The Epidemic of Spectacles:
The HIV/AIDS Pandemic, Visual Culture and the Philanthropic Documentary Archive of
the Global South

by

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Abstract

In the twenty years since the recognition of HIV/AIDS as a pandemic, the disease has become a global challenge, which is not only of a medical nature, but also involves various political, social, and cultural factors. As Simon Watney once wrote, “AIDS is not only a medical crisis on an unparalleled scale, it involves a crisis of representation itself” (3). And indeed, HIV/AIDS visual culture and the politics of representation have become integral to our understanding of the meaning of the pandemic. Within the epidemic’s visual culture, AIDS documentaries stand out as one of the most prominent forms of media for narrating the pandemic and creating its global image. My thesis looks at the HIV/AIDS visual culture by documenting and analyzing the transformation of the AIDS documentary archive—both in form and focus—from the radical works of the earlier years (the 1980s to the mid1990s) in the West to the more conventional documentary films of the later years in and about the global South. Concentrating on this recent AIDS documentary archive concerned with the global South, I discuss how the colonial and stereotypical visuals of the pandemic in the global South find their way into the growing archive of what I call “philanthropic documentaries”: a tradition of globally-oriented documentary making that focuses on the state of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the global South and which is aimed at attracting financial and political aid from the outsider—mostly Western—viewers by presenting narratives and visuals that initiate effects of shock and sympathy. Yet such well-intentioned filmmaking does as much harm as good by dehumanizing its subjects and failing to show anything other than geographies of despair when it documents the pandemic. Consequently, what the thesis argues for is the need for the formation and growth of an alternative AIDS documentary archive that actively challenges and diversifies what has been established over the years as the image of the pandemic in the global South by philanthropic
documentaries and other visual representations of the like, through destabilizing the normative spectacles of the pandemic, representing the excluded and marginalized narratives and, most importantly, visualizing its own frames.
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To my mother
Chapter 1: Introduction

Whatever else it may be, AIDS is a story, or multiple stories, read to a surprising extent from a text that does not exist … AIDS is a nexus where multiple meanings, stories and discourses intersect and overlap, reinforce, and subvert one another. (Treichler 42)

Each of us has the plague within us; … no one, no one on earth is free from it. (Camus 229)

In the twenty years since the recognition of HIV/AIDS as a pandemic, the disease has become a global challenge. This challenge is not only of a medical nature, but also involves various political, social, and cultural factors. As Simon Watney once wrote, “AIDS is not only a medical crisis on an unparalleled scale, it involves a crisis of representation itself” (3). And indeed, the lives of those who are infected or affected by HIV/AIDS have come to be decisively shaped by how we represent what it means to live with the disease. “In multiple, fragmentary, and often contradictory ways, we struggle to achieve some sort of understanding of AIDS, a reality that is frightening, widely publicized, and yet finally neither directly nor fully knowable” (Treichler 31). As Paula Treichler explains, HIV/AIDS, in this respect, “is no different from other linguistic constructions, which, in the common sense view of the language, are thought to transmit preexisting ideas and represent real world entities and yet, in fact, do neither” (31). HIV/AIDS does not merely connote a specific medical condition, caused by a virus, which the scientific establishment has defined for us. Rather, the very nature of AIDS is “constructed through language and in particular through discourses of medicine and science” (Treichler 31). Thus, it is not possible to understand HIV/AIDS by looking past the construction to reveal what it “really”
is. Rather one must, instead of looking past language, begin “to explore the site where such determinations *really* occur and intervene at the point where meaning is created; in language” (Treichler 31).

To account for both the material and constructed realities of the epidemic it seems reasonable to agree with Treichler that the AIDS epidemic is in fact “simultaneously an epidemic of a transmissible lethal disease and an epidemic of meanings or signification” (32). Both registers are equally crucial for us to understand. What Treichler calls “the epidemic of meanings” (33) is apparent in the myriad overlapping, opposing and multiplying chaos of representations and perceptions that form the image of the pandemic in the new millennium. So, no matter how much we desire to accept Susan Sontag’s demand that we abandon the morality that treats illness as metaphor, the HIV/AIDS pandemic proves that illness *is* metaphor and that the effort to make sense of HIV/AIDS is only possible through making sense of how it is represented and what meanings are associated with it. Needless to say, this “epidemic of meanings” is neither simple nor under control. HIV/AIDS exists at a point where many narratives intersect, each with its own problematic and specific context within which HIV/AIDS acquires meaning. This is, of course, not to say that all representative meanings of the pandemic have an equal role in shaping its reality. For HIV/AIDS, “where meanings are overwhelming in their sheer volume and often explicitly linked to extreme political agendas” (Crimp 68), we do not know whose meanings will become “the official story”. What matters, however, is that in order to understand and respond to an epidemic which is diverse and contradictory, we must try to break free from and challenge any narratives or images that claim to be “the reality” or “the official story” of the pandemic. If there is one lesson to be learned from the over thirty years of struggle against the global pandemic of HIV/AIDS, it is that “what HIV/AIDS signifies is always
being determined and that how it is determined can reflect global and local relations of power” (Crimp 70). Crimp is right in asserting that “we cannot afford to let scientists or any other group of “experts” dismiss our meanings as “misconceptions” and our alternative views as noise that interferes with the pure processes of scientific inquiry” (70). Rather, it needs to be recognized that myriad voices are part of what has become known as the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and that there is a need for these voices to be heard, “even and especially when they speak about the pandemic in ways that may at first be inaudible because they depart from conventional ways of knowing the pandemic” (Crimp 71).

1.1 HIV/AIDS and the Arts or Why Does Visual Activism Matter?

Criticizing the mainstream art scene of the early 1990s, Douglas Crimp declared that the following:

Within the arts, the scientific explanation and management of AIDS is largely taken for granted, and it is therefore assumed that cultural producers can respond to the epidemic in only two ways: by raising money for scientific research and service organizations or by creating works that express the human suffering and loss. (Crimp 3)

Two decades later, raising money still remains—and seems to be more emphasized—as the most passive response of cultural practitioners to social crisis; a response that perpetuates the idea that art itself has no social function (aside from being a commodity), and that there is no such thing as an “engaged activist aesthetic practice” (Crimp 7). Although artistic expressions or visual representations of the epidemic may seem as matters considerably less urgent or significant than the embodied experiences of people living with HIV/AIDS or the work of organizations seeking
to fight inequalities, I maintain that mediated forms of engagement, such as documentary films that address the HIV/AIDS pandemic, should not be dismissed precisely because they document the remarkable global diversity of the pandemic and those transformed by it. As HIV/AIDS scholar Cindy Patton states,

Non-face-to-face spaces are extremely important elements of reality, for activists, for researchers, and for people living with HIV. To acknowledge only local knowledge suggests that we cannot understand any situation we have not directly experienced and ignores the role of other registers of experience in helping us conceptualize, interpret and realize our particular situation. (xx)

A prime example of the significant role that mediated forms of visual representations can play and the effects they can have on the meaning of the pandemic is the activist HIV/AIDS media of late 1980s to early 1990s within the United States. Crimp coined the term *AIDS Cultural Activism* to describe forms of cultural production dedicated to the critical rethinking of AIDS in terms “of language and representation, of science and medicine, of health and illness, of sex and death, of the public and private realms” (38). As major contributors to AIDS cultural activism, queer media makers produced an extraordinary body of films and videos during this key period of the pandemic in North America. These works not only contributed to the image of the pandemic in the United States and challenged what was being presented to the public as “official narratives” of HIV/AIDS, but they also “created a political consciousness of the pandemic and spaces of dialogue within which both the makers themselves and critics, scholars and viewers rigorously discussed these works. In fact, AIDS cultural activism of late 1980s and early 1990s engendered a politicized community, at once local and transnational, in which the distinctions between activists, artists, viewers and critics became increasingly fluid” (Hallas 8). Although not
the pioneer of this trend of visual activism, the most influential and powerful model of AIDS media activism of the early years of the pandemic within the United States is without doubt the *AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power*, better known as ACT UP.

### 1.2 On Act Up

Picture a Coalition of People refusing to be victims.

Picture a Coalition of People having safe sex and shooting up with clean works.

Picture a Coalition of People staging a die-in in front of City Hall or the White House until massive funds for AIDS are released.

Picture a Coalition of People getting arrested for blocking traffic during rush hour as they stand in the middle of Times Square kissing one another.

Picture a Coalition of People occupying abandoned buildings, demanding that they be made into hospices for people living with AIDS.

Picture a Coalition of People chanting “Money for AIDS, not for war” as they surround and quarantine the Pentagon. …

Getting no answers, people are mobilizing.

Getting no answers, a movement is emerging.

Picture a Coalition of People who will end this epidemic. (Bordowitz 195-96)
1.2.1 The State vs the Activists: A Brief History

In the early years of the pandemic in the United States, governmental attention to the epidemic was close to nonexistent. This was, to a large extent, due to the fact that the emergence of the AIDS epidemic in 1981 coincided with the start of the Reagan administration. President Ronald Reagan, “an advocate of shrinking government and indebted to the religious right who had helped to elect him, did not mention the word AIDS in public until 1985, 4 years and 10,000 deaths into the epidemic” (Gould 11), and then only in response to a reporter's question. Reagan did not publicly discuss his government’s AIDS policy until 1987.

By the mid-1980s, “the government's continuing failure to address the AIDS crisis and widespread homophobic hysteria about AIDS in the media were generating anger and frustration among growing numbers of lesbians and gay men” (Gould 144). A number of AIDS activists at the time started “to try more confrontational tactics” (Gould 145). In late 1985, two gay men with AIDS “chained themselves to the door of the Federal Building in UN Plaza to protest the government’s inaction” (Ingalls 1); their action marked the beginning of the San Francisco AIDS/ARC Vigil (Gould 145). It was around the same time that a group of activists in New York formed an organization that eventually became the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD). In December 1985, “800 people joined GLAAD in a demonstration that targeted Rupert Murdoch’s New York Post for its sensationalized AIDS coverage that blames the gay community for the problem” (Hill). These forms of direct and oppositional activism were not yet widespread at that point, but their occurrence heralded a new era of cultural activism and a major shift in the social and political climate within the United States and particularly the queer communities with regard to HIV/AIDS.
ACT UP (The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) was officially introduced to the public in 1987. Self-identified as “a diverse nonpartisan group united in anger and committed to direct action to end the global AIDS epidemic” (ACT UP/NY), ACT UP emerged out of the lesbian and gay community in New York City. “They were numerous chapters and affiliated groups across the United States, all locally autonomous but nationally networked under the goal of street AIDS activist movement. Using dramatic tactics, including street protests, die-ins, office takeovers, disruptions, and guerrilla theater” (Gould 10), ACT UP “targeted all levels of government, the scientific-medical establishment, the insurance and pharmaceutical industries, the media, the Catholic Church, and other institutions seen as hindering the fight against HIV/AIDS” (Gould 10). ACT UP was also famous for its visually powerful graphics—such as the “SILENCE = DEATH” sign—and for its radical sexual politics.

ACT UP’s first action was staged on Wall Street in March 1987 to protest the “unavailability of promising drug treatments and the announcement by Burroughs-Wellcome that they would charge each patient up to $13,000 per year for AZT” (Bordowitz 185). Soon after the protest, at which seventeen people were arrested, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced their plans to cut two years off the drug approval process. This ignited the media attention to drug-treatment issues, and footage of ACT UP’s Wall Street demonstration became the main focus of all media reports. After this initial demonstration, ACT UP grew to “a core group of over 200 people, with chapters in over 80 cities and towns across the United States” (Bordowitz 185). Driven by a sense of urgency, “ACT UP instigated a model of activism that, rather than demanding ideological unity among all members and chapters, undertook any tactical battle that might help save lives” (Gould 12).
By most measures, ACT UP was an extremely successful movement. Its victories included “forcing the FDA to shorten the drug approval process and to expand access to experimental drugs, obtaining increased government AIDS funding, preventing the passage of many repressive legislative measures” (Gould 12), forcing pharmaceutical companies to lower AIDS drug prices, and successfully arguing that people with AIDS should be consulted in AIDS drug trial designs (ACT UP/NY). In addition to its many significant AIDS-related victories, ACT UP inaugurated a new era in which anger, defiant street activism, and sex-radical politics became normalized and, more importantly, valued among queer communities.

1.3 Global South\(^1\) and the AIDS Documentary Archive

Among the different forms of artistic contribution, AIDS documentaries became one of the most prominent media for narrating the pandemic. The number of AIDS documentaries created in the last three decades has been so high that it is now an established sub-genre of health-care documentaries. As I discuss in the second chapter, the documentary medium became an important tool in both the HIV/AIDS activism of the early years of the pandemic in the West and the creation of the image of the epidemic in the global South in the later years. Despite the significance of the AIDS documentary archive of the global South and its role in shaping the ‘global’ image of the pandemic, however, critical literature on the archive is almost non-existent.

There are indeed works that examine the HIV/AIDS visual culture and documentary archive of the early years of the epidemic by examining the visual productions of the people with HIV/AIDS [PWAs] (most notably works of Alexandra Juhasz and Douglas Crimp), analyzing

\(^1\) My usage of the term ‘global South’ is informed by both the geopolitical connotations of the term and its more specific meaning in relation to the HIV/AIDS pandemic which connotes all geographies that were excluded from the narrative of the global epidemic in its early years. Thus geographies that might not fit within the political economy’s definition of the global South could still be regarded as part of the global South of the epidemic. Consequently I use the term as not simply part of a binary of North-South; but rather as a fluid term that could break conventional binaries and be understood on different levels depending on its context.
the films and videos created by activist groups and LGBT communities (Roger Hallas’s works are prime examples) or by focusing on individual productions (Gabrielle Griffin’s works on Derek Jarman’s films, and Gust Yep’s work on Common Threads: Stories of the Quilt are among these works). One can also find a very small body of works on specific AIDS documentary films of the global South, but there is almost no critical literature that examines these works as an archive. And this is exactly what my thesis attempts to do, to analyze the AIDS documentary archive of the global South as part of the AIDS documentary canon of the later years (arguably the post pandemic years) of the epidemic and narratives and images that have come to be characteristics of this archive. In spite of the Eurocentric narrative of the pandemic that presented the history of the epidemic in the global North as definitive of the early years of the epidemic and thus the focus of its visual culture, HIV/AIDS has been, from the very beginning, a crisis of the global South as well, but one that has been excluded from the global image of the epidemic for so long and upon inclusion in later years framed in very specific and partial ways. This project, therefore sheds light on the transformation of the exclusionary visual archive of the epidemic and revisiting it in conjunction with the often-eliminated narrative of the pandemic in the global South. In doing so, I juxtapose and read the archive in relation to a number of phenomena including the neoliberal philanthropic market, the documentary archive and visual culture of the epidemic in the early years, and the dynamics of affect and sympathy at a global level, to avoid the futile endeavor (in my opinion) of analyzing the archive in isolation. By examining the AIDS documentary archive in form and content as part of a network of knowledge-power, one can comprehend not only the influence of the archive on the visual culture and image of the epidemic in the global South but also its role in constructing the global narrative of the epidemic. Thus, I contend that it is only through such detailed and multilayered
understanding of the politics of representation within the archive that we can begin to imagine ways of challenging the deep-rooted structures and frames of the epidemic of meaning.

Practices of documentary making, I argue, are as much part of the colonial power relations as are contemporary perceptions of HIV/AIDS. Representations of HIV/AIDS fit into established patterns of orientalism, for example. Consider how some of the first media accounts of HIV/AIDS revolved around theories that traced the origin of the disease in Africa. As I will discuss in the second chapter, such colonial and stereotypical visuals of the condition of the pandemic in the global South find their way into the growing archive of what I call “philanthropic documentaries” of the global South, a tradition of globally-oriented documentary making in and about the global South regions and the state of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in them that is aimed at attracting financial and political aid from mostly Western viewers through presenting narratives and visuals that initiate effects of shock and sympathy. The philanthropic documentary has a mission. It aims to use the documentary medium in the service of a humane cause, by claiming that documentary can provide access to both facts and feelings. Documentary can thus be used as a specific political tool, as a way of rallying public opinion in favor of a particular issue, or as Lewis Hine puts it as way of “showing things that have to be corrected” (qtd. in Beloff 171). However, in order to solicit such attention and care, the philanthropic documentary genre employs specific visuals that are often closely conflated with stereotypical images of the pandemic in the global South. Images of impoverished children, villages devastated by disaster, or people dying of HIV/AIDS, are often circulated with the hope that an outpouring of humanitarian support will help those who are in need. In this sense, philanthropic documentary has become an important aspect of what Michael Ignatieff calls the new “internationalization of conscience” (10). Making public a person’s private suffering may
well draw attention to the issue of HIV/AIDS, but perhaps only by compromising the dignity of those being filmed. Yazir Henry has argued that the use of the image of a “victim” as a trigger for an affective response is a “violation of the individual depicted” (103). Such a strategy is “presumptuous—even if well-intentioned—because it fails to respect the dignity and autonomy of the subject”, reducing him or her to “a cipher of victimhood” (Henry 104) and thereby enacting a further form of colonization. Philanthropic documentaries are meant to shock viewers and draw their attention to the urgency of the issue. However, exposing the local conditions of the pandemic in all the corners of the global South, “relies on and reinscribes generic images of HIV/AIDS, providing a universalized and decontextualized notion of human suffering” that leaves viewers with “increasingly fixed images frozen in time and place” (Bleiker & Kay 150). The result is a fixed symbolic representation of HIV/AIDS, one that may shock Western viewers and evoke pity in them, but this shock comes at the expense of understanding the complexities of the local and personal situation.

What I focus on in the second half of this document, then, is the need for the formation of an alternative AIDS documentary archive that actively challenges and diversifies what has been established over the years as the image of the pandemic in the global South by philanthropic documentaries and other visual representations. The alternative documentary is seen as a means to validate multiple local knowledge and practices, thereby disrupting existing hierarchies and power relationships. The goal is neither mere critiques of the dominant media representation of the epidemic nor “corrective attempts to produce ‘positive images’ of people living with HIV/AIDS” (Hallas 3); rather, it is to provide people with HIV/AIDS with the power to decide for themselves what kind of information and representation is most appropriate to capture and to find ways through which people can express the multiple and often local manifestations of what
it means to live with HIV/AIDS. In this context, alternative documentaries have the potential to replace centralized, professionalized, and consumer-oriented communication practices which tend to silence many people, particularly those who do not fit within the stereotypes. Thus, they can be part of an alternative, more heterogeneous means of representation that seeks to create space, for diverse and simultaneously globalized and localized ways of communicating meaning and visibilizing the marginalized ‘realities’ and images of the pandemic. In 1988, Members of ACT UP/New York, in response to the Nixon exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, issued an open letter in which they criticized the dominant iconography of the PWA (person with AIDS) and demanded access to representation in the public sphere: “We demand the visibility of PWAs who are vibrant, angry, loving, sexy, beautiful, acting up and fighting back. Stop looking at us; Start listening to us” (qtd. in Hallas 18). Twenty seven years later, it might be time to start demanding the same for the PWAs (and the image of the pandemic as a whole) in the global South.

1.4 Terminology

Throughout this text, I have made a number of terminological choices, each carefully thought through and selected based on their connotations and implications within the discourses and literature around the pandemic. Here I have provided short descriptions of some of these contested terms and the reasoning behind their usage in this document.

1.4.1 HIV/AIDS

I use the term ‘HIV/AIDS’ to include both references to the virus (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) and to the syndrome (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). By using this inclusive term I hope to avoid some of “the problematic applications of the HIV/AIDS terminology that
Simon Watney and others have critiqued, although I occasionally use the acronym AIDS on its own, usually in a context that makes clear why such usage is called for in the specific instance.

1.4.2 Person with AIDS

From ‘AIDS patient’ to ‘AIDS victim’ to ‘AIDS sufferer,’ there is a wide range of terms used to refer to the person with AIDS. In 1983, The Advisory Committee of People with AIDS issued the following statement: “We condemn attempts to label us as ‘victims,’ which implies defeat, and we are only occasionally ‘patients,’ which implies passivity, helplessness, and dependence on the care of others. We are ‘people with AIDS’” (qtd. in Grover 26). At the October 1987 March in Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, PWAs (Person with AIDS) from all over the United States took the naming of their condition one step further, announcing that they are ‘people living with AIDS.’ As Grover argues, the PWAs’ insistence upon naming, “though partially aimed at the press, the public, the government, and the medical profession, is primarily an act of self-acclaim”: “We do not see ourselves as victims. We will not be victimized. We have the right to be treated with respect, dignity, compassion, and understanding. We have the right to live fulfilling, productive lives—to live and die with dignity and compassion.” (NAPA’s Statement of Purpose 1986).

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2 Although it is now widely accepted that AIDS does not exist without HIV infection, this view is still not entirely without its critics. Since the virus itself has not yet been confirmed in itself, meaning that its presence has to be detected through another presence, that of the antibodies. The antibodies can be made visible through various tests, but they are effectively second-rate proofs of the presence of the virus, that highlight the absence of proof of the virus itself. The still-present skepticism around the virus’s presence is indicative of the need for visible signs, of the importance of the visibility of things within the discourse of Western science. The debates about the relationship between HIV and AIDS and the importance of the terms that are used to refer to these phenomena are as Griffin puts it effects of “the discursive dependency which this uncertainty gives rise to: the words in which you say it become everything” (95).
1.4.3 Global South

The term ‘global South’ is one of a family of terms, including “Third World” and “developing countries,” that denote regions outside Europe and North America, mostly (though not all) low-income and often politically or culturally marginalized. What distinguishes ‘global South’ from similar terms, is its implication of a “shift from a central focus on development or cultural difference toward an emphasis on geopolitical relations of power” (Dados and Connell 12). Following the Cold War—during which the terms “First World” and “Third World” became popular—the phrases “Global North” and “Global South” spread in academic fields. The North-South language “provided an alternative to the concept of globalization, contesting the belief in a growing homogenization of cultures and societies” (Dados and Connell 12). The North-South terminology is often employed to name patterns of wealth, privilege, and development across broad regions. In this sense, the term ‘global South’ functions as more than a metaphor for underdevelopment. It references an entire history of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and economic and social change through which “large inequalities in living standards, life expectancy, and access to resources are maintained” (Dados and Connell 13).

1.4.4 Alternative AIDS Media

The ‘alternative AIDS media’ is a concept that can only be defined in relation to what it opposes, i.e. the mainstream AIDS media. In her discussion of the visual archive of the activist AIDS groups, Alexandra Juhasz defines alternative AIDS media as one that “positions itself in a dialogical relationship with what it perceives to be dominant culture and the dominant media” (31). Being as complex as the dominant culture to which it responds, the alternative AIDS media (sometimes referred to as activist AIDS media) can perhaps be best recognized in its effort to
“correct, augment, or politicize the paltry, timid, and incorrect representations” (31) offered by mainstream media and to contextualize the representation of AIDS with a politics, a history, and an analysis.

1.5 Introduction to the Chapters

Chapter 2, “The Visibilized Pandemic and Invisible AIDS,” begins by looking at the visual archive of the pandemic in its early years—the 1980s to the mid-1990s—and examines the visual culture that formed around the epidemic in the United States. Focusing on the representations of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in both the mainstream and alternative media, the chapter investigates the reasons behind the epidemic’s hyper-visualization and the politics of representation associated with it. It then narrows its analysis to visibilizing of the pandemic within the AIDS documentary archive in the United States and highlights the shift in the archive from the radical and action-oriented documentaries of the early years of the pandemic to the “reminiscing” documentaries of the later years. This shift in the form and approach is studied in relation to the parallel change in the canon of AIDS documentaries toward an excessive attention to the state of the pandemic in the global South. The chapter closes with a discussion on the archive of AIDS documentaries of the global South—with a focus on post 2000 films—in the context of neoliberal philanthropy, demonstrating the ways in which the canonized documentaries of the genre act as part of the marketing machine of philanthropy and the kind of normative images they reproduce in order to do so.

Chapter 3, “The Alternative Documentary and the Othered Geographies,” follows up on the arguments made in the second chapter around the normativity and stereotypical representations of the condition of the pandemic in the global South within the archive of
philanthropic AIDS documentaries, by focusing on two of the most recurrent visual narratives (the portrayal of what I call “geographies of misfortune” and displays of detailed accounts of human suffering) used in these works. The chapter then focuses on how these visual and narrative tropes inscribe and reinscribe dynamics of othering and colonial perspectives and argues for the need for an alternative AIDS documentary archive of the global South. To support its argument, the chapter offers close readings of two AIDS documentaries (Mohammad and the Matchmaker and The Epic of Central Plains) as examples of the works belonging to the still marginalized but growing archive of alternative documentaries of the global South and tracks the ways in which they each—both in form and content—pose a challenge to the all-too-familiar normative philanthropic AIDS documentary.
Chapter 2: The Visibilized Pandemic and Invisible AIDS

This invisible contagion is the logical culmination of the postmodern condition, only manageable in representation, and best managed in postmodernism’s definitive discourse—television. (Juhasz 3)

Rhetoric is not the bastard child of logic, but more likely its master. (Nichols 104)

A thin, pale, hollow-cheeked African woman, sitting on an old chair, talks to the camera while tearing up. A skinny, dirty-looking child is wandering around a ruined house. Rows of miserable ill patients are lying on old simple hospital beds in small rooms. A waifish parent holds her ailing child in her arms. Numbers, maps and statistics appear on the screen… Do any of these images or their juxtaposition strike one as strange or unfathomable? I doubt it. In fact, there is a good chance that scenes similar to the ones described above, flow into one’s mind when asked about the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the global South. The strong ties between the image of the pandemic in the global South and the normative spectacles of extreme poverty and destitution are, to a large extent, a product of the visualization of the global pandemic through the lens of the media and a tradition of AIDS documentary making that began to present an image of the epidemic in the global South to the eyes of the world.

But how did it become natural and obvious to represent the pandemic in the way these documentaries do? In order to begin to imagine an answer to this question, one needs to think

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3 *Lifecycles: A Story of AIDS in Malawi*
4 *Blood of Yingzhou District*
5 *The Central Plains*
6 *Together*
about relations of power within communities affected by the pandemic and those who blindly cling to an idea of being unaffected by it, and the global South and the politics of aid that have come to define HIV/AIDS as an international event. These contexts will prove to be crucial but we first need to consider how HIV/AIDS has become enmeshed within visual culture in general.

One of the curious aspects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic has been its sudden and widespread presence in the both mainstream and avant-garde visual media of its time. There are no instances of such a proliferated media production and process of visibilizing for a similar pandemic. As Ann Jurecic states in her comparison of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the influenza epidemic of 1918 (an epidemic that took the life of nearly a hundred million people), there is a stark contrast to be found between the near silence that followed the 1918 epidemic—despite its ferocity—and the “flood” of cultural products that “appeared in response to the emergence of HIV/AIDS” (2). While such differences might be explained in terms of the global development of media-saturated cultural politics over the twentieth century, this is more than simply a matter of increased opportunities to disseminate official narratives of a pandemic. Indeed, as the HIV/AIDS pandemic went on, its influence on the public consciousness and the traditional understandings of the media of the time grew deeper. More and more people from different artistic and literary media joined, “in an effort to document the pandemic, create memorial art, and make meaning of suffering and loss on scales ranging from the individual to the global” (Jurecic 2). A significant number of such cultural productions inspired by or responsive to the pandemic take the form of visual media, and it is in these expressions in particular that the pandemic comes to be defined by ideas of visibility and invisibility.

The idea of the relatively ambiguous and undetermined condition of HIV/AIDS surfaced in the cultural and public domain predominantly in “over-determined media like films, posters,
theater pieces, installations, art exhibitions and videos” (Griffin 5). It is worth mentioning, moreover, that this cultural interest in visualizing the epidemic and bringing it into the public consciousness includes representations that are far from affirmative or positive, whether for the queer community or for a wider public grappling with the emergence of a new and deadly disease, that is, alongside thought-provoking works such as the AIDS quilt that sought, in part, to make suffering and death visible for public memory, a visual archive of the pandemic also includes accounts of hasty and attention-grabbing tabloid journalism as well as TV news reports that more often than not proposed bizarre stories and false “facts” about the pandemic. But what provoked these very different investments in visual culture surrounding HIV/AIDS? What could explain such broad visual media coverage of the HIV/AIDS pandemic? What was it that distinguished the HIV/AIDS pandemic from other epidemics or equally critical conditions of the modern time? There are a number of possible answers to such an inquiry, and no single answer. Initially, following Griffin, I want to focus on two distinct but related elements: (1) the immediacy and urgency of the pandemic which necessitated quick responses and actions and (2) the ambiguous and unknown nature of HIV/AIDS itself. The goal of such attention is to understand the ways in which, from the very beginning, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has been defined and transformed by visual culture, a legacy that continues to evolve and which has profound implications for contemporary cultural expressions of HIV/AIDS that are not always aware of the ways in which the pandemic exists now, in part, as a visual phenomenon.

The early years of the pandemic in the West were turbulent times. In a short period, the number of people becoming infected and dying rose steeply, resulting in an atmosphere of fear, shortage of accurate information, and loss. People, especially within queer communities, were witnessing the deaths of their friends and families and the demise of their communities without
being aware or certain of what was transpiring or what needed to be done to halt the calamity. This sense of urgency within queer communities and—albeit of a different nature—within the general public, which was created by the great voids in structures of knowledge and power, provides an explanation—although neither sufficient nor exhaustive—for why the overt visual representations of the pandemic became privileged in its early years. The crucial desire for immediate answers and disseminating vital messages called for the quickest, most instantaneous and most effective forms of representation which within the cultural media would translate into the preference of the visual over the written word or other forms of representation.

Another contributing factor to the proliferation of visual media coverage of the pandemic was the relative ambiguity and uncertainty of the phenomenon of HIV/AIDS itself; an uncertainty made vivid by the inability of the medical establishment to define the disease and “fix” it to recognizable [risk] groups and/or patterns of behavior. In the absence of such a clarification from the medical and governmental authorities, mainstream and activist media took on the role of “figuring out” the pandemic and offering images that “captured the realities of the situation” in its different stages (Griffin 5). This process of visibilizing or pinning down the pandemic to certain images and corresponding groups or lifestyles is one of the major causes of division between the mainstream commercial media and what came to be known as alternative or independent activist media of HIV/AIDS. Although, in principle, the productions of mainstream and activist media both were the effects of the same cause and responding to the same basic concerns, their outcomes were starkly different and at times in complete opposition. In fact, many of the activist works and artistic productions were created in response to the

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7 Among the major so-called “high-risk groups” of the epidemic were gay men, IV drug users, workers in the sex industry, black Africans, and the Latino population; not to mention the famous “4H Group,” publicized by the (primarily right wing) mainstream media of the time, which stood for Homosexuals, Hemophiliacs, Heroin addicts and Haitians as the main victims of the epidemic.
“overwhelming needs to counter the [mis]information about HIV/AIDS represented on broadcast television and to represent the underrepresented experiences of the crisis” (Juhasz 202). The desire for quick solutions and straight-forward answers had caused the majority of the mainstream representations of the epidemic in its early stages to be filled with stereotypical images, reductive representations, sanitized statements and monotonous judgments and sanctions towards specific marginalized groups and lifestyles that could in turn cause the majority of the general public to feel at ease.

The act of powerfully ascribing the pandemic to certain people and places, and thus generating a meaningful distance, not only left the majority of the population and members of privileged social groups, most notably the white heterosexual upper and middle classes, to disown the pandemic and maintain a false state of innocence, but it also initiated processes of victim blaming by turning the incomprehensible epidemic into a controllable entity whose locus of risk was located outside of oneself and within the so-called 4H risk groups: homosexuals, haemophiliacs, Haitians, and intravenous heroin users. The media-generated “us versus them” dichotomy was perhaps best captured in Ronald Reagan’s 1987 address to the American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR), where he stated that, “If a person has reason to believe that he or she may be a carrier, that person has a moral duty to be tested for AIDS; human decency requires it. And the reason is very simple: Innocent people are being infected by this virus, and some of them are going to acquire AIDS and die” [emphasis mine] (President Reagan’s amfAR Speech), or when in 1985 CBS broadcasted a breaking news report on AIDS by emphasizing that scientists now realize “the disease can strike within the bounds of ‘respectable society’ and it does not solely result from the ‘immoral’ actions of intravenous drug users and gay men” (qtd. in Hart 35).
Such a trend of victim blaming in the politics of commercial and mainstream media ignited vigorous local responses from the American activist groups\(^8\). They made use of the means of video production to “articulate a rebuttal to or a revision of the mainstream media’s definitions and representations of AIDS and to form communities around a new identity forced into existence by the fact of AIDS” (Juhasz 203). The alternative activist media needed to present an affirmative counter-image of people with AIDS “whose lives and identities were neither to be reduced to pathology nor to be confined merely to the context of their illness” (Hallas 84). In order to propose this alternative image and visibilize it to the public eye, the AIDS activist groups, most of which were identified at the time as part of ACT UP, GLAAD\(^9\), or ARC\(^{10}\)/AIDS Vigil, needed to take part in the AIDS visual culture of the era and respond to the overtly visual mainstream media using their own means, i.e. visual footage. This unique form of challenging and countering the prevalent ideologies, resulted in a cycle of visual representation in the form of an extraordinary body of films, videos and installations during this key period of the pandemic in North America.

All throughout the early years of the pandemic, television and news broadcasting in particular remained as “the most important medium for shaping the dominant public perception of AIDS in the United States, and it often rejected any alternative, reconfigured discourse that was not readable within its signifying system” (Hallas 80). The mainstream media, especially the news media, tended to either resist any coverage of people with HIV/AIDS and AIDS stories, or to present them as belonging only to certain marginalized groups, reassuring the general public that they are not the ones threatened. So, even when these marginalized groups were let in on the

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8 *Silverlake Life: the View from here* (1993), *Tongues Untied* (1989), *We are Dad* (2005) are few examples of such alternative documentaries.

9 Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation

10 AIDS Related Complex
conversation they were often framed in particular ways and spaces in the name of ”giving them a face” or a voice. The AIDS activist groups, particularly ACT UP, challenged such seemingly affirmative goals and demonstrated the ways in which these processes were meant to keep individuals in their socially expected ideological roles.

One of the most interesting and curious characteristics of the visual culture of these early years of the pandemic in North America is the combination or juxtaposition of images and visual elements with words or as Griffin calls it the “logocentricity”(6) of these works. Given the fact that, through the silence of the medical and political authorities, the visual media became the source of information as well as change and intervention in the fight against the pandemic and, as such, the primary means to disseminate messages, it was not strange that the messages were rarely purely visual. Rather, much of the visual productions, and especially the activist art, used text or a combination of text and image as spectacle to convey their messages in the most direct and unambiguous ways possible. Griffin explains this peculiar characteristic of both commercial and activist works by arguing that such a combination was in fact a reflection of the inherent sense of urgency and “indeterminacy” of the epidemic and explains how both groups aimed to ensure that their audiences get the exact messages that they intended to send. In other words, although the visual form was privileged due to its potential for widespread and quick delivery and the strength of impact, it was not trusted to be the sole representative as it would by nature widen the range for possible diverse interpretations (Griffin 6).

I use the term logocentrism in a broad sense to mean the employment of words and narration either as image or as complementary of the image. In the context of the early visual culture of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, especially the works of the activist groups, including Gran Fury and ACT UP, logocentrism was used mainly as a means to specify, emphasize and even
radicalize meaning. As Griffin argues, much of the activist art of the era was geared towards “influencing public opinion and changing public behavior” (6). However, the combination of words and images and use of words as images (most notably in the case of the Silence=Death posters) was not only a way of ensuring “an instant and unambiguous impact” (Griffin 6) that would reach vast audiences; rather, it became definitive of the radicalism of the activist movements and added to their works the shock value that they desired.

By the mid-1990s, as the image of the pandemic in the West gradually changed from one of an ambiguous, urgent and disastrous epidemic to a clinically manageable condition, the shock-inducing and unambiguously intelligible logocentric works of the earlier years became less relevant. Logocentrism, however, remained intact as part of the visual culture and visual productions of the pandemic in form of the voice-over in narration-based AIDS documentaries. Where the alternative or activist media used logocentrism as an arguably productive and radical way of representing the politics of the epidemic and challenging the ethical and cultural stigma woven around it, mainstream media, both in the form of news reports and documentary films, used the combination of words and images as a way of enforcing a very specific narrative and way of seeing. Many of ACT UP’s logocentric works aimed at opening the space for conversation by breaking with the conventional modes of representation and perception and inviting the viewers to challenge the normative. The narrative-based documentaries, conversely, often close the discursive space by excluding diverse and subjective ways of understanding and seeing and narrating the right or correct way of seeing what is being shown. This is of course not to say that the AIDS alternative media’s logocentric works were unbiased; on the contrary, the AIDS activist media had very clear and emphatic ideologies guiding them. What makes their work radical though—as opposed to the normativity of the narration-based AIDS
documentaries—is their tendency to question and confront the normative and stereotypical narratives, instead of offering a clear-cut representation of their own. In other words, rather than attempting to construct a homogeneous narrative, what the alternative AIDS media of the early years of the pandemic did, and it is exactly where their value lies in my opinion, was to constantly battle and deconstruct every narrative that the main stream media or the popular culture was trying to normalize or represent as the *true* image of the pandemic.

One of the most prominent examples of the logocentric trend is the series of works and installations by Gran Fury (ACT UP’s unofficial media division) in which powerful images were paired with short and stinging slogans. Aside from their phenomenal Silence=Death posters, one of the most successful works of Gran Fury that garnered public attention was the *Read My Lips* series; a series of posters presenting same-sex kisses with a bold line that reads *Read my Lips*. Gran Fury’s posters and art had an immense influence upon the AIDS activist scene of the 1980s and 1990s and became the public face of AIDS activism in and out of the queer community.

To see the image please visit: http://www.actupny.org/reports/silencedeath.html

Figure 2.1: The groundbreaking Gran Fury poster that gave fame to ACT UP’s highly influential slogan.

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11 This was of course at the same time a clear attack on the famous George Bush speech during which he used the phrase “read my lips, no more taxes”.
To see the image please visit: http://maiterodriguez.es/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/ReadMyLips.jpg

Figure 2.2: Two of the most famous posters from Gran Fury's Read My Lips series. The posters became instantly controversial upon their release in 1988.

To see the images please visit:
http://31.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_l59d5v6OAd1qcnh5jo1_500.jpg

Figure 2.3: Examples of the logocentric activist art of the early years of the pandemic. ACT UP 1987.

As I mentioned earlier, this reliance on words to supplement or clarify the visual was not by any means limited to the static artworks of the era. It was also well translated into film and documentary formats in the form of verbal narrations. The use of narration as an artistic choice has long been part of the tradition of documentary making, but it is a particular mark of the logocentrism of documentaries of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Bill Nichols, the prominent documentary theorist and scholar explains the tendency to use narration by confirming that such a practice “can help filter out interpretations that project stories of personal experience onto the story of the film” (97). The use of narration also becomes critical when photographic images are expected to capture not only the external realities but also abstract concepts and affects of fear, pain or grief. The visual may not be able to simply present such concepts but can embody them through specific situations. This is why so many documentaries rely on “a spoken commentary to guide the viewer to the “correct” interpretation of the images that embody what’s said. The
omniscient off-screen narrator is there to structure and frame the speech and the events recorded by the camera” (Nichols 99). The need to ensure the correct interpretation of HIV/AIDS could scarcely have been more consequential or difficult to determine.

Like Griffin, I contend that the reason behind the existence of these narrations and the emphasis on verbal narratives to accompany the visual, reflects the immediacy of the time and the urgent desire to send out clear messages, especially since the audiences were large and made up of diverse groups of people and thus the alternative media could not risk the possibility of personal interpretations threatening the integrity and clarity of their messages. This emphasis on narration and clarity, however, becomes more complicated in documentaries of the later years of the pandemic. While in the early years of the new millennium, the tradition of AIDS documentary filmmaking in and about the pandemic in the West does not come to a halt, the quantity and nature of these works begin to change. Even the queer alternative media “had shown fatigue over AIDS by the turn of the millennium” (Hallas 5). In fact, as Roger Hallas astutely observes, by the late 1990s, it had become commonplace among the queer intellectual scene of the global North to hear that “no one talks about AIDS anymore” (5). The relative disappearance of the atmosphere of immediacy and ambiguity, which was an attribute of the early years of the pandemic, results in very different dynamics and diverse forms of works and artistic productions in these post-2000 years. Where earlier works focused on provoking public reactions to controversial issues that were sites of contradiction and debate such as LGBT rights, stereotypical representations or governmental negligence, the trend of artistic productions and especially documentaries of the later years in the West had less critical and action-oriented edge and generated more of what I call the reminiscing documentaries: films that look back and chronicle the history of the pandemic with an implication that the epidemic has changed its status
from a present and powerful catastrophe to a historical phenomenon whose remainder is a “manageable condition” that does not resemble a pandemic anymore.

While the idea of a post-AIDS era seems naïve and contradictory in light of the booming global pandemic as well as in the context of antiretroviral medication and their unknown long term effects and gradual ineffectiveness due to virus resistance, it is clear that the mid-1990s ended a particular historical period of HIV/AIDS that gave rise to radicalization of AIDS activism and contributed to HIV/AIDS visual culture. Consequently, in what might, perhaps bizarrely, be called the post-epidemic years of HIV/AIDS in the West, the trend of documentary filmmaking turns its focus to the histories of the events, the activist groups, the global responses and even the media representations of the pandemic in the early years. Documentary films such as *30 Years from Here* (2011) and *Sex Positive* (2008) are a few examples of this recent tradition of HIV/AIDS documentary filmmaking. The films look at the pandemic through a historical lens and narrate the ordeals and sufferings brought about by the pandemic (*30 Years From Here*), the stories of its heroic figures (*Sex Positive*), and the political and emotional responses and ups and downs of its afflicted communities. The reminiscing documentary trend also includes the myriad films that limit the scope of their focus to the individual “victims” or observers of the pandemic, people who tell their personal narratives of that time. Two of the most telling examples of this tradition are the critically acclaimed 2011 documentary *We Were Here* and the 2012 Oscar nominee *How to Survive a Plague*. Both films were produced in the United States and both narrate the stories of the critical early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. *We Were Here* documents the crisis within the queer community of San Francisco in the early 1980s through interviews with five individuals—all of whom were active participants of the queer community of San Francisco before the emergence of the pandemic. They each give an account of the state
of the epidemic and the struggles of the queer community at the time, while telling the stories of how the pandemic changed their own lives. The film casts light on the complexities of the political movements, emotional toll, and the restlessness of the queer communities in the daunting atmosphere of the outbreak years of the pandemic, then known as “Gay Plague.” A prime example of reminiscent documentaries of the new millennium, the film takes a reflective look at the history of the epidemic and recounts the stories of the individuals without any gesturing towards the state of the epidemic at present.

The same goes with David France’s *How to Survive a Plague* which follows in retrospect the efforts and struggles of ACT UP and its clashes and triumphs with the government and political powers of the time. One can clearly see the fading sense of urgency, fear, anxiety, and simultaneous hopelessness and hope that were the traits of the early years. Instead in these later works, what is prevalent is the pandemic wrapped in the image of a historical event, the complex and unyielding work of mourning and remembering and a retrospective examination of how the AIDS crisis emerged and was experienced. The decline in radical activist works—works that directly, and at times even angrily, attacked and criticized the responsible authorities and perpetuators of the culture of ignorance and inaction around the pandemic—within the context of the global North in these later years coincides with an upsurge in investigative documentary making with a focus on the global South. As the epidemic changes its status in the West and, to some extent, its immediate significance in the North American social and cultural map, the AIDS documentary archive turns its attention to the nature of the HIV/AIDS culture in the global South.
2.1 The New Canon

Why did the AIDS documentary canon\textsuperscript{12} change its focus onto the Global South in the later years (the late 1990s to early 2000s) of the pandemic?\textsuperscript{13} Why was there a proliferation in the number of films made in and about the developing countries and funded by the Western or global institutions?\textsuperscript{14} Rather than trying to formulate a single, exhaustive answer to such a seemingly simple and straightforward but complex in nature question, I will point at a number of different analyses and arguments that have been posited in response to this phenomenon in an attempt to make sense of its complexity by unpacking its different levels and bringing the different ratiocinations into conversation.

One of the most common answers to the question of the gradual turn to the global South in the later years of the pandemic is based on the Eurocentric belief that although HIV/AIDS [presumably] started in Africa, it was in North America that its outbreak took the form of a widespread and dire pandemic; and that it was in the later years—namely late 1990s and early 2000s—that the epidemic began to emerge in many of the developing countries of the East for

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\textsuperscript{12} I use the term canon and canonized documentaries to refer to the works that best exemplify the normalized and popular conventions and trends of the genre. Thus when I speak of the shift in the canon of AIDS documentary genre from the Western context to the global South, I refer to the change in the trend within that archive toward a focus on the condition and cultures of the pandemic in the global South. Similarly when referring to the canon of AIDS documentaries of the global South, my contention is to highlight the major narratives, styles and tendencies of that archive and the films that best capture them. Needless to say the canon is far from a static phenomenon and thus marginalized works of each era might turn into canonical works over time and vice versa. My usage of the concept of a canon then is not with the intention of classifying and categorizing the archives or presenting clear-cut formulas; rather I use the idea as a way of navigating and understanding the dynamics of the archives and the ways in which they establish, privilege and reproduce definitive images and narratives.

\textsuperscript{13} See B. Horrigan, “Notes on AIDS and Its Combatants: An Appreciation.”

\textsuperscript{14} Rebecca Hodes’s study of HIV/AIDS in African Documentary films reveals that although the early 1990s the academic reports on Africa’s HIV/AIDS rates announced “exponential increases”, the African media “had yet to run—or indeed plan—a single program [educational or political] on HIV/AIDS”(156). Focusing on how in the 1980s when the HIV/AIDS pandemic began, “Western film-makers harnessed the documentary format in order to foster awareness and challenge misinformation about the disease,” she maintains that “between 1990 and 2000, the same happened in Africa and the presence of Western media corporations brought about the production of many documentaries focusing on HIV/AIDS in Africa. (157).
the first time and generated high rates of contagion and death. So, it is understandable that the media and the documentary medium in specific were focused, in the early years, on the North American HIV/AIDS crisis and the deaths and disparities that ensued. Consequently, when the crisis began to spread to the other parts of the world, the media followed in an effort to visibilize it and solicit awareness and aid. While there is a certain amount of truth to such a narrative, it reinscribes the linear, colonial understanding of the epidemic that places the North American history of the pandemic at the focal point of the HIV/AIDS history, with the other parts of the world following in its footsteps. A closer look into the claims of this narrative, however, reveals cracks in its logic. According to the UNAIDS reports in 1996, of the nearly 4.6 million people that had died because of AIDS from the start of the pandemic up to that point and the 20.1 million people that were living with the virus, a gross majority of over 15 million were living in Sub Saharan Africa, followed by more than 3.8 million in Asia, 1 million in Latin America and the Caribbean and about 1.5 million in North America and Western and Central Europe. Thus, considering the numbers alone, it is neither rational nor truthful to say that the pandemic was more disastrous or claimed more lives in North America in its early years or even that the epidemic began to spread from there. Then why did the non-Western side of the pandemic, in spite of its bleakness, get excluded from the initial global conversation on the disease, given that it was almost entirely absent in the visual media exposure and AIDS documentary tradition of the first decade of the epidemic? Why did the all-powerful narrative of the North American experience define the epidemic’s early years and the axis of its history?

Related to the first analysis, another prominent answer to these questions and the more general question of why the global South was more or less excluded from the global discourse and media

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attention of the epidemic dwells on the concept of Eurocentrism by claiming that for as long as the West was struggling with the pandemic, the media attention and the global focus was nothing short of predictable given the privileged position of the Western countries and North America in particular in the global political economy. Hence, it was only when the pandemic started to change its status from a deadly widespread crisis that was threatening the whole society to a manageable condition that only [in theory] affected certain groups of people, that the media started to look to the outside.

The third and last rationalization that I will focus on here is the connection between AIDS documentaries in the global South and the concept of philanthropy. In her discussion of breast cancer-related charity work, Samantha King refers to breast cancer as a favorite cause for consumer-related philanthropy. She zeroes in on how national and global corporations seek to attract consumers through cause-related marketing campaigns. I contend that the same argument can be applied to HIV/AIDS and more specifically HIV/AIDS in the global South. That is, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has also been a favorite cause both within the corporate profit-oriented philanthropic economy of North America and the individual and non-profit philanthropic establishments. Although the ties between HIV/AIDS and the diverse and all-inclusive culture of philanthropy is nothing short of complex and the approaches diverse, the effort towards attracting aid (financial or other) and/or attention (which is to an extent one of the most basic objectives of philanthropic discourse) provides a common ground among the diverse range of initiatives. If we take this for granted then the more pressing question will be what in fact is the appeal of HIV/AIDS and why and how has it been made to appeal to donors? And how have the AIDS documentaries become part of the consumption-based culture of organized giving and HIV/AIDS related philanthropy?
In reality, all three of the explanations have merit and I do not believe that an analysis of the presence of the global South within the HIV/AIDS global discourse through the medium of documentary could be meaningful if it did not take all these matters into account. While the Eurocentric and colonialist tendencies of the global discourse of the pandemic and the inscription and privileging of the Western narrative of the epidemic (which resulted in the othering of the non-normative) have been meticulously discussed by prominent HIV/AIDS scholars such as Paula Treichler, Douglas Crimp and Alexandra Juhasz\textsuperscript{16}, my work aims at extending those arguments into the archive of HIV/AIDS visual culture and bringing them into conversation with the less discussed issue of HIV/AIDS philanthropic discourse in order to shed light on the complexities of the representational narratives of the global pandemic. In order to elaborate on the concept of consumer-related philanthropy and its ties with what I call philanthropic AIDS documentaries of the global South, I am going to take a brief detour into the realm of neoliberal philanthropy and then arrive at AIDS documentaries as part of the philanthropic machine so as to develop how philanthropy operates within the context of HIV/AIDS documentary filmmaking outside of North America.

\textbf{2.1.1 The Disease Du Jour}

On August 1, 2006, in a report in the business section of The Globe and Mail on the state of HIV/AIDS-related corporate philanthropy, Nick Rodrigue, manager of corporate sponsorship and donations for the AIDS committee of Toronto deemed HIV/AIDS as not “the sexy cause anymore.” He maintained that “it’s not the cause du jour. Everyone has moved on to breast cancer. It’s a great cause and certainly needed but there is certainly a lot of need in HIV and

\textsuperscript{16} Juhasz’s feminist readings of the alternative AIDS media touch on the processes of othering, exclusion and misrepresentation in the visual politics of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the North American and global contexts.
AIDS.” The article continues by focusing on the decline in the interest of Canadian business leaders in HIV/AIDS and the disappearance of the disease as the “cause celebre” that was the high priority for corporate giving. It concluded by hoping that “the start of the 16th international AIDS conference in Toronto will reverse that trend and encourage Canadian businesses to become involved in AIDS once again.”

The Globe and Mail article and the comments made by Rodrigue present an interesting window into the issue of corporate, consumer-oriented philanthropy. In the United States and now Canada, a neoliberal doctrine identifies philanthropy and philanthropic practice as “a necessary feature of “proper” citizenship and good government” (King xxvi). Philanthropy and voluntarism are often proposed by politicians as morally and economically viable solutions to social problems. The mainstream media offer constant coverage of stories highlighting the generosity of individuals, with the focus ranging from ordinary people striving to make a difference in their communities, to billionaire philanthropists such as Bill Gates or Warren Buffet (King xxvi). The spectacle of the large fortunes of people like Bill and Melinda Gates and celebrities like Bono and Angelina Jolie, along with their very visible modes of giving, have been a source of great interest for the media. One can hardly read a newspaper or magazine or turn on the television without some news about a celebrity or wealthy individual being visibly philanthropic. Case in point, the December 10, 2005 issue of The Globe and Mail featured a long report on the major philanthropists of the previous year by running a list of major donations, short bios of each of their donors and interviews with prominent philanthropists in which they were asked for advice on how to “give back when you are pressed for money and time.” The report ends on the happy and proud note that “the Canadian generosity has increased steadily in recent years.”
The relationship between philanthropy and citizenship has grown even more complex in a marketized and globalized environment. Philanthropists are taking a more “entrepreneurial and market-like approach to investing [their] philanthropic dollars, and the act of giving has turned more into an act of consumerism than an act of responsible citizenship” (Eikenberry 588). Eikenberry argues that philanthropy is increasingly conflated with “the media of consumption (i.e., chocolate for charity), “profit (i.e., philanthrocapitalism),” and “media celebration (i.e., charitainment)” as the basis for altruistic human relations. She maintains that, through such privileging of money and market consumerism over benevolence, “the current texts of philanthropy stabilize the very system that results in suffering and erodes the possibility for philanthropy's transformative potential” (592). In other words, that millionaire philanthropists have wealth to give away and that it is celebrated by so many, hides the fact that the system that creates a need for extreme philanthropy is a system that also creates extreme poverty. It is undeniable, then, that the whole system of market philanthropy is largely based on the principle that the ones with the most wealth and the most to gain from the poverty of others will have the most impact on poverty and the poorest will have the least. “Philanthropy can be used by the hegemonic elite to maintain the status quo” (Eikenberry 589), and to use Foucault’s concept, discipline the masses through both visible and subtle manoeuvers (Foucault 1995). When public problems become individual publicity opportunities, “we fail to see the struggle that social problems represent and fail to question the discourses and practices that philanthropic actors favor for the good of all human beings”. Rather, we close our eyes over the problematic measures that corporate philanthropy takes and celebrate it as “what is best about humanity” (Nickel & Eikenberry 278).
The supporters of philanthropic citizenship, however, might claim that it is a universal and inclusive category, external to the realms of politics. They argue that “nobody can be opposed to ordinary people doing good deeds for one another and that philanthropic citizenship is something that we can all support and participate in regardless of our social or geographical location or political leanings” (King 10). I contend that such arguments tend to exclude from their discussion the power relations that underline philanthropic activities and as a result present the often highly racialized, gendered and class-structured practice of neoliberal philanthropy as an ideal of citizenship. Corporate volunteer programs are now commonplace, and increasing numbers of commodities are sold to the public through their association with social causes. Satin ribbons and silicon wristbands of every imaginable color are worn to indicate awareness of a myriad of issues, and people walk, swim, climb or run thousands of miles each year to raise money for any number of charitable causes. The participation in giving, of time or money, is viewed as not simply a preferable way to fund public services, but as a means for implanting self-responsibility in the public. “Donning a brightly colored silicone bracelet or participating in a leisurely 5K stroll on a Sunday afternoon” is thought to help inspire the culture of personal generosity and generate a more “harmonious, benevolent, personally responsible, and active citizenry” (King xxvii). It may have the unintended effect of also ratifying an economic culture that creates the need for such benevolence in the first place.

One of the most prominent instances of such treatment of the philanthropic practice is the AIDS ribbon. In 1990, the activist art group Visual AIDS, in an attempt to garner attention and cultural awareness of the status of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States, decided to use the idea of using symbolic ribbons to draw attention to “our boys dying here at home” (Sturken 173). As Marita Sturken writes in “AIDS as Kitsch”: 

36
Soon red ribbons were turning up not only at AIDS events and art events but also on the street and the mall, and designer red ribbons glitter pins began to flood the market. In 1993 the US postal service even issued a red ribbons stamp promoting AIDS awareness. In terms of ubiquitiveness and popularity, the red ribbon was an instant success. (175)

Sturken notes, however, that “the moment the ribbon entered the public sphere it ignited a series of debates over the mainstreaming of AIDS discourse and the normalizing of activism that detractors claimed accompanied the popularity of the ribbon” (qtd. in King xxiv). Members of more radical groups even refused to wear this particular symbol in an effort to maintain an approach that refuses to see HIV/AIDS as something pretty or pleasant. The reactions towards the popularity of the ribbon and its philosophy and function signal at a broader, serious debate on how the consumer-oriented philanthropic machine “glams up” the image of a drastic cause such as HIV/AIDS and presents it through fun and glamorous events or activities that people would enjoy while also feeling good about themselves as active global citizens and honorable philanthropists. Elizabeth Taylor’s co-founded AIDS research foundation, amfAR, holds an annual Cinema Against AIDS event every year (since 1993) during the Cannes Film Festival, which raises significant funds for AIDS research. Based on their own reports, they have raised more than 80 million dollars since 1993 from this one night event alone. The event is a celebrity-packed gala attracting “faces from the worlds of fashion, music, business, and international society” (amfAR). It is sponsored by big corporations such as Bold Films, L’Oréal Paris, The Weinstein Company, Chopard, Mercedes-Benz, and as the amfAR website describes,

| It is invariably punctuated by unscripted, unforgettable moments. One year it’s George Clooney bestowing a kiss on a lucky auction bidder or Sharon Stone | 37 |
dancing along to an impromptu performance by Sir Elton John and Ringo Starr. The next, it’s Mary J. Blige bringing the crowd to its feet during a moving rendition of U2’s anthem “One” or Janet Jackson paying a heartfelt tribute to amfAR’s co-founder the late Dame Elizabeth Taylor. (amfAR)

Ironically, the biggest HIV/AIDS philanthropic gesture in the world is in fact one of the fanciest and most enjoyable of affairs that provides its participators with a place to see and be seen. The closest the pandemic comes to visibility at the event is through the “symbolic” red-ribbon shaped cookies.

2.1.2 AIDS Documentaries and the Global South: Friend or Foe?

An investigation of the role of organized giving, particularly consumer-oriented giving, in the politics of HIV/AIDS requires that we rethink some of the key assumptions about the meaning of HIV/AIDS in general and HIV/AIDS in the global South in particular and re-examine the ways in which corporate marketing strategies, government policies, and the agendas of large nonprofit organizations serve to reinforce one another in the social production of the epidemic. Thus, when looking at the AIDS documentaries of the global South, we need to contextualize them within the larger philanthropic discourse. In this context, a large number of what I call “philanthropic AIDS documentaries” become part of the marketing machine for attracting aid from outsider audiences. They are not simply consciousness-raising films that seek to reveal an otherwise hidden truth. Affirming and supporting the logic of a competing market of hundreds of thousands of philanthropic causes and a relatively small pool of resources, each cause comes be seen as one that requires promotion. And the philanthropic AIDS documentaries of the global South work in some ways as part of the campaign for attracting the funds and selling AIDS to the consumers of
philanthropic giving. The films are screened at international festivals, high-end galas, charity events and affairs of the like to bring attention to the state of the pandemic in different parts of the developing world and impress the audiences enough to attract their generosity.

Given the role that the philanthropic AIDS documentaries of the global South—not all but a large number of them—play in this marketing machine of humanitarian good, it is not surprising to see that certain narratives, spectacles and images have become privileged in the production of these films. As Bill Nichols explains, “if a film can activate our predispositions and tap into the emotions we already have toward certain values and beliefs, it can enhance their effective power” (97-8). When looking into the globally-funded AIDS documentaries of the global South and who and what is included in and excluded from their narratives, it becomes clear that such works play into the pre-existing assumptions and predispositions of the Western audience in intricate ways in order to achieve an affective response. A prominent and telling example of such normative narratives is the 2006 short documentary The Blood of Yingzhou District (hereafter referred to as The Blood) produced by Thomas Lennon Films in China. The film\(^\text{17}\) won an Oscar for Best Documentary Short along with eight other awards in International Film festivals. It was released in The U.S. in Silverdocs Film Festival, IDA Film festival and Frameline Film Festival and screened at DCONZ International Documentary Festival in New Zealand, Thessaloniki Documentary Festival in Greece, Birds Eye View Film Festival in the UK and on national TV in Japan. Following the global success of the film, it was also screened in many global HIV/AIDS events and fundraising galas including a 2008 amfAR discussion panel.

The documentary narrates the lives of a number of orphans in the Anhui province of China who

\(^{17}\) My focus on The Blood is due to its position as a prime example of the canonized works of the philanthropic AIDS documentary genre that has found widespread global praise and success. Needless to say, any documentary film within the archive can be analyzed in this context and my choice of The Blood has been simply based on its hyper-visualization of most of the normative narrative and visual tropes that are characteristics of the genre.
have lost their parents to HIV/AIDS as a result of a blood donation crisis that has occurred at the small villages of the district.

Most of the scenes in the film are of a selection of children talking to or wandering in front of the camera. In many of the shots, the children do not speak themselves. Instead an adult in or out of the frame tells their stories and talks about how they have lost their parents and how no one wants them due to the prevalent stigma surrounding the disease. Putting aside the strangeness of talking in front of the children about how poor their living conditions are, or how they have lost their parents and ended up unwanted—as if they cannot hear or understand these words—what is most peculiar about the film is the silence of the children. In the entire second half of the documentary and most of the first, the children are the focus of almost all of the shots and, although they do not speak (there are few scenes where the children do speak about themselves and their parents while painfully crying), their faces and their cries are the focus of the shots. It is as though the children—in their most vulnerable of positions no less—have been chosen to be the face—but not the voice—of the narrative. Thus, one can imagine that the main reason behind the specific way in which the scenes have been shot and developed has been to tap into the audience’s emotions—given the construction of childhood innocence and its associated feelings—in order to generate a sympathetic response.

The people and villages showcased in the film are in extremely poor conditions and there are numerous scenes of typical illustrations of poverty in the form of ruined houses, broken dishes, empty rooms and dirty walls accompanied by disheartening soundtracks. The demonstrations of poverty can of course be justified by the film’s attempt to highlight the reason behind the spread of the virus in the villages. In the 1990s a governmental blood plasma collection program was initiated in many rural areas of China, most notably in Henan province,
through which people could sell their blood to blood banks. After the plasma was extracted, the blood was transfused back into the donor’s body in order to achieve a quicker recovery and get ready for another sale. Given the financial difficulties of the rural population of China, and Henan in particular, the blood banks became very popular and people rushed to sell their blood (as much as two full bags each day) in exchange for money. A year into this program, however, it was revealed that in many cases the blood banks had used contaminated equipment, resulting in thousands of villagers being infected with HIV/AIDS. The outbreak of the virus in Henan’s “AIDS villages” was kept hidden from the general public by the Chinese state until the mid-1990s when it caught the attention of activist groups and media. This blood crisis, which brought about the widespread transmission of the HIV virus in these villages, is what the title of Ruby Yang’s documentary gestures toward; although in her documentary there is only one short scene—in which two deputy officers of the district explain the incident vaguely to the camera—that directly addresses the issue. Aside from the single shot of the deputy officers and a number of lines that appear on the screen and utter what the officers have already discussed, there are no other accounts of elaboration or investigation into who has been in charge of the donations, who is responsible, why it has happened in the first place or what the socio-legal consequences have been. The manner in which the incident is narrated and its juxtaposition with scenes of poverty and destitution even implies a partial fault on the part of the villagers themselves or a representation of the incident as an unfortunate but nevertheless inevitable effect of their poverty without a hint of critique or consideration of the broader social and political structures and powers that have given rise to it.

The implicit attempt of the film to trigger certain affective responses in an outsider audience becomes more explicit in the second half where there are instances of direct reference
to attracting aid and charity. When narrating the story of a little child, Gao Jun, who has lost both his parents, the screen reads “over the past three years private charities have reached thousands of children like Gao Jun” which is then followed by “thousands more are still waiting for support and care”. In another instance when the six year old Nan Nan is shown playing in the backyard of her new foster house, the caregiver explains that “Nan Nan is very fortunate. An American lady personally helps Nan Nan get medicine in the U.S. and sends it. Other kids are not as lucky.”

Given the critical and commercial success of The Blood in the West—the film has not been publicly broadcasted in mainland China as of yet—and its numerous screenings in AIDS fundraising and awareness events, one can argue that the film has in fact managed—either purposefully or unintentionally—to tap into the emotions and assumptions of its implied audiences. The Blood’s representation of HIV/AIDS in China—it is true that the film focuses on a specific province in China but more often than not, within the global discourse, the lines between the local and the national become blurry, so that one becomes understood as signaling or representing the other—and the images and spectacles that it offers are in many ways in compliance with the stereotypical images of the global South and its HIV/AIDS culture. The over-emphasis on sights of poverty, helplessness, social and cultural stigma, as well as the lack of proper knowledge or equipment\(^\text{18}\) are all indicative elements of such a discourse. It goes without saying that such normative narratives are not exclusive to Ruby Yang’s documentary feature. Indeed, as I will argue, many other philanthropic AIDS documentaries of the global

\(^{18}\text{In the one scene that Gao Jun is taken to the clinic for his check up, an English speaking (presumably American) doctor from Clinton Foundation examines him and explains his condition and the lack of necessary medication to the camera.}\)
South follow similar modes of narration and tell and retell familiar stories with different and uneven levels of direness and within different cultural contexts.
Chapter 3: The Alternative Documentary and the Othered Geographies

The Third World has attempted to write its own history, take control of its own cinematic image, speak in its own voice. The colonialist wrote the colonized out of history. (Stam and Spence 632)

The HIV/AIDS philanthropic documentary archive is dependent on the sympathy of its viewer. Thus, it is not unexpected that, in order to attract this sympathy, the documentaries often take advantage of a number of narrative and visual devices that can ignite affective responses. What I focus on here are the two arguably most recurrent—and I claim most problematic—of these representational devices that are often hyper-visibilized within this archive. First, the portrayal of the geographies of the global South as what I call “geographies of misfortune”, i.e. grim places of despair, poverty, stigma and inability within which people with HIV/AIDS—and at times people in general—are perishing; second, the use of (mostly personal) stories of suffering, pain and survival and revealing intimate portraits of individuals dealing with painful events and choices to the outsider viewer. From Sari’s Mother’s narrating of the story of a mother who is looking for medication and treatment for her ten year old HIV positive son set against the background of dire poverty and others’ judgmental treatment of the son in a war-struck Iraq to Life Cycles: A story of AIDS in Malawi’s account of an HIV/AIDS orphan in conjunction with images of the country’s poor housing, dysfunctional medical system and ignorant residents, juxtapositions of personal narratives of suffering and/or survival with bleak images of what appears to many Western eyes to be all but uninhabitable places given their utter difference from Western norms are common in the archive of AIDS documentaries of the global South.
What these spectacles of pain, suffering and disparity achieve, however, is not simply the audience’s affect and sympathy, even if this is their initial goal. The HIV/AIDS documentary archive’s attempts to create intimacy and the illusion of non-distance, through using the aforementioned visual devices, reinforce dynamics of othering. Not only are the representations of geographies of global South as places of abject misfortune and despair reminiscent of colonial visuals, but also presenting the Western viewer with images that are both closely connected to the ‘imagined’ Western conception of the global South and at the same time extremely different from their own geographies immediately instigates a here/there binary that invites the gaze of the viewer upon the exotic othered place. In an analysis of “media space,” Anita Beressi identifies the diverse range of affective responses to mediated experiences of watching:

For those watching at home, audio-visual technology clearly offers a different experience from that of being present at the pro-filmic [non-mediated] event; offering a ‘modality’ of experience in which the viewer feels both powerful and disempowered, involved and helpless. There is a real contrast here between the ordinary and the domestic and the extraordinary and geographically distant.’ (338)

In its pursuit of intimacy, the mediate camera of the philanthropic documentaries does in fact highlight the spatial contrast that Beressi speaks of and emphasizes the “watched places” as locations of the extraordinary.

What further reinforces such dynamics of othering and reinscribes the one-sided gaze is the depth the philanthropic documentaries often go to in order to visibilize the most intimate and disturbing moments of human suffering. Granted that such scenes can potentially draw
sympathetic responses from viewers and provide them with what Susan Feagin calls “tragic satisfaction” (98). They nevertheless ultimately reconfirm the normative image of the person with HIV/AIDS in the global South and, more importantly, reinforce the Western viewer’s sense of entitlement to the gaze by inviting the gaze unto the most private and intimate accounts of a human life. Feagin argues that human sympathy, as a distinct phenomenon, depends on, one might even say “feeds on,” human misery. She goes on to say that taking this sort of pleasure in one’s sympathetic responses in real life would reveal a certain “smugness, self-satisfaction, and complacency” (103), not only in direct confrontations with suffering, but also “when one is confronted with just the idea or memory of the event” (103). I extend Feagin’s argument to also include visual representations of an event, in addition to an idea or memory of it. Whatever sympathies we may feel in response to a documentary that shows actual suffering depend on the existence of real suffering in essentially the same way that memories do. This raises obvious ethical concerns when the events occur before the camera. How ethical is it to take pleasure or satisfaction—even if it is just the satisfaction of fulfilling a sense of curiosity—in observing human suffering? And on the other hand, how ethical is it for documentary films to visibilize the most private sights of human pain and suffering, even if it is for the arguably noble intentions of creating awareness (however accurate and effective it might be) and gathering aid? To what purposes are such depictions put, when we recognize that the camera never simply records and witnesses such pain but transforms it and makes it meaningful in very particular ways, ways that may be alien to the sufferer herself?

3.1 Normativity and the Question of Alternative Documentaries

Attention to the reproduction of normativity and normative spectacles calls for an analysis of form as well as content. I argue that there is a need for a change in both the formal and narrative
dynamics of the AIDS documentary archive to produce new forms of visual intimacy. To the extent that the two normative optics of visibilizing “geographies of misfortune” and “sights of suffering” play a role in creating the problematic canon of AIDS documentaries and reproduction of an othering gaze, the alternative documentaries of the archive—which I believe are what the archive still needs more than anything—should target exactly these visuals and challenge the spectacles they offer. However, it is important to mention that the antidote to the framed realities of the stereotyped or normative images is not what often is referred to as representing the "real", holistic or inclusive reality that is meant to display "the truth” or the full picture of a geography—which is in itself always already a framed reality—but rather is a form of representation that actively visibilizes its own frames—instead of constantly trying to render them invisible to the viewer—and in fact offers an intentionally framed image of the reality of the pandemic in these places. Where the philanthropic documentary attempts to hide the frame of the camera and create moments of illusionary intimacy between the two sides of the gaze, the alternative documentary visibilizes the frame and brings the viewers’ attention to it at all times to constantly remind them of the framed nature of what is being watched, in order to fight against, to quote Butler, “our inability to see what we see” (100). Butler confirms that it is not an easy task to “learn to see the frame that blinds us to what we see” (100), and that is exactly why it is crucial for the visual culture of the pandemic to “thematize the forcible frame, the one that conducts the dehumanizing norm, that restricts what is perceivable and indeed what can be” (100). Therefore, what could present a much-needed challenge to the normative images of bleak geographies of the pandemic is indeed the challenging of the visual norms of “not seeing in the midst of seeing” (Butler 100) and the hyper-visibilization and emphasis on the marginalized realities of these geographies and the diversities of the condition of the pandemic in them.
Both stereotypes and normative visions are deeply rooted in reality and are not in any sense empty signifiers. There is no doubt that most of the images of poverty, abjectness, violence and direness portrayed in the philanthropic documentaries of the pandemic are in fact representations of aspects of the realities of these places. In that sense, the problem is not in any way that these representations offer false accounts of reality, but that what they offer is only a narrow fragment of reality. And even this fragmented representation is not in itself problematic, as it is, after all, the only thing any form of visual representation can offer: a fragmented, framed version of reality. It does becomes an issue, however, when the same narrow window into the realities of these geographies gets repeated and reproduced so many times that it begins to become not just a frame of reality but rather the frame of reality. This is precisely why I argue that challenging such a visual tradition and destabilizing its solid structure requires documentary works that actively exclude what the canonical documentaries of the archive focus on—even though it is part of the realities of these geographies—and instead place their focus on the less visibilized and marginalized narratives of the pandemic within the global South. This is not to say that such challenging forms of representation can easily deflect the deep-rooted dynamics of othering (however ideal that might be), but I maintain that through these alternative forms of documentary, audiences can begin to engage Otherness in order to remake and reinvent, rather than simply reinforce, the relations of power that shape the possibility of viewing.

In this chapter I examine two documentaries both belonging to the post-2000 archive of AIDS documentaries of the global South: Maziar Bahari’s Iranian documentary, Mohammad and the Matchmaker, and Ai Xiaoming’s Chinese film, The Epic of Central Plains. Mohammad and the Matchmaker narrates the personal story of Mohammad, an HIV positive recovering addict in his forties who, with the help of his doctor and friend, Arash Alaei, begins his pursuit of a life
partner. The film goes back and forth between the story of Mohammad and to a lesser extent Maryam (a young HIV-positive woman who is introduced to Mohammad by his doctor) and Fereshteh (Mohammad’s eventual partner whom he meets at a Narcotics Anonymous meeting) and images and general accounts of the condition of the pandemic in Iran. Xiaoming’s *The Epic of Central Plains* retells the story of the HIV breakout in the villages of the Henan province of China (known as the AIDS villages) as a result of uncontrolled and unsanitary governmental blood collection. Unlike *Mohammad and the Matchmaker*, which follows a single personal narrative of HIV/AIDS, *The Epic of Central Plains* provides the viewer with a larger view of the event and investigates the effects of the outbreak of the epidemic in the area from a number of different angles and narrates it through stories and testimonials of different individuals and groups, each connected to the pandemic in one way or another.

Although the two films are different in their form, narrative style and view of the pandemic, they are both—in their own way—exemplars of a movement within the AIDS documentary archive towards the alternative modes of representation. This is not to say that these films present perfect examples of alternative AIDS documentaries, if there is even such a thing. *Mohammad and the Matchmaker* and *The Epic of Central Plains* both contain moments that defy visual norms and offer, instead, innovative styles of representation that hint at opportunities for transformative viewing experience, which set them apart from the myriad canonical AIDS documentaries of the archive. They are among the few works in the new millennium’s archive of the pandemic that have managed to break with the conventions of the genre and resist the philanthropic appeal. In their resistance, however, both films struggle with and, in substantive ways, fail to dislodge colonial narratives and optics by reinforcing the very hierarchies of power they seek to trouble. Nevertheless, they are still significant works because
of their attempts at alternative modes of representation and their strong commitment to greater justice for people living with HIV/AIDS.

3.2 The Good, the Bad and the Unfortunate, or How does *Mohammad and the Matchmaker* Remap the HIV/AIDS Crisis?

You won’t definitely get AIDS but you’ll definitely get high. (*Mohammad and the Matchmaker*)

In more than one way, Maziar Bahari’s *Mohammad and the Matchmaker* is a highly normative film that reinforces many of the philanthropic representations of the global South and the Middle East in particular. As I will explain, the film uses a number of clichéd formal and narrative devices that affirm its status as part of the mainstream archive of documentaries about the state of the pandemic in the global South. However, in spite of the film’s representational issues, I argue that *Mohammad and the Matchmaker* is an important documentary within the archive of AIDS documentaries because, while it fails to break entirely from the normative conventions of pandemic documentaries that have made some lives disappear and render their pain and suffering invisible, this film nonetheless works to make many of these conventions appear less natural. Indeed, in this film in particular, we are given the opportunity to see how conventional discourses of the pandemic have been constructed and framed for Western eyes. I base this argument on a number of the film’s major features: its critique of the normative image of the person with AIDS as well as of the medical institution in the global South, its unique glimpse into the experience of life with HIV/AIDS without reducing its subjects to their illness, its resistance towards the common tropes of philanthropic documentaries—the film cannily deploys sympathy and affect but refuses to construct abject or pitiful images of its subjects in order to
appeal to the philanthropic mentality—and, more importantly, its visibilizing of its representational framing and making it recognizable to the viewer.

_Mohammad and the Matchmaker_ is largely intended for a Western audience. The film employs many visual and narrative devices that the mainstream documentary format uses to either shock or reassure the Western viewer. It also has an English-speaking narrator—a high profile English actor, John Simm—who throughout the film both “explains” and interprets the visual footage and even at points contextualizes the dialogue to help the viewer “understand” the film. Moreover, although all the documentary subjects speak Persian (there are English voiceovers rather than dubbing so the original voices can be heard), the narration is only in English, evoking a privileged form of viewership that is completely inaccessible to non-English-speaking local audiences, including most of the people profiled in the documentary. Even though the film focuses on a local and very personalized narrative and is directed by a well-known local director, it clearly aims at visualizing its narrative for a global viewership.

The film’s use of an English-speaking British celebrity as the narrator not only determines the documentary’s implied viewership, but it also affects, and I would argue undermines, the authority and agency of the documentary’s subjects. The narrator is positioned as the all-knowing “voice of god” who informs the viewer and interprets the presumably ambiguous scenes and dialogue and, at times, even completes and reiterates the statements made by the people in the documentary or deciphers their unsaid thoughts and feelings. In one scene where Mohammad is talking to Maryam, the HIV-positive woman he has been introduced to by his doctor, the narrator’s voice interrupts the moments of silence between the two in an effort to read their silences. When Maryam and Mohammad talk about Mohammad’s drug addiction past, the camera zooms in on Maryam’s hands and face as she pauses for what seems to be a moment
of contemplation, and it is in that exact same moment that the narrator jumps in and explains that “even though Mohammad is more than twice her age, Maryam has little choice but to consider him as a potential partner.” By commenting on Maryam’s silent expression in such an assertive way, the narration subverts both the viewer’s interpretive authority and the subject’s agential power by pinning down the ambiguous moment to a specific and simplified meaning. The privileged position of the narrator becomes even more problematic when we consider his celebrity status, causing the narration to function as a representative of idealized citizenship.

Documentary scholar Stella Bruzzi argues that “narration-led documentaries ... even the least radical amongst them ... suggest that documentaries, far from being able to represent the truth in an unadulterated way, can only do so through interpretation” (57). Although I agree with Bruzzi that use of narration—regardless of the form in which it has been used—imposes a level of interpretation or framing unto what is being represented, I do not see it as the only barrier to what she calls “representing the truth in an unadulterated way” (57). While it is true that vocal narration adds a (sometimes unnecessary) layer of interpretative authority to the documentary footage, I would argue that any form of visual footage is always already tainted or “adulterated” by interpretation even before it is explicitly framed by commentary. Indeed, it is not only the vocal or written forms of narration that can instigate interpretation, but rather, as Judith Butler puts it, when we speak about “visual interpretation” (67), it becomes important to recognize the interpretive power of the visual frame itself and what it allows to count as the reality of the moment captured.

One of the most influential techniques used in Mohammad and the Matchmaker is the close-up. The close-ups have the potential to create affective interactions between the viewers and the documentary subjects. Ardis Cameron argues that effective documentary always draws
attention to “the ongoing complicity of camera work, its power to rob, to plunder, to produce, to shape, to reveal, and to distort, to inspire” (420). The close-up is one of the film's important tactics for drawing the viewers in and shattering the barriers between them and the documentary subjects. At various points in the documentary, Mohammad gazes back and talks to the camera—or at least the person who is behind the camera—and even uses English words while doing so. These moments of direct interaction not only bring attention to the frame or, as Cameron calls it, the “complicity of camera work,” but they also demolish the illusion of the viewer gazing voyeuristically into an unframed reality—which is the allusion that many documentary films actively aim to create—by showing that the subjects are in fact themselves aware of the gaze and perhaps even partly in control of it. This uncovering of the frame and its mediatory role has, potentially, a dual effect. On the one hand, it creates an intimate connection between the two sides of the frame by crossing the boundaries of interpersonal space. On the other hand, by drawing the viewer’s attention to the existence of the frame and the documentary subjects’ knowledge of it, it emphasizes the constructed nature of the realities watched. This dual effect is best captured in the scene where Maryam bursts into tears when talking about her condition. As the camera zooms in on her hand-covered face, she gazes into it for a brief moment and then pushes it back with her hand. This is a critical moment, as Maryam’s gesture towards the camera invites the viewer to recognize that perhaps he or she was looking at the intimate moment without invitation or consent. It creates a disruption in the gaze and a resistance towards the colonial relationships that grant the Western viewer a sense of—arguably conscious or unconscious—entitlement to gaze.

If Mohammad and the Matchmaker offers moments of resistance in which the viewer is invited to challenge the relations of power that have crafted a seamless narrative of living with
HIV/AIDS in Tehran as if it were a transparent truth by acknowledging that even this intensely personal narrative has been shot and edited in ways that support the designs of a global philanthropic narrative, the film is not always so reflexive or attentive to how it constructs reality. The documentary combines the broad—and I would argue reductive—image of the culture around the pandemic in Iran with a very personal story of a person with AIDS who as the narrator puts it “is trying to lead a normal life.” The documentary moves back and forth between scenes of Mohammad’s pursuit of love and companionship and shots of and commentaries on Iran’s HIV/AIDS culture and “drug problem.” Given the contrast between the bleak images of Iran and Tehran in particular (the scenes are often literally in black and white), and the portrayal of Mohammad as a happy, hopeful and high-spirited man—which is quite dissimilar and even challenging to the normative image of the person with HIV/AIDS, particularly in the context of the global South—the film takes the form of a familiar heroic narrative of the individual fighting for survival in the ruthless society. This tendency is perhaps best exemplified in the beginning of the documentary when, after introducing Mohammad and his doctor/friend, the narrator states “in a country where people with HIV are often ostracized, Mohammad is one of the few with the courage to speak out about his disease.” The heroic rhetoric is repeated in different moments of the documentary—almost always by the narrator—in an attempt to represent the individuals in the film as not only survivors but antagonistic to their surroundings, and, as a result, reinforcing the colonial images of unmitigated ignorance, stigma and discriminatory attitudes closely associated with the cultures of the pandemic in the global South. The very first scene of the documentary shows images of fast-paced Tehran, focusing on billboards and pictures of the religious and authoritative figures of the country (including the current and previous supreme leaders), shots of veiled women—which is in no way the common form of hijab in Tehran—and
the view of a wall painting of the United States flag with the “Down with The USA” motto on it. Juxtaposed to these alienating scenes that emphasize the difference and strangeness of life in Tehran and thus inscribe a familiarity for the Western viewer who expects difference and particular manifestations of difference, the film then introduces Mohammad while showing him dancing and laughing with a group of friends inside an apartment. This first scene, with its heavily loaded ideological trajectories and reliance on the stereotypical images of Iran in the Western media, instantly reconstructs an othered entity that is all too familiar to the “global” viewer of the film. While the second one introduces a likable character who is not only a lot more relatable than the people on the street shown in the previous scene, but also contained in his own space, in an apartment and removed from the cold harsh city. The film produces Mohammad as hero, then, in part by contrasting his heroic and courageous life with the grim environment outside and its ideological representations of joyless life in Tehran. This same technique is used in another scene where the viewer is exposed to black and white shots of people walking the city and close-ups of hands holding syringes with the narrator’s voice informing them that “Iran has the highest proportion of Heroin addicts of any country in the world and a growing HIV crisis.” This is followed by shots of Mohammad walking in a park and the narrator’s comment on the fact that Mohammad has been clean for three years. These are only two examples of Mohammad and the Matchmaker’s attempts at creating what I believe is meant to be a heartwarming narrative of personal survival and the search for happiness in the midst of a geography of misfortune.

Mohammad and the Matchmaker clearly attempts to promote the viewer's affective identification with the individuals it profiles. In doing so, two arguably universal concepts of hope and family constantly appear to accentuate the humanity of the documentary subjects. In
one scene, we can see Mohammad’s mother talking to the camera as they are going to Mohammad’s birthday party (the anniversary of his rebirth, i.e. being free of drugs, at Narcotics Anonymous) expressing her relief and joy to see Mohammad next to her and clean, without any mention of his HIV-positive condition. This is an important moment, as HIV/AIDS in the global South is more often than not framed as an exclusionary phenomenon, separating the people with AIDS from their families—the evidence of which are numerous scenes of family conflict and banishment in the archive of AIDS documentaries of the global South which foreground the family as more of an obstacle rather than a place of support for the HIV positive person. What Mohammad and the Matchmaker does, however, is place emphasis on the family as a source of hope and revival for its subjects. In addition to the scene of Mohammad’s mother, a discussion of family and family support is pivotal for Maryam when she is talking to Mohammad about her condition and how her only relief comes from the fact that her family accepted her with open arms. The ultimate reference to family and its intrinsic affective connotations in the film is embedded within the story of Mohammad himself and his search for a life companion. Mohammad’s quest for a spouse—or as the narrator puts it, his attempt at “leading a normal life”—is symbolic of the documentary’s attempt at presenting the universal notions of hope and family as the solutions to the grave phenomenon of HIV/AIDS and turning the pandemic into an affective rather than a material tragedy. This sentimentalizing approach that, I would argue, reduces the issue of the pandemic in Iran to an individual story of hope and survival creates an affective response in the viewers and prevents—at least partially—the emergence of an state of critical contemplation or productive thought by providing the viewers with a personal happy ending, one that fails to visibilize the structures that underlie the pandemic or Mohammad’s

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19 I am arguing for the reductive presentation of the narrative not because the film focuses on a single personal narrative, but rather since it actively combines it with broader images of the pandemic in the country and thus granting it, at least covertly, a representational authority.
condition in the first place. Mohammad's misfortune comes across as his location. This is important as the film condones the geography of misfortune rather than criticizing and challenging the structural inequalities and the global consequences of the pandemic. Consequently, sympathy is the only way the viewer finds himself or herself implicated in this geography.

Mohammad and the Matchmaker offers a fresh and unique image of the realities of life in the midst of the pandemic in part of the global South, constructing an affective identification with the humanity of its subjects. What it does not manage to do, however, is denaturalize the hopelessness of the geography it portrays in any way. Thus, even as the film seeks to challenge the dehumanization of people living with AIDS in the global South, it reinforces the notion of unlivable geographies and of regions in which questions of access to drugs and medical care are held at bay. While the film teases the audience with its own awareness of the divide that separates Mohammad and Maryam and their families from those who view them at a distance, the documentary never returns to that knowledge to consider how such differences are created, sustained, and policed globally in the age of HIV/AIDS. Throughout the film, inequality, discrimination and drug use become clear themes, but there is no suggestion that the viewer, located at some distance from such concerns for survival, has anything to do with the perpetuation of these issues. Indeed, Mohammad’s narrative is told as a decisively Iranian one: he has overcome the pervasive drug-use of his nation and will thrive despite the pandemic as well. There are problems at the root of the pandemic. But these are local and individual matters (not international ones) that would ever ask why global outcomes vary so widely. It is perhaps no accident that Mohammad and the Matchmaker ends with the same juxtaposed images of the othered geography of misfortune and the hopeful heroic individual. In the last scene, Mohammad
is shown again laughing and dancing—just as he was doing in the first scene of the film, although this time with his new-found partner—while the narrator concludes that “No one knows the true extent of HIV infection in Iran. The Islamic republic has been reluctant to accept the reality of an epidemic related to widespread drug taking.” This is followed instantly by the statement, “But with the help of his friends, his family and his doctor, Arash, Mohammad has taken the first steps towards a new life.” This final image of hope provides narrative closure to the anxieties about survival and releases the viewer from further concern. Thus, neither the film’s geography nor its affective demands challenge the dynamics that undergird the privileged viewer’s distance from the pandemic. The film is not resolutely ideological, however, as we can sense again at these moments, a sense of friction between what the film says and what it does. If “no one knows the true extent of HIV infection in Iran,” we have an epistemological problem that cannot be covered over as easily as the voiceover imagines. The film tries to forget what it encourages us not to see, but it has moments like this, and others discussed earlier, that haunt the filmmaker’s confident construction of the pandemic as a sheer individual event. As I mentioned at the very start of my discussion of the film, Mohammad and the Matchmaker remains an integral part of the global South AIDS documentary archive because the film offers a critical movement towards troubling the normative images of the pandemic and by encouraging the global viewer to be self-aware and understand how this narrative has been staged for them as well as encouraging them to recognize the frames that often go unseen with such carefully crafted narratives of personal heroism and redemption.

3.3 The Epic of Central Plains

“In prison, he was beaten down by 4 officers. The police were still shouting. Some went out to fetch sticks. Soon there were 10 or more, 8 held steel rods.”
“Did they know he had AIDS?”

“They did.”

“They didn’t stop?”

“The police leader started it.”

“This is outside the law.”

“But who can we complain to?”

This is the opening dialogue in Ai Xiaoming’s 2006 documentary, The Epic of Central Plains (hereafter referred to as The Epic). The dialogue is between two men on the phone, both of whom are not introduced strangers to the viewer. As the abrupt conversation progresses, the viewer is not given a clear idea of who the two men are, who they are talking about or what the context of the beating has been. This opening scene captures The Epic’s style of narration as well as its relationship with its viewer. The Epic is not an easy film to watch; it requires its viewer to pay close attention and think with it as it paints a more and more complicated picture of its seemingly simple subject and creates ambiguities and questions in its viewer’s mind before starting to offer possible answers to them. Although The Epic is filmed during a particular time period (March 2006 when People’s Congress was held in Beijing), and follows a specific historical event (the story of the early 2000 outbreak of the HIV virus in Henan province of China), its narrative is in no way linear. The film, instead, presents a complicated network of narratives and events by going back and forth between the detailed stories of the life of villagers to interviews and reports on the government officials’ decisions, activist movements and media coverage of the issue. In addition to presenting a complex image of the pandemic in China since
2000, *The Epic* also dives into the past and recites events and stories of the pre-pandemic era as well as the epidemic’s early years, in an attempt to make linkages between current reality and what preceded it. By providing the viewer with a complex and multi-layered image of the reality of the pandemic in the area, the film refrains from making rash or simplified judgments—although it clearly has its own biases—and invites the viewer to rethink the narrative—or what they have known as the narrative—of the epidemic.

3.3.1 Structural Critique vs. Personal Sensationalism

Perhaps the most significant attribute of *The Epic* that sets it apart from similar documentaries of the genre is its attention to the structural and political aspects of the pandemic. Rather than following in the footsteps of sentimental documentary films that often focus on one or a few personal narratives and life stories of people dealing with the epidemic, *The Epic* takes a more activist-oriented and political stance that refuses to continue to frame its subjects as passive victims and instead tries to portray them as knowledgeable, political subjects who are not only capable of instigating change but also shown as doing so. Furthermore, while being informed by a number of different individuals, each connected to the pandemic in one way or another, *The Epic* does not stop at that level and turns its focus and the viewer’s attention to the larger structure and political implications of the epidemic. This is especially noteworthy as reliance on detached personal narratives and ignorance about or superficial treatment of the underlying sociopolitical structures of the pandemic within the global South has been for long almost a characteristic of this genre. While *The Epic* makes an attempt to give weight to the voiced interpretations of its—usually female—subjects, it refuses to focus on a single personal story by insisting that the pandemic is in fact a public issue. In an interview in *New Left Review*, the director Ai Xiaoming herself explains this tendency in the film while comparing it to the 2003
Chen Weijun documentary *To Live Is Better than to Die* which tackles the same issue as Xiaoming’s film:

His film [Weijun’s documentary] centered on the sad fate of a single family, whereas for *Epic of the Central Plains* I shot more footage of the villagers’ struggles, their push to defend the rights of AIDS patients. I also included interviews with activists such as Gao Yaojie, an elderly doctor who has spent her retirement providing the villagers with information and raising awareness of their plight. So, the film emphasized the power of popular resistance. (71-72)

Xiaoming’s understanding of the pandemic as a primarily political and public issue rather than a personal or geographical tragedy, sets her film up as a challenge to the genre and the works of other local independent filmmakers.

In this context, by comparing *The Epic* with *Mohammad and the Matchmaker*, which exemplifies many of the conventions of films that focus on personal narratives, one can see not only a difference in outlook to the pandemic, but also a quite different approach to the viewer. While *Mohammad and the Matchmaker* is clearly made for an outsider Western audience, the same cannot be easily said of *The Epic*. In spite of the fact that the film has had its success in the international documentary film scene, there are a number of factors that position it as critical of both the philanthropic and the made-for-a-global-audience categories of AIDS documentaries. First and foremost, the film’s detailed coverage of the outbreak of the pandemic through the complicated network of activists, governmental officials and the media, and its investigation of

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*The Epic has been screened numerous times at film festivals and AIDS activism events outside China.*
the legal and political consequences of the event, clearly position the film as being aimed at a local audience, since many of the references to the judicial system or authoritative process in the film require the viewer to be familiar with the Chinese society, politics and legal system. Also, Xiaoming herself has stated at different points that she sees the audience of her work to be mainly people of mainland China, “especially those who suffered, who lost their family members and who are still suffering from systematic social injustice … They have a right to information and to know what strategies others took to defend their rights” (183). When juxtaposed with the success of the film in attracting global viewers, this approach to privileging of local viewers and a politicized structure that is geared toward highlighting “systematic injustice” and grass root activism in documentary filmmaking about the pandemic becomes even more important, as it challenges both the practice and the idea of erasure of local audiences and local ways of understanding from a documentary in order to make it comprehensible or appealing to the global viewer. By privileging Chinese people as its target audience, *The Epic* challenges the desires that structure the conventional stories and images of its genre, desires that often spectacularize the pandemic as a personal tragedy for outside viewers, and instead provides viewers with a powerful sense of social injustice and the specific ways in which harm comes to those living with HIV/AIDS and the structural features of social life that make such harm possible.

### 3.3.2 The Political Subject vs. The Passive Victim

Like *Mohammad and the Matchmaker*, *The Epic*’s represented individuals offer an alternative to the normative image of the tragic person with HIV/AIDS in the global South. However, while Mohammad’s presence in the film does that by offering a healthy-looking and happy person whose whole life and identity is not reduced to his condition, *The Epic*’s characters defy the normalized idea of a person with HIV/AIDS by appearing as active and politically aware
subjects. Almost all the film’s information about the outbreak of the pandemic, the role of the governmental officials, and what has been done in response, comes straight from stories told by the villagers, the people with HIV/AIDS and other individuals interviewed. Xiaoming mentions that, upon her trips to the villages, “so many people would come to [her], to tell [her] the story … They would guide [her] to different places, to meet the vital people, to show [her] what happened. They know what are the most important things and the most important persons for the documentary” (185). Rather than reproducing the image of the poor villagers as naïve and passive victims of the pandemic who are in need of help and support and unable to voice their concerns, the film actually portrays its subjects as knowledgeable participants who not only are aware of the situation and the role of its different actors, but also actively protest it. *The Epic* avoids reinscribing the colonial notion of giving people a voice by showing that its subjects have distinct voices of their own that are always already present. This is perhaps best exemplified in the scene where a number of the villagers are gathered together at night to talk to Xiaoming despite the risk of getting arrested—the village is under surveillance and they are not allowed to speak to the media—and they begin to describe the whole incident in detail, showing immaculate knowledge of the role of the government, the problem with the blood banks, the economic and political factors involved in the outbreak and its consequences and what is being done and how the issue is dealt with in its aftermath. They unanimously criticize the government for the crisis and analyze the government’s attempts at hiding the issue from the public eye by silencing the villagers through constant surveillance: “why not just tell us what you [the government] expect? A citizen is entitled to his right to freedom. A person is no longer a Chinese citizen without the right to freedom,” says one of the villagers, while the other one talks about their plans to petition
at the next People’s Congress in Beijing. The villagers portrayed in this scene are as anything but passive and helpless victims who are living a non-political life.

The documentary subjects in Xiaoming’s film have a strong presence and a strong voice. The film is not narrated by a third person and thus reserves the authority and agency of its subjects. Furthermore, the viewer can also hear the questions that Xiaoming herself asks at different points when talking to the interviewees. The film also frequently features AIDS activists—most of whom are women—and documents their work in supporting the villagers, informing the public and battling the authorities. While women of the global South—alongside children—are often portrayed as the most vulnerable victims of the pandemic, the women in Xiaoming’s documentary are not weak or passive victims. This is a significant intervention as gender, the relationship between women and the pandemic and the media’s account of it have been at the heart of the rhetoric and media discussions around the epidemic since its early years.

In 1990, Alexandra Juhasz wrote her famous article on the representations of women in mainstream AIDS documentaries and compared the attempt to construct control over the anxiety of heterosexual transmission and the role of women in it to “other social controls over women” (25). In her discussion of the media’s attempted control over women’s sexuality and their portrayal as “contained threats,” Juhasz brings the reader’s attention to the stereotyping of the contained image of the woman with HIV/AIDS. Although in a different fashion, the same process of normalizing and containing the image of the woman with HIV/AIDS has occurred within the global media and the AIDS documentary archive concerned with the global South. Not surprisingly, the portrayal of women of the global South in relation to the pandemic has been largely drawn in accordance with the deep-rooted and longstanding tradition of depicting these women in global media as helpless and passive non-agents in need of rescue. That is why The
Epic’s alternative portrayal of its female subjects is not only a radical move within the AIDS documentary genre but also one that targets a broader and timeworn politics of representation. Of course, Xiaoming’s work is not the only resistant narrative of the archive—although the number of such works, especially the ones that focus on gender relations, are still very few—and there is in fact a slowly growing body of works that aim at and challenge the gender politics of the pandemic within the global South. Analyzing the complex politics of gendered representation and its intersections with heteronormativity, colonialism, and cultural dynamics in these films is a process that needs the kind of elaborate discussions and detailed examination that are unfortunately outside the scope of the current research. I do believe, however, that this is an area of research that is of utmost importance and one that will help immensely in understanding the AIDS documentary archive of the global South in all its intricacies; and while scholars such as Patricia Made, Nancy Van Leuven, Katharine Sarikakis, and Leslie Shade have contributed greatly to the literature on the matter, there is still much to be done in that regard.

3.3.3 Back to Black

In spite of its attempts at zooming in on the structural critique of the condition of the pandemic in Henan and inviting the viewer to recognize the complexity of the issue, The Epic does have its moments when it resorts to the normative imagery of poverty and loss and displays of often-used footages of orphans, crying mothers and suffering individuals. At one point, after a lengthy scene in which Li Xige, a female activist, who has lost her own daughter to HIV/AIDS, talks about her numerous experiences of house arrests and imprisonment—with a smile on her face no less—due to her active role in disseminating information online about the faulty blood transfusions and the condition of the HIV/AIDS patients, the film moves on to a family and their story of how they found out that their son is infected. As the scene changes, suddenly the film shifts back to the all-
too-familiar images of close-ups of a sobbing mother, an empty and damaged house and a silent child who wanders around it. While the inclusion of such a scene may not seem as problematic at first glance, and rather a sign of the film’s attempt at offering an inclusive image of the full range of lived conditions of the pandemic, one that includes both coverage at the structural and personal levels, the film’s constant movement from the former to the latter acts against what it tries to achieve and halts the desired process of critical thinking, reflection, and interpretation in the viewer by bringing the film back to the affective level of momentary sympathy. It is important to note here that I am not arguing against the portrayal of human suffering in general, but rather against such portrayals in the specific archive of AIDS documentaries of the global South. While images of human pain, suffering and loss can potentially create shock or an affective or moral response, the constant bombarding of the viewer with these sensationalist visuals as representative of the pandemic has resulted in images that lose what Sontag calls “their power to enrage, to incite” (qtd. in Butler 68). In this sense, continuing to load the AIDS documentaries with footage of the—sadly now clichéd—images of human suffering can only result in further normalization of the issue and removal of any possibility of ethical responsiveness or political understanding or action.

In her discussion of the influence of the photographic representation, Sontag concedes that photographs “can and must represent human suffering, establishing through the visual frame a proximity that keeps us alert to the human cost of war, famine, and destruction in places that may be distant both geographically and culturally” (qtd. In Butler 68). Although I agree with the logic behind this argument, I maintain that it is not applicable in the context of the epidemic in geographies of the global South. Sontag’s claim on the importance of being aware and alert to human suffering that happens all around the world has its merits; however, her argument is
bound by a variety of spatial and temporal restrictions. Given the years and years of representing the global South, and the people with HIV/AIDS in them in particular, through a very specific lens of abject poverty, helplessness and suffering, further production and reproduction of these images can only contribute to the continuing process of normalization and confirmation of the imagined global perception of these places and the people residing in them rather than creating awareness and a sense of responsibility in the viewers of the images. What Sontag claims may be true of the geographies in which any form of human suffering is not only represented but expected as abnormal and thus enraging and thought-provoking, I am not certain however that the same can be said of the geographies of the global South where human pain and suffering is considered and traditionally represented as the norm.
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