



"Prostitutes, Risk, and AIDS", by Alexandra Juhasz

CONSTRUCTING DOCUMENTARY

by Alexandra Juhasz

The AIDS crisis is not merely a crisis in health, but one of authority. To claim authority over AIDS justifies distance: distance from contagion, from the "kinds of people" who are sick, from their differences, from their desperation, and from responsibility for a crisis of biological origin but social protraction. By analyzing an NBC Special News Report *Life, Death, and AIDS* (aired on January 21, 1986), I will discuss how the mass media has claimed authority over this crisis through a controlling and distancing discourse. The implication of the media's hold on AIDS are more far reaching than the hours pegged for news specials, for the television is an authority which constructs, interprets, and thus contains and controls, the social, political, economic, personal and medical. "It is in the world of representation that we manage our fear of disease, isolating it as surely as if we had placed it in quarantine," cautions historian Sander Gilman, in *AIDS and Syphilis: The Iconography of Disease*.

I wish to consider the ways in which the codes and form of television documentary work to advance the mainstream media's agenda concerning AIDS; that a cautious and distanced relationship to this crisis is permissible. Perhaps surprisingly, documentary form has only recently been discussed critically, rather, it is usually taken as given that documentary faithfully records real events for the lofty purposes of education or enlightenment. But, form that erases itself still constructs meaning; and form that is hidden is only vanished through familiarity. I would assert that the organizing principles of documentary have been so hard to see because they reflect the basic power relations of dominant culture. Thus, for example, the mainstream media's account of AIDS perpetuates already existing hierarchies of authority in its very construction, if not also in rhetorical design. Contrasting the formal and ideological constructions of *Life, Death and AIDS* with those of alternative AIDS documentary will help to illuminate the manufactured codes which the mainstream dons as "natural" to present its "truthful" renditions of a subjective and political discourse about AIDS. If alternative AIDS media wishes to contradict and re-define the all-powerful but all-irresponsible agenda of the dominant media regarding AIDS, a firm understanding of the formal organization of mainstream representation is a most primary tactic for mounting this oppositional practise.

AIDS documentaries, in general, mimic and confirm the social formations upon which they report. Film and video, mediums of mechanical reproduction, are most commonly seen in documentary production to "reflect" reality. Although the relationship between this reflection and truth and/or objectivity has been challenged within the academy, as well as within more popular productions like *The Thin Blue Line*, *The David Letterman Show* and *Broadcast News*, most news and documentary productions still bank upon the spectator's willing disbelief about the constructedness and bias of television reportage. TV says, and spectators believe, that the camera records what is out there to see. In a society where hierarchies of power define all social relations, it is not surprising then that the documentation of the AIDS crisis reflects the already operating systems of power relations which define the meanings and workings of this disease, and society in general. Because, to date, AIDS has been a disease whose course has moved largely along lines of race, class, and sexual behaviour, the media need only report "realistically" what exists in the natural world to legitimize the rankings of power found in their already working definitions of the socially "ill" and "healthy".

Life, Death and AIDS depicts Tom Brokaw asking questions of a wall of four video monitors, each holding the head of an expert. Only white, male experts' heads fill its monitors. In mainstream documentary's terms, this can be explained not as sexism or racism, but as the unbiased reportage of the world-out-there — a sexist, racist place where women and

people of color are under-represented in the ranks of experts. But, there are alternatives to the prime-time logic that insists that the existing, dominant structures are the only possible organizations of power. For example, the videotape *Women and AIDS*, a tape I produced for GMHC's Living With AIDS Show, with Jean Carlomusto, reflects a world where the only experts are women, many of whom are women of color. Professional women easily take the seats of their white, male peers in the tape's typical talking heads shots. Similarly in GMHC's *Work Your Body and PWA Power*, both made by Carlomusto and Gregg Bordowitz, the experts of the tape are PWA's, who speak their needs and issues with force, knowledge and insight.

Unfortunately, rectifying the imbalance of authority is not always a matter of merely recognizing who doesn't speak and making it possible for them to do so. For there are deeply imbedded societal constraints which strongly withhold authority of voice from many individuals. These constraints are re-confirmed in television documentary where interviews are granted to those who always speak publicly. For example, in *Life, Death and AIDS*, there is a limited line-up of individuals who are granted the privilege to speak about AIDS: scientific experts, doctors, a PWA (Person With AIDS) who was infected through a contaminated blood transfusion, three gay male PWAs, and archetypal Americans (firefighters, PTA Moms, construction workers). The many people affected by AIDS, but left unaccounted for in mainstream documentaries like *Life, Death and AIDS*, are those who are never allowed the power of speech in our society: poor people of color (especially women) who are referred to, minimally, in the show by blurred images of "ghetto" streets; mothers of infected children, who are infected themselves, but who are represented only vicariously by the doe-eyed images of sick babies; prostitutes and I.V. drug users whose status as "criminals" ensure not their invisibility, but voyeuristic, confrontational, and only sometimes "consensual" images; gay teenagers, who, like all teenagers are at a real risk for infection, but who have always been silenced. In his article *The Spectacle of AIDS*, Simon Watney discusses the implications of mainstream reportage which guarantees that the majority of PWAs are rarely seen: *This disappearance is strategic, and faithfully duplicates the positions the social groups most vulnerable to HIV found themselves in before the epidemic began.*

The project of the alternative media becomes the complicated task of being at once sensitive to, while striving to alter, the power relations which limit public articulation in our society. So, for example, as it is true that it is particularly difficult for women to speak in patriarchal culture, it is also true that under the right conditions, women can and do speak quite powerfully. There are many strategies by which the alternative media can create safe spaces from which women feel comfortable speaking. In *Women and AIDS*, for instance, the voice of a woman who is identified as "Anita: A Woman Who Is HIV Positive", is accompanied not by her face, but by images of women grocery shopping, walking on city streets, caring for their children. This tactic allows the hitherto-invisible woman into the production, while still respecting her fears of discrimination (especially against her children) if she would be identified on television. Another strategy is used in *The Second Epidemic*, produced by Amber Hollibaugh for the New York City Commission on Human Rights AIDS Discrimination Unit. Here, one sequence is devoted to the words and image of Margie Rivera, a Puerto Rican woman who speaks candidly about her experiences with AIDS. The voice of one brave woman expresses her experience, while taking on the weight of all of her silenced sisters as well. Similarly, a videomaker like Carol Leigh, a prostitutes rights and AIDS activist, makes tapes where she speaks for a large community of women who (like I.V. drug users) are silenced because speaking about their concerns and needs regarding AIDS also exposes them to prosecution for their "illegal" behaviour.

In the few cases where the mainstream media trains its cameras on the disenfranchised, it assumes that this is enough to compensate for the imbalances of public discourse. However, the "realistic" images created by turning on network cameras, perpetuate, not contradict, the real power relations they record. The talking-head interview is a case in point. This documentary staple is never, in fact, merely a head making words, an unidentified language source. Talking heads have professions and ranks which flash over their features as titles. They are filmed in rooms, houses, and offices which reflect their social standing and position. They are gendered. They have facial features which identify ethnicity. They have diverse relationships to spoken English — accents, lingo, vocabulary, age, media-savvy. In a society where authority is more often gauged by the trappings of class, race, and gender, than by the content or specificity of one's argument, hierarchies of authority are immediately assumed when a camera is turned on to record a head talking in its' reality. *Life, Death and AIDS* again perpetuates the position that the camera has only the power to record, and not to create, an individual's relationship to authority in its talking-head interviews with PWAs.

There are several PWAs pictured in their "real", but coded, talking-head-backdrops over the course of the hour long news special. The show's most lovely PWA by far, that darling of the mainstream media, the "innocent victim" of AIDS, is Amy, a suburban married woman who was a recipient of a contaminated blood transfusion; and, who is interviewed with her blue-eyeshadowed, pretty face, seated next to her husband by a roaring hearth in their suburban home. Unlike this woman, the first gay male PWA presented is not shown in his home. Rather, he is interviewed seated in a hospital room. But not for long. Quickly, a still image cuts over his continuing voice. In the image, he is dressed in a hospital gown. He stands in a sterile, grey room with steel medical equipment. A doctor stares into his eyes. Certainly, the image is "real", but why this particularly real space of discomfort and disempowerment as the natural space for the not-so-innocent gay man with AIDS? The I.V. drug-users in the tape, "honestly" depicted in their world, are interviewed in an empty, burned-out, city lot — their home is the dirty, fenced-in space where they shoot drugs.

In all three cases the camera more honestly reflects the program's assumptions and prejudices about its interviewees than it does their words and worlds. There are alternatives to the biased but "true" reflections of reality that have been created in *Life, Death and AIDS*. For instance, the crew could have sought a different place for interviewing the gay male PWA. His suburban house, as tidy, neat and lovely as any straight blood recipient's. Gay men live in houses too. Similarly, the I.V. drug users could have been interviewed feeling their most safe, comfortable and in control — not when they are sick and shooting up to feel better — but in their own apartments.

Thus far, I have tried to discuss how the social divisions which rule our society can be either reflected or challenged by a documentary recording of these "real" relations. However, most of the media's operations of ideology are worked through the much more subtle, and therefore dangerous, manipulations of form. The formal organization of a work communicates as much, if not more, than the words being spoken. A close analysis of the introductory segment of *Life, Death, and AIDS* displays the way that the authoritative voice of the piece is established formally. Ultimately, the voice of this program will subtly enforce for its intended "general public" audience that they, in opposition to an undefined but understood other, need not be overly concerned about AIDS.

At the time of the program's production in January 1986, the media was finding itself in a difficult predicament. The earlier, easily understandable, I'm-not-at-risk-and-you-are structure of AIDS-risk definition was no longer quite so

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clear cut, now that irrefutable scientific evidence was being released which proved that heterosexuals were at risk for AIDS. How could the media inform its audience that all were at risk while assuring each individual television viewer (the potential customer who can never be worried or angered enough to turn off the TV and stop being primea to buy) not to worry? In *Life, Death, and AIDS* we watch NBC take on the difficult task of discussing the relative risk for "normal Americans", while at the same time convincing them of their relative safety, and their concurrent non-response.

How is this worked formally? The show begins with the image of a thin tall woman, dressed to party, with high brown hair. Her male friend is touching her protectively from behind. "Remington Steele will not be seen tonight so that we can bring you the following report." What has already been introduced in these "insignificant" five seconds? First, we are being forced to miss a night of high hetero-romance-and-mystery so that NBC's "we" can bring the audience "you" something more serious, less enjoyable, and luckily only a special report. Next week, and for many following, we'll have Remington Steele again. The thwarted crimes and deals of wealthy blonds is ultimately much more important to NBC's "we" and to us too. NBC the network, the force that rules the programming flow, tells us its attitude towards the "Special": begrudged, sighing tolerance: for this one special night we'll all be serious: enter a computer-generated screen of grey with small black shapes forming jail-bar-like lines.

Then, Tom Brokaw's voice sounds as a photograph of Rock Hudson lifts into the upper left corner of the grey grid screen. Neither are identified, but both are to be recognized and accorded their respective authority. "They were actors, teachers, scientists, bartenders. And then, there were those who never had a chance to be anything," opens Brokaw. Hudson is joined on the grey field with the images of three more unidentified adults, constructing a square of photos. A photo of a little baby flips onto the square's centre. The voice and images are telling us two things: all these individuals represented in photographs are dead — "they were"; and these who died were doing totally normal and blameless things until they died, one of them merely being a baby.

"In the end," continues Brokaw, "they were all victims of AIDS." The five faces fade into an image of a crowd of people walking on a city street: TV's representation of the mainstream. "In a way, we are all victims of fear and private anxiety." These words are accompanied by portrait-shots of individual Americans: a cowboy with a hat, a woman in a car with babies. We now know much about the show's agenda: 1) it wishes to let us know that normal, blameless people have died of AIDS, so that 2) we know that, as members of the mainstream universal crowd referred to in the street image, we should have some fear and anxiety, but that 3) as individual, unique, normal people, the identifiable faces of American, each of us is different from the "victims" of AIDS because we have to worry only about worry and not about death.

The show then does the unpardonable. For a good five minutes Tom Brokaw speaks the fears and anxieties of "normal" Americans without dispelling them: "Worry about AIDS is part of being a parent now", "Police, firemen, hospital workers, deal with their own fears", "Even some of the faithful are frightened about receiving communion through a common cup." These words are accompanied by predictable images: mothers at a PTA meeting, police learning how to give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation through a protective mask, a priest holding up the communion chalice. Brokaw speaks "our" irrational fear about AIDS; the images illustrate and confirm our wrong-headedness. Nothing interrupts this flow of idiocy to allay these uninformed and needless fears: children are not at risk of infection at school, you cannot get AIDS through mouth-to-mouth or sharing a common cup

because there is only an infinitesimal amounts of the virus in saliva. Martha Geier confirms this in her analysis of alternative media on AIDS, *Picture of Sickness: Stuart Marshall's Bright Eyes*:

"Each news story, investigative report, panel discussion, talk show, or 'realistic' drama about AIDS circulated by the mass media contributes to the shape of the narrative by which the epidemic is made comprehensible to 'the public'... And what the mass media has produced reveals its complicity in constructing the very fears it presumes judiciously to mediate."

Life, Death and AIDS feeds our fears and says we're right to be wrong.

Brokaw then tells us what we Americans said in polls about AIDS fears. We're worried. Boom, boom, boom, goes the sound track. An image of the Statue of Liberty comes up. (Worry, but don't worry, this is the land of the free.) Then, the words: NBC News Special Report. (Worry, but don't worry, this is the land of NBC News) Finally, at last, the title: LIFE. New word: DEATH. And then covering these biggies over slightly: AND AIDS. (Think about AIDS just as you do about life and death: worry but don't worry.) Once again, the ever unidentified voice of TV-land: "Here again is Tom Brokaw." The magic hand of TV raises the lights, and there, in fact, is Tom Brokaw, again, just as promised, this time seated on a circular, carpeted platform in a high-tech choir: "Good Evening," he says, safe and alone in a sound-studio. "Our hope is to de-mystify this disease. We will consult leading experts to answer your questions about AIDS." Tom's going to answer our questions about life, he'll tell us all about death, then he'll de-mystify us on AIDS.

Finally, ten minutes after the Remington-Steele-pardon the field is set; the show tells us how its going to tell to us. At the top is NBC: controlling our vision, turning up the lights, paying Tom Brokaw. Trust the TV. Coming a close second is Tom and us. Sure, sometimes we're wrong-headed, but it's best to be cautious. Tom's advice for us, stick with the Americans: cowboys, PTA Moms, firefighters. Then come the experts. We'll listen to 'em, but we'll always trust good old American distrust more than any fancy-dancy professor or doctor. You gotta be sceptical, take care of yourself and your own.

Why all this time and trouble to create a space of scepticism? The program let us know that, really, Brokaw can't demystify us about life, death or AIDS — what is he, God, after all? And so, therefore, *Life, Death and AIDS* argues that AIDS, like life's other big and great mysteries, has no answers, only questions. NBC handles this issue as it does all other major political crises: positions the issue into a place of mystery and cosmic solutions, therefore maintaining a de-politicized audience who believes that only God can intervene (or at least multi-national superpowers) and tells the audience that the right way to handle an issue with no answers (life, nuclear war, poverty, death, racism, AIDS) is to rely on your instincts, your gut. NBC has pre-arranged an hour where the audience, and Tom Brokaw, have been granted permission to evaluate this issue from the gut — the sexist, racist, homophobic, frightened way that they always do. The form legitimizes its prejudice.

Now enter PWAs. Unlike Brokaw, who exists on the carpeted platform, unlike the experts, who exist in TV monitors in Brokaw's module, even unlike the normal Americans asking the uninformed questions who are shot live on-the-street - the gay male PWAs, (who live with one of the doctor's in a monitor and are introduced only as "Dr. Volberding's patients") are given their own, special format: the pre-recorded mini-report by NBC's Science Correspondent. This totally controlled, pre-packaged form is the documentary code's version of the sterilized, segregated



"The Second Epidemic", by Amber Hollibaugh and Alisa Lebow

space of quarantine: no worry of live mishaps, embarrassing spills or smells, unsightly scars or blemishes, it's not live, it's controlled and edited. Here we meet the married blood recipient in her cosy home, the "junkies" of the surveillance camera, the brief images of prostitutes observed from afar, and the strange and mysterious Africans.

Need it be mentioned that the camera and microphone treat each of these symbolic AIDS "victims" differently in NBC AIDS reportage? The lady gets to introduce herself: "Hi, I'm Amy. I have AIDS." She is also allowed a steady tripod two-shot with her husband. The I.V. drug users are never allowed a name, they are condemned by the words of the judgemental voice-over the science correspondent, and when they are allowed to talk, it is in response to one of the crew members who shout questions at them from a safe distance. The camera is either too-close, or too high, watching them as distinct body parts, and not human beings. The prostitutes and Africans imaged in the program are not even granted the privilege of an interview, let alone a steady, centred shot. They are caught unawares by a camera as far way from them as possible while still able to vaguely catch an image. The words we hear with these images, are of course, the frightened and punitive voice of the science correspondent.

The program concludes with Brokaw's words: "If you are heterosexual and don't live a freewheeling lifestyle...your chances are 1/1,000,000... All of us, of course, hope there will be a vaccine... I'm Tom Brokaw, for all of us at NBC News. Good night." The message: all of us (us who are not infected, us at NBC News) need not worry, but we do hope that those who do need to worry get a vaccine soon. We don't like them, but we are Christians. But, how do a lot of "us" feel when we hear NBC's message? According to Suki Pots in her article *Needed (For Women and Children)*:

"While black and Hispanic women are disproportionately and increasingly affected by AIDS, the media insensitively and incorrectly tells us that the heterosexual spread of AIDS is not really a threat. How does a black or Hispanic woman feel when she hears this?"

The black and Hispanic women who are actively confronting AIDS in their communities, and perhaps in their homes, are not the people for whom TV is made. Therefore, for such women to see a PWA on TV, even if it is someone who looks like them, is to see someone to be disliked and mistrusted. Besides being incorrect and misinformed, this is, more dangerously, not at all an effective strategy for the dissemination of risk-reduction education to the populations most at risk. But clearly, saving people's lives is not the mainstream's agenda.

Alternative media makers must learn from the dominant media — learning what not to do, learn how to show the same crisis differently, learn how to help people by providing information not evaluation. Alternative media makers must call into question the social divisions and prejudices inscribed into mainstream documentary. We must talk to each distinct "us" of TV-land, making community specific programming addressing the specific needs of the many people affected by AIDS. The trajectory of control over AIDS is governed by access to speech and control over images: the powers of defining, naming, showing. We can speak and we can make images. We can re-cast the hierarchy of authority over AIDS with new images that re-figure the meaning and trajectory of this disease.

* The citations in this article are all from the collection of essays *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Boston: MIT Press, 1988).

