EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF Cultural studies
Cultural Commons: special section on It's a Sin

European Journal of Cultural Studies
2023, Vol. 26(1) 122–128
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DOI: 10.1177/13675494221097134
journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs

AIDS melodrama now: Queer tears in *It's a Sin* and *Pose*

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Abstract

This short article compares the British TV show *It's a Sin* and the American TV show *Pose* as landmark new examples of AIDS melodrama – a genre of tear-jerking, mass-market AIDS narrative which has renewed popularity due to contemporary investment in the queer histories of AIDS in the United Kingdom and the United States. While both shows deploy melodramatic aesthetics to stage the grief, virtue, and injustices endured by queer people living with HIV/AIDS in London and New York City prior to the arrival of antiretroviral medication, I argue that the squeezed budget and truncated format of *It's a Sin* – reduced from a longer series, to eight episodes, to five episodes – means that each episode builds towards the climax of the dead gay male body in anachronistic, contradictory ways. By contrast, I find that the lush excess of *Pose* transcends realism to dodge stereotypes of Black suffering and construct a queer history of AIDS in New York that is not reliant on the white gay male imaginary; a variation of what Saidiya Hartman calls critical fabulation. This short article thus aims to show that the cultural politics of melodrama remain central to the representation of AIDS history, and that AIDS melodrama can be a radical as well as reductive or ambivalent genre.

Keywords

HIV/AIDS, Melodrama, *It's a Sin*, *Pose*, AIDS Crisis Revisitation, queer TV.

Although *It's a Sin* (Channel 4, (2021) is one of the only mainstream TV shows about British queer experiences of AIDS, it finds parallels in the late-20th-century AIDS melodrama. Here, 'AIDS melodrama' refers to mass-market films and TV that dramatize the tragedy and hysteria of AIDS prior to the introduction of antiretroviral medication in the mid-1990s. In this short article, I examine *It's a Sin* as a reanimation of this tear-jerking

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genre, by comparing it to *Pose* (Netflix, 2018–2021). *Pose* is another recent TV series about queer AIDS history, focused on a different geography of the epidemic. Written by a team of writers but best associated with Janet Mock, Our Lady J, and Ryan Murphy, *Pose* is a three-season series set between 1987 and 1994. The show is led by Blanca (MJ Rodriguez), its matriarch and moral centre, a Black trans woman in New York City who learns that she is HIV+ in the first episode and starts her own drag house to help homeless queer youth and compete in the ball scene for her legacy. *It's a Sin* and *Pose* grapple with distinct AIDS histories with different implications for ongoing, unended crises; the latter radically centres Black American trans female experience, while the former reflects the white gay male imaginary. Both shows emerge within the same cultural context of AIDS Crisis Revisitation, a term used by Alexandra Juhasz and Theodore Kerr (2020) to describe post-2010 interest in the start of the crisis. Both represent queer subcultures and ACT UP activism in the 1980s and 1990s, feeding into overlapping cultural memories and an appetite for nostalgic AIDS-related media in Anglo-American popular culture. As contemporary iterations of AIDS melodrama, they demonstrate both the hazards of the genre today and its reparative potential as a queer historical project.

It's a Sin and *Pose* construct queer visions of the past through melodrama's iconic emphasis on justice, suffering, and virtue. Writing in 1998, Eve Cherniavsky (1998) argues that melodrama 'stands as the dominant preconstituted category for the representation of AIDS on television and in the mass media generally' (p. 375). It is well-established that many early AIDS melodramas staged the deaths of white gay men as opportunities for straight people to learn compassion (Corber, 2003; Hart, 2000). Even so, gay-led AIDS films like *Longtime Companion* (René, 1988) showed that melodrama constituted a 'worthy aesthetic strategy' (Waugh, 2000: 222) for queer-centred projects, and so does not need to be perceived as oppressive despite its association with the dominant culture. Indeed, melodrama's affect has always had an appeal to queer people (Halperin, 2012), and recently, the theatricality and pathos of popular shows like *Glee* (Netflix, 2009–2015) and *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Netflix, 2009) have been theorized as providing a sort of queer pedagogy for the viewer (Parsemain, 2019). It is unsurprising that *It's a Sin* and *Pose* draw upon this association, because melodrama – so integral to TV itself – is intertwined with the 'grievability' (Butler, 2004) of AIDS, as well as describing a mode (like camp) which is generative in and of queer culture.

AIDS Crisis Revisitation began as a queer archival project that sought to challenge the 'unremembering' (Castiglia and Reed, 2011) of AIDS in the United States (Davies, 2012; Schulman, 2021). As blockbuster fictions designed to move and even astonish their audience, *It's a Sin* and *Pose* constitute the melodramatization of these politics of memory. If melodrama is associated with nostalgia for a time 'before' – a fantasy of a home always already lost – then the pre-antiretroviral, pre-PrEP, pre-gentrification, and pre-Internet settings of *It's a Sin* and *Pose* function as romantic spaces of innocence and embodiment. With both shows, but especially *It's a Sin*, a noxious draw for the spectator is the dramatic irony of knowing what will happen to the characters as they engage in condomless sex – like awaiting the iceberg in James Cameron's (1997) *Titanic*. New AIDS melodramas enact this tension between disrupting the oppressive legacy that shapes AIDS and merely re-exploiting it for an increasingly distant contemporary viewer. *Pose* works against the exploitation of Black suffering by blurring AIDS into

multiple plot strands through its sitcom-like format; in its final episode, the show ultimately shows the survival and thriving of several of its HIV+ characters into the post-antiretroviral era. By contrast, *It's a Sin*'s five short episodes are crowded with death, as though the frenzied display of dying white gay men is a remedy for the fraught history of their representation. The lushness of *Pose* across three seasons magnifies the uncanny moralism of *It's a Sin*, providing a way to consider alternative approaches to AIDS melodrama now.

It's a Sin is the flagship British example of AIDS Crisis Revisitation, and one of few representations of British experiences to be made for TV at any time. The American-made *Pose* has been celebrated for its singularity as a mainstream show about Black queer experiences of AIDS, starring and co-written by Black trans women. That these shows exist hence exemplifies the 'victory over repression' that Peter Brooks (1976: 41) sees in melodrama, yet precarious representational politics remain at stake. Davies scripted *It's a Sin* as eight episodes but had to reduce the number to five due to budget constraints. In an interview (Davies, 2021), he notes that he might 'still mourn' the unmade full version, or even 'a long-running series' that would have looked in-depth at different years of the crisis. Understanding the final product as a scaled-down, or even incomplete, version of a hypothetical longer series (like *Pose*) provides a degree of context for the criticism it has received; as Brian Mullins (2021) argues, the show re-inscribes rather than challenges AIDS-phobic and homophobic ideology. Reducing the show's length while maintaining the rate of dying white gay men (one per episode) makes it become a sort of death drive hurtling towards the spectacle of main character Ritchie's (Olly Alexander) demise. Furthermore, within these constraints, the representation of the show's gender-nonconforming queers and queers of colour feels superficial.

There is plenty of fucking in *It's a Sin*. But if gay male sex is represented excessively this is only to register it *as* an excess, framed through the laughingly incredulous but then eventually judgemental gaze of implied-straight female best friend Jill (Lydia West), who functions as a sort of 'fag-hag' cypher for heterosexual compassion. Cut to the final episode: Ritchie lies in hospital, wondering aloud 'how many boys he killed' after impulsive condomless sex. His visiting friend Roscoe (Omari Douglas) then bumps into his estranged evangelical Nigerian father (one of several serendipities that occur in the AIDS ward; such is the mystical power of melodrama), declaring that he (Roscoe) remains HIV– only because he 'got lucky with who he fucked'. These lines hierarchize HIV+ from HIV– people, omitting the safer sexual behaviours (regardless of individual serostatus) which were well-established by the early 1990s. It is a missed opportunity to probe rather than pathologize why people did not and do not have safer sex. That the show contains no nuance about this subtext indicates the reactionary rather than interrogative position it takes regarding the history that it constructs.

As with *Pose*, the show's depiction of minoritized subjects moves between courting in-group and out-group viewers. It folds back into maternal melodrama for its final act, indicative of its heterosexual gaze. Ritchie's mother (Keeley Hawes) – until now peripheral, a symbol of the closet – arrives at the hospital as a victim–villain to take Ritchie home to die. It is strange, if predictable, to watch what feels like a tightly costed show dedicate several long minutes to the mother's psychodrama as she paces the hospital ward; the camera tracks her (she becomes the focalizer) in an uncomfortably long shot.

The sudden speech that Ritchie later delivers on his death-bed in his childhood bedroom – declaring that he regrets nothing while acting as though he regrets everything – inserts a queer politic that adds to the show's overall effect of ambivalence about its subject. Finally, it turns out that the saintly but empty Jill and Ritchie's villainous mother have been the main characters all along. Mixed-race and gay affirming Jill is an accessible point of identification for a self-consciously 'compassionate' (Patton, 1996) audience, while Ritchie's mother is her racist and homophobic opposite. Their competing identities come to a head after his death: Jill blames the mother for causing her son's death, and triumphs by symbolically condemning the mother's bigotry to the past. As melodrama, *It's a Sin* affirms Jill's virtue more than that of Ritchie, who is instead pathologized. Within the logic of the show, only Jill is actually without guilt.

The problems I see in *It's a Sin* underscore British TV's lack of investment in queer representation more generally – a gap which the comparison to *Pose* highlights. If Davies' landmark *Queer as Folk* (Channel 4, 1999–2000) was criticized for *not* addressing AIDS (Attitude, 2018), then *It's a Sin* is an apology for that absence; a melancholic staging of everything that Davies had to disavow 20 years ago in order to placate the politics of unremembering. But the show is an example of how melodrama can function as a bad faith genre; its attempt to cohere its subjects within a nostalgic popular form can ultimately appropriate the history that it seeks to dramatize. I want to close by examining *Pose*, identifying what I see as the show's more subversive use of melodrama to form its outsider subjects within the mainstream. A challenge of the show is that historicizing Black trans experiences of AIDS belies a present in which HIV remains especially urgent among Black queer communities (Stamm, 2020). With this in mind, Alfred L Martin Jr. notes that *Pose* is 'only secondarily imagined *for* LGBTQ audiences', instead courting a viewer who is 'otherwise unschooled in what it means to be a queer or transwoman of color' (Martin, 2020: 71, original emphasis). However, Noe Montez and Kareem Khubchandani (2020) applaud the ways in which ball culture-inspired queer pedagogy 'seems to be happening everywhere' in the show, 'promoting the value of kinship amidst the AIDS crisis and rampantly transphobic city' (p. ix).

In *It's a Sin*, characters find out they have HIV/AIDS and die one by one, until the shadow finally falls onto Ritchie, a comeuppance for the hubris of his denial. HIV is depicted as punishment, invoking queerphobic tropes. But *Pose* dodges this moralism by blurring AIDS into other plot strands, as though to de-centre it from the viewer's gaze without neglecting its fundamental pathos or the show's duty to represent it. Through *Pose*'*s* sitcom-like rhythm across three seasons, the (implicitly cis, white, seronegative) viewer can forget the serostatus of healthy HIV+ characters rather than anticipating the spectacle of their immediate death. These characters get sick but often get better for a time, conveying the hard-to-dramatize random latency of HIV and the uneven events of an AIDS diagnosis. The circular TV format of *Pose* is thus constitutive of its queer pedagogy because it frames a more *realistic* representation of HIV/AIDS than *It's a Sin* – not despite but rather through the American show's fuller embrace of wish-fulfilment and pure theatricality. There are snippets of music and dance in *It's a Sin*, but characters in *Pose* literally burst into song as though always pushing to express 'what is in "real life" unsayable' (Brooks, 41).

This theatricality has political effects that altogether transcend realism. In an extraordinarily powerful episode in the second season, a trans character, Candy (Angelica Ross), is murdered by a John after returning to sex work. As Emily VanDerWeff (2019) argues, the show tries to stage this tragedy without exploiting transphobic spectacle. The show dedicates most of the hour-long episode to Candy's funeral, at which she returns as a ghost to speak with her friends and even her estranged and repentant biological parents. The music soars and the crematorium doors finally open to swallow the coffin, only to reveal the beloved ballroom beyond, as though a dream. The ghost-Candy twirls and swirls through a lip-sync performance of *Never Had Love Like This Before* at a final ball, her community gasping in melodramatic astonishment in recognition of her worth. In the final scene, another HIV+ character, Pray Tell (Billy Porter), reveals his decision to start taking AZT in response to her death. The ghost-Candy later returns to visit Pray Tell as he lies in hospital, revealing to him that she was living with AIDS at the time of her murder. This scene transcends the typical mediation of AIDS as sentimentalized hospital decline to instead show its intersection with other forms of violence in the lives of Black trans women. Another moment of politically potent melodramatic excess worth mentioning comes at the end of the second season as Blanca's health falters. Leaving hospital, she arrives at the ballroom in a wheelchair, but rises to her feet to sing the national anthem after being crowned Mother of the Year – a tableau of political protest worked into the blunt symbolic realm of TV melodrama.

If *It's a Sin* reanimates the moralism of the white gay AIDS melodrama, *Pose* writes against an empty archive, constituting a sort of critical fabulation (Hartman, 2008). Indeed, the lushness of Pose is comparable to what José Muñoz (1999) calls a disidentification, to describe how minority subjects can work subversively *within* mainstream representational models. Largely because of its trans co-writing team, *Pose* disidentifies with the terms of the AIDS melodrama to push against the status quo that it represents, using cliché and excess along with real-life events to transcend racist and transphobic stereotypes. Janet Mock's recent remarks regarding her ambivalent experience of working on the show make the urgency of this clear (Milton, 2021). By comparison, *It's a Sin* is less disidentification than over-identification with moralistic and homophobic conceptualizations of AIDS, which jostle in contradiction to the show's queer political and history-building context. This ambivalence amounts to a kind of 'ideological failure' (Nowell-Smith, 1977: 118) akin to classic Neo-Marxist readings of Hollywood melodrama, which see its contradictions as an aperture for social critique. And yet, this potential is impacted by the meagre time and space which Davies was allocated, with the effect that the show seems so focused on displaying the dying gay male body with AIDS that it re-establishes rather than dismantles an oppressive false equivalence between queer sexual pleasure and death. The different approaches (and budgets) of these two shows demonstrate that AIDS melodrama is an integral component in the victory over repression that the emotional politics of AIDS Crisis Revisitation speak to.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the editors and to Jennifer Chukwu, Jon Davies, Chase Ledin and Kenneth Kidd for their feedback on these ideas. Thank you also to Josefine Hetterich, who used the phrase "queer

tears" so beautifully at the conference *HIV/AIDS in the 21st Century: Memorialisation, Representation and Temporality* at the University of Manchester in January 2020.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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