

Viral Representations in *Pose* (2018 - 2021)

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An analysis of *Pose* (2018 - 2021) shows that the way HIV/AIDS suffering was represented in this series was very different to earlier representations. In particular, multimodal analysis is deployed to show how the series contributes to the provision of opportunities for audiences to identify and empathise with PLWHA. At a critical discourse level of analysis, *Pose* enables audiences to reflect on the position of PLWHA in the society; as such, rather than promoting feelings of care, the series appears to encourage audiences to engage with HIV/AIDS suffering in more depth, promoting the possibility of audiences contributing to the demand for civil rights for PLWHA. Indeed, the analysis suggests that *Pose* addresses social stigmatisation and marginalisation in a manner that promotes sociocultural change. The *us versus them* binary is reversed in such a manner whereby it becomes possible that those who contribute to the stigmatisation of PLWHA are the ones who become the *Others*. The contribution of the series lies not only on the fact that PLWHA as well as members of the queer community were involved in the creation and production process; rather, the series addressed HIV/AIDS in an empowering, rather than a stigmatising manner.

Keywords: HIV/AIDS, representation, *Pose*, television, sexuality

FX's *Pose* (2018-2021) is one of the most praised contemporary television series which will be a point of reference for its novelty in casting, as well as for the way it narrativised queer history (Stout, 2020). Not only did the series cast the largest number of transgender people in a mainstream TV show to date (Real, 2018; Walsh, 2018), but there was also provision for transgender people to be involved in its creation and production stages. Episode 6 of season 1 was the first ever episode to have been written and directed by a transgender woman of colour, Janet Mock, who is also one of the executive producers of the show (Gemmill, 2018).

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The main premise of the series is to present a dramatised account of the '80s ballroom culture that had previously been documented in *Paris Is Burning* (1991), the influential documentary that shed light onto the black and brown transgender subculture of the 80s. After its release, *Paris Is Burning* was praised by both mainstream and independent media. Hilderbrand (2013) provides a collection of all the accolades of the picture. Among others, he documents Terrence Rafferty's (1991) review in *The New Yorker* that the success of the picture is mainly due to the fact that Livingston, the director of the documentary, was "[...] smart enough not to reduce her subjects to the sum of their possible meanings [...]" (p. 72). Also, Kornstein (2020) identifies *Paris is Burning* as the starting point that aided the inclusion of transgender people and drag art into mainstream media.

The two works differ with regards to the level of fictionalisation involved. *Paris is Burning* is a documentary whereby those who were part of ballrooms are interviewed; thus, the documentary focuses on their stories. *Pose* is a TV show where the characters are not the actual people who participated in ballrooms but actors. A user on IMDB describes *Pose* as a "[...] dance musical that explores the juxtaposition of several segments of life and society in New York: the ball culture world, the rise of the luxury Trump-era universe, and the downtown social and literary scene" (Jwelch5742, n.d.). The series follows the story of Blanca, a black transwoman who takes under her protection several members of the LGBTQI+ community by forming a 'house', that is a form of a family whereby its members care and provide for one another.

Set in New York, the series explores the lives of black and latinx queer young people at the end of 1980s until the middle of the 1990s. The first season focuses on introducing audiences to ballroom culture, the discrimination and social exclusion queer people faced at the time, and the beginning of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The second

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season is significantly more heavily focused on HIV/AIDS, the lived experiences of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA), as well as activism and kinship structures that emerged as a response to the way HIV/AIDS and PLWHA were treated at the time. The third, and arguably the weakest, season of the series provides audiences with information about each character's past as well as the ways in which each character organises their lives almost a decade after the HIV/AIDS outbreak.

Pose is of significance for analysis not only because of its achievements in relation to representation, but also because of the way it treated the outbreak of HIV/AIDS. Richard Lawson (2018) of *Vanity Fair* situates the success of the series in the realistic depiction of the lived experiences of people who, at the time, lived with HIV/AIDS. This, Lawson (*ibid.*) argues, was achieved by maintaining a balance between tragedy and joy, hardships and kinships. This representation of suffering,¹ one that presents spectators with a balanced view of the life of the sufferers, is new in mainstream television.

Unlike earlier representations of HIV/AIDS narratives of suffering, such as *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005), *The Hours* (2002), or *Chemsex* (2015), *Pose* provides spectators with a new dimension of sufferers, a more humane and whole depiction. The sections that follow provide a systematic analysis of *Pose* by using the adapted version of Chouliaraki's (2006) *analytics of mediation*. In doing so, both multimodal and discourse analyses are deployed. This allows for detailed understanding of the values toward HIV/AIDS suffering that the series promotes, and the extent in which the series allows spectators to make these values their own. It is important to note here that whether audiences make these values their own or not is not the focus of this analysis; rather, the focus is on the possibilities it offers to audiences.

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Sufferers' Voices Take Centre Stage

One of the main features of *Pose*, which makes it different to other popular media productions that dramatise HIV/AIDS suffering, is that audiences are presented with the point of view of either the sufferers or those who are spectators of suffering, yet belong to the same non-mainstream culture with the ones who suffer². Contrary to previous works where the HIV positive person and those observing them suffer belonged to different backgrounds, like in *The Hours* (2002), in *Pose* both sufferers and spectators are all part of the ballroom culture.³ This is significant because "[...] ballroom provides a family and community for those who are otherwise routinely denied such relationships and experiences due to family rejection, sexism, transphobia and homophobia" (Glover, 2020, p. 7). As such, not only are there no normative characters for mainstream audiences to identify with, but also HIV/AIDS suffering is presented as one of the many forms of suffering, like "[...] transiency, poverty, and violence" (*ibid.*) among others, that members of the ballroom scene often face.

In *Pose*, the *us versus them* binary, which was often established by other works whose subject matter has been HIV/AIDS, is subverted by the exclusive presentation of the *Other* as the only character-option through whom audiences learn about the realities of HIV/AIDS suffering. The spectator of HIV/AIDS suffering in *Pose* is always a marginalised person whose position in society is such that allows them to empathise with the HIV/AIDS sufferer. In doing so, audiences are also encouraged to identify HIV/AIDS suffering not as something detached and alien to them, but as something which is part of their society, something that could happen to anyone, not just to an *Other*.

One of the first scenes of HIV/AIDS suffering is presented in episode 3 of season 1 ('Giving and Receiving') when Pray Tell (Billy Porter), the emcee of the New

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York ballroom scene and father-figure of the series whom many young queer community members view as mentor, visits his AIDS suffering boyfriend Costas (Johnny Sibilly) at the hospital. In that scene, Pray Tell reminds Costas of their Christmas plans in an attempt to motivate him not to lose hope but to continue fighting the virus. Costas, on the other hand, appears to be more realistic about his condition, saying to Pray Tell that "[...] I do not believe that I will spend my last Christmas in this hospital", acknowledging that he is about to die. At this moment in the series, Pray Tell does not know his serostatus and believes himself to be HIV negative - he learns that he is HIV positive in the next episode. He is spectator to his boyfriend's suffering and ensuing death.

However, similar to the scene where Clarissa meets Richard in *The Hours* (2001), the spectator of the suffering appears to be a sufferer, as well. In this case, Pray Tell is suffering from HIV/AIDS even though he is not HIV positive. He is about to lose his boyfriend and many of his friends to the virus. The scene also provides commentary for the poor conditions HIV/AIDS patients had to be in. The background to this scene shows nurses refusing to enter patients' rooms, a hospital which is understaffed of medical personnel, and rooms which are dirty because there are no cleaning staff. Unlike the scene in *The Hours*, here there is no room for audiences to empathise more with the spectator-to-suffering than with the one who suffers. In this scene, both spectator and HIV sufferer are suffering from the effects of the virus; as such, audiences are provided with opportunities to empathise with Pray Tell's desperation for living to see his loved ones being taken away by the virus and their dignity been taken away by governmental negligence.

One of the few instances in the series where a scene of HIV/AIDS suffering involves the person who suffers and a spectator who does not belong to the queer

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community is in episode 4 of season 1 ('The Fever') when Pray Tell takes Damon (Ryan Jamaal Swain), Ricky (Dyllón Burnside), and Lil Papi (Angel Bismark Curiel), three young men who have had unprotected sex and/or used drugs to the hospital for an HIV test. The built up to the episode leaves audiences to believe that the young men might test positive; however, they all test negative, except Pray Tell. The scene when he finds out about his diagnosis presents him and the doctor who is giving him the news. Despite the fact that we are presented with a white, healthy-looking doctor, who represents traditional institutions and normativity, audiences have not had the opportunity to get to know this character, thus it becomes more difficult to connect or identify with her compared to Pray Tell whom audiences have got to know over the past four episodes.

By contrast, the camera goes closer to Pray Tell's face, and we are presented with one of Billy Porter's best scenes in the series where he admits that "[...] this is the moment that I dreaded most. Dodged it, for years. And now the son of a bitch has finally caught up with me." Porter gives audience a plethora of emotions ranging from terror, defeat, acceptance, and desperation to strength; the strength that he needs to find in order not to scare the boys that are waiting for him in the waiting room of the hospital. In this scene, the mode of representation becomes a significant way to encourage audiences to develop what Chouliaraki (2006) discusses as *feelings of pity* toward HIV/AIDS. This is achieved because of the fact that by that time we have gotten to know Pray Tell and connect with him; that he is the only one with whom we can identify; as well as because of the movement of the camera and his stellar performance.

Also important to the analysis of the mode of representation is the choice of medium. As discussed earlier, *Pose* is a fictional re-telling of *Paris Is Burning*. As a result, audiences are not clear as to whether what they watch is real or fictional. This ambivalence enables *Pose* to be more direct when it comes to establishing a connection

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with its audience. Messages become more relatable, and the distance between audiences and sufferers is reduced, transforming the series from fictional storytelling to an act of activism.⁴ Indeed, Janet Mock, one of the executive producers of the series, as well as writer and director of some episodes, quoted Ryan Murphy in one of her interviews with Jude Dry. According to her, Murphy said that "[...] the reason I'm doing this show is the internal thing that I've been saying to myself - show running as advocacy" (Dry, 2019).

Parker and Igielnik (2020) argue that contemporary audiences are no longer just interested in the final product. Rather, they care about impact, principled social responsibility, and about investing time and energy on things that have positive results for the environment and the society (Young, 2019). Therefore, the fact that the creator and producer of *Pose* declares that the series is to be seen as a political and activist act is very likely to change the way audiences view it. In addition, the choice of medium becomes even more significant by the creators' decision to re-present *Paris Is Burning* as a mainstream TV product through *Pose*, instead of an independent and less mainstream one, while keeping the main premise of giving voice to the *Others* who have been denied the opportunity to voice their truth. As a result, the reach of the show, and its potential influence become significantly stronger and wider.

Sufferers Are More Than Their Suffering

Another area of attention when conducting multimodal analysis of cultural products of HIV/AIDS suffering is the relationship between verbal narrative and image. A cultural product can elicit a factual, emotional, or ideological response from its audience, based on how the language that is used in the scene of suffering relates - or not - to its visual representation. A benefit of narrativising *Paris Is Burning*, for instance, is that the response which *Pose* seems to elicit from audiences is not a factual one.

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In *Paris Is Burning*, audiences are not presented with just fictional characters, but with the actual people who lived the HIV outbreak and are either HIV positive themselves, or whose lives have been affected by HIV. Audiences are also presented with language which describes HIV/AIDS suffering in an authentic, factual, and non-sensational manner. In the documentary, ballroom queens explain ballroom culture and describe it as a sanctuary from the horrors of HIV/AIDS, among other types of suffering that they experience (Cunningham, 1998). In doing so, HIV/AIDS suffering is presented as just another one of the challenges that these people had to go through. It is expected that audiences might develop feelings of sympathy for the people who are depicted in the documentary. Yet, the fact that they appear as the sum of their suffering, and that there is nothing else other than their suffering which might enable audiences to connect with them, does not provide any alternative potential for audiences to be further moved and, thus, for change with regard to audiences' feelings and attitudes toward HIV/AIDS sufferers to occur.

Pose was created to differ from *Paris Is Burning* in that it not only focused on highlighting the importance of ballroom for LGBTQI+ community members in the 1980s, but it also portrayed each character as a whole person whose life was not just about HIV/AIDS, poverty, violence, discrimination, homelessness, and other types of suffering. Mj Rodriguez, one of the lead actresses of the series, gave an interview to Seth Meyers discussing further the importance of Ballroom culture and the contribution of *Pose* in ensuring that this culture will not be forgotten (Late Night with Seth Meyers, 2019).

Stout (2020) observes that *Pose* is "[...] making a point not only to show the hardships and tragedies but also to show the moments of joy and fellowship" (p. 42).
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Lawson (2018) in his Vanity Fair article also discussed the significance of maintaining a balance between tragic and happy moments. In presenting audiences with round, whole characters and by establishing a certain correspondence between what is said and what is shown, *Pose* can elicit emotional and ideological responses from its audience.

Episode 6 of season 1 ('Love is the Message') illustrates the types of correspondence that invoke such responses. In one of the scenes of this episode, we see Pray Tell revisiting his dying boyfriend, Costas, at the hospital. The scene quickly becomes emotional as Costas's health has significantly deteriorated since last time we saw him in episode 3 of season 1. In this scene, Pray Tell tells Costas how he would like to teach the young ones about time before AIDS when "[...] we were truly free, free to love, free to fuck, free to be our gay ass selves in this beautiful shithole of a town [...] what it's like to love without worrying that you're gonna die, or worse yet, that you're gonna kill somebody". While saying this, Pray Tell is lying on the same bed as Costas, foreshadowing his own imminent death.

The language that Pray Tell uses in this scene is one of storytelling. Not only does he talk about the past, narrating life before HIV/AIDS, but there are also didactic elements for the audience in that he ensures that we do not take for granted that HIV/AIDS is a given reality, that life was different prior to the outbreak of the virus, and in that the series presents us with the non-physical damages the virus is causing to people, HIV positive and negative alike. At the same time, the scene is visually rather sensational.

The setting is an almost abandoned hospital, dirty bedsheets, and not enough personnel to take care of the patients. Costas appears to be very weak, unable to eat because his throat hurts so much that he cannot swallow anymore. Pray Tell starts

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talking to Costas and appears to be cheery and smiling, until he starts talking about how the young people will not know of, let alone live in a world without AIDS. The camera zooms in and we are presented with yet another *gros plan* of Pray Tell where he initially appears to be nostalgic and then desperate in the realisation that "[...] either way, ain't no going back now." At that moment, the camera captures him lying on Costas's bed where he is hugging him, illustrating how love, in the era of AIDS, is synonymous to death.

At the same time, the particular scene elicits an ideological response from audiences. Chouliaraki (2006) argues that an ideological response can be elicited when the relationship between what is said and what is shown presents an in-group *versus* out-group reality in which the latter are presented as *savages*.⁵ The antithesis that is created through the interaction between Pray Tell and Costas and the setting of the scene is such that audiences are likely to be compelled to identify with Pray Tell and Costas. In crude terms, they are gay men, one of them black and HIV positive, and the other one white and dying of AIDS, therefore arguably marginalised and not part of mainstream culture.

However, in this scene, which is solely focused on love between two people and the effects HIV/AIDS has on love, both characters present a range of emotions, from anger to desperation, which make them appear humane. On the other hand, the setting works as a signifier of political and governmental negligence, a savage reality that these two humane characters are bound to spend their last days together; a reality that neither of them challenge because they take it for granted. This portrayal is dynamic not only in its affective potential, but most importantly in its potential to address the audiences' possible ideological norms and its potential to instigate an ideological conflict which, in [Bollas, A. \(2022\), 'Viral representations in *Pose* \(2018-2021\)', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 50\(3\), pp. 112–129, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.2022.2110559>.](#)

turn, can challenge established sociocultural norms. The *us versus them* binary is subverted here in such a way that the potential of the HIV/AIDS sufferers becoming *us* and society's overt discrimination becoming *them* can be realised.

Death As Vehicle For Empathy

The aesthetic quality of the series is the last of the three areas where multimodal analysis can be deployed. An analysis of the aesthetic quality of a cultural product enables the examination of its overall effect " [...] in terms of [...] *pamphleteering*, *philanthropy*, and *sublimation*" (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 81, emphasis in original). In an interview with Evan Real (2018) for *The Hollywood Reporter*, Mj Rodriguez, the lead actress of the series, emphasised that "*Pose* gives me hope that we can change people's hearts and minds... at the end of the day, we're all human" (emphasis in the original). Therefore, to examine whether such a change was promoted through the series, one needs to examine closely its overall aesthetic quality.

In the analysis that follows, it becomes evident that it is important for all three possible effects to be activated to ensure the possibility of provoking some form of social change. The effect of sublimation is significant in prompting audiences to contemplate the conditions of HIV/AIDS suffering. Of similar importance are the effects of pamphleteering and philanthropy. Pamphleteering enables feelings of anger to be generated from audiences against those who contribute to the HIV/AIDS suffering of others. It is important to note that such feelings are not necessarily directed to specific people; they could also be directed to institutions, societal structures, as well as cultural conditions that are instrumental in the augmentation, if not the initiation, of the HIV/AIDS suffering of others. Finally, philanthropy refers to the effect of the possible

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identification of audiences with the character who is presented to offer help to the one who suffers in a scene of suffering. The movements from sublimation to pamphleteering to philanthropy are significant in that while audiences watch these cultural products, they can experience contemplation, anger, and the need to offer help, which could encourage them to take action, and help those who suffer in their day to day lives.

The hospital scenes that were analysed in the two previous sections come to an end with Costas's death. After Pray Tell's second visit at the hospital, the one where Costas's health has evidently deteriorated, and following his feelings of outrage with the inhumane conditions in which AIDS patients are bound to spend their final days, he decides to host a show that, he hopes, will make the patients lift their spirits. The particular scene opens with Pray Tell taking Costas to the part of the ward where the cabaret show will be hosted. He explains to Costas what this "AIDS cabaret" is, and despite the fact that he is aware that Costas can no longer eat because of an inflammation in his throat, he tells him that it "[...] is going to make you feel much better. I hung some streamers and gathered a buffet. We got crackers and cheese and punch."

In the following scene, Pray Tell sings Donny Hathaway's *For All We Know* and dedicates it to Costas, "the love of [his] life". The setting is completely different to the one that we were presented with earlier in this episode as well as in episode 3 where the first hospital scene was shot. Rather than being presented with a deserted, dirty, and degrading hospital ward, we now watch a lightly decorated space which aims to remind patients that they are still human and they deserve to be treated as such. Immediately after this rather emotional scene, Costas dies. The time in which Costas's death is placed is significant in provoking an effect of sublimation. It is the first time that he was seen

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to regain his dignity as an AIDS patient, and he has just been reminded that he is loved. Having him die immediately after this allows audiences not only to be presented with, but also to ponder over the real conditions of HIV/AIDS suffering. This is particularly important when considering audiences who might not be familiar with the lived experiences of HIV/AIDS sufferers.

Season 2 of *Pose* is significantly more clearly focused on the HIV/AIDS struggles of the LGBTQI+ community. In the opening episode of the season ('Acting Up'), Pray Tell and Blanca (Mj Rodriguez) visit the grave of Keenan, an ex-boyfriend of Pray Tell. The grave site at Hart Island seems not to be surprising to the two characters, but it might very possibly be surprising to the audiences of this scene. Rather than visiting a graveyard, they go on a boat to a place which Pray Tell refers to as "[...] out of sight, out of mind [...]" alluding to society's negligence in properly addressing HIV/AIDS suffering. The receptionist at the burial site of Hart Island does not welcome them or ask them questions verbally; instead she uses gestures to communicate with them, an action that hints to the belittling treatment of LGBTQI+, and potentially HIV positive, people by bureaucratic institutions. They do engage in conversation once Pray Tell asks her to show him where his partner's remains are only to find out that

[...] names don't matter here. Just a bunch of pine boxes in a ditch. [...] Just a mass grave of people whose families couldn't afford a burial or unclaimed bodies from the morgue. [...] We quarantine the ones that died of AIDS, don't want them infecting anyone else, you know.

The scene becomes even stronger when Pray Tell and Blanca face what looks more like a rubbish dump than a burial site. Situating the particular site as a site of burial for not only those who died of AIDS, but also those who have been abandoned by their families

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can encourage a pamphleteering effect on the audiences whereby feelings of anger are directed to a number of directions: those who abandoned family members when they were most in need, the system which denies humane treatment to those who died of AIDS and the people who relate to them, and/or a society which chooses to take HIV/AIDS suffering "[...] out of sight, out of mind [...]" instead of addressing its existence and its adverse effects.

In the scene that follows, Blanca is at the doctor's (Sandra Bernhard) office where she is told that her T-cell count has dropped to 200. This is an indicator that her HIV has progressed to AIDS. After the initial shock and denial based on her believing to be of overall good health, Blanca asks the doctor whether this means that she is dying. The doctor reassures her that even though a cure has not been found yet, Blanca can start taking AZT, a medication that will help slow down the progression of the virus. In what follows, the creators of the series provide a commentary about how "[...] pharmaceutical companies are in the business of making a profit [...]" and therefore such medication is accessible only by "[...] rich folk [...]". However, the doctor explains how there are people in the community who care about helping those who are in need but cannot afford such medication. She tells Blanca that

[...] when the wealthy white queens and their friends know that the end is coming close, they call us. [...] We pay our respects, we say our goodbyes, and then we collect the leftover meds. Their dying wishes are to make sure that the grief isn't the only thing they're leaving behind.

The emergence and role of kinship structures in the LGBTQI+ culture as a result of HIV/AIDS suffering has been discussed at length by a number of scholars (Arnold and Bailey, 2009; Bailey, 2011; Bailey, 2013; Glover, 2020; Phillips II *et al.*, 2011;

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Shacklock, 2019). However, the significance of this scene is that audiences are presented with a scene of suffering whereby the HIV/AIDS sufferer is helped not by the societal structures that have come into place to offer this kind of help, but by others who have also been experiencing HIV/AIDS suffering themselves. This juxtaposition between governmental negligence and HIV/AIDS sufferers as agents of help contributes to the emergence of an effect of *philanthropy* through which audiences are inclined to feel sympathetic towards the one(s) offering help and, in turn, are encouraged to become themselves agents of help.

Queering Time and Space

So far in this article, a multimodal analysis has shown how creators of cultural products can use the mode of representation, the relationship between verbal narrative and visual representations, as well as the aesthetic quality of HIV/AIDS suffering to present, or invoke specific values toward suffering. All three generic features of multimodal analysis confirm that *Pose* is created in such a way that audiences are encouraged to feel sympathetic toward the HIV/AIDS sufferer, while challenging those sociocultural structures which either inflict or maintain the suffering. It was also shown that the show offers the potential to motivate audiences and instigate a *call for action* type of response, whereby audiences assume the position of the one who either directly helps or indirectly contributes to the amelioration of any form of suffering caused by HIV/AIDS. In other words, by analysing the semiotic system of the representation of HIV/AIDS suffering, it has been shown that cultural productions have the potential to promote certain reactions towards suffering. Proceeding to a critical discourse analysis, though, can provide further insights as to how, if at all, these reactions are internalised among audience members, and the extent in which changes in socio-political structures can

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occur. From an analysis of the representation of suffering, by looking at how HIV/AIDS suffering is represented in the medium in focus, the attention now shifts to an analysis of the mediation of suffering, by examining how audiences are oriented toward or against the *Other*.

An examination of the spatial distance between audiences and the spectacle of suffering allows us to analyse whether audiences are provided with opportunities to develop feelings of danger or safety. Close spatial proximity, argues Chouliaraki (2006), is able to instil danger in audiences, while spatial distance is more often associated with generating feelings of safety.

The premise of *Pose*, being a fictionalised account of the reality faced by many LGBTQI+ community members at the outbreak of the HIV global epidemic, situates it into the heart of the Global North, New York. The setting is both realistic and symbolic. It is realistic in that ballroom culture flourished in New York City, but also because some of the events that are represented in the series actually happened at that time in New York. For example, the first episode of season 2 dramatises the 'Stop the Church' protest at St. Patrick's Cathedral organised by ACT UP organisation, a real event that took place on December 10, 1989. Activists had planned a staged *die-in* which quickly got out of hand (O'Loughlin, 2019). *Pose* has been criticised for focusing too much on New York City, though. Glover (2020) argues that people watching series like *Pose* tend to believe that New York City was the sole epicentre of the struggles of the LGBTQI+ community. Indeed, he provides a very detailed account of other cities in all parts of the United States where similar issues occurred.⁶

Arguably, therefore, New York is also a symbolic setting, representing spaces of

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HIV/AIDS suffering in the global North. This double function of the setting creates a constant back and forth between spatial proximity and distance, and by extension, between audiences' possible feelings of danger and safety, respectively. From the earlier discussion on the analysis of the mode of representation, the relationship between verbal narrative and visual representations, as well as the aesthetic quality of HIV/AIDS suffering, it emerges that the absence of non-Others as spectators to HIV/AIDS suffering in a sense allows audiences the possibility to create a connection with those who suffer.

In *Pose*, everyone is an *Other*. This allows us to redefine the meaning of safety and danger. Even though safety and danger can be used to describe audience's feelings in relation to the possibility of them being affected by the *Others'* suffering, *Pose* enables us to discuss safety and danger as a collective response to suffering. The interplay between feelings of safety and danger created by the symbolic and real function of the setting, respectively, allows us to consider possible that audiences are likely to experience HIV/AIDS suffering as something that might not be in spatial proximity to them. However, at a humane level, it allows them to realise that they are not so far from being affected, directly or indirectly, by it.

In other words, by understanding the setting of the series as being potentially any city in the global North, it becomes possible that audiences understand that HIV/AIDS suffering could be something relevant to their own lives. If a certain group of people, in this case those dying of AIDS and their loved ones, are treated in the most inhumane way possible, who is to say that audiences might not be treated as such one day for one reason or another? The temporal distance with the spectacle of suffering that is discussed below further contributes to this. The medical advancements that have

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taken place since 1996 have ensured that the danger of contracting HIV is minimal. As such, audiences are less likely to feel that they are in danger in terms of suffering from HIV themselves. However, the series presents HIV/AIDS suffering in a manner that is not exclusively focused on HIV/AIDS suffering in the narrow sense of physical suffering; instead, we are presented with a more global sense of suffering that allows audiences to see how HIV/AIDS suffering affects everyone's lives irrespective of their serostatus.

With regard to temporal distance and proximity, *Pose* is clearly set in the past. This raises the possibility of audience's indifference. When audiences are presented with spectacles of suffering which are set in temporal distance from them, they are more likely to remain indifferent. However, when suffering is presented in temporal proximity, it is possible that audiences feel the need to take action and address either what causes suffering to happen, or to contribute to helping those who suffer. Following this, one could argue that *Pose* fails to promote feelings of taking action and addressing HIV/AIDS suffering, as is common with works of the retrovision genre. Rather than encouraging audiences to feel the urge to do something to help ameliorate suffering, a fictional account of the distant past is more likely to leave audiences indifferent in terms of action.

However, despite the fact that *Pose* dramatises the outbreak and first years of the HIV/AIDS global epidemic, certain intertextual references, visual and linguistic, create a sense of temporal proximity with its contemporary audience. For example, one of the main preoccupations of episode 1 of season 2 of the series is the release of Madonna's song *Vogue* and its significance for the ballroom culture. Blanca says about this "Everything is about to change. I can see it as clear as day. [...] Madonna is shining a

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bright spotlight on us. We have been underground for [...] about 20 years. [...] Mark my words: 'Vogue' will make us stars". Candy (Angelica Ross), though, is more critical about this when she responds that Blanca's "[...] vision must be cloudy, 'cause ain't shit about to change for our black asses." The significance of this scene is that despite the fact that it discusses a very specific event of the 1990s, the release of Madonna's *Vogue*, it also alludes to pink capitalism⁷ and the way in which mainstream society appropriates aspects of the LGBTQI+ culture to either gain more financial benefits from LGBTQI+ members themselves, or to achieve certain political ends (Drucker, 2015; Sears, 2005; Yaksich, 2005).

At the time of viewing *Pose*, pink capitalism, homonormativity in marketing and purchasing activities, as well as political pink washing are at their highest. From product marketing campaigns being directed at LGBTQI+ audiences, to politicians supporting legislation relevant to LGBTQI+ issues - as long as these do not interrupt normative structures and institutions - the end of the 2010s saw an increase in attempts from several governments and markets to appear LGBTQI+ friendly so as to broaden their influence planes (Wahab, 2021; Walters, 2021).

As such, time and temporal distance, much like spatial distance discussed above, become relative. On one level, the series is set in the distant past, but its intertextual references to the present make it relevant to contemporary audiences and, therefore, can invoke feelings of action and non-discriminatory responses to HIV/AIDS suffering. What distinguishes this series, therefore, from *Paris Is Burning*, and other works that focus on similar themes, is that it provides the possibility for audiences to become moved from the HIV/AIDS suffering of *Others*, and to consider acting on it.

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Humanisation of HIV/AIDS Sufferers

The next two aspects for analysis - the degree of humanisation and the agency of the HIV/AIDS sufferer - are interconnected in that the more humane the sufferer appears to be, the more likely the audiences are to acknowledge their agency. The humanisation of the sufferer depends on the verbal and visual modes of representation that were discussed earlier in this article. In particular, when audiences are presented with personal narratives that illustrate the sufferers' predicament, they are more likely to be engaged than when they are presented with impersonal or generic facts and statistics. Similarly, when the visual representation is focused on the sufferers themselves, for example by using focused shots on the sufferers' faces, audiences are more likely to develop an emotional connection with the ones who suffer than when visual representations situate the sufferers in generic shots that involve many people who are not connected to the suffering.

One can consider possible responses from the audience in relation to how, and if, the spectacle of suffering can manipulate the direction of their emotions. This is achieved by presenting them not only with the one who experiences suffering, but also by including another one present in the scene of suffering who, instead of experiencing suffering in terms of being HIV positive or having been diagnosed with AIDS, their role appears to be either of benefactor or persecutor. It was shown that audience responses were dependent on whom they were encouraged to identify with, the benefactor or the persecutor. Identifying with the benefactor can instigate acts of care, while identifying with the persecutor is more significant in that it can lead to demands for civil rights. However, it was also shown that neither acts of care, nor demands for civil rights can emerge unless the sufferers are presented in a humane manner.

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The scenes that have been analysed so far in this chapter illustrate how *Pose* achieves the presentation of all its characters as humane and, most importantly, how it achieves to subvert the *us versus them* binary that can often emerge in cultural products of social suffering, especially HIV/AIDS suffering. Stout (2020) highlights how audiences

[...] follow multiple community members as they negotiate their places within and outside the community, bringing to the fore discussions of transphobia and racism within the LGBT community, conceptions of what womanhood engenders, and the importance of a chosen family in light of oppression (p. 42).

She continues highlighting how the series functions not only as a platform of remembrance of often forgotten histories, but also as a platform for celebration of queer people as well-rounded people who experience a range of emotions, situations, instances of joy, sadness, discrimination, but also empowerment. HIV/AIDS suffering is the central theme of the series, but it is not its *sole* theme. The characters have dreams and aspirations - many of which they achieve - failures, and personal victories which enable us to identify them as similar to us in that they are not unrealistic characters, but they share similar characteristics with real people who have dreams and goals. Despite the fact that they are *Othered* by their sociocultural context, in the universe of *Pose*, *Otherness* is mainstream. This is in line with what the ballroom culture stood for: the celebration of Otherness, and the subversion of established sociocultural norms, among others Glover (2020). As such, audiences are encouraged to identify with the characters, perceive them as humane, and create emotional connections with them. This, as it was shown earlier, is the main prerequisite for the motivation of audiences and the subversion of *hegemonic othering*.

In relation to types of emotional response, *Pose* has the potential to elicit both

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acts of care and demands for civil rights. To elicit the former, there are two conditions that need to be met. The first refers to the existence of two parts in a scene of suffering: a sufferer and a spectator. The second refers to the function of the spectator who should act as benefactor to the sufferer. In the scene that was analysed earlier in this article, season 2 episode 1, audiences are presented with an act of help that transgresses social, financial, and racial differences. When rich white people realise that the condition of their suffering loved ones is irreversible, they donate medicines to those who cannot afford to pay for them. In this case, the ones who do not physically suffer from HIV/AIDS themselves act as benefactors to the ones who suffer and are in need of help. Similarly, throughout the episodes of the series, the concepts of helping those who are in need and of being there for them are punctuated by the structure of the ballroom house system whereby a *house* is a group of people who not only compete together at the balls, but also a group of people who live together and form each other's chosen family. Each house has a *mother* the role of whom is to offer guidance and support to the younger members of the house. Audiences follow Blanca, mother of the house of Evangelista, educating, guiding, as well as supporting financially and emotionally the members of her house, her *children*.

Presenting the spectator of a scene of suffering *only* as benefactor, though, does not seem to be enough to encourage audiences to challenge established sociocultural norms and demand civil rights on behalf of those who suffer. Audiences must also be presented with spectators who function as persecutors, instead. In Season 2 of *Pose*, we are presented with the character of Frederica Norman (Patti LuPone), a real estate mogul. Frederica is the owner of a storefront that Blanca rents to turn into a nail salon. Since episode 2 of season 2 ('Worth It'), when Frederica finds out that Blanca is

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transgender, she tries to evict her. Blanca, claiming squatter's rights, successfully resists eviction. However, what follows from this episode until the end of the series is a sequence of horrifying actions initiated by Frederica aiming at terrorizing Blanca out of her property.

From boarding up Blanca's nail salon to burning it down, Frederica, who in episode 6 of season 2 ('Love's in Need of Love Today') claims that she "[...] love[s] gays; it's AIDS that [she does] not like," deploys all available legal and illegal means she has to ensure Blanca is not associated with her, solely based on the fact that she is transgender, and therefore, according to her, a possible AIDS threat. Frederica's prosecution of Blanca is another symbolic representation of the hardships queer people had to go through as a result of society's fear of HIV/AIDS. As if having to suffer the virus and its aftermath was not enough, audiences experience how all facets of the lives of queer people were affected because of HIV/AIDS suffering. By watching the cunningness of Frederica and the pain she caused to Blanca, audiences are likely to disapprove of Frederica's behaviour, but most importantly, to challenge behaviours like this when they occur in their daily lives.

From Individual Agency to Collective Movement

Of similar significance to the degree of the sufferers' humanisation is the role of agency in relation to the spectacle of suffering. Analysing agency allows for a detailed look into social relationships of suffering. To do this, both the agency of the sufferers themselves, and the one of those who are in contact with the sufferers but do not experience physical suffering need to be examined. The latter was discussed in the previous section where the analysis focused on the spectator-as-benefactor, the spectator-as-persecutor, as well

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as their function as means of possibly eliciting certain emotions from the audience. An analysis of the sufferers' agency illustrates whether audiences watch the spectacle of suffering in a passive or an active manner.

What is of interest, therefore, is an analysis of what Chouliaraki (2006) terms as "[...] a process of identity construction that endows sufferers with the power to say or do something about their condition, even if this power is simply the power to evoke and receive the beneficiary action of others" (p. 88). It becomes clear that the audiences' interest is more likely to be maintained when presented with sufferers who are active in that they speak, if not do something, about their suffering; they are, in other words, active agents. Therefore, looking at whether HIV/AIDS sufferers in *Pose* are presented as active agents, taking charge of their own suffering, and actively striving to improve their condition will highlight whether or not the series offers audiences the potential to be motivated and become active agents of care and social change themselves.

Both when it comes to their own suffering, but also when their friends' suffering is involved, *Pose* characters appear to be consistent in addressing it actively, trying to improve their situation or the situation of their loved ones. An example of the latter is in episode 6 season 1 when Pray Tell decides to host the AIDS cabaret. Despite the government's negligence toward HIV/AIDS sufferers, Pray Tell decides to put on an event that aims to help the hospital inmates be treated like human beings and for a moment forget about their condition. Similarly, in season 1 episode 2 ('Access'), after Blanca is diagnosed as HIV positive, she takes it up to her to educate her *children* about safe sex. In particular, when she realises that Damon is about to go out on a date with Ricky, a romantically and sexually experienced dancer, she discusses with Damon issues not only related to romantic love but also safe sex, something that the

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government should have done at the wake of the HIV global epidemic but did not.

In the same episode, audiences follow Blanca being denied entry to a gay bar for being transwoman; however, she keeps returning to this bar, gets arrested for not leaving the premises, and returns back until she is granted entry to the bar. These are just three examples where the characters appear to be fighting for what they feel is right for them, instead of allowing the circumstances dictate how they should live and what is socially acceptable for them.

The second season of the series is significantly more focused on group action compared to the first one. The first episode of season 2 finds Pray Tell attending an ACT UP meeting which inspires him, Blanca, Blanca's *children*, and Judy, the nurse who works at the HIV/AIDS ward of the hospital, to participate in the *Stop the Church* protest. This protest actually happened on the 10th of December, 1989, when members of ACT UP demonstrated against Bishop John Cardinal O'Connor whose political efforts were focused on inhibiting gay rights legislation, on advocating against safe sex education, and on having an overall negative stance against gay people. According to O'Laughlin (2019), this has been the largest protest to date that was against the Roman Catholic Church, with more than 4500 people participated in the protest, and about 100 of them were arrested by NYPD.

Desrosiers (2020) reports that demonstrators protested "[...] outside the cathedral church during a Sunday Mass, and some entered the church with the intent of staging a "die-in" [...]. Some protestors chained themselves to pews, while others lay "dead" on the floor of the church" (p. 16, emphasis in original). Including this protest and having the main characters of the show take part in it not only does it set the scene for a season

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which is heavily focused on political engagement and grassroots activism by and for HIV/AIDS sufferers, but it also establishes the main characters as active agents who care not only about their own suffering, but they also focus on helping the community. As they realise that nobody will stand up for them, they take charge of the situation and they show up for each other.

A similar act of agency is repeated twice in season two. In episode 6, and after Frederica has boarded up Blanca's nail salon, Blanca decides to organise a protest. Her aim is to create some noise, attract media attention, and show Frederica that she is not giving up. What appears to be an insignificant protest of 5 people shortly becomes another major demonstration when Lulu (Haillie Sahar) and Elektra (Dominique Jackson) mobilise members of the ballroom community to join Blanca's protest against Frederica's actions. In the subsequent episode ('Blow'), after Blanca's attempts to provide her younger *children* with purpose, her friends decide to set up an action by creating a giant condom and placing it outside Frederica's house. In doing so, they aimed to protest against Frederica's financial exploitation of Blanca. At the same time Pray Tell and Blanca use the publicity of the action to send a message to the public about ways to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS. Once the media arrive, Blanca gives an interview to a TV network where she accuses the church and the government for not informing the people appropriately. "It's the government, it's churches, they refuse to tell the people the truth, that condoms are the most effective way to prevent the spread of HIV and AIDS", she says to the camera taking over the role of governments, the church, and schools who should be providing the public with such information.

Montez and Khubchandani (2020) observe that "[...] pedagogy seems to be happening everywhere in the lives of these queer and trans of colors characters. *Pose* [Bollas, A. \(2022\), 'Viral representations in *Pose* \(2018-2021\)', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 50\(3\), pp. 112–129, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.2022.2110559>.](#)

insists on the value of kinship and pedagogy amidst the AIDS crisis [...]" (p. ix, emphasis in original). Indeed, here we see how pedagogy and kinship are used in a manner that empowers the characters of the series which, in turn, renders possible for audiences to assume agency and demand civil rights for those who suffer. At various points, the series presents audiences with characters who refuse to give up and conform to sociocultural injustices; rather, defying the consequences, they show up for themselves and for one another in a shared understanding that for suffering to end, people should fight together.

Conclusion

By applying multimodal and critical discourse analysis to, it becomes clear that this cultural product differs from its predecessors in that rather than reinforcing *hegemonic othering*, it subverts it. The multimodal analysis conducted in previous sections focused on the mode of representation, the relationship between verbal and visual narratives, as well as the overall aesthetic quality of HIV/AIDS suffering. By analysing these three aspects, it was possible to see how audiences were provided with an opportunity to identify with HIV/AIDS sufferers and empathise with them. The critical discourse level of analysis provided an in-depth focus on the types of responses that were generated as a result of the mediation of HIV/AIDS suffering in *Pose*. What was shown was that audiences are led to feel an array of emotions, each one of which with the potential to encourage them not only to develop feelings of care toward those who suffer from HIV/AIDS, but also to actively demand civil rights for them. By focusing on the spatial and temporal proximity, the degree of humanisation, as well as the aspect of agency, it emerges that *Pose* addresses social stigmatisation and marginalisation in a manner that promotes sociocultural change. The *us versus them* binary is reversed in such a manner

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whereby it becomes possible that those who contribute to the stigmatisation of HIV/AIDS sufferers are the ones who become the *Others*.

¹ In line with the Denver Principles, it is important to note that the use of the words suffering and sufferers in this article refers only to cultural productions that present HIV/AIDS and PLWHA within discourses and contexts of suffering. The aim of the article is to examine whether contemporary representations of HIV/AIDS and PLWHA provide alternative, positive and de-stigmatised, representations of HIV/AIDS and PLWHA.

² In this article, 'spectators' is used to describe the characters who are present in a scene of suffering. Both the spectator and the sufferer are portrayed in a spectacle of suffering. 'Audiences' is used to describe the consumers of such a spectacle, those who watch this spectacle (both sufferers and spectators) at home.

³ For a detailed account of the Ballroom scene of the time, see Baker, S. (2011) *Voguing and the house ballroom scene of New York city 198-92*. New York: Soul Jazz Books.

⁴ A portmanteau word of art and activism. Ensler (2011) wrote about the significance of activism in Ensler, E. (2011) 'Politics, power, and passion', *The New York Times*, 2 December. Available at: <http://nytimes.com/2ZWwUpr> (Accessed: 10 April 2020).

⁵ Here, savage is used in the same manner as in Chouliaraki (2006, p. 80) to describe the way in which Others are often viewed as by members of the mainstream, dominant culture.

⁶ A relevant study mapping the emergence (and disappearance) of urban LGBTQI+ spaces is offered by Amin Ghaziani in Ghaziani, A. (2015) *There goes the gayborhood?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

⁷ Dr Justin Bengry (2019) offers an extensive discussion on pink capitalism(s) in a presentation at the University of Cambridge. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qspjQuBXy5I&t=977s> (Accessed: 20 August 2021).

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