

Mediating the AIDS crisis

The affective and queer politics of cultural memory in film, television, and digital media

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine how AIDS is remembered and mediated in popular culture by identifying three distinct waves of representation: contemporaneous portrayals in the 1980s and early 1990s, a first retrospective wave in the mid-2000s to early 2010s, and a second retrospective wave emerging from 2017 onwards. Drawing on theories of prosthetic memory, retroactivism, and reflective nostalgia, I propose this tripartite framework as a historiographical contribution that clarifies how mainstream film, television, and digital media have shaped AIDS memory over time. Using a purposive sample of widely circulated audiovisual works, the analysis shows how early representations relied on heteronormative respectability, how the first retrospective wave reintroduced the epidemic through melodrama and selective commemoration, and how the most recent wave expands the field through more intersectional and collective histories. I conclude the article by considering how digital platforms enable new, participatory forms of transnational remembrance.

KEYWORDS: AIDS cultural memory, retroactivism, queer intergenerational kinship, media representation of HIV/AIDS, AIDS films and television, participatory remembrance

Introduction

More than four decades after the first reported cases, the AIDS epidemic continues to shape queer cultural memory. While the biomedical landscape has changed, representations of AIDS remain charged with affect, politics, and historical erasure. As Paula Treichler (1987) famously argued, AIDS must be understood not only as a public health crisis, but also as “an epidemic of signification”. The way AIDS is remembered today is central to how queer histories are told and whose stories are rendered visible.

In this article, I examine the evolving memory culture of AIDS through three waves of representation: a contemporaneous phase in the 1980s and early 1990s, a retrospective phase beginning in the mid-2000s and gaining prominence in the early 2010s, and a second retrospective phase emerging from 2017 onwards. Drawing on theories of retroactivism, prosthetic memory, and nostalgia, I analyse how cultural texts and media platforms reframe the epidemic as an ongoing concern. The study takes its point of departure in a Danish context, and I examine how AIDS memory has been mediated to and through Danish audiences while situating these representations within broader transnational circuits. These representations do not merely look back; they rework the past to negotiate queer identity, loss, and community in the present. In particular, I explore how AIDS memory culture operates as a form of queer intergenerational conversation, bridging temporal gaps through affective storytelling and mediated mourning.

The analysis is guided by the following research questions:

- How is AIDS history mediated through mainstream film, television, and digital platforms?
- How do these cultural products, aesthetically, stylistically, and narratively, enable and perform retroactivism and memory practices?
- How do they function as forms of queer intergenerational dialogue?

The article contributes to AIDS historiography in three ways. First, it proposes a three-wave periodisation of cultural memory, tracing how representation shifts from contemporaneous crisis narratives to retrospective and digital forms of remembrance. Second, it shifts attention from subcultural and activist production to mainstream film, television, and digital media, examining how public memories of AIDS have been shaped through popular storytelling. Finally, it situates these transformations within a changing digital media ecology, showing how new infrastructures alter the temporalities and geographies of remembrance. In doing so, it extends earlier accounts of AIDS cultural activism by demonstrating how queer histories are remembered through popular, affective, and transnational forms of media.

Context, corpus, and methodology

The AIDS epidemic not only devastated communities but also reshaped the political and cultural landscape of queer life. In the US, the crisis unfolded amid governmental neglect, media silence, and widespread homophobia (France, 2016; Treichler, 1999; Watney, 1994). From this vacuum of care emerged a powerful wave of activism: Direct-action groups such as ACT UP transformed anger and grief into protest and media intervention (Gould, 2009; Schulman, 2021). In Denmark, the welfare state responded more quickly with participatory policies, prevention campaigns, and treatment (Nebeling Petersen et al., 2023, 2024; Nebeling Petersen & Nielsen, 2023; Wung-Sung, 2024, 2026), yet public debate was shaped by moral panic (Eriksen & Nebeling Petersen, 2024). The Danish press framed AIDS as a “gay disease” (Larsen, 2026) and reinforced distinctions between “innocent” and “guilty” victims (Eriksen, 2025). Across both contexts, the epidemic exposed the boundaries of care and ignited new forms of queer resistance and visibility.

In his seminal article, “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism”, Douglas Crimp (1987: 3) rejected any separation between biomedical reality and its representations, arguing that AIDS exists “only in and through the practices that conceptualise, represent, and respond to it”. This insight placed the struggle over meaning, visibility, and representation at the centre of both politics and cultural production (see also Hall et al., 2013). Building on this framework, this article focuses on mainstream and popular-cultural arenas. By examining these sites, I explore how widely circulating media participate in the construction of AIDS memory, shaping collective understandings of the crisis and mediating its political and emotional legacies.

I employed a purposive sampling strategy, selecting an AIDS memorial online project and cultural texts that have reached broad Danish audiences: feature films released in cinemas, public service television programmes, and widely distributed streaming titles that generated substantial press coverage or online circulation (see Table 1).

Table 1 Sample of cultural texts and online project

	<i>An Early Frost</i> (John Erman, 1985)
	<i>Næste Sommer, Måske</i> (Piv Bernth, 1988)
	<i>Philadelphia</i> (Jonathan Demme, 1993)
	<i>And the Band Played On</i> (Roger Spottiswoode, 1993)
Movies	<i>It's My Party</i> (Randal Kleiser, 1996)
	<i>Todo Sobre Mi Madre</i> (Pedro Almodovar, 1999)
	<i>Rent</i> (Chris Columbus, 2005)
	<i>Dallas Buyers Club</i> (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2013)
	<i>The Normal Heart</i> (Ryan Murphy, 2014)
	<i>120 BPM</i> (Robin Campillo, 2017)
	<i>Angels In America</i> (HBO, 2003)
	<i>Torka aldrig tårar utan handskar</i> (SVT, 2012)
TV-Series	<i>Unspeakable</i> (CBC Television, 2019)
	<i>Pose</i> (HBO, 2018-2021)
	<i>It's a Sin</i> (Channel 4, 2021)
	<i>In Our Blood</i> (ABC TV, 2023)
Online Project	<i>The AIDS Memorial @theaidsmemorial</i> (Instagram)

The corpus is qualitative rather than representative, and I did not seek to map all media dealing with HIV/AIDS but to highlight dominant modes of address, affective framing, and mnemonic technique in the public sphere. Selection has been informed by field knowledge from long-term research in the project, “*The Cultural History of AIDS in Denmark*”,¹ including interviews with people who lived with or worked around HIV/AIDS between 1981 and 2000. Conversations within Danish queer and HIV/AIDS communities, and discussions with students, have also assisted in identifying which media texts remain most referenced or emotionally resonant. The corpus is thus co-informed by lived and experiential knowledge.

This approach allows an analysis of hegemonic storytelling and public affect, though not of the full diversity of AIDS representations. It is shaped by the dominance of English-language media, the global reach of Hollywood, and the algorithmic hierarchies of digital platforms, which ensure that American narratives and affective codes circulate far more widely than those from smaller linguistic contexts. Danish interlocutors confirmed this imbalance: Many interpreted local experiences through the lens of Anglo-American memory culture, from

Philadelphia (1993, released in Danish cinemas in 1994) to *It's a Sin* (2021, available to Danish viewers via HBO Nordic in 2021).

Mainstream cultural representations of HIV/AIDS have been scarce in the Nordic countries: almost absent in Finland, Norway, and Iceland, and relatively limited in Denmark and Sweden. While documentary films exist, they are not included here. This study focuses instead on popular formats that circulate through entertainment industries and global media platforms – those most directly involved in shaping public affect and collective memory.

The scarcity of large-scale productions in the Nordic region has further reinforced the dominance of American and English-language narratives. The Americanisation of AIDS remembrance thus appears not only as a consequence of global media circulation but as a symptom of limited local production. This transatlantic mediation makes the US-American archive both an emotional resource and a filter shaping how AIDS is remembered. Hence, the question is not only how AIDS is remembered, but what it means for collective memory to be Americanised.

First wave: Contemporaneous cultural representations (1980s–mid-1990s)

In the 1980s, AIDS became a lightning rod for anxieties about sexuality, morality, and risk. Early media coverage framed the epidemic as a consequence of deviance (Sontag, 1989; Treichler, 1999). In Denmark, the tabloid press labelled it “gay cancer” and “the killer disease”, confirming stereotypes of the “promiscuous, irresponsible” homosexual (Nebeling Petersen et al., 2024: 31–33). Similar rhetoric in American and British media linked AIDS to marginalised groups (Watney, 1987). Danish mainstream media also distinguished between “innocent” and “guilty” victims (Eriksen, 2025): Compassion was directed toward haemophiliac children and “blameless” wives, while those infected through gay sex or drug use were considered responsible (Nebeling Petersen et al., 2024). This moral coding shaped both public empathy and policy.

Entertainment media of the 1980s and early 1990s turned AIDS into tragedy and a moral lesson. As Watney (1987) documented, NBC's *An Early Frost* (1985, aired in Danish television in 1987), the first major American television drama about AIDS, was shaped by censors who demanded that its gay content be muted. Centred on a young gay man, Michael, who returns home with an AIDS diagnosis, the story becomes a conservative “family reconciliation” narrative. His father's acceptance comes only through illness, and his partner is excluded from the family photograph. AIDS here becomes a vehicle for a morally legible tragedy: The prodigal son's suffering brings understanding but only through sacrifice. As Watney (1987) noted, *An Early Frost* reassured mainstream audiences rather than challenging prejudice.

The Danish television movie *Næste sommer, måske!* [*Next summer, maybe!*] (1988) was unusually nuanced. It follows Hans, his wife Beate, and his male lover Tommy as they face HIV. Instead of melodrama or moral condemnation,

the film shows the trio navigating the crisis with compassion and mutual support. The script avoids casting blame, as when Beate tells Tommy, “Hans must live his life as he wants”, but still reflects the era’s underlying anxieties, implicitly raising the question: In a time of AIDS, who can one really trust?

Hollywood’s *Philadelphia* (1993) offered groundbreaking visibility yet carefully encoded its gay protagonist within heteronormative sentiment (Edelman, 2004). Andrew Beckett is portrayed as saintly, a diligent lawyer, devoted son, and loving partner, notably stripped of any disruptive queerness. Lee Edelman’s reading focuses on the final sequence, where the meaning of Andrew’s life is relocated to the family and future. At his memorial, the camera pans across pregnant women and children, ending with home videos of Andrew as a child. This imagery, Edelman (2004: 19) has argued, reinstates “the disciplinary image of the ‘innocent’ Child”, displacing queer intimacy in favour of a narrative of moral redemption and social reproduction.

Alongside *And the Band Played On* (1993) and *It’s My Party* (1996), these works defined the first wave of AIDS cultural memory. Dominated by tragedy, morality, and heroism, they established a prototypical “AIDS story” centred on courageous individuals battling illness with dignity. While they evoked compassion, they also reinforced the sense of AIDS as a fate that befell “others”.

Yet even compromised or heteronormatively framed stories mattered. Produced in a culture of pervasive homophobia – also in Denmark despite gradual legal improvements in the late 1980s (Nebeling Petersen, 2015; Nebeling Petersen et al., 2024: 30–38) – they nonetheless offered rare visibility and moments of recognition. Within the moral and aesthetic conventions of the time, they opened space for mainstream audiences to encounter queer characters and the realities of AIDS, laying the groundwork for later shifts in representation and memory.

Silences, un-remembering, and endemic time

Throughout the history of the epidemic, cultural production has been punctuated by silences: periods when AIDS was invisible or disappeared from public discourse and political attention. The first silence occurred in the early 1980s, across the US, Denmark, and other parts of the world, when governments, media, and activists met the emerging crisis with inaction and denial (Crimp, 1987; Larsen, 2026).

The second silence, described by Alexandra Juhasz and Ted Kerr (2022), followed the introduction of effective antiretroviral therapies in the mid-1990s, which transformed HIV/AIDS into a chronic but treatable condition in the Global North. As death rates fell, cultural urgency waned: Activist groups dissolved, artistic interventions subsided, and the epidemic slipped from public consciousness. Years of mass death and care work left communities exhausted, leading to a period of withdrawal and healing, particularly in places like Denmark, where the response had been largely institutional rather than confrontational. This “second silence” lasted about a decade, weakening intergenerational ties and risking the loss of lived memory. New queer generations emerged with little direct knowledge of the past, aware only that most queers of the previous generation had died.

Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed (2011) argued that those most devastated by AIDS, especially activists and cultural producers who had shaped the sexual liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, were no longer present to transmit their experiences and ideals to younger generations. This rupture enabled both conservative forces and certain strands of queer theory to recast the sexual liberation movements of the 1970s as reckless or naïve. Forgetting thus became an active cultural process: The absence of witnesses coincided with reinterpretations that severed links to radical queer pasts. The deaths of so many became both the loss of memory bearers and an opportunity for political rewriting, what Castiglia and Reed have called “un-remembering”.

Julian Gill-Peterson (2013) added another dimension by describing the shift from epidemic to endemic time – from public crisis to managed condition. Drawing on Derrida’s notion of being “out of joint”, she has shown how the present is haunted by the dead and by unresolved struggles. From this hauntological perspective, queer memory is not mere commemoration but an ethical encounter with what remains unfinished. To inherit the memory of epidemic is not simply to preserve its symbols but to answer its ghosts’ demands: to acknowledge the political and affective responsibilities that remembrance entails. Against the erasures of un-remembering, Gill-Peterson called for “an ethics for an endemic”, where memory is not sealed off or monumentalised but continually reanimated as a site of struggle, keeping alive the solidarities and unfinished work of the epidemic in the present.

Mediated memory and intergenerational transmission

If un-remembering and the hauntological condition of endemic time expose the vulnerabilities of queer cultural memory, they also highlight the need for new modes of transmission capable of bridging temporal and generational gaps. In the absence of direct experience and living witnesses, cultural memory increasingly depends on mediated forms that can carry the affective and political charge of the past into the present.

Alison Landsberg’s (2004) concept of prosthetic memory, complemented by Marita Sturken’s (1997) analysis of the politics of mediated memory, offers a useful framework. Landsberg argued that individuals can come to feel connected to historical events they never lived through via media such as film, television, museums, and digital archives. These memories are “prosthetic” not because they are artificial but because they extend beyond personal biography, enabling viewers to inhabit the emotions and perspectives of others. She emphasised their democratic potential: By cultivating an empathetic imagination, prosthetic memories can foster identification across difference and generate political solidarity (Landsberg, 2004: 21).

Yet, as Sturken has reminded us, media never simply preserve the past. They frame and narrate it within cultural and ideological boundaries. The affective force of prosthetic memory is thus inseparable from the politics of its construction. What is remembered and how it is framed are contingent on representational hierarchies and the emotional vocabularies of their time.

These questions of mediation and transmission set the stage for Lucas Hilderbrand's (2006) concept of retroactivism, which captures how contemporary media reanimate the aesthetics, affects, and unfinished political energies of earlier AIDS activism for new audiences. Retroactivism often reuses archival material to forge affective links between past and present struggles. These artefacts are not static records but touchstones that reanimate the urgency of activism, allowing new generations to feel connected to histories they did not live through. Operating trans-temporally, retroactivism mobilises nostalgia and archival imagery as catalysts for mourning, remembrance, and renewed engagement.

Roger Hallas (2009) extended this framework by reading queer AIDS media as cultural activism that creates an intersubjective, ethical space for witnessing. His analyses show how such works hold mourning and militancy in productive tension, transforming spectatorship into an ethical encounter. Techniques such as direct address to the camera, for instance, turn viewers into secondary witnesses, ensuring that the act of looking itself becomes political. In doing so, queer AIDS media fulfil Crimp's (1989) call for both mourning and militancy: They bear witness to trauma while demanding response.

Together, these theorists reveal how mediated memory sustains queer intergenerational connection. By linking prosthetic affect, retroactive engagement, and witnessing, AIDS memory culture becomes a living bridge between those who experienced the epidemic and those who inherit its legacies, a mode of remembrance that resists forgetting by making memory itself a form of activism.

Second wave: First retrospective phase (mid-2000s–early 2010s)

The first retrospective phase of AIDS memory culture emerged quietly in the mid-2000s, within Anglo-American media industries, often through prestige television and film adaptations of landmark theatre works such as HBO's *Angels in America* (2003, aired in Danish television 2004) and *Rent* (2005, released in Danish cinemas in 2006). Yet the impulse to revisit the epidemic appeared earlier in Europe, notably in Pedro Almodóvar's *Todo sobre mi madre* [*All About my Mother*] (1999, released in Danish cinemas the same year), which wove AIDS-related loss into a broader meditation on care, motherhood, and queer kinship. These works signalled a renewed willingness to return to the early years of the epidemic, though often by softening its political edge and translating activist histories into intimate dramas. The wave reached peak visibility in the early 2010s with *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013, released in Danish cinemas in 2014), the Swedish miniseries *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* (2012), and HBO's *The Normal Heart* (2014, released in Denmark the same year), reintroducing the AIDS crisis to mainstream global consciousness through nostalgia, affective witnessing, and selective commemoration.

As Victoria Rivera-Cordero (2012: 311) noted, *All About my Mother* offers “an unconventional vision of HIV and AIDS” that renders the illness both visible and absent. Through its emphasis on care and forgiveness, the film transforms

AIDS into a metaphor for tolerance and renewal in post-Franco Spain, avoiding physical depictions of illness in favour of emotional reconciliation. Ana María Sánchez-Arce (2022: 170, 184) showed that Almodóvar links personal loss to Spain's collective history of repression, staging what she calls a "prosthetic" and "multidirectional memory". The film thus marks a transition between contemporaneous and retrospective modes, transforming the epidemic into an allegory of remembrance and reconciliation rather than activism or confrontation.

HBO's *Angels in America*, adapted from Tony Kushner's 1991 stage play, translates the material into a visually lush miniseries set during New York's 1985–1986 AIDS crisis. It offers an intimate portrayal of queer suffering and abandonment, inviting viewers to experience grief and transcendence through affective witnessing. The final scene, in which survivors affirm hope and endurance, reframes a story born of rage and defiance as prestige drama: Remembrance is encouraged, but political confrontation is softened. Its retroactivist potential lies in the vivid recreation of 1980s homophobia and governmental indifference, packaged for mainstream consumption.

Other works from this phase balanced retroactivism with nostalgic elegy, often framing AIDS history through familiar and emotionally accessible conventions. *Rent* (2005), adapted from Jonathan Larson's musical, balances retroactivism and elegy. Set in late 1980s New York, it follows a circle of young bohemian artists, several living with HIV. It commemorates queer loss and celebrates chosen family with unapologetic sentimentality: Rock ballads and ensemble anthems build a powerful prosthetic memory. Audiences mourn the drag queen Angel and celebrate community resilience, yet the focus remains on personal struggle rather than explicit political critique. Issues such as homelessness, addiction, and AIDS are present, but activism is largely off-screen. The film also recentres heterosexual audience surrogates, notably the straight narrator Mark, who is HIV-negative, situating AIDS within a narrative of bohemian nostalgia and individual perseverance rather than collective political action.

Dallas Buyers Club (2013) revived the activist past through a conventional Hollywood hero narrative. Set in 1985, it follows Ron Woodroof, a heterosexual white Texan who contracts HIV and begins smuggling unapproved medications. Using the underdog-versus-authority formula, the film reframes AIDS activism around a straight, masculine protagonist, sidelining women and queer people of colour. While it charts Ron's transformation from homophobia to solidarity and gives space to Rayon, a transgender Latina character (played by a cisgender actor), Rayon's arc primarily functions to elicit empathy before her tragic death. Laura Copier and Eliza Steinbock (2018) have shown how *Dallas Buyers Club* makes Rayon visible while repeatedly framing her as absent, a dynamic that reproduces cisgenderist spectatorship. Cheng (2016) and Kagan (2018) likewise argued that early-2010s "true story" AIDS films tend to centre white male heroes and push women and queers of colour to the margins.

HBO's *The Normal Heart* (2014) offered a more explicitly political account. Adapted from Larry Kramer's 1985 autobiographical play about the founding of an AIDS advocacy group in New York, Ryan Murphy's version retains

the play's anger and urgency. Centring on the confrontational Ned Weeks, it delivers a scathing critique of governmental neglect and social indifference. Yet, as Kagan (2018) has argued, the narrative ultimately aligns AIDS history with the conservative turn of marriage-equality politics, equating moral responsibility with monogamy and respectability, framing these as the moral counterpoint to the sexual culture of the liberation years.

The Swedish three-part drama *Torka aldrig tårar utan handskar* [*Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves*] (2012), based on Jonas Gardell's novels, follows Rasmus and Benjamin's love story in 1980s Stockholm. It broke a long public silence, prompting widespread empathy and what Dirk Gindt (2018) called a "national performance of crying", as Gardell, an openly gay public figure, urged Swedes to mourn those they had once ignored. Anu Koivunen (2018) similarly read the Gardell phenomenon as a reparative fantasy of the caring nation, reframing the epidemic as a shared national trauma and Sweden as a site of public compassion. At the same time, as Gindt argued, this outpouring of sentiment exemplified a "sentimental neoliberal dramaturgy", where individualised emotion replaces critique, framing AIDS as a closed chapter to be wept over and then set aside.

The selective nature of these retrospectives reflects aesthetic and ideological choices. Casting well-known cis-heterosexual actors, using nostalgic music, and structuring stories as melodramas make the past emotionally accessible while privileging white, middle-class gay men and marginalising women, people of colour, sex workers, and trans people (Cheng, 2016). Yet moments of political critique and queer remembrance persist. *The Normal Heart* names systemic negligence, *Angels in America* channels anti-Reagan anger, and *Dallas Buyers Club* indicts the pharmaceutical industry, while *Todo sobre mi madre* brings visibility to trans women and sex workers as figures of both care and loss. These gestures act as retroactivist sparks, reactivating the affective and political energies of past activism through contemporary storytelling. Remembering AIDS in mainstream culture, even in softened or sentimentalised form, remained an act of resistance against erasure.

This wave marked what Campbell and Gindt (2018) described as a "return of AIDS to cultural agendas". While it often relied on nostalgia and melodrama, it nonetheless reopened public space for mourning and remembrance. The early 2010s thus represent a large-scale attempt to reinsert AIDS into mainstream cultural consciousness after years of silence, building affective bridges between the struggles of the past and the present moment.

Third wave: Second retrospective phase (late 2010s onwards)

The third wave of AIDS cultural production emerged in the late 2010s and gained momentum in the early 2020s, marked by broader representation and intersectional storytelling. Whereas the first retrospective phase reintroduced AIDS memory through individualised, sentimental, and often white-centred

narratives, this new wave engages more directly with the social, political, and structural dimensions of the epidemic. It foregrounds collective perspectives, affective complexity, and media forms that both document and revitalise queer history. Nostalgia is a key affective strategy in this wave of AIDS representation. Svetlana Boym (2001) distinguished between restorative nostalgia, which idealises and seeks to reconstruct a lost past, and reflective nostalgia, which critically lingers on longing and loss.

This phase includes acclaimed works such as the French film *120 BPM [Beats Per Minute]* (2017, released in Danish cinemas in 2018), the American series *Pose* (2018–2021), and the British miniseries *It's a Sin* (2021), alongside productions like Canadian *Unspeakable* (2019) and Australian *In Our Blood* (2023). All series are available in Denmark via different streaming services. In parallel, digital platforms such as *The AIDS Memorial* on Instagram have expanded the circulation of AIDS memory, transforming it into a participatory, transnational practice. In Denmark, *The AIDS Memorial* has a sizable following, and many of my interlocutors referred to it as a distinctive site of memory.

120 BPM exemplifies this wave's interplay between historical reconstruction and renewed activism. The film blends documentary realism, intense ACT UP meetings, strategic debates, and die-ins (staged "mass die-offs" where activists lie down in public to dramatise AIDS deaths and political inaction), with intimate personal storytelling, especially the love and loss between Sean and Nathan. It restages real ACT UP actions, such as throwing blood-filled balloons at a pharmaceutical conference, while imagining future-oriented interventions, including new treatments (Ledin, 2022). This fusion of documentation and speculation epitomises AIDS retroactivism: It memorialises past resistance while reimagining it for the present. Yet, as Chase Ledin (2022) noted, *120 BPM* idealises a version of AIDS activism that foregrounds biomedical progress and successful intervention while omitting many of the personal, political, and cultural conflicts that characterised ACT UP Paris. In doing so, it reproduces some of the omissions and hierarchies familiar from earlier AIDS narratives, including a continued privileging of charismatic male leadership, with the contributions of women and less visible activists often relegated to the background.

Visually, *120 BPM* juxtaposes rapidly edited protest scenes and heated debates with long, sensuous club sequences where queer joy takes centre stage. The pulsing rhythm of the title operates as both a historical reference and a metaphor for vitality amid crisis. Working in what Boym (2001) has called reflective nostalgia, the film revisits the past critically, acknowledging pain while celebrating the collective energy that sustained activism.

On television, Ryan Murphy's *Pose* brought these dynamics into mainstream entertainment, centring Black and Latinx queer and trans characters in New York's ballroom culture at the height of the AIDS crisis. Spanning 1987–1994, the series repositions AIDS history around communities long excluded from earlier narratives. As F. Hollis Griffin (2022) argued, *Pose* fosters an empathic historical consciousness by merging personal and structural stories of race,

gender, and class. It offers a reparative intervention into the historiography of AIDS, bringing the voices and experiences of queer people of colour to a broad audience.

Formally, *Pose* combines vivid production design, elaborate costuming, and a period-specific soundtrack with depictions of illness, poverty, and discrimination. Hospital wards filled with fear and grief, visible signs of illness, and successive funerals are interwoven with scenes of solidarity, love, and defiance – from ACT UP-style die-ins to Pray Tell’s cabaret fundraiser. Memory here is treated as an explicit political act: Characters fear their generation’s stories will be forgotten, echoing Castiglia and Reed’s (2011) warning that AIDS history risks fading without deliberate acts of remembrance. Narrative techniques such as intercut protest scenes, slow fades, and visual nods to archival footage blur the line between dramatisation and documentation. In Griffin’s (2020) reading, *Pose* functions as affective pedagogy, teaching audiences the entanglement of activism and inequality while foregrounding the creative resilience of marginalised communities.

It’s a Sin (2021) expands this intersectional storytelling in a distinctly British context. Spanning 1981–1991, it follows a circle of young gay men and their straight friend Jill as AIDS devastates their lives in London. By including a Black gay character (Roscoe), working-class and regional perspectives (Colin from Wales, Ritchie from the Isle of Wight), and activism through organisations like the Terrence Higgins Trust, the series expands AIDS memory beyond its usual American focus and highlights intersections of race, class, sexuality, and geography. Jill, based on a real-life activist, personifies the vital yet often overlooked role of women in caregiving and advocacy (Nebeling Petersen et al., forthcoming). As Janey Umback (2024) has noted, her narrative remains less developed than her male counterparts, reflecting a broader pattern of underrepresentation. Still, Jill’s climactic confrontation with Ritchie’s mother, condemning secrecy and stigma, becomes one of the series’ most morally charged moments, a scene that transforms care into critique.

Aesthetically, *It’s a Sin* uses nostalgia to draw viewers in before unsettling them. Early episodes are saturated with the exuberance of 1980s queer life – parties, music, fashion, desire – creating a restorative nostalgia that celebrates liberation and belonging, seeking to reconstruct an idealised past of queer joy and solidarity. As the series progresses, this vibrancy is steadily undercut by the encroaching realities of illness, stigma, and loss. The tonal shift immerses viewers in joy before confronting them with tragedy, carefully orchestrating the affective impact of loss. The nostalgia becomes reflective rather than sentimental, as characters openly critique government negligence, media hysteria, and the moral hypocrisy of the era. In doing so, *It’s a Sin* transforms memory into a political indictment, insisting that to remember the crisis is to hold systems and society accountable.

Compared with the first retrospective wave, this phase marks a decisive turn toward intersectional, affectively rich, and critically reflexive forms of remembrance. The focus moves from heroic individuals to collective experience,

from private tragedy to systemic critique. They employ formal and aesthetic strategies that operate on multiple levels: emotionally, by forging empathic bonds through immersive storytelling; politically, by foregrounding activism and systemic critique; and historically, by deliberately linking past and present through retrospective narration.

At the same time, these works are not without representational limits. *120 BPM*'s male-focused narrative and *It's a Sin*'s constrained exploration of women's caregiving both illustrate the persistence of certain narrative hierarchies. The result is a memory culture that is more intersectional than its predecessors but still shaped by decisions about whose stories are told most fully. Yet these limitations coexist with substantial advances: the centring of queer and trans people of colour in *Pose*, the unflinching depiction of activism's confrontational tactics in *120 BPM*, and the sustained critique of institutional negligence combined with a strong regional and working-class focus in *It's a Sin*.

This balance of achievement and constraint defines the second retrospective phase. Rather than reducing AIDS to moral redemption or tragic closure, these works depict the epidemic as a site of intersecting oppressions and resilient solidarities, resulting in a more layered, politically alert, and affectively powerful memory culture that recognises both progress and the unfinished work of remembrance.

Digital memory and retroactivism in the second retrospective phase

A significant dimension of the second retrospective phase unfolds in the digital sphere, where memory practices intersect with participatory culture and transnational connectivity. *It's a Sin* not only depicts the AIDS crisis on television but also through online engagement. The show's creator, Russell T. Davies, launched the hashtag #BeMoreJill, named after the character Jill, whose unwavering care for friends affected by AIDS epitomises compassion and activism (Umback, 2024). The hashtag went viral, becoming a platform for sharing stories about real-life "Jills", women and allies who supported the LGBTQIA+ community during the epidemic. Through #BeMoreJill, digital users collectively commemorated past carers and activists, transforming on-screen affect into participatory remembrance. This retroactivist engagement offered viewers a way to feel connected to the political and emotional landscape of the 1980s, translating nostalgia and empathy into contemporary solidarity.

The Instagram account *The AIDS Memorial* has become one of the most significant digital sites of remembrance. Operating as a living archive, it enables thousands of users to commemorate those lost to AIDS. Each post combines an image with a short narrative written by lovers, friends, family, or community members, producing a mosaic of collective grief. The account visually echoes the *AIDS Quilt* through its gridded layout, yet as Spencer P. Cherasia (2022) has argued, its platformed form extends memorial practice through interactivity and transnational circulation: Stories can be shared widely and almost instantly,

while followers respond, comment, and form affective bonds through shared mourning and remembrance.

In this way, *The AIDS Memorial* creates a form of connective memory (Ekelund, 2023) in which individual recollections are woven into a collective narrative of the epidemic. The structure and user-generated content make it both a forum for testimony and an archive. Each story gives voice and face to the history of HIV/AIDS, in line with Hallas's (2009) point that cultural media can bear witness to trauma and ensure that past voices are heard in the present. Griffin (2020) conceptualised this as a mode of "merely following", a diffuse, low-intensity engagement characteristic of social media, where users may scroll past content semi-attentively yet still form affective and political connections. Such engagements, while not always deliberate or radical, can nonetheless expose users to queer histories, desires, and losses they might not otherwise encounter, creating what Griffin has called a tacitly politicised encounter with otherness.

At the same time, the accumulated posts constitute a digital archive for future remembrance. Marika Cifor (2021) characterised *The AIDS Memorial* as a platform that disrupts normative conceptions of AIDS time. Its algorithmic present, where past events appear as part of the "now", renders the history of AIDS disruptively alive in everyday life. Through what Cifor has termed disruptive animacy, the immediacy of digital media collapses temporal distance, allowing grief and activism to coexist in the present. This creates affective immediacy: The images and stories elicit grief, love, and indignation in the here-and-now, as if the epidemic were once again pressing on the present.

In bringing together these forms of engagement, digital culture extends queer intergenerational connection. Younger users who never lived through the crisis "meet" earlier generations through the feed, while older contributors see their experiences acknowledged and shared. *The AIDS Memorial* thus fosters a mode of queer kinship across time, transforming mourning into a participatory ethics. As both Cherasia (2022) and Griffin (2020) have noted, such digital practices are retroactivist at heart: They not only preserve memory but reanimate it, linking past activism to present struggles against stigma and inequality.

In this sense, digital memory culture itself becomes a site of activism, a space in which grief and remembrance merge with community mobilisation. Through images, hashtags, and shared testimony, the archive of AIDS is not only kept alive but continually rewritten in dialogue with the living.

Digital prosthetic memory, affect, and nostalgia across generations

The retroactivist strategies in *It's a Sin*, *The AIDS Memorial*, and similar digital memory practices can also be understood through Alison Landsberg's (2004) concept of prosthetic memory. Younger audiences, many with no lived experience of the early crisis, are invited into an embodied understanding of AIDS through immersive storytelling. By inhabiting the perspectives of its characters, viewers

acquire a kind of prosthetic memory that links them emotionally to histories of stigma, activism, and loss. The *#BeMoreJill* campaign reinforces this connection, translating on-screen affect into off-screen acts of recognition and solidarity. First viewers step into the lives of the young characters, feeling the fear, love, and loss of 1980s London; via *#BeMoreJill*, this affective identification is translated into active engagement by encouraging today's audiences to "be more like Jill" – to demonstrate care and awareness in the present.

Similarly, the personal testimonies on *The AIDS Memorial* allow followers to mourn as if for someone they knew. This affective intimacy creates a sense of queer kinship across time, where contemporary LGBTQIA+ communities perceive those lost to AIDS as part of their collective ancestry. Both formats thus generate intergenerational connection by transmitting shared emotions of grief, love, and anger. Affect becomes a political force, reigniting urgency around AIDS in a present that often treats it as history.

Cifor (2021) argued that precisely this reigniting of urgent presence can disrupt today's tendency to normalise AIDS as either past or a niche problem. When historical trauma is made emotionally present, indifference becomes harder to sustain. Such reactivation can also draw attention to broader structures of inequality, how disease, stigma, and neglect continue to affect marginalised communities and mobilise solidarity that extends beyond the specific context of HIV/AIDS.

Nostalgia plays a crucial role in these digital affective economies. In Boym's (2001) terms, *It's a Sin* and its associated hashtag narratives primarily mobilise reflective nostalgia: Audiences remember the AIDS crisis of the 1980s with both pain and love, but this longing is accompanied by awareness of the stigma and failings of the past, transformed into learning and active positioning in the present. The engagement under *#BeMoreJill* is not an attempt to recreate the 1980s, but a nostalgically driven call for solidarity and education today, a critical reflection on how to avoid past failures by embodying the values Jill represents.

Conversely, *The AIDS Memorial* carries an undertone of affective longing, yet not restorative nostalgia. Each post mourns a specific life, yet there is no illusion of reviving the past exactly as it was. Rather, the longing functions as a reflective practice, in which memory becomes a means of healing and understanding loss. The motto "What is remembered, lives" embodies this dynamic: both keeping the memory of loved ones alive and making a quiet activist statement – that society must not forget the AIDS crisis and its lessons. Nostalgia here is double-edged, both a deep emotional connection to a bygone time and a mirror through which the present is critically examined.

Taken together, these examples show how digital and audiovisual cultures sustain a living, transgenerational archive. By merging prosthetic affect, reflective nostalgia, and activism, they transform memory into a shared ethical practice, one that binds communities across time while keeping the unfinished work of the epidemic emotionally and politically alive.

Digital developments and cultural homogenisation

The emergence of digital media cultures has not only expanded the circulation of AIDS memory but also reconfigured its geography. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and streaming services enable representations of the epidemic to move seamlessly across borders, connecting users and audiences who would once have encountered these stories only within national frameworks. This transnational reach helps constitute what can be understood as a networked archive of feelings, enabling affective participation in mourning, witnessing, and remembrance through (e.g., Instagram's) highly networked circulation and affective immediacy (Cifor, 2021: 371, 374).

Yet the very infrastructures that democratise access also produce new hierarchies. The cultural homogenisation long associated with Hollywood's dominance is now intensified by the logics of digital media. Algorithmic visibility, English-language predominance, and the global prominence of Anglo-American entertainment industries privilege certain narrative templates and emotional registers over others (Bucher, 2018; Jin, 2015; Lobato, 2019; Phillipson, 1992). As a result, the affective vocabulary of AIDS remembrance – tropes of loss, resilience, and moral redemption – often circulates in a recognisably American idiom. Local and regional histories, including those of the Nordic countries, tend to appear only as faint echoes within this transnational flow rather than as fully articulated memory cultures in their own right.

Digital developments thus create a paradox. On the one hand, participatory platforms democratise remembrance, allowing individuals and communities to share memories, testimonies, and grief across borders. On the other hand, the same infrastructures reinforce sameness by rewarding repetition and emotional familiarity within an economy of likes, shares, and algorithmic amplification. What travels most effectively is not historical specificity but *recognisable feelings*. The viral aesthetics of empathy and nostalgia produce connection, but they also flatten difference, translating diverse experiences into a shared, yet standardised, emotional language.

These dynamics demand critical attention to how digital infrastructures mediate not only who remembers, but also how and in what emotional key collective memory is expressed. The global visibility of AIDS memory is inseparable from the dominance of Anglo-American affect, a grammar of compassion and resilience that both invites solidarity and constrains the range of stories that can be told. Digital media thus expand the archive while simultaneously narrowing its emotional and aesthetic possibilities.

Conclusion

This article has traced the cultural and historical mediation of the AIDS crisis across three waves of representation, each shaped by the affective and political conditions of its time. The first, contemporaneous phase of the 1980s and early 1990s unfolded in an atmosphere of homophobia, stigma, and fear. Films like

Philadelphia, with heteronormative framing and emphasis on moral respectability, were among the few ways to counter prevailing hostility and generate public empathy. Although limited in representational scope, these narratives countered prejudice and created the first mainstream space for empathy, restricted yet vital in their moment.

The first retrospective phase of the mid-2000s to early 2010s reintroduced the epidemic through melodrama, nostalgia, and selective commemoration. Works such as *Angels in America* and *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* reopened public space for mourning, though often by translating activism into sentiment.

The second retrospective phase, emerging in the late 2010s, expanded both scope and sensibility. Works such as *120 BPM*, *Pose*, and *It's a Sin* integrated intersectional perspectives and collective histories, reflecting a broader cultural moment shaped by movements such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and the renewed visibility of LGBTQIA+ activism. These movements challenged entrenched inequalities and opened new affective and aesthetic possibilities for representing grief, solidarity, and resistance. Within this wider climate of social critique and visibility, AIDS memory could be reimagined through more diverse voices and collective experiences. In parallel, digital platforms like *The AIDS Memorial* turned remembrance into a participatory practice, forging affective networks that connect individual loss to collective belonging.

Across these phases, the historiography of AIDS representation reveals that cultural memory is never static but continually reshaped by the technologies, economies, and emotional grammars of its time. From the moral narratives of early Hollywood to the algorithmic circulations of digital culture, each phase has produced its own affective modes of knowing and remembering the epidemic.

While digital media have democratized remembrance and fostered new intergenerational solidarities, they have also consolidated the global dominance of Anglo-American narrative and affect. The challenge, then, is to engage this expanded archive critically: to recognize both its connective power and its exclusions.

Remembering AIDS is not only about preserving the past but about shaping the present and future. To revisit the epidemic through culture is to confront its ongoing legacies of inequality, stigma, and care, and to imagine new queer futures grounded in remembrance, solidarity, and justice.

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Endnotes

1 The archival corpus of the research project, “The Cultural History of AIDS in Denmark”, encompasses a broad range of primary and ephemeral sources, including written, audiovisual, campaign, organisational, political, and legal documents, as well as cultural artefacts such as novels, documentary films, visual art, television programmes, and theatre. The archive further includes more than 40 oral history interviews, accompanied by field notes and personal documents (e.g., photographs and diaries). In addition, it comprises a digitised and coded collection of over 2,400 newspaper articles from national dailies, together with material from professional journals, organisational publications, and other periodicals from 1981–2000.