Brian. *Novel to Film*. New York: Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 8-9.

In respects to Greyson's appropriation of the Patient Zero fable, the director completely and consciously throws away any fidelity to Shilts's text. Greyson only ever references Shilts's version of Dugas in an effort to acknowledge the ludicrousness of his fabrication, as exemplified through Zero's resurrection at the Jet Set baths. Columbus and Chbosky, however, abide too faithfully to Larson's foundation in their conception of the film, ignoring an opportunity to modify and make the material more relevant to a post-antiretroviral therapy context. Similarly, the filmmakers maintain the stage play's sense of American-centrism and decidedly conform to a more classical Hollywood standard of literal fidelity to major Broadway properties.

Peter Dickinson proclaims that a new standard must be adhered to when attempting to adapt cultural expressions to the filmic medium. A Canadian writer, Dickinson calls for a new criterion through which to evaluate our cultural artistic products in a contemporary economy:

If we are to move our cultural products as easily as we do our wheat, they must be truly "borderless;" they must play as well internationally as they do domestically. In the case of adaptations, this often means de-emphasizing the gender, cultural, regional, and historical specificity of the source texts. Which makes it all the more important to insist on such specificities in our critical readings, both of the film/televisual product and, retrospectively, of its source text.⁷⁴

As Dickinson asserts, in an increasingly global economy, the contemporary adapter must be prepared to compromise socially constructed paradigms in an attempt to make the product more accessible to a global viewing audience, both for monetary and

⁷⁴ Dickinson, Peter. *Screening Gender, Framing Genre*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007, p. 45.

supplementary reasons. He articulates and privileges the importance of a film's plot and creative expression over an emphasis on social construction directed specifically to an individual culture. Consequently, the evaluator of a contemporary work of adaptation must respect this move towards "borderless" adaptation and express regard for this way of thinking in their analysis of the text and its subsequent source.

Greyson enables this kind of assessment as he produces *Patience* with a story and plot laced with implicit messaging not only accessible to Canadian audiences (his emphasis on Toronto is decidedly light), but to a global audience as he broaches the universal thematic of the nonsensical approach of the media to the AIDS pandemic. Likewise, the film is interspersed with safer-sex messaging and discourses of advocacy—thematics crucial to communicate to global audiences, even (and especially) if the majority of that viewing audience is gay men.

Comparatively, Columbus's version of *Rent* unabashedly plants itself in the East Village of New York City and privileges a heterosexual artist's encounter with the syndrome in the late 1980s (as only really evidenced through continual references to AZT,⁷⁵ a medication commonly prescribed to PHAs in this period and only a supplementary ingredient in HAART post-1996); Greyson's references to a bogus AIDS medication ZPO and the implicit parallels to AZT set the film in a vague present (early 90s).

⁷⁵ AZT, or Ziduvudine, is said to be highly toxic to the human body, thus following the introduction of Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy (HAART), its use was drastically decreased in favour of protease inhibitors

Combined with the usage of interior sets—which Greyson identifies as one of the film’s greatest weaknesses⁷⁶—*Patience* de-emphasizes the region in which it is set, in contrast to the overt placement of both versions of *Rent* in the setting of New York’s Lower East Side. In the name of Dickinson’s aforementioned assertion, one must consider how the act of adapting and/or appropriating contributes to restricting the very universality of the two films and the foreign audience’s ability or lack thereof to engage with a respective text. Though New York City is decidedly recognizable, the effects of appropriating the city for a “period piece” must be considered when measuring how those familiar with the city can suspend their disbelief.

Furthermore, the didactic elements of the particular film must conform to Dickinson’s notion of de-emphasis, and since the texts are both musicals, the responsibility lies primarily within their musicality. Both equipped with songs and lyrical choices bursting with didacticism, a comparison of the films’s musical numbers is essential to gleaning their similarities and points of divergence. Intent on imparting their expressions musically, the texts’ collections of tunes are fundamental to assessing how these artists are seeking to engage with the AIDS epidemic.

“Contact”

Through the process of adapting *Rent* from stage to screen, Chbosky made a decision to omit the play’s most politically-aware song—the overtly sexualized number “Contact.” Performed by the main characters under the wrapping of a white sheet intended to represent an enormous condom, “Contact” is a number in the stage play

⁷⁶ Greyson, John. Personal Interview. 3 May. 2010.

imperative for endorsing safer-sexual practices. Chbosky concedes that the song would have been too difficult to stage for a cinematic audience and believes that there were more fitting ways to express to the audience that the character of Angel is going to die,⁷⁷ which he does at the number's conclusion.

The fact that such a significant piece of the play is omitted, however, is problematic in an analysis of the text's adaptation; the omission of the number from the adaptation detracts from any explicit endorsement of condom-use. Through the act of cutting the song, Chbosky and Columbus are seemingly telling viewers that condom-use in 2005 is no longer necessary, or at least as pressing as it was in the context of the stage play's debut. Such an implication on the part of the filmmakers would be completely erroneous considering the fact that HIV is still primarily spread through sexual fluids, along with other bothersome sexually transmitted infections such as syphilis, gonorrhoea and chlamydia. Furthermore, any fan of the Broadway show would undoubtedly observe and question the absence of the number in the film.

Produced and released at the height of the epidemic, Greyson makes no effort to hide his insistence on condom use in *Patience* as exhibited through a camera pan across a multitude of used condoms following a night of implicit sexual intercourse between Burton and Zero. And preceding this scene of off-camera "cosiness" (prior to the growth of their mutual affection), Burton enters his bedroom in a condom-like body suit as he offers himself to the "contaminated" Zero—further contributing to the film's discourse on safer-sex. A major dissimilarity between the filmic version of *Rent* and *Patience*, therefore, is the fact that Greyson's text uninhibitedly advocates the use of condoms and

⁷⁷ Chbosky, Stephen. Personal Telephone Interview. 16 April. 2010.

Columbus's text does not. *Patience*, in fact, offers up a very unabashed approach to the precarious subject of safer-sex education through this self-conscious "product placement" and this "in-your-face" body-condom joke.⁷⁸

Assessment of Song/Lyrical Choices

Greyson acknowledges that his greatest disappointment in *Patience* is the fact that he had the hubris to think that he could write original pop songs.⁷⁹ In retrospect, Greyson would have liked to have appropriated pre-existing pop songs the way he does with *Fig Trees*.⁸⁰ If given the opportunity, Greyson would construct the film in the way he approached *The Making of Monsters*; produced in 1991, Greyson encountered legal problems with *Monsters* on account of the contentious appropriation of the Bertold Brecht and Kurt Weill song "Mack the Knife" and other songs.⁸¹

Despite Greyson's misgivings, *Patience* will decidedly evermore be regarded as a national treasure; the gay community, in particular, persists in holding the film⁸² in high esteem for its exceedingly original and provocative songs such as "Pop-A-Boner," "Butthole Duet," and "Positive." The musical format similarly enabled Greyson to scrutinize multifaceted issues of the epidemic: "in its typical stress on sophisticated song-and-dance numbers over a highly refined plot, the Hollywood film musical offered

⁷⁸ Cagle, Robert L. "Tell the Story of my Life...: The Making of Meaning, 'Monsters', and Music in John Greyson's *Zero Patience*," p. 8

⁷⁹ Greyson, John. Personal Telephone Interview. 3 May. 2010.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Arsenal Pulp Press is publishing a book in 2011 solely devoted to *Patience*—a volume in their Queer Film Classics series

Greyson the possibility to explore complex ideas in the spectacular space of such numbers.”⁸³

Waugh has the opinion that Greyson was indeed interested in fashioning musical numbers that conformed to the classical musical standard. Waugh identifies in the film, “a ‘character development’ solo self-portrait, a love duet, a full-company ‘Act One curtain’ showstopper, a comic or novelty number, an inspirational or motivational number, etc.”⁸⁴ Greyson was thus concerned with conforming to musical song choices of a more traditional standard while manipulating that model to push taboo and expectation.

The selection of musical numbers in *Rent* could likewise be said to be highly influenced by a classical musical standard. Studded with songs that embody the conventions Greyson utilized, Larson was influenced by the likes of Cole Porter, the Gershwins, and Rodgers and Hart in generating a pop music score that would be accessible and welcoming to an untrained ear.⁸⁵ He thus embarked upon producing rock songs that conformed to the standard of the musical format while similarly contributing to theme, affect and character development in a realistic framework.⁸⁶

One such number is “Without You,” an inspiring and bereavement-themed duet characters Mimi and Roger share about the meaninglessness of their lives apart from one another. Sung after the conclusion of their romance and in opposing onscreen spaces, the number similarly acts as a commentary on the impending loss of friends and their own lives as they mutually struggle with AIDS diagnoses. Positioned directly before

⁸³ Hallas, Roger. “The Genealogical Pedagogy of John Greyson’s *Zero Patience*,” p. 16.

⁸⁴ Waugh, “Anti-Retroviral,” p. 296.

⁸⁵ Miller, Scott. “Rent,” p. 194.

⁸⁶ Warfield, Scott. “From *Hair* to *Rent*: is ‘rock’ a four-letter word on Broadway?” *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 244.

“Contact” and following the reprise of what is decidedly *Rent*’s theme song, “Seasons of Love” (if only because the film was predominantly marketed with the number throughout the trailer), the song reflects on a world continuing to revolve despite their respective losses.

Commencing with the evocative verse:

Without you

The ground thaws

The rain falls

The grass grows⁸⁷

and concluding with both characters twice repeating “without you,” the song acts as an explicit call to mourning and remembrance of Larson’s friends lost to the scourge while likewise enabling the audience to anticipate and emotionally prepare for the inevitable death of some of the show’s characters.

A similar such number in *Patience* is the reprise of “Scheherazade,” sung by the character of Miss HIV (Michael Callen). Founder of the “People with AIDS Self Empowerment Movement” as well as a celebrated performer and activist, Callen played a crucial role in the American social response to the epidemic. As Roger Hallas explores, Greyson’s casting of Callen evokes the notion of testimony as Callen himself was a long-term survivor who succumbed to the virus shortly after wrapping on the film.⁸⁸ Though brief, the song is poignant and actively denounces those who have been corrupted throughout the scourge. Callen sings:

⁸⁷ Larson, Jonathan. *Rent: The Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical*. New York: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 1996, p. 108. Future citations from the film script are also taken from this source.

⁸⁸ Hallas, Roger. “The Genealogical Pedagogy of John Greyson’s *Zero Patience*,” p. 10.

Tell the story of a virus
 Of greed and ambition and fraud
 A case of science gone bad
 Tell a tale of friends we miss
 A tale that's cruel and sad
 Weep for me, Scheherazade⁸⁹

Burton and Zero look on through a microscope before Miss HIV sprays them with water enabling Zero to be visible on film, thus revealing a clue to his release from his apparent purgatory. The rich sense of remorse and frustration in the song's lyrics captivate and epitomize Greyson's own frustrations with the epidemic, that of death and suffering in the midst of dishonesty and gluttony. In contrast with "Without You," "Scheherazade" further exemplifies the conflicting cultural perspectives of the films. Although both texts reflect on the absence of individuals, *Patience* utilizes this loss in an effort to endorse activism and provoke a contestation of that which may seem inevitable.

Mark Doty articulates these sentiments in *Coast*: "you cannot know the life you might have had. Epidemic forces us to multiply this loss a thousandfold, a hundred thousandfold: had AIDS not appeared among us, what lives, what works would we have had?"⁹⁰ This sentiment not only applies to the loss of friends and countless others that Doty cannot identify, but correlates with the loss of Callen and indeed Larson himself. Terminal illness takes from the world potential for higher individual and collective achievement—artistic, cultural and other.

⁸⁹ *Zero Patience*. Dir. John Greyson. 1993. DVD. Strand Releasing, 2005. Further citations from the film script are also taken from this source.

⁹⁰ Doty, Mark. *Heaven's Coast*, p. 42.

Reasonably, one would hope to be fortunate enough to leave some sort of legacy—creative, familial or other—as Callen and Larson have irrefutably done. *Rent*'s “One Song Glory” and “Positive” from *Patience* perfectly encapsulate this inherent desire to leave something behind. *Rent*'s Roger is intent on producing a song before his life expires and *Patience*'s George is implicitly intent on knowing that he made some kind of tangible difference in the lives of the students he is leaving behind. A comparison of “One Song Glory” and “Positive” produces a clear distinction between these two rather comparable songs. Waugh supports that “Positive” is about teaching, “about the contradiction of a human subject wracked with uncertainty yet hired to transmit certainty and knowledge to young minds.”⁹¹

George thus epitomizes an internal paradox—someone who knows nothing about what's happening in his body but must exercise a competency and aptitude in his work environment. Despite this contradiction, George is never depicted as underperforming or appearing distracted at work—aside for a moment of vulnerability when a student cracks an AIDS joke—proving that he truly privileges his career and his students above all else.

On the other side of the spectrum, Roger is intent on leaving a song behind for which he'll be remembered. As one verse of “One Song Glory” goes:

Find
 The one song
 Before the virus takes hold
 Glory
 Like a sunset

⁹¹ Waugh, “Anti-Retroviral,” p. 298.

One song

To redeem this empty life

Roger's obsession throughout the course of the show—albeit supplementary to his love affair with Mimi—is the act of writing a song that will act as a source of redemption for all his wrongdoings. A recovering IDU grieving the loss of his late girlfriend, herself a PHA who slit her wrists in a bathtub, Roger is intent on a melodic legacy. Roger eventually does craft a somewhat sleepy love ballad with which he serenades Mimi on her faux deathbed (“Your Eyes”), though otherwise, Roger doesn't seem to have much ambition throughout the year *Rent* chronicles.

George and Roger share a very significant commonality—they express an overt concern about their mortality. As Sontag writes, “the most terrifying illnesses are those perceived not just as lethal but as dehumanizing, literally so.”⁹² Greyson and Larson, however, have decided to manifest this fear in decidedly dissimilar behaviours. Though George and Roger are both desperate to leave behind a validation of their existence, the emblems of this validation are decidedly different; George's ideal is decidedly more altruistic than that of the more sedentary Roger. Are national ideals figured respectively in the characterizations of the Canadian and the American PHA?

Their fears of the unknown can only be settled once they find comfort through the completion of their respective goals: George finally finds affirmation that his pedagogical efforts will be remembered when he is visited in hospital by the same student who made the AIDS joke, and Roger finally finds/produces a song that provokes Mimi's resurrection (surely this means to imply that the song is good enough...?).

⁹² Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, p. 126.

This notion correlates with Greyson's professed qualms with *Rent* (the stage play)—that none of the characters is truly an advocate or an active member of ACT UP.

Greyson asserts that none of Larson's characters bother to become active or politically engage in the epidemic.⁹³ The characters are indeed relatively inactive, despite a line in "La Vie Boheme" that calls out to the audience: "Actual reality—act up—fight AIDS."

Although the character of Maureen stages an elaborate protest in the name of homelessness, the cast of characters are happy to be sedentary in the midst of HIV/AIDS. It doesn't seem to occur to Roger and his roommate (and aspiring filmmaker) Mark to create awareness about the virus/syndrome through their gifts and talent; alternatively, they decide to utilize these talents for their own wants and fulfillments.

Douglas Crimp stresses that in order to inspire change one must recognize what needs to explicitly occur in a crisis.⁹⁴ Crimp continues:

You learn all you can and help to educate others. You begin to protect yourself and those with whom you interact. You build systems of support. You make demands on your social institutions and your government. You fight for the attention of the mass media, and you create your own media.⁹⁵

Ironically, Crimp's statement seems to characterize the ACT UP group portrayed in *Patience* and puts to shame the characters of *Rent*. Larson's cast of characters never seem to fully engage with the concept of the epidemic or advocacy; instead, the PHA

⁹³ Greyson, John. Personal Interview. 3 May. 2010.

⁹⁴ Crimp, "De-Moralizing Representations of AIDS", p. 261. [*Visual AIDS Tokyo; Stop AIDS, Sapporo; and Dumb Type and AIDS Poster Project, Kyoto*. Tenth International AIDS Conference. Yokohoma, Japan. 12 August 1994.]

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

characters passively await their eventual and inevitable demise, as evidenced through the decidedly heartfelt “Will I?”

Albeit brief, “Will I?” encapsulates an intense awareness of sentiment that many PHAs were feeling in the era preceding protease inhibitors, the period in which Larson is writing. “Will I?” actually only consists of the repetition of the same verse five times:

Will I lose my dignity?

Will someone care?

Will I wake tomorrow?

From this nightmare?

Performed at a “Life Support” meeting where PHAs gather to discuss prevalent issues in a private and safe environment, the cast’s choral performance is a tender and candid segment of the play. One has to question, however, why Larson didn’t instead place the number at an ACT UP meeting. The group is instead depicted sitting around feeling sorry for themselves and one another, never taking initiative to become active in the response.

In Columbus’s version, he inserts a 360-degree camera pan of a future “Life Support” meeting into a montage embedded in “Without You;” as Mimi extradiagetically sings, half of the support group members vanish as the camera pans over them, indicating their passing. Columbus thus complements Larson’s representation of inaction but takes it one step further in actually depicting support group members slowly fading away, never being granted the chance to advocate for their rights or their lives. Though they’ve established a system of support, to correlate with Crimp’s assertion, the “Life Support” group members have seemingly discontinued any further action to defend their wellbeing.

In contrast to Greyson's very proactive characters, *Rent*'s cast and ensemble come across as passive and disconnected from the epidemic occurring around them.

The Musical number "Control" in *Patience* further illustrates Greyson's endorsement of more-than simple compliance; Greyson demands individual empowerment for PHAs, in stark and considerable contrast to the Larson and Columbus model. An undeniably campy and pugnacious number, "Control" is Greyson's way of boisterously calling for our consideration of those individuals struggling in the midst of the epidemic as opposed to siding with corporate, money-hungry capitalists (like pharmaceuticals) who seemingly retain all the authority in the epidemic.

Beginning with a confrontational introduction of each ACT UP member and their respective symptoms, the sequence moves to a fantastical airplane set where the members change into a flight attendant and first-class passengers in pharmaceutical employee attire. The song boasts:

You body needs more than a pill

Sit up

Take charge

Make your choices

Buckle-up to the empowerment drill

Greyson thus very explicitly calls for PHA empowerment despite all other contributing factors and obstacles. Furthermore, he expands on the notion of the ACT UP group taking control and grabbing the attention of the mass media as their protest later in the film is documented on the evening news. Greyson responds with a sense of urgency and non-compliance, as he states, "I find my work is becoming more topical—more and

more about the urgency of activism ... and the needs of the current moment.”⁹⁶ Greyson openly pushes advocacy and activism as facets of self-empowerment for PHAs—this notion can be seen explicitly and consistently embedded throughout his films.

Though there are a handful of song choices through which to compare *Zero Patience* and *Rent*, the selection explored most accurately encapsulates the palpable dissimilarities between the two texts; similarly, these songs encapsulate Larson and Greyson’s objectives through their musicality. A further contrast worth noting is the fact that these decidedly poignant songs from *Rent* are each sung by heterosexual characters, further confirming Larson’s privileging of heteronormativity. Though there are gay characters involved in “Will I?,” their voices are merely part of a collective and are not enabled to stand apart or beyond those of their heterosexual counterparts.

Greyson grants the authorial voice to primarily homosexual characters striving to be active in the crisis, as opposed to Larson’s majority heterosexual characters that are represented as merely awaiting the fulfillment of their destinies. These disparities are extremely vital to an examination of how either text endorses “how to live with HIV/AIDS;” similarly, these differences testify to which communities are granted authority and control in the respective cultural responses. All three authors involved in their pertinent national responses (in one way or another), their depictions are essential for understanding the disparate reaction to the scourge from the two North American arts cultures.

Each film a box office success in its own respective culture, this factor is crucial to assessing how the epidemic is represented to theatrical and film-viewing audiences.

⁹⁶ Greyson, John. Personal Interview. 3 May. 2010.

Similarly, this reasoning helps expose the agency those spectators will ultimately grasp in the works through which to respond to collective and individual adversity.

***RENT* FILM AND *ZERO PATIENCE*: DIFFERENT EFFECTS**

Receiving a divided response upon its theatrical release on November 23rd 2005, *Rent*'s film adaptation finally came to fruition nearly a decade after the debut of Jonathan Larson's Pulitzer Prize-winning stage play. A length of time in which there were great advancements in the fields of HIV/AIDS research and treatment, this delay in adaptation and distribution is an issue of sizeable importance in an investigation of the film. Likewise, this era between January 1996 and November 2005 witnessed a considerable evolution in respects to universal awareness of the retrovirus.

The opportunity to adapt *Rent* to film was optioned and bypassed by various noteworthy Hollywood forces.⁹⁷ After negotiations between Spike Lee and Miramax Films stalled, the television network NBC exhibited an interest in adapting the material for a miniseries or made-for-television movie as they aggressively accosted Jonathan Larson's family about attaining the rights. Uninterested, Julie Larson, Jonathan's sister, severed discussions with NBC as she was sceptical as to how the material could faithfully be done justice in a broadcast television rendering.⁹⁸

After viewing the show during the early part of its Broadway run, Anthony Rapp's friend and former collaborator (on *Adventures in Babysitting* [1987]) Chris Columbus expressed an interest in directing a cinematic adaptation.⁹⁹ Rapp recalls that Columbus proceeded to approach the now defunct Revolution Studios head Joe Roth with the concept; Roth expressed a similar interest in the project on account of persuasion from his teenage daughter, a self-proclaimed *Rent*head (a fan of the Broadway

⁹⁷ Rapp, Anthony. Personal Interview. 21 January. 2010.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

production).¹⁰⁰ As Rapp remembers, the film adaptation was thus finally greenlit for production with financial backing from Revolution.¹⁰¹

Unofficial spokesperson for the show following Larson's death on the eve of its debut at the New York Theatre Workshop in 1994, Rapp discloses a fondness for the film adaptation and the timelessness of the material:¹⁰² “the fact that it exists, and will always ... and that it to me does capture the spirit of it.”¹⁰³ Rapp's approval of Columbus's cinematic adaptation of the play is significant as he is privy to how the material was intended to be produced.

***Rent's* Postponed Cinematic Rendering: Effects and Consequences**

Arguably, however, Columbus's adaptation could be said to be excessively late. As Douglas Crimp asserts, “we must recognize that every image of a PWA is a *representation*, and formulate our activist demands not in relation to the ‘truth’ of the image, but in relation to the conditions of its construction and to its social effects.”¹⁰⁴ As Crimp articulates, a representation of a PHA is accountable to the particular constructional and situational elements that contribute to its production. The release of the film adaptation of *Rent* in 2005 posed several complications with regard to its depiction of PHAs—primarily, the socio-cultural context of its release.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Rapp is also devoted to *Broadway Cares*—an annual fundraising initiative that awards grants to ASOs, and *Friends In Deed*—an ASO dedicated to providing emotional support to PHAs and those affected by cancer

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Crimp, “Portraits of People with AIDS,” p. 100.

Premiering at the Toronto International Film Festival on September 11th 1993, John Greyson's *Patience* finally realized its cinematic rendering six years following the initial publication of *And the Band Played On* (1987) by St. Martin's Press. Since he is Canadian, however, one is inclined to bestow Greyson a little slack for this delay considering the rather tedious and lengthy process of acquiring government and private funding for national cinematic endeavours.

Moreover, the stretch of time between 1987 and 1993, however, is less significant to the evolution of HIV/AIDS treatments and cultural contexts than the period between 1996 and 2005. The earlier period bore witness to extensive unnecessary PHA deaths accompanied by anguish and the common practice of prescribing AZT.¹⁰⁵ No advancements in the HIV/AIDS field made during this period can quite compare to the landmark announcement at the 1996 International AIDS Conference in Vancouver that would significantly change how the retrovirus was tackled on an international level: protease inhibitors would now be used in combination with antiretroviral therapies.¹⁰⁶ As a result of this finding, the incidence of AIDS deaths radically decreased and those living with HIV were enabled to prolong their lifespan substantially.¹⁰⁷

Greyson's text was released in the midst of a very dim and disheartening period in the history of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, while Columbus's text was released at a time of continued anticipation and optimism. The accountability of either director is thus

¹⁰⁵ Cimon, Marlene. "U.S. Approves Sale of AZT to AIDS Patients." *Los Angeles Times* 21 March. 1987: pp. 1. 25 February 2010. <http://articles.latimes.com/1987-03-21/news/mn-4526_1_other-aids-patients>.

¹⁰⁶ Valdiserri, RO. "HIV/AIDS in Historical Profile." *Dawning Answers: How the HIV/AIDS Epidemic Has Helped to Strengthen Public Health*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 3-32.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

quantitatively and qualitatively different in respects to their representation of PHAs; Greyson depicts an epoch of the epidemic that was bleak and essentially unchanged in relation to the present of 1992 in which his film was produced, while Columbus unveils his adaptation at a time of significant and considerable forward movement. Rapp finds it moving and appropriate to know that that Columbus approached the property cinematically in line with Larson's vision.¹⁰⁸ What Rapp declines to acknowledge, however, is Columbus's responsibility to modernize Larson's considerably dated text or to provide context to the spectator; Columbus neglects to provide a historical framework even through the simple use of intertitle or voice-over.

Hart acknowledges this dilemma: "by associating gay men so persistently with AIDS, while not significantly enhancing representations of gay men and the gay male experience, the regular representation of gay men in AIDS movies has served primarily to reinforce the social construction of AIDS as 'a universal problem perpetuated by gays'."¹⁰⁹ Though specific to gay male representations, Hart's declaration is essential to understanding the contentious issue of representing PHAs on film; social constructions can be unrelenting and significantly contribute to global stigmas and ignorance surrounding HIV and AIDS on account of a single portrayal. The representation of PHAs in Columbus's *Rent* thus holds a great responsibility in its representation. Although *Rent*'s narrative gives Columbus access to PHA characters who are not gay men, which is a tangible reality of the epidemic today, he is seemingly unaware of the opportunity he is presented with.

¹⁰⁸ Rapp, Anthony. 21 January. 2010.

¹⁰⁹ Hart, Kylo-Patrick R. *The AIDS Movie: Representing a Pandemic in Film and Television*, p. 58.

Columbus's depiction of "a-year-in-the-life" of friends deploys post-production techniques such as editing which act to significantly lessen the representation of suffering by the film's characters (PHAs and otherwise); Columbus is enabled to compact only the most dramatic moments into the span of his one-hundred-and-thirty-five minute feature. Larson achieved a similar feat for his stage play (running time: one-hundred-and-sixty-five minutes) through the work-shopping process, but the sense of contextual urgency and rawness in the play is *not* communicated through the film.

Mark Doty recognizes this discrepancy between the lived experience of a PHA and their loved ones and the oft-inaccurate representation of this in filmic depictions. Doty concedes, "*fluidity* doesn't seem quite the right word for what time does; if experience were a film, it would be one that doubles back on itself, looping, superimposing, one moment coming to stand beside another, layered over it, though they're years apart."¹¹⁰ Doty acknowledges that real time and lived experience are most certainly not something that can be properly appropriated in the filmic medium; greater consideration of this discrepancy is therefore essential from a cinematic portrayal of a person's struggle with their mortality, if only through the insertion of a simple intertitle clarifying context.

Cinematic Styles and National Influences

Rob Baker—author, performing arts critic and survivor of a partner who succumbed to AIDS—applauds Greyson's campy, postmodern approach to *Patience*. Baker concedes that there is an "endless array of stories to tell, especially when the film

¹¹⁰ Doty, Mark. *Heaven's Coast*, p. 41.

and video medium is allowed to soar on its own, not imitating theatre or literature, but finding new and daring visual references to explore the many questions of AIDS.”¹¹¹

Baker recognizes and supports Greyson’s innovative approach to the scourge, acknowledging that the blending of camp and politics is an ideal methodology through which to confront a narrative as fraught as Shilts’s *Patient Zero* theory.

One could argue that Columbus’s highly-stylized *Rent* is impractical even on its own terms as the film’s hyper-real mise-en-scene undermines the tone and message of Larson’s story. Though Rapp does not believe Columbus manoeuvred the material in such a way as to impede its ideology,¹¹² Columbus seemingly transports the style of his adaptation back to that of musicals produced in the golden studio era. Columbus quite literally approaches his rendition through depicting the world of his film as a gigantic stage.

Through his use of overly ostentatious mise-en-scene and lack of bridging between dialogue and musical number, Columbus truly makes the world of the film out to be a stage on which the characters enact their lives. Jane Feuer addresses this irony:

By eliminating professionalism within the films, the more exploitative aspects of professionalism appear to be eliminated between the film and its spectator. Many musicals deal with the dilemma of professionalism by eliminating the backstage

¹¹¹ Baker, Rob. *The Art of AIDS: From Stigma to Conscience*. New York: Continuum Publishing, 1994, p. 57.

¹¹² Rapp, Anthony. 21 January. 2010.

context entirely. In this way singing and dancing may emerge from the joys of ordinary life.¹¹³

Thus, by not staging the musical numbers in the fashion of Rob Marshall's recent musicals *Chicago* (2003) or *Nine* (2009) in which the musical sequences are staged in the imaginations of Roxy Hart and Guido Contini, or even on a literal stage set as in George Cukor's *A Star is Born* (1954), Columbus exploits the spectators' willingness to suspend their disbelief and takes advantage of their ability to passively view the film. *Rent*'s characters break into song-and-dance for no inherent reason—their aesthetically over-saturated world, however, is completely conducive to and encouraging of this behaviour.

Nevertheless, one cannot discount the opening performance of “Seasons of Love,” sung in a world entirely separated from the rest of the film and set on a stage with no perceived audience. The spectator is taken backstage and the professionalism to which Feuer refers is indeed eliminated. This opening sequence remains overtly faithful to Larson's stage play in that the characters sing the number to the audience, breaking the wall between their perceived world on stage and the audience's world. The performance of “Seasons of Love” is thus an exception to what hereafter becomes the standard of Columbus's film to treat the world of the film as the perceived “real world.”

As the characters project their performance of “Love” to an empty theatre, they affirm the world in which they are about to be immersed for the remainder of the film. The audience is being prepped to enter into the milieu of the film as the tradition of the theatrical medium is established for them.¹¹⁴ Columbus proceeds to unrelentingly immerse the spectator into the stylized streets and structures of New York's East Village

¹¹³ Feuer, Jane. *The Hollywood Musical: Second Edition*, p. 14.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 47.

(primarily consisting of sets) circa the late 1980s. In stark opposition to the stage play's bare-bones set, Columbus's characters inhabit a fantastic and indisputably aesthetically pleasing world.

Greyson's uninhibited use of a faux "Natural History Museum" (the city's Royal Ontario Museum merely has a department of Natural History) and other actual locations around the Greater Toronto Area—often utilizing minimal non-natural lighting—on the other hand, inserts the spectator into a more gritty and raw urban realm of the early 1990s. This same register could be said to be occupied by Larson's *Rent*, though set in New York City. *Zero Patience* and Larson's *Rent* hold this in common— they both possess and convey a certain amount of grittiness as denoted by their sets and implicit environments, corresponding to a sense of urgency for activism.

A country traditionally mythologized for its natural beauty and benevolence, Canadian film has seen a significant shift as identified by Katherine Monk as a result of Canada's increasing integration of immigrants.¹¹⁵ The nation's urban areas have sprawled in recent decades and Monk believes that this shift to urbanism helps to shape the new Canadian's emotional world and provides the essential framework for the new Canadian cultural expression.¹¹⁶ This association illuminates *Zero Patience*: George, Burton and Zero's ghost inhabit a city gripped by a scourge—a city at war with AIDS.

The very existence of the PHA in the city—as represented through Zero and George—helps to shape the world of the film into a truly queered urban space (further affirmed by the closeted Burton taking residence in the city). *Patience* is therefore a film about "the city" and the urban response to the epidemic. Whether a place in which to

¹¹⁵ Monk, Katherine. *Weird Sex and Snowshoes and other Canadian Film Phenomena*, p. 190.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

absolve one's reputation (*Zero*), a locale in which to subsist as the virus steals pieces of one's identity (*George*), or a niche in which to extrapolate on contagions (*Burton*), Toronto is a hard and uncharitable setting in which these characters frantically seek to hold onto their former and evolving selves. Though Greyson was prevented from shooting extensively on location due to budgetary constrictions, the interior sets represent Toronto as a hostile and somewhat murky environment. Furthermore, his use of minimal lighting helps to demonstrate just how bleak the city is in the midst of a crisis.

Greyson's film is thus a hybrid between an AIDS film, musical, and city film. Toronto plays an essential role for these characters and their quests to uphold their identities. In a nation forever plagued with the perception of not being aware of its own personality, these characters desperate attempts to grasp onto their individuality are truly reflective of Canada itself. As Matthew Hays asserts, Greyson "added another dimension to the existentialism of the Canadian psyche. In the wake of the AIDS crisis, gay and bisexual men were now faced with a very real connection between their own threatened existence and intimacy of a certain kind."¹¹⁷

Zero, *George* and *Burton* thus represent the urban-Canadian gay (and/or bisexual) male attempting to make sense of a prognosis or aspect of themselves they cannot comprehend. Though interjected with plenty of camp, Greyson's Toronto is an honest and sincere depiction. Greyson knows what these characters are feeling as he too is a gay Torontonian trying to make sense of—and perhaps experiencing—an existential crisis in the face of HIV/AIDS.

¹¹⁷ Hays, Matthew. "Where is Here? Here is Queer: Four Defining Bent Moments in Toronto Films." *Toronto on Film*. Ed. Geoff Pevere. Toronto: TIFF, 2009, p. 145.

In the introductory chapter of his text *Melancholia and Moralism*, Crimp describes the experience of walking the streets of New York City following the height of the epidemic. Crimp offers, “I felt overwhelming loss just walking the streets of New York, the city that since the late 1960s had given me my sense of being alive.”¹¹⁸ In a footnote linked with this statement, Crimp offers that the streets and neighbourhoods to which he is referring had undergone significant structural and transformational change during the AIDS crisis, and that the structures he had once frequented, along with countless other gay acquaintances, had now been appropriated by the real-estate industry.¹¹⁹

Corresponding to Crimp’s feelings of despondency, streets at once filled with hope and optimism following the gay lib movement had been sanitized. Crimp’s statement verifies that an identity once vigorously fought for has subsequently been restructured, replaced, and made suitable for more so-called “appropriate” usage.

These supposed “gay ghettos” of the post-liberation period were promptly appropriated by more “respectable” classes and communities¹²⁰ as soon as the former homosexual inhabitants exhibited any sense of vulnerability. New York City underwent significant change during and following the height of the AIDS crisis under the Republican mayoral supervision of Rudy Giuliani. Credited with cleaning up the city’s

¹¹⁸ Crimp, “Melancholia and Moralism: An Introduction,” p. 15.

¹¹⁹ Ibid,

¹²⁰ Mennel, Barbara. “The City as Queer Playground.” *Cities and Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 177.

crime, countless numbers of sex shops, and Times Square,¹²¹ Giuliani uninhibitedly acted to gentrify the city.

Columbus's task was thus to not only to recreate these lost ghettos, but also to convey an essence of the bohemian life to which *Rent*'s characters so strongly subscribe. Engaged in a discussion on the film's DVD commentary with actors Anthony Rapp and Adam Pascal, Columbus defends his decision to insert a phoney subway stop in the East Village. The stop is staged in front of Thompson Square Park¹²² and provides the setting for the performance of "I'll Cover You," a musical number that features the characters of Collins and Angel as they sidewalk shop. Though corrected by Rapp as to where the scene takes place in the play, Columbus asserts that "it was just our chance to really shoot New York—really shoot the East Village."¹²³ The very fact that Columbus admittedly had to "reconstruct" this supposed "location" reaffirms Crimp's glum reflection; New York City had undergone a change both literally and figuratively as a result of AIDS, which it could never restore.

Referring to the city as a locale of cancer-inducing immorality, Susan Sontag reveals a common perception of the city: "before it was understood as, literally, a cancer-causing (carcinogenic) environment, the city was seen as itself a cancer—a place of abnormal, unnatural growth and extravagant, devouring, armoured passions."¹²⁴ Written before the AIDS crisis, Sontag's perceptions could absolutely be utilized in reference to the metropolitan centers of New York City and Toronto. These two urban landscapes

¹²¹ Smith, Chris. "Requiem for Rudy." *New York Magazine* 27 Dec. 2009: 16 March 2010. <<http://nymag.com/news/intelligencer/62910/>>.

¹²² *Rent*. Dir. Chris Columbus. 2005. DVD. Columbia Pictures, 2006.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*. New York: Picador USA, 1988, p. 73.

were formerly viewed as seedy and dissolute to outsiders, as enforced by Sontag's assertion; the scourge only helped to reinforce for an outside observer notions of immorality existing and flourishing within.

Though decidedly developed and extensively structured since the height of the crisis, one could not similarly state that Toronto has undergone such transformation or appropriation as New York City. One could even offer that the city has experienced greater progression and acceptance in terms of gay and lesbian lifestyles as evidenced in the 10th of June 2003 decision to legally recognize same-sex marriage in Ontario.

Greyson showcases Toronto in *Patience* in much the same way that Columbus depicts New York through his use of minimal location shots. The film's minimal exterior shots are either set at night or in a drab and dreary context: Zero and Burton's first encounter outside George's house occurs at night in a shady bush (reminiscent of a cruising area) and Zero runs into George for the first time since being "back" outside a beauty care salon on Lansdowne Street in the pouring rain. Similarly, the two establishing exterior shots of the Natural History Museum (interiors shot in the Museum of Natural History in Ottawa) are captured on an overcast day.

Through the inclusion of hand-held location shooting, however, Greyson truly captures the epoch of the era with faux documentary News footage of a protest targeting the fictional drug company Gilbert Sullivan. As the character of Mary verbally describes the riot footage to a bed-ridden and blind George, Greyson intercuts images of Mary and other fellow ACT UP members and advocates as they protest the bloated cost of the fabricated drug ZPO outside the downtown offices of the pharmaceutical.

Greyson is here referencing his own AIDS activist videos such as *The World is Sick* (1989) and *The Pink Pimpernel* (1989) while showcasing the drab, concrete, and alienating structure of downtown Toronto. Shot in black-and-white, the footage faithfully and honestly captures the urban rallies of the 1980s and early 1990s as perceived in Greyson's earlier work.

Greyson's canon of video work, including his AIDS videos, significantly helped to set a standard and push the boundaries for the depiction and representation of sexuality on film. Described as being "one of the first to bring together traditional left solidarity activism with queer politics in an energized art form that was pulsating with formal invention, ideas, and fun,"¹²⁵ Greyson truly established a benchmark for those that would follow him. Furthermore, Waugh proposed that the anthology video that Greyson curated, *Video Against AIDS*, was highly influential in initiating an arts cultural response to the epidemic from within North America.¹²⁶

Greyson's style is undoubtedly unique, and his astute approach to his craft and day-to-day endeavours identifies itself through his ever-expanding legacy in the Canadian arts culture. As Treichler suggests, Greyson "adopts/adapts academic methodologies to develop challenging and yet always entertaining works that reflect his desire both to voice a critique against the system and to effect radical change in the face of an 'epidemic

¹²⁵ Waugh, Thomas. *The Romance of Transgression in Canada*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006, p. 423.

¹²⁶ Ibid, p. 424.

of signification’.”¹²⁷ Greyson thus injects didacticism throughout his works while similarly having fun with his subject matter.

Roger Hallas similarly attests, “Greyson’s films and videos use passion, intellect, and cheek to play on the dialectical tensions between aesthetics and activism, grief and anger, entertainment and pedagogy.”¹²⁸

Academically-minded with multiple publications to his name, Greyson is an astute and original artist for Canada to take pride in. Greyson’s contribution to the national cultural response to HIV/AIDS is invaluable and has facilitated a degree of awareness that may not have been observed in the Canadian context had it not been for his efforts and innovation.

Greyson was highly involved also in the community response to the scourge, thus his writings and filmic works are informed by his participation on the front lines. Having been privy to the activities occurring on the front line, however, Greyson acknowledges limitations of artistic mediums in creating a sense of awareness and education in the response. Greyson asserts:

Video as a technical information medium for treatment issues will never be able to substitute the clarity of a take-home-and-read brochure. What video can provide is the intimate sense of shared and often contradictory experience of

¹²⁷ Treichler, Paula. “AIDS, Homophobia, and the Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification.” *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp. Boston: MIT, 1987, p. 1.

¹²⁸ Hallas, Roger. *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009, p. 153.

giving viewers in the same situation a sense of community, and hence vocabulary, and hence empowerment.¹²⁹

Greyson subscribes to the notion that video working against HIV/AIDS can act as a key to forming a sense of kinship for PHAs and a tool through which they can be represented; subsequently, video enables PHAs to acquire a sense of brightness and hope beyond their diagnoses. Having been so involved in the community, Greyson empathetically shares his experience with those affected by the scourge and channels this comprehension into works specifically geared towards a queer audience.

Beginning with *The ADS Epidemic* (1987), continuing through *Patience* and two versions of *Fig Trees* (2003, 2009), Greyson took an interest in musicality, for which he originated music with collaborators Glenn Schellenberg and David Wall. Through this practice of producing musical works, Greyson has helped to inspire and inform his future works. As Waugh indicates, “in terms of generic form, the works progress from rock video to the classical Broadway/Hollywood ‘integrated musical’ idiom, to avant-garde opera, and in some sense they thus represent a search for a musical form resonant with indigenous realities and the international AIDS crisis.”¹³⁰

Greyson thus began his quest for an honest musical representation of the scourge with *Epidemic* and his work and interests truly evolved with the progression of the crisis; *Fig Trees* corroborates this assertion as Greyson intercuts interviews of Zackie Achmat and Tim McCaskell reflecting on previous periods of the epidemic as their (actor-portrayed) doppelgangers sing in the context of various moments of the crisis. Greyson

¹²⁹ Greyson, John. “Still Searching.” *A Leap in the Dark: AIDS, Art and Contemporary Cultures*, eds. Allan Klusačk and Ken Morrison. Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1992, p. 94.

¹³⁰ Waugh, “Anti-Retroviral,” p. 292.

himself affirms that the operatic *Trees* is important to the medium due to its more experimental nature and that the film is essentially part of an ongoing dialogue.¹³¹

Similarly, Greyson is no stranger to resurrecting fictional and non-fiction historical queer figures throughout his filmography,¹³² as he does with the character of Aschenbach of *Death in Venice* (1964) for *Epidemic* and Richard Francis Burton in *Patience*. Greyson's use of Aschenbach thus acts as a precursor to his resurrection of Burton, informing his forthcoming and seminal work. As he has for other queer Canadian artists, Greyson sets a paradigm for himself through this tool of character appropriation that truly exhibits his "Canadianness." This act of character appropriation comfortably fits into Greyson's unconventional filmic toolbox.¹³³

In comparison, Columbus's nationality is evidenced through the apparent influence on *Rent* by a number of rock-leaning musical films from inside the Hollywood system. Specifically, *Rent*'s linear format seems to most closely resemble that of *Hair* (1979) directed by Milos Forman, with a sprinkling of influence from the likes of *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), *Almost Famous* (2000), *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), and the more jazz-oriented *Chicago*.

Similarly set in New York City and following the lives of a group of bohemian (specifically hippie) friends as they reside and rebel in the epoch of the Vietnam War, *Hair* seems a likely precursor for Columbus's vision for his adaptation. In fact, Jonathan Larson is said to have been heavily influenced by the stage production of *Hair* (1968) in his conception of *Rent*, which itself is heralded as being "the first example of the

¹³¹ Greyson, John. "Other People's Words." U of T. Harsh Light Lecture Series. Robert Gill Theatre, U of T, Toronto, Ontario. 9 March. 2010.

¹³² Waugh, "Anti-Retroviral," p. 293.

¹³³ Ibid.

genre.”¹³⁴ As Scott Miller attests, “just as the authors of *Hair*, Jim Rado and Gerry Ragni, used their lives and the lives of their friends as material, Larson did the same with *Rent* ... many small details of his life found their way into the show, as did the names of friends lost to AIDS.”¹³⁵

Both narratives revolving around an affliction plaguing the story’s youthful characters and their generation, *Rent* could be said to be an update of *Hair* and all its confrontations with taboos upon its initial staging. Both plays were intent on stirring a reaction from their audience through a strong musicality anchored in minimal sets and choreography, and they similarly hold an important place within the Broadway musical canon for their bold feats and subsequent commercial success despite a lack of conformity to Broadway norms.¹³⁶

As Miller continues, both *Hair* and *Rent* actually sought to match a style of staging that reflected that of cinéma vérité filmmaking with their very natural approach to stage direction and blocking with seemingly little interference or manipulation from the director.¹³⁷ Essentially, Rado and Ragni were interested in capturing the feelings and frustrations of their characters and truly letting their actions appear to spontaneously flow onstage as they reacted to their circumstances, similar to what Larson was interested in through the perceived lack of stylization throughout *Rent*. Either production sought to

¹³⁴ Warfield, Scott. “From *Hair* to *Rent*: is ‘rock’ a four-letter word on Broadway?” *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 231.

¹³⁵ Miller, Scott. “Rent.” p. 196.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

reject the Broadway tradition, instead borrowing from a more experimental cultural movement.¹³⁸

In an adaptation process that anticipated Columbus's, Foreman could be said to have rejected the fluidity and abstract elements of the stage play in his film adaptation of *Hair*, opting instead to conform to a more commercially-friendly and stylized approach. Like *Rent*, *Hair* was adapted to film roughly ten years following its Broadway debut, and four years following the conclusion of the Vietnam War, to which it so closely owed much of its forming narrative. Gone is the urgency of the stage play—both the timing of the adaptation and the seemingly Hollywood-ization of the source material significantly changed the text for film-viewing audiences.

Preceded by rock musicals of the 70s like *Godspell* (1970) and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971)—both similarly adapted to film in 1973—rock quickly became a staple genre on stage following the success of *Hair*. As Scott Warfield attests:

By the 1990s, rock—or at least a conservative form of it—was in widespread use on Broadway, making the rift between theatrical and popular music narrower than it had been at any time since just before the premiere of *Hair* in 1967. It was again possible to hear songs in a Broadway theatre that were also regularly played on radio and easily available in stores, and major rock musicians were now courted by Broadway.¹³⁹

Despite the hopes of musical traditionalists, rock thus established itself as a genre that would pave the way for the likes of *Rent* and for Stephen Trask's off-Broadway sensation *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (1998). Itself adapted to film in 2001 by John

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Warfield, Scott. "From *Hair* to *Rent*: is 'rock' a four-letter word on Broadway?" p. 241.

Cameron Mitchell, *Hedwig*'s cult following and respectable financial success could be said to have played a major factor in influencing the eventual greenlighting of Columbus's *Rent*. Combined with the release of Todd Haynes's *Velvet Goldmine* (1998) and Cameron Crowe's semi-autobiographical *Almost Famous* (2000), rock musical film had found a niche market. *Chicago*'s awards season glory in 2003 (including the Best Picture Academy Award) only helped cement the fact that there was indeed a market for musicals.

Other than *Chicago*, this new batch of independently—produced rock musicals was never anticipated to reap hefty financial returns at the box office. With the exception of *Famous*, these films explore taboo subject matter such as transgenderism and homosexuality, as *Rent* would later feature in 2005. These films indisputably helped pave the way for the adaptation of *Rent*; one has to wonder, however, how the adaptation would have differently materialized under the original direction of Spike Lee. Perhaps under Lee's supervision, *Rent* could have followed in the tradition of these earlier films in not attempting to be too slick and conventional.

This section has explored the national and cultural influences on Greyson and Columbus and how their contexts facilitated the production of their respective films. Each produced from within distinct circumstances, an understanding of the socio-historical frameworks from which these products emerged helps to further reinforce the contrasting conditions of each films' conception and the two directors' distinct approaches as adapters, musicians and filmmakers.

Stigma Battles: Now and Then

Focused and marketed towards a gay male viewing audience, *Hedwig* and *Goldmine* seek to expose a subgenre of homosexual narrative with which current generations may be unfamiliar. In this respect, these texts are pedagogical as they aim to enlighten while entertaining the young homosexual spectator. Both proud gay men, Mitchell and Haynes are interested in utilizing their respective subjects to endorse diversity and acceptance in a subculture that can at times itself be somewhat alienating and unwelcoming to outsiders.

With *Patience*, Greyson is similarly aiming to be didactic, though through a decidedly dissimilar methodology. A genre esteemed by gay communities, the musical format is utilized by Greyson in *Patience* and *Trees* as a way of speaking to his audience through a genre he knows can similarly act as a curative medium. Though a stereotypical insinuation, gay communities have traditionally embraced the musical and camp aesthetic. As Hallas affirms, “song has the propensity to fill a room, but it also has a capacity to fill us.”¹⁴⁰ Greyson thus remains rooted in and at the same time diverges from traditional and conventional musical narrative in the name of doing justice to his subject matter and his spectators.¹⁴¹

Greyson is willing to sacrifice commerciality for the sake of his community. Greyson tells Matthew Hays, “*Zero Patience* was just paying tribute in a larger form to

¹⁴⁰ Hallas. *Reframing Bodies*, p. 157.

¹⁴¹ Hallas, Roger. “The Genealogical Pedagogy of John Greyson’s *Zero Patience*.” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 12.1 (Spring 2003).

what so many video artists, activists, and filmmakers were already doing.”¹⁴² He continues by acknowledging that producing the film was a bold move but one he consciously made in spite of the mainstream public and authorities.¹⁴³

Uninterested as such in the approval of the media and/or mass public, Greyson thus takes upon himself the responsibility of not only exonerating the reputation of a singular Canadian, but of helping to mend the morale of his people; Greyson is conscious of the devastation gay communities have endured and attempts to fulfill their need for a little song-and-dance blended with campy wit.

On the same level, Greyson weaves melodrama into the film as a way of creating a similarly accessible and entertaining linear plot. Waugh investigates Greyson’s repertoire of filmic tools, one of which he identifies as “melodramatic narrative that reveals the queer romantic deep down and enables and affirms affect, pleasure, and desire.”¹⁴⁴ As Waugh articulates, Greyson utilizes melodrama in a curative manner as it enables the spectator to participate and engage with their emotional trajectory, a difficult feat in the midst of a bleak epidemic and uncertain future. Waugh asserts of gay male melodramas:

Their resurgence in the mid-eighties may have helped keep in view a certain continuity of cultural tradition and sex-positive erotic energy, mingling the “positive image” ideology of seventies gay-lib aesthetics with the cathartic

¹⁴² Hays, Matthew. “John Greyson: Activist with a Movie Camera.” *The View from Here: Conversations with Gay and Lesbian Filmmakers*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2007, p. 154.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Waugh. “Anti-Retroviral,” p. 295.

function of narrative fiction to help us in the crisis of the eighties to communally mourn the dead, comfort the living, and imagine the future.¹⁴⁵

Corresponding to Waugh's assertion, AIDS melodramas thus helped bring together a community that was ailing and bearing witness to the devastating loss of lovers and companions. Greyson is highly conscious of this capacity of melodrama to affect a cathartic response from his viewers. He therefore offers them a vehicle through which to process their grieving and feelings of melancholy while similarly providing hope for the future of their community.

Greyson is also conscious of the epidemic's influence on his community's "sex-positive" erotic energy and acknowledges this psychic damage. At a time when gay men were becoming sceptical of seeking carefree pleasure and affection, Greyson truly allows the spectator to engage and exercise these emotions and sexually-charged inclinations in a safe and risk-free way. As the viewer engages in the love connection between Zero and Burton, they are seduced into a steamy and hot love affair that acts as a form of catharsis. In this sense, the spectator is positioned within a hypothetical threesome with two attractive men without having to worry about the messiness of actual intercourse and/or sexual relations—not to mention any risks involved in these activities.

Similarly, Greyson enables the spectator to join the character of George on his journey towards his eventual loss of sight as a result of his AIDS infection. Greyson's selection to highlight a side effect of a compromised immune system as opposed to a character's demise is significant to the melodramatic objectives of *Patience*. From *Longtime Companion* (1989) to indeed, *Rent*, directors of HIV/AIDS films have opted to

¹⁴⁵ Waugh, Thomas. "Erotic Self-Images and AIDS." *The Fruit Machine: Twenty Years of Writing on Queer Cinema*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 229.

showcase a character's prolonged struggle and subsequent death on account of their infection. Greyson's resolution to feature an out-of-the-spotlight yet nonetheless devastating effect of living with HIV/AIDS is thus momentous and helps create a sense of poignancy in George's struggle.

Greyson doesn't intend to bring his spectator to tears over George's retinitis—the audience is instead granted a fresh perspective of a symptom related to HIV/AIDS. Granted, George will likely succumb to his illness, but Greyson leaves the viewer with the final image of a depressed and bedridden George finding consolation in a visit from a pupil—an individual he will never *see* again.

Greyson thus imposes a unique form of safe-sex messaging to the gay community, a culture numbed by an endless association of AIDS with death. George's predicament affirms that in addition to certain death, there are other serious complications associated with HIV/AIDS transmission: Greyson seeks to be didactic in showcasing George's plight as he weaves this subplot into the more curative central narrative. Utilizing melodrama, Greyson pedagogically exposes his viewers to the threat of blindness; in doing so, he is gallantly and predominantly enforcing safer-sexual practice.

Columbus similarly takes full advantage of melodramatic strategies with his approach to *Rent*; unlike *Patience*, however, one could hardly deem his methodology to be curative or didactic. Bearing in mind the film's release date, to describe the film as remedial nearly fifteen-years after the peak of the epidemic would be a far stretch indeed.

The cutting of the song "Contact" from the film (as previously discussed) drops almost all responsibility to endorse safer-sex messaging to its audience. The song

acknowledges the somewhat less-fun aspects of condom-use with lyrics such as “fire latex rubber latex bummer;” the staging of the number in the play, however, is an irrefutable endorsement of condom use despite personal qualms. As the song implicitly acknowledges, one may find themselves faced with their mortality as Angel does at the end of the song as a result of careless fornication. To straights, gays and everyone in between, Larson unabashedly sanctions the use of protection through the all-encompassing “condom sheet” prop.

The act of removing “Contact” from his adaptation is significant to Columbus’s intended audience; essentially, he is wary of alienating younger viewers and/or being subjected to more than a PG-13 rating from the MPAA. Furthermore, he is seemingly afraid that any explicit acknowledgement of sex between characters, specifically the same-sex couples, could be seen as problematic to a mainstream viewing audience.

At the conclusion of the aforementioned rendition of “I’ll Cover You” in which the characters of Collins and Angel share a same-sex kiss, Columbus admits that the scene left a distaste in the mouths of numerous spectators. On the DVD commentary, Columbus declares “the kiss at the end of this scene seemed to bother a few people, and a few—several people had walked out of the theatre at that point.”¹⁴⁶ Columbus therefore deserves some credit for including such a loaded and controversial moment in the film, but his decision to omit “Contact” is nonetheless significant and detrimental to the film’s overall integrity.

Hart discusses the importance of depicting homosexuality to mainstream audiences through AIDS films of the 80s and 90s and asserts that some form of

¹⁴⁶ *Rent*. Dir. Chris Columbus. 2006.

representation, however inaccurate or offensive, is better than no recognition at all.¹⁴⁷

What Hart does not acknowledge, however, is the viewpoint of the gay community that is being so inaccurately portrayed. Though he has opted to include the same-sex kiss, Columbus's film ultimately neglects to adequately speak to its gay audience, and in doing so it fails to acknowledge the tremendous hardship the community endured on account of the virus/syndrome.

Through Columbus's attempt to avoid alienating a conventional audience, he is in fact ostracizing the community that the stage play spoke so profoundly to upon its bow on Broadway. Columbus's endeavour to appropriate the material has once again worked against the fundamental logic behind the play of living for today and loving oneself—he has essentially sacrificed the gay male viewer in hopes of box office return and mainstream approval. Columbus goes one large step further than Larson by offering a sanitized and appropriated cultural product.

Alternatively, Greyson has produced *Patience* in a way as to purposefully challenge the heterosexual spectator—he is interested in speaking primarily to, and indeed for, the homosexual community. In reference to early AIDS melodramatic works, Waugh argues that, “the melodrama has had a privileged relationship with gay men as well as with women, both as audience and as producers, situated as we are, like women, if not outside patriarchal power, in ambiguous and contradictory relationship to it.”¹⁴⁸

Greyson, however, takes the melodrama in *Patience* even further by risking alienating the heterosexual female spectator. His complete disregard for mainstream

¹⁴⁷ Hart, Kylo-Patrick R. *The AIDS Movie: Representing a Pandemic in Film and Television*, p. 49.

¹⁴⁸ Waugh, Thomas. “Erotic Self-Images and AIDS,” p. 221.

viewership is unabashedly evident from the beginning of the film. From the multiple visits to bathhouses to the “Butthole Duet,” Greyson is unafraid to depict gay-specific nuances. If these aspects weren’t enough to literally thwart heterosexual viewers, the film’s depiction of male genitalia provides yet another potentially alienating facet of the film.

A cultural and representational taboo, the penis can be an isolating motif indeed. Though there are no extreme close-ups of male genitalia, many can be seen as the “butt brigade” engages in nude jumping jacks; similarly, Burton’s extremely phallic video camera revealed in the “Pop-A-Boner” number is implicit enough to surely disgruntle some viewers, despite its light-hearted slapstick tone. Peter Lehman discusses the various issues with depicting male genitalia in cultural products, primarily linking the representation of penises to homophobic response within the heterosexual male viewer.¹⁴⁹

Though the vague representations of penises in *Patience* could arguably be tolerated by heterosexual viewers, Greyson’s shocking use of Burton and Zero’s assholes for the “Butthole Duet” is undoubtedly enough, in my opinion, to cast away the majority of straight males from the audience. Thus, Greyson very intentionally alienates viewers and consciously narrows his market; in doing so, he is fully aware of the reach and effect of the film on the gay community.

Greyson finally produces a film that is specific to a gay male culture by actively subverting the boundaries of heteronormativity. As Christopher Gittings affirms, *Patience* “plays on audience expectations of generic identification—for example, the trajectory of the white heterosexual couple—by queering them and creating new

¹⁴⁹ Lehman, Peter. “Crying Over the Melodramatic Penis: Melodrama and Male Nudity in Films of the 90s.” *Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2001, p. 27.

coordinates for identification with a gay couple in the context of a love story.”¹⁵⁰ With *Patience*, Greyson produces a seminal gay text with pride of place within the DVD collections of queers worldwide.

The filmmaker and adapter are thus responsible for speaking not only on behalf of, but *to* the audience for which their text is fashioned; in the case of both *Zero Patience* and *Rent*, the responsibility falls upon the gay male spectator. As Randy Shilts’s text can verify, an inaccurate or botched representation can have major impact on the gay community, ultimately obstructive to our efforts against HIV/AIDS and the therapeutic communal role of a “positive image.” As Crimps states, “the real problem with Patient Zero is that he already existed as a phobic fantasy in the minds of Shilts’s readers before Shilts ever wrote the story. And, thanks in part to *And the Band Played On*, that fantasy still haunts us—as it still haunts Shilts—today.”¹⁵¹

Youth and adults—gays and straights alike—are still in need of safer-sex messaging and portrayals they can relate to and actively empathize with; conventional representations will likely continue to fail to instil any sense of awareness in generations desensitized to traditional methodologies. More radical approaches to self-love and protection, as seen in *Patience*, may therefore be exactly what are needed.

This section has assessed the audience configurations to which Greyson and Columbus direct their films and their objectives in these respective endeavours. Whether an attempt to act through a curative lens or to appeal to a broad and diverse range of viewers, the audience to which each film speaks is vital to my assessment of each

¹⁵⁰ Gittings, Christopher. “*Zero Patience*, Genre, Difference, and Ideology: Singing and Dancing Queer Nation.” *Cinema Journal* 41.1 (Autumn, 2001): 28-39.

¹⁵¹ Crimp, “Randy Shilts’s Miserable Failure,” p. 124.

director's artistic achievement. Similarly, their endorsement of safer sexual practice is important in gauging the accountability of either director as artist and citizen and their position in relation to the front line of community response.

CONCLUSIONS

In my conclusion, I would like to provide a more personal perspective to accompany the assessments I have presented throughout this paper. As a PHA for more than six years, I have borne witness to more suffering and self-destruction than an individual of the age of twenty-six should have to even imagine. Unable to wholly empathize with the experiences and recollections of my gay elders who endured the bleakest periods of the epidemic, I can still observe the unrelenting recklessness of HIV/AIDS in contemporary society. The scourge is far from over.

Whilst embarking upon the endeavour of writing this thesis, I found myself employed at the Hassle Free Men's Clinic, a sexual health clinic in Toronto where I perform rapid, point-of-care HIV testing on men of diverse sexual and cultural backgrounds. Though initially a volunteer at the clinic, the staff found my self-assured disclosure of my status to be laudable and offered me employ—thus began my very front line field research.¹⁵² Additionally, I was enrolled to administer the testing at a local bathhouse where I observe first hand the cruising and drug-fuelled casual sexual encounters of the contemporary gay cohort.

Furthermore, I endured the dissolution of my six-year relationship—a companionship that was almost solely initiated on account of my seroconversion from HIV- to +. Though forever “in my heart” (we pledged to eternally “cover” one another—in the spirit of *Rent*'s “I'll Cover You”), as they say, my partner felt as though my work at the clinic and copious amount of time spent researching and scripting this thesis had changed me from a vulnerable young man to a strong and independent “force.” I concur

¹⁵² Admittedly, these experiences may contribute to an over-emphasis on my part of the feature film's potential to transmit safer-sex messaging

with him in that I've finally been enabled to come to know myself through an awesome sense of empowerment.

From what I've come to observe through my community work, a fresh generation of gay and heterosexual youth are being raised in a time that's lacking in effective education and awareness techniques. Unfortunately, the 1996 introduction of protease inhibitors seems to have contributed to a widespread assumption that HIV/AIDS is no longer a "big deal."

One can likewise observe an under-exposure of representations of the virus in popular and independent media, despite recent efforts at broaching the subject by Greyson (*Fig Trees*) and Thom Fitzgerald (*3 Needles* [2005]), to name a very select (and Canadian) few. And though they lived to observe the horrendous peak of the syndrome/virus, large numbers of older generations have seemingly forgotten—or even repudiated—what it means to practice safe sex.

Recent Responses

The era of *Rent* has ended. Though released a mere six years ago, Columbus's film adaptation seems to have nearly slipped from public consciousness, for better or worse. Proud gay television star Neil Patrick Harris took a postmodern approach to his recent staging of the musical at the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles for a brief three-performance stint in August 2010. Harris apparently utilized the venue's Jumbotrons in

addition to adding ten ensemble members and a customized re-tooling of the orchestration.¹⁵³

Entertainment Weekly magazine columnist Whitney Pastorek describes the re-staging as a “welcome reminder of how a rock 'n' roll rewrite of *La Bohème* managed to move so many people in the first place.”¹⁵⁴ Ironically, however, Pastorek at the same time states that the “American AIDS crisis is no longer of urgent concern to many.”¹⁵⁵ A popular culture connoisseur, Pastorek’s insinuation wholly correlates with the lack of knowledge and interest in the response to HIV/AIDS within contemporary culture.

In his dissertation on the representation of the epidemic in American popular musical culture, Matthew Christen Tift observes that “few scholars have looked closely at the sonic dimension of the AIDS epidemic—the American music that affects the social dimension.”¹⁵⁶ Though he continues on to identify a number of musical contributions to the popular music canon from the likes of Elton John, U2, and Janet Jackson, Tift’s declaration of this perceived lack of interest in the AIDS epidemic by the music industry and indeed music scholars alike is an inspired statement and one that I can personally relate to through my own scholarly investigation.

Ultimately, what I perceive to be the greatest failure of Columbus’s film is its inability to inspire a new degree of awareness and renewed discussion in the midst of the ongoing response. What furthermore irritates me is the fact that Columbus and Chbosky seem completely disinterested in contributing to a contemporary conversation about the

¹⁵³ Pastorek, Whitney. “Rent.” Rev. of *Rent*, dir. Neil Patrick Harris. *Entertainment Weekly Online* 7 August 2010. <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20364394_20408810,00.html>.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Tift, Matthew Christen. “Musical AIDS: Music, Musicians, and the Cultural Construction of HIV/AIDS in the United States.” Diss. University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1997, p. 4.

virus/syndrome. The pair is seemingly content with their negligent representation of HIV/AIDS, and has since moved on to other filmic projects including *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (2010) and the television series *Jericho* (2006-2008), a teen fantasy and a terrorism melodrama, respectively.

As presented throughout this thesis, Greyson's ongoing and particular interest in contributing to the response is in stark opposition to Columbus and Chbosky's singular and fleeting involvement. The fact that Greyson persists in contributing to the AIDS filmic canon and subsequent dialogue twenty-three years following the release of *The AIDS Epidemic* (1987) demonstrates his unyielding tenacity, the difference he has made in the response. As he stated in 1990, "the desperate need for alternate AIDS media images remains as pressing today as it was in 1981. Whole subjects and issues have still not been addressed."¹⁵⁷ *Fig Trees* demonstrates that Greyson continues to live by this sentiment.

Summary of Two Texts within Socio-Historic Context

As I shared the topic of my paper with younger community members whom I've encountered both socially and through my employ at the clinic, I came to discern that *Zero Patience* has lapsed from contemporary relevance. Though mature queers remember it fondly (particularly for the "Butthole Duet"), community members under the age of thirty typically give me a blank expression when I share the title of the Canadian film I propose to contrast with *Rent*. Partially attributable to its "Canadianness" and the politics

¹⁵⁷ Greyson, John. "Strategic Compromises: AIDS and Alternative Video Practices." *Reimagining America*. Ed. Craig Little and Mark O'Brien. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1990, p. 73.

related to this, Greyson himself doesn't mind that *Patience* has lost its contemporaneous significance.¹⁵⁸

Fig Trees is Greyson's attempt at broaching what dissatisfied him about *Patience*—he asserts that the film is reactive to what he failed to accomplish and acknowledge in his prior work.¹⁵⁹ Greyson similarly opines that no topic ever truly exhausts itself and that there are always experiences and those experiences do not necessarily have to be about today.¹⁶⁰

In the light of Greyson's assertion, *Rent*'s crime of providing misinformation and concealing its very essence as a period piece depicting the early 1990s may not seem as severe as initially proposed. However, Columbus's film's harshest offence for me is that it utilizes the background of the worst years of the epidemic to produce a highly melodramatic product for a contemporary mass audience. Linda Williams articulates the triumph of a noble genre picture: "part of the excitement of the form is the genuine turmoil and timeliness of the issues it takes up and the popular debate it can generate when it dramatizes a new controversy of issue."¹⁶¹ Columbus seemingly underestimates the vocation of a successful melodramatic text.

In accordance with Williams's assertion, Columbus miserably fails to re-invigorate conversation about HIV/AIDS, instead presenting audiences with a representation of a bleak epoch of the epidemic that harks back nearly twenty years. Though I humbly admit to being a fan of the film, I'm highly aware of its oversights and

¹⁵⁸ Greyson, John. Personal Interview. 3 May. 2010.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Williams, Linda. "Melodrama Revisited." *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*. Ed. Nick Browne. Berkley: University of California Press, 1998, p.53.

its inclination towards misinforming contemporary viewers. One of my greatest fears is that young audiences are not aware of the film's unreserved inexactness.

Viewing the film for the first time in the calendar year of my diagnosis, I found *Rent* to be a highly inspiring cultural product. After countless viewings, I persist to find the cinematography used throughout the film to be decidedly striking, making it a truly aesthetically pleasing piece of art. Above all, however, Larson's score still strikes me as greatly affecting and I like to think that it helped to facilitate my evolution into the empowered PHA that I am today. Is it acceptable to be inspired by a criminally negligent film? Yes and maybe. After all, everyone is entitled to at least one guilty pleasure (perhaps this explains the recent and ever-growing *Glee* phenomenon).

My initial viewing of *Patience*, held a few years post-diagnosis, struck me in a completely different fashion. In Greyson's film, I saw the city streets of Toronto—I heard dialogue and lyrics that actually spoke to me... I saw *reality*. As a Canadian gay male living with HIV, *Zero Patience* established a dialogue with me that I can candidly say no other filmic text had ever done before or since. Though initially released when I was nine, I find a relevance in *Patience* that I am confident will endure as long as HIV/AIDS persists to plague us—and beyond.

Boasting timeless narrative themes of redemption, love, and empowerment, *Patience* will undoubtedly remain relevant to those of us familiar with it for some time to come, in spite of Greyson's reservations. Although Greyson basically attempts to move beyond the film through *Trees*, *Patience* has all but left the ownership of its auteur and cemented itself and its message in the courage and resilience of immeasurable numbers of Canadian PHAs.

Larson's *Rent* has similarly positioned itself in the spirits of PHAs on a considerably more international level, while Columbus's filmic rendering of the play will likely soon find its place on a list of mediocre film adaptations. Unafraid to own the circumstance of their original formation and production, Larson's *Rent* and *Zero Patience* are fine agents for the representation of PHAs in their own regard. I have shown how *Rent* and *Patience* depict their respective context and the subsequent issues and obstacles their narratives encounter; I have similarly assessed the timeliness of either film. Either film has indisputably come to retain a distinct relevancy for generations of both homosexual and heterosexual audiences.

Questions for Further Research

A more extensive exploration of the representation of HIV/AIDS in musical film would yield a much larger problematic and perspective on this investigation. Films such as Rosa von Praunheim's German film *A Virus Knows No Morals* (1986), Oliver Ducastel and Jacques Martineau's *Jeanne et la garçon formidable* (1998) from France, and Onir's *My Brother Nikhil* (2005) from India, would undoubtedly merit a much broader and internationally-informed examination but are to be broached elsewhere.

Rehashing lines from "Will I?," I find a grouping of lyrics from "Finale B" to be especially poignant as Larson's *Rent* comes to a close. Separated by gender, the ensemble sings:

Women:

I can't control

My destiny

Men:

Will I lose my dignity

Will someone care

I trust my soul

Will I wake Tomorrow

My only goal

From this nightmare

Is just to be

At the risk of coming across as overly melodramatic and cliché, this group of lyrics seemingly encapsulates how I and undoubtedly countless other PHAs feel on a daily basis. Though I consider myself to be empowered by my HIV + status, I struggle to accept that destiny has its own agenda for me and all I can really hope for is to sufficiently subsist in each moment of every day as best and as capably as possible.

Through the loss of friends, love, and the compromise of my immune system, I have come to a much greater appreciation of living than I suspect many people will be privileged to throughout the course of their entire lives. The only thing I truly want and call for in return is respectful and accurate representation in the hopes that fellow PHAs on an international scale can come to know that they are not alone... and help them to find the strength to stand tall each and every day. As such, it is imperative for continued “positive images” of PHAs.

Since my initial viewing of *Patience* some years back, I have changed significantly as a person and as a PHA. Through my mentorship roles and throughout my daily endeavours, I channel my self empowerment and I do my best to help facilitate the empowerment of those with whom I associate. I have indeed come to live by these lines from “Control:”

Take charge

Make your choices

Buckle-up to the empowerment drill

I can safely assert, therefore, that *Patience* and *Rent* have each indeed had a very significant effect on my development as a Person with HIV. I believe this fact serves as a testament to what I initially set out to do in this thesis—to assess the influence that these two cultural products can have on their viewers. Though each film may have its shortcomings and contradictions (who doesn't?), their existence in the cultural realm has undoubtedly helped facilitate my growth and development—thus I believe their act of representing PHAs is noteworthy and laudable.

Additionally, their musical elements put an affective and inspiring perspective on a very bleak and poignant topic and help to provide a sense of catharsis in a time of despair. The act of representing HIV/AIDS through the musical genre—as exemplified by these two films—has truly contributed a certain amount of resilience in a period of trauma. Perhaps we should resort to singing in the face of every impending scourge.

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- Beauty and the Beast*. Dir. Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise. Walt Disney Pictures, 1991.
- Chicago*. Dir. Rob Marshall. Miramax, 2003.
- Fig Trees*. Dir. John Greyson. Greyzone, 2009.
- Godspell*. Dir. David Greene. Columbia Pictures, 1973.
- Hair*. Dir. Milos Forman. United Artists, 1979.
- Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. Dir. John Cameron Mitchell. New Line, 2001.
- The Hours*. Dir. Stephen Daldry. Paramount, 2003.
- Jeanne et le garçon formidable*. Dir. Oliver Ducastel & Jacques Martineau. Strand Releasing, 1998.
- Jesus Christ Superstar*. Dir. Norman Jewison. Universal Pictures, 1973.
- Jericho*. Multiple Directors. CBS, 2006–2008.

- Longtime Companion*. Dir. Norman René. The Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1989.
- Moulin Rouge!* Dir. Baz Luhrmann. 20th Century Fox, 2001.
- My Brother Nikhil*. Dir. Onir. Yash Raj Films, 2005.
- Nine*. Dir. Rob Marshall. The Weinstein Company, 2009.
- “No Day but Today.” *Rent*. Dir. Chris Columbus. 2005. DVD. Sony Pictures, 2006.
- Outrageous!* Dir. Richard Benner. Alliance Atlantis Communications, 1977.
- Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief*. Dir. Chris Columbus. 20th Century Fox, 2010.
- The Pink Pimpernel*. Dir. John Greyson. V Tape, 1989.
- Rent*. Dir. Chris Columbus. 2005. DVD. Sony Pictures, 2006.
- Rent: Filmed Live on Broadway*. Dir. Michael John Warren. 2008. DVD. Sony Pictures, 2009.
- Romeo + Juliet*. Dir. Baz Luhrmann. 20th Century Fox, 2001.
- Velvet Goldmine*. Dir. Todd Haynes. Miramax, 1998.
- Video Against AIDS*. Org. John Greyson and Bill Horrigan. V Tape, 1989.
- The World is Sick*. Dir. John Greyson. V Tape, 1989.
- Zero Patience*. Dir. John Greyson. 1993. DVD. Strand Releasing, 2005.