



*...Bringing History To Life*

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## **AIDS/HIV as Portrayed in Films - I**

**Lead:** In the early 1980s, a mysterious infectious disease began to emerge among gay men and intravenous drug users. It soon acquired a name and found itself the subject of motion pictures.

**Intro:** *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts

**Content:** Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome or AIDS crept into the national consciousness with slow but terrifying resolve. This blood-borne virus, HIV, infects

**and renders impotent those human cells which fight off other infectious diseases such as the skin cancer Karposi's sarcoma and rare forms of pneumonia. The disease destroys the elaborate defense system the human body has developed over thousands of years and soon tens of thousands of people, beginning with gay men and intravenous drug users, had become infected through blood transfer or sexually transmitted fluids and had little hope for survival. Before a regimen of medications emerged in the 1990s which staved off the disease and opportunistic infections, AIDS had claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. As of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is still no cure or vaccine to prevent HIV infection though there are prophylactic medications which if taken help prevent infection in endangered populations. World-wide, AIDS is no longer a gay disease as the**

**vast majority of those infected or imperiled are heterosexual men and women.**

**Such a terrible plague has powerful dramatic implications and soon the entertainment industry was tip-toeing onto this treacherous playing field, touching with hesitation at first even the mention of AIDS. The openness of the industry to explore the theme followed closely the development and spread of the disease. During the early years during which little was known about the illness, its origins, or its transmission, fear and hysteria gripped society in a way that reflected social norms generally associated with homosexuality. Homophobia, always present, also characterized the approach of the film industry. This was demonstrated in Randy Shilts' book and film *And the Band Played On* (1993). Hollywood touched on the AIDS epidemic by rolling out "pseudo-AIDS" films, often remakes of monster films**

such as *The Blob* (1988) or *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1981). Films that explored the nexus between sex and death such as *Fatal Attraction* (1987) or *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) are considered part of this genre which was influenced by the AIDS pandemic. Next time: open discussion.

At the University of Richmond's School of Professional and Continuing Studies, I'm Dan Roberts.

## Resources

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