



Medicine in Television Series

Editor: Toni de la Torre





Angels in America, The Normal Heart and Positius: HIV/AIDS in TV Series

Aina Clotet and Marc Clotet, under the supervision of Bonaventura Clotet

*Although the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and AIDS have been explored in TV series of a gay bent such as *Queer as Folk* (Channel 4, Showtime) and *Looking* (HBO), the fact is that, to date, they have only been examined more deeply in shorter formats. Such is the case with *Angels in America*, a miniseries produced by HBO in 2003, which narrates the spread of the epidemic in the midst of the Reagan era. It is also true of the more recent *The Normal Heart* (2014), also by HBO, a movie for TV that travels a little further back in time to describe the early years of confusion surrounding an unknown virus. Yet rarely has this infection been dealt with on television away from the gay stigma. One example can be found in the TV film *Positius* (2007) by Catalan channel TV3, starring two heterosexual women infected by the disease.*

How does a society react to the threat of a new disease? And if that disease –apparently– only affects a specific collective? How long would a government take to respond? How would it manage the fear of the unknown? And once known, how does the stigma develop? How are your world and your surroundings transformed? Do your priorities in life change? To answer these questions that arise with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), we will analyze the North American fictions *Angels in America* and *The Normal Heart*, and the Catalan production *Positius* –the first, a miniseries and the other two, TV movies.

In both American productions, the stigma caused by HIV is mainly told through male protagonists, men who have sex with men (MSM), who, as well as fighting the disease, must also confront the social rejection generated by a disease associated with sexual licentiousness and homosexuality. In contrast, *Positius* portrays two heterosexual women infected by the disease. We will start by examining the American productions, since they occur chronologically in time, and lastly look at how the Catalan fiction has dealt with this terrible epidemic.

The Normal Heart portrays the early years of AIDS, a period in which almost nothing was

known about what was initially branded the “gay cancer”, whose cause was a total mystery. The infection was only recognized when the patient developed Kaposi’s sarcoma, a cancer caused by a virus that produces purplish lesions under the skin, in the lymph nodes and other parts of the body.

Set between 1981 and 1984, the TV movie relates how society, the government (President Reagan having recently entered the White House) and the US medical sector decided to ignore the early spread of the epidemic. The film centers on a group of gay activists who embark on a campaign to call attention to this infection which apparently only affects gay men. The scriptwriter Larry Kramer used his own experience in New York in the early 1980s to write this TV film that won several awards in 2014, among them an Emmy for Outstanding Television Movie.

The miniseries *Angels in America* was developed shortly afterwards, in 1985. Reagan was still in the White House, but AIDS was no longer an unknown word, albeit highly stigmatized. The miniseries focuses on the story of five people (four men and one woman) affected by the disease in one way or another. The four men practice sex with other men, though one of them, Republican

and Mormon, is married with a wife. The production earned eleven Emmys and five Golden Globes, in each case including Outstanding Television Movie and Best Miniseries, respectively.

Diseases from which the protagonists suffer

Neither fiction deeply examines medical treatment of the infection, though *Angels in America* is somewhat more explicit on symptoms. Two of its lead characters, Prior Walter (Justin Kirk) and Lou (Ben Shenkman), are a couple until the former confesses he has caught HIV. When Lou questions the accuracy of the diagnosis, Prior Walter lists his symptoms: Kaposi's sarcoma, the presence of protein in his urine (from the effect of HIV on his kidneys), diarrhea and blood in his feces.

The other character infected is Roy Cohn (Al Pacino), a highly influential Republican who hides his homosexuality to stay in power. Cohn visits his doctor with a clinical profile of lesions from Kaposi's sarcoma, inflammation of glands in his neck, groin and armpits, oral candidiasis and fungus under his nails.

Ignorance of the transmission routes

Meanwhile *The Normal Heart* bases its medical viewpoint on the relationship that its main character, Ned Weeks (Mark Ruffalo), establishes with Doctor Emma Brookner (Julia Roberts). Brookner uses a wheelchair, having suffered from polio as a girl. For this reason she empathizes with the impotence her patients feel. However, the doctor is an exception in the TV movie. At a time when the immune system was "a real unknown" and the transmission routes of the disease were unknown, many doctors refused to see patients because of a fear of contagion. "They turned us away from four emergency rooms," says a friend of Weeks one night when he turns up at his home with his boyfriend passed out in his arms.

In another scene, Weeks visits a hospital where several patients have been hospitalized because of the "gay cancer", and where numerous posters warn him that he is entering a "contagious area". When he asks about the lunch trays

in the hallway, they tell him that hospital staff will not deliver the food to the rooms for fear of getting infected, the same reason the maintenance technician refuses to fix one patient's TV set.

Discovery of the virus that causes the disease

In *Angels in America*, set in 1985, Cohn's doctor can give his patient a more detailed explanation than Doctor Brookner can. By then, the virus causing the infection had been identified (in 1983, by scientists at Paris's Institut Pasteur), and it was known that those infected underwent a drastic decrease in their white blood cell count. The series, however, does not accurately reflect the information that was known, as reflected in the explanation the doctor gives Cohn after telling him his diagnosis:

"Nobody knows what causes it. [This statement is false because HIV had already been identified.] And nobody knows how to cure it. The best theory is that we blame a retrovirus, the human immunodeficiency virus. Its presence is made known to us by the useless antibodies which appear in reaction to its entrance into the bloodstream through a cut, or an orifice. The antibodies are powerless to protect the body against it. Why? We don't know. The body's immune system ceases to function. [It would be more correct to say it gets weaker.] Sometimes the body even attacks itself. [In fact it is the virus that weakens the immune system.] At any rate, it's left open to a whole horror house of infections from microbes it usually defends against. [...] We think it may also be able to slip past the blood-brain barrier into the brain. Which is, of course, very bad news. It's fatal in we don't know what percent of people with suppressed immune responses. [...] The NIH in Bethesda has a new drug called AZT with a two-year waiting list that not even I can get you onto."

Prevention and transmission routes

"Do you think that this cancer is sexually transmitted?". "I think it is, yes. Can I prove it yet? No."



MEDICINE IN TELEVISION SERIES

Through this conversation in *The Normal Heart*, Doctor Brookner asks Weeks, a renowned and polemic writer, to try to convince the gay community to stop having unprotected sexual relations. His efforts with a generation blinded by the ideology of sexual liberation, one which took them so many years of struggle to attain, are in vain. “The entire gay political movement is fucking,” he says. “Guys will become frightened of sex. They will lose our self-respect, that we fought very, very hard for.” Brookner’s discourse, moreover, loses force from the moment she cannot even assert that the infection is sexually transmitted.

Later it was shown that infection was contracted through blood, sexual relations and mother’s milk. Drug addicts, from sharing used syringes, hemophiliacs, through contaminated blood transfusions, and MSM, due to the nature of their sexual relations, were the first population groups affected. However, the infection was also transmitted in heterosexual relations. In fact, at one point in *The Normal Heart*, Brookner states that “Women have been discovered to have it in Africa, where it is clearly transmitted heterosexually”.

The stigma

Social rejection is doubtless the most difficult hurdle to overcome for characters in both fictions. Nobody knows where the disease comes from, not even the homosexual community itself, which in *The Normal Heart* even points to a possible “conspiracy to murder all gay men”, or questions “monogamy” as a possible cause of infection. Outside of their community, things are much worse. They have problems even hiring a venue for their association, the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC), and one of their members is warned that, if it came out that he belongs to it, his job at the Department of Health would be at risk.

The toughest situation, however, arises when a friend of the protagonists travels to Phoenix (Arizona) with his boyfriend to visit his mother before death. The pilot of the plane refuses to take off when he discovers there is an AIDS sufferer on board. When, thanks to another pilot, they finally arrive, the young man dies and the hospital

doctors refuse to examine him for the cause of death. Because there is no death certificate, the undertakers and police will not come, so the deceased’s boyfriend and mother pay 50 dollars to a hospital attendant to remove the corpse from the hospital and they transport it in their own car. Once at the funeral home, they are forced to pay 3000 dollars to collect the deceased’s ashes.

In *Angels in America*, social acceptance of the disease has progressed very little. When the doctor tells Cohn his diagnosis, they have the following conversation:

- COHN. This disease...
- DOCTOR. Syndrome.
- COHN. Whatever. It afflicts mostly homosexuals and drug addicts.
- DOCTOR. Mostly. Hemophiliacs are also at risk. [...]
- COHN. And what is my diagnosis, Henry?
- DOCTOR. You have AIDS, Roy.
- COHN. No, Henry, no. AIDS is what homosexuals have. I have liver cancer.

So Cohn is stating that the version he will make public regarding his state of health is that he has liver cancer, since he cannot admit he is suffering from a disease attributed to homosexuals. If he did, he fears he would lose all his power and influence.

A lack of support from the public authorities

The Normal Heart also shows the fierce struggle the activists take on to achieve social and financial support from the public authorities. For example, it took the GMHC 14 months to gain a meeting with the mayor of New York, and in the end, he did not show up to the meeting. When, some time later, they receive financing from the council, they are given strict instructions not to say where it came from. The justification that Weeks receives from the council is: “I don’t think we can afford to make so many enemies.”

From the White House, the only attention they receive is from one of the president’s advisers who, once in the meeting, makes it clear that his sole interest in the meeting was to find out per-

sonally whether the infection can be transmitted between men and women. Weeks, beaten, can only answer that, though he cannot guarantee it, in theory, the affliction seems only to affect the homosexual community.

For her part, Doctor Brookner also maintains her personal crusade to ensure that study of the disease receives government funding. She accuses the government of spending more money on “investigating seven deaths from Tylenol” (a drug whose active ingredient is paracetamol) than on HIV, and of refusing to cooperate with the French to “steal a Nobel Prize”.

The allusion to the dispute for the Nobel Prize is not anecdotal. The virus was isolated for the first time in 1983, by investigators at the Institut Pasteur in Paris. Virologist Luc Montagnier’s team identified a new class of human retrovirus, and indicated it was the cause of AIDS. Montagnier sent samples to the American virologist Robert C. Gallo, who confirmed that HIV was the cause of AIDS, and helped develop the blood test to detect it. Nevertheless, the 2008 Nobel Prize for Medicine was awarded to Montagnier and the French virologist Françoise Barré-Sinoussi. Gallo had confirmed the link of HIV with the disease, but the French were the first to isolate the virus.

The Normal Heart finishes in 1984. The final credits explain that Reagan did not mention AIDS in public until 1985, when he promised that research against the disease would have “maximum priority” and that 126 million dollars would be earmarked for it in 1986. The film denounces that this figure was reduced to 85.5 million, an insufficient amount to cover the costs of a pandemic that, by the end of that year, had caused 24,559 documented deaths in the US.

The case of Positius

In Catalonia, the disease has occasionally appeared in many TV series, though few productions have had HIV as their central theme. In contrast, the TV movie *Positius*, produced by Ovideo for TV3, written by Aina Clotet and Àlex Mañas, and directed by Judith Colell, did place the disease center stage in the script. The story focuses

on the disease’s social aspect. One of its objectives was, precisely, to destigmatize the disease and distance it from prejudice.

Its main characters are two women who are carriers of the virus, but very different to each other. Vero (Montse Germán) is a well-to-do graduate of around 38, who seems to have normalized her illness among her friends and inner circle. She does not tell everyone she meets, but neither is she ashamed of her status, and she seems to lead a happy life. In contrast, Gloria (Mercedes Sampietro) is a woman over 60, from a low socio-cultural level, who keeps the disease an absolute secret. She lives with her son Rober (Roger Coma), who is likewise unaware of his mother’s status. Both women only meet the odd time during the film, in hospital, and in the NGO where they both seek shelter.

The TV movie starts with a birthday celebration, bringing together ex-students from Vero’s university days after 20 years. This is where Vero meets Xavier (Pau Durà) again, and everything she thought she had under control comes tumbling down. Xavier has just separated from his wife and has a son, but the passion and love between them reignites immediately. In their first sexual encounter, Vero does not tell him she is HIV-positive because she thinks that, since they use protection, it is unnecessary. We then see how, on successive occasions, they always use condoms and she becomes increasingly concerned about the situation as her relationship develops and she starts falling in love. Finally, urged on by her best friend, she decides to talk to him. This is a key scene: a conversation lasting over ten minutes that develops into an emotional roller-coaster between the two characters. For Vero, it is clear that the fear and anguish hold the same weight as the need to communicate (it has taken several weeks for her to feel strong enough to take this step). Xavier, for his part, starts by listening understandingly, but little by little his face transforms from “apparent understanding” to “utter panic”. He does not understand how she could hide something so significant, which directly affects him. Meanwhile, Vero does not stop repeating that she “has always protected him” and that she “needed to feel safe with [him] in



order to share [this knowledge]”. The scene lets viewers share and understand the fears that this disease entails: fear of rejection for the sufferers, and fear of contagion (often the result of massive disinformation) in the case of the sexual partner. The scene comes to a tragic end for both, terminating with Xavier’s exit, leaving Vero broken and alone.

In contrast, Gloria, the other protagonist, gets a job offer to look after the daughter of Belén (Aina Clotet). Gloria’s lack of education and knowledge cause her to make excuses and turn the job down, afraid she will infect the girl just by contact. Worried, Gloria goes to visit an NGO (pretending she has an HIV-positive friend), where finally they inform her and help her understand that she “cannot infect anybody just by touching them”. In the end, Gloria is able to accept the nannying job and the relationship with the little girl becomes increasingly closer until the girl becomes her reason for living. Unfortunately, Belén ends up finding out that Gloria is HIV-positive. With no explanation, she immediately forbids her from seeing her daughter. Gloria falls into a deep depression, goes off her medication and is admitted to hospital. It is Gloria’s son, who until that point had seemed a distant figure and did not know about her illness, who becomes her greatest support.

Conclusions

Analyzing all three productions, we can see that they all practically repeat the same concepts: disinformation, lack of prevention, stigmatization and scarcity of resources from the authorities to fight against the disease.

In the twenty-first century, AIDS continues to be a reality among us. Nowadays, thanks to the huge advances made in recent years, we can chronicle the disease, but at an untenable long-term cost for public health, and with a certain toxicity for the patient.

Science is progressing in great leaps to cure AIDS in infected sufferers. Research seeks to eradicate HIV from the organism so that lifelong treatment becomes unnecessary. Highly promising therapeutic vaccine models exist, which, combined with other strategies, will lead to a cure for the infection. The foremost laboratories worldwide have set the goal for achieving it in 2020. But until this occurs, AIDS remains a reality. The stigmatization has not disappeared, but young people live “as if it didn’t exist”, leading to a fresh peak in cases. In these moments of crisis, when resources are increasingly limited, we have to extend the concept of “corporate social responsibility” not to apply just to companies, but to people individually. If each of us do our bit, we can help to end this pandemic.