

Research Article

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# HIV/AIDS Pandemic in Visual Arts, Theatre, and Literature

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## Abstract

Past epidemics and pandemics had a marked impact on culture and arts. According to unquestionable authorities, the beginning of Renaissance dates back to the end of the great plague epidemic during 1348-1351 initially in the current Italian territory. When studying past epidemics and pandemics and their impact on arts and culture, it becomes evident that great attention is paid to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Three historical milestones can be identified with regard to the impact of epidemics and pandemics on arts and culture, the first milestone being individual plague epidemics, including the last European epidemic that struck in Southern France, specifically in Marseille, at the beginning of the 18th century. The Spanish flu epidemic during 1918-1920 was the second milestone, although the impact of this epidemic on arts and culture is far less marked compared to the plague periods. The HIV/AIDS pandemic spreading significantly since the beginning of the 1980s represents the third milestone. This milestone may well be the most important one as regards historical epidemics and pandemics, as the humanity has not yet managed to entirely control the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the extent of this control may be reduced greatly as a result of political, economic and military crises [1].

**Keywords:** HIV; AIDS; visual arts; theatre; literature

## Introduction

### HIV/AIDS as One of Major Three Milestones as regards the Impact of Epidemics and Pandemics on Culture and Arts

Past epidemics and pandemics had a marked impact on culture and arts. According to unquestionable authorities, the beginning of Renaissance dates back to the end of the great plague epidemic during 1348-1351 initially in the current Italian territory. When studying past epidemics and pandemics and their impact on arts and culture, it becomes evident that great attention is paid to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Three historical milestones can be identified with regard to the impact of epidemics and pandemics on arts and culture, the first milestone being individual plague epidemics, including the last European epidemic that struck in Southern France, specifically in Marseille, at the beginning of the 18th century. The Spanish flu epidemic during 1918-1920 was the second milestone, although the impact of this epidemic on arts and culture is far less marked compared to the plague periods. The HIV/AIDS pandemic spreading significantly since the beginning of the 1980s represents the third milestone. This milestone may well be the most important

one as regards historical epidemics and pandemics, as the humanity has not yet managed to entirely control the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the extent of this control may be reduced greatly as a result of political, economic and military crises [1].

This paper will focus on the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on visual arts, theatre and literature.

## Objectives

### Addressing Three Key Topics as the Objective

The examination of the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on culture and arts (specifically on visual arts, theatre and literature) poses three major questions – three key topics. As the HIV/AIDS pandemic is ongoing from the global perspective, the answers cannot be anything but provisional. However, the topics, questions are permanent.

a) Overall assessment of the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on culture and arts (specifically on visual arts, theatre and literature) compared to the most significant epidemics and pandemics of the past.

b) Indication of phases within the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on culture and arts (specifically on visual arts, theatre and literature).

c) Evaluation of the current situation as regards the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on culture and arts (specifically on visual arts, theatre and literature).

## Methods

a) The author has been monitoring the topic of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on a long-term basis from the purely medical perspective, and from the perspective of culture and ethics, for example the issues associated with stigmatization of HIV positive individuals and the topic of sexual minorities.

b) Bibliographic research entitled "HIV/AIDS Pandemic in Visual Arts, Theatre and Literature", period covered: 1980-2025, languages: Czech, English, German.

c) Tomáš Hájek (2025) HIV/AIDS Pandemic in Visual Arts, Theatre and Literature. 11th Czech Congress on HIV/AIDS with international attendees, Primavera Hotel & Congress Centre in Pilsen 27th - 28th November 2025, collection of lecture abstracts.

d) Tomáš Hájek (2025) On the Aesthetics of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Context of the Impact of Historic Epidemics and Pandemics on Visual Arts, Urbanism, and Architecture. Biomedical Journal of Scientific & Technical Research, DOI: 10.26717/BJSTR.2025.63.009926, Online Booklet Edition, Volume 63 - Issue 4, October, 2025, e-Book ISBN 978-1-946628-20-6.

e) Tomáš Hájek (2026) HIV/AIDS Pandemic and the Art of Mosaic. Open Access Journal of Archaeology & Anthropology, Iris Publishers, DOI: 10.33552/OAJAA.2026.06.000633, Volume 6 - Issue 2, January, 2026.

## Results

### Result (1)

a) Overall assessment of the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on culture and arts (specifically on visual arts, theatre and literature) compared to the most significant epidemics and pandemics of the past – this type of assessment has not yet been conducted at a sufficiently authoritative level, partly due to the fact that the HIV/AIDS pandemic is ongoing. However, it is important to note that the dynamics of the impact of epidemics in general on culture and arts has not been understood at the universal level. In other words, entire series of fragmentary statements or musings on this topic can be found, but no comprehensive theory built on clear and evidenced axioms exists.

b) Individual assessments stating that the culture and arts inspired by the HIV/AIDS pandemic tend to be of a documentary character instead of reflecting timeless artistic values can be found. Plague epidemics, in particular those occurring in the mid-14th century, are thought to have had a major impact on culture and arts, although this impact became evident after some delay. The Spanish flu pandemic during 1918-1920 on the other hand is seen to have had a surprisingly minor impact, despite the total number of victims. However, these mass outbreaks inspired greatly renowned artists to create truly timeless artworks (as far as visual arts are

concerned). This development cannot be observed in the case of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, or at least not to this day. This can only be commented on by stating that the necessary distance has not yet been gained, the history has not had sufficient time to allow for a verdict on timelessness of artworks.

c) Deep and almost principal connection between artistic performance and political activism is a major characteristic of the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on culture and arts (specifically on visual arts, theatre and literature) compared to the most significant epidemics and pandemics of the past. As noted by Bill Arning: "Much of the art about AIDS constituted a new subgenre of "political art", which has always been a problematic category for those who feel that timelessness and universality are primary values for art [2]". It is typical to some extent that the Visual AIDS group formed inside the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power in 1988 (New York curators and art critics Robert Atkins, Garry Garrels and Thomas Sokolowski being the members of this group, later to be joined by William Olander) initiated the Day without Art one year later. However, it should be stated for the sake of objectiveness that the Roman Catholic Church following the Council of Trent also built its baroque ideological principals on the psychological heritage of plague and this only occurred centuries after the first great outbreak of the Black Death in mid-14th century.

d) Let's point out that the major epidemic of the Black Death struck Europe without directly causing changes in culture and arts, or more precisely, the changes resulting from the plague epidemic were not essentially caused by the outbreak of the Black, because these were already present before the onset of the epidemic. In the case of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, we are witnessing artistic performance being almost purposefully intertwined with political activism from the very start, fighting for responsible governmental approach to science and research of the pandemic free of moral stigmatization of the victims. However, the movement pursuing the rights of homosexuals has been highly politically active since the 1960s, when the gay liberation movement started in the USA, culminating in the so-called Stonewall Riots in 1969 – and the victims of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the western culture are predominantly homosexuals – at least in the 1980s. The political activism fighting for the rights of homosexuals preceding the HIV/AIDS pandemic is essentially legitimized, multiplied and internationalized by the pandemic and becomes the key cultural heritage of the first era of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the 1980s and early 1990s. It is therefore possible to state that the cultural consequences of the HIV/AIDS pandemic precede the pandemic itself, or more precisely that the prerequisites for these consequences are clearly present before the pandemic.

### Result (2)

#### On the Basic Description of the Dynamics of the HIV/AIDS Pandemic as regards its Impact on Culture and Arts (Specifically on Visual Arts, Theatre and Literature)

Primarily, the milestones in the cultural and artistic representation of the HIV/AIDS pandemic are of an external character: introduction of blood tests in 1985, introduction of the first AZT drug in 1987, combined antiretroviral therapy in mid 1990s. As artists in the first wave of the 1980s learnt about

their diagnosis shortly before their death, any systematic artistic reflection was impossible. This only changed with improved diagnostics and therapeutical options. Systematic cultural and artistic reflection of the HIV/AIDS pandemic only appeared towards the end of the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s. However, this was also the peak of the overall cultural and artistic reflection of the entire course of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

A paradox arises: while on the one hand, scientific progress allows for systematic cultural and artistic reflection of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, on the other hand it suppresses this reflection by suppressing the pandemic itself to the level of a pandemic of a chronic disease, at least in the USA as a country playing a major role in global culture and arts in the 1990s.

The impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on culture and arts can be likened to a swing, an amplitude of the upswing of culture and arts, which work with the topic of civilizational anxiety in the 1980s and early 1990s. However, this is promptly replaced by the plateau of cultural and artistic activities mainly of a retrospective character, which focus on topics such as stigmatization of HIV+ and the status of sexual minorities. "Safe sex" is globally promoted due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, yet the western discourse does not turn to abolition of prostitution. Quite the contrary, "safe sex" often leads to the defense of sexual hedonism in the western discourse.

Unlike the West, Africa as a continent struck heavily by the HIV/AIDS pandemic places emphasis in heterosexual relationships in artistic and educational literature, rejecting heterosexual prostitution [3] (Tables 1-3).

**Table 1:** Definition and arrangement of the key symbolic milestones in the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on culture and arts (specifically on visual arts, theatre and literature).

Author, year, title of work, description of work	Notes
David Emfinger 1983) Fighting for our Lives, an AIDS Candlelight March, poster [4] Larry Stanton (1984) Untitled (Hospital Drawing), Crayon on Paper [5] Cleve Jones (1985) created the first panel of the quilt as commemoration of Marvin Feldman; panel dimensions 0.9 x 1.8 m. Jones and his friends formally established the NAMES Project Memorial Quilt.	
Paul Monette (1988) Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir; first published in United States of America by Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch [6]; Robert Mapplethorpe (1988) Self-Portrait; Gelatin Silver print; 24 x 20 inches; The Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe [7]; David Wojnarowicz (1988-89) Untitled (Buffalo) Vintage Gelatin Silver Print; 28 ½ x 35 ¼ inches; Collection of Michael Sodomick; Keith Haring (1989) Untitled (Billboard Design); Phonostat; 8 x 10 inches; Nancy Burson (1991) Visualize This.; poster; 18 ½ x 28 ½ inches; Tony Kushner (1991) Angels in America; drama; Sue Coe (1993) Kaposi's Sarcoma; Color woodcut on heavy cream wove paper; 23 ½ x 17 ½ inches; Private collection, courtesy of Galerie St. Etienne, New York.	The book by Paul Monette was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award 1988.

Robert Atkins, Thomas D. Sokolowski (1991) From media to metaphor: art about AIDS – A traveling exhibition organized and circulated by Independent Curators Incorporated.	According to this study, this is the culmination of the reflection of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in visual arts for the entire course of the pandemic. The catalogue is created as an expressive, documentary and aesthetically coherent work containing, among other aspects, prophetically included visualisation of the virus as such, in this case the HIV virus, as mentioned in the literature on the COVID-19 pandemic.
The first itinerary item: 20 January to 15 March 1992 – Emerson Gallery, Hamilton College, Clinton, New York	
The last itinerary item: January to February 1994 – Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, New York.	
<i>"After 2000, the interest in gay literature declined slightly for reasons within and outside the literary circles... One of the key factors in this development being the fact that drastic images of patients with the terminal stage of AIDS disappeared from the public space owing to progress in treatment [8]."</i>	
Why we fight: remembering AIDS activism (2013,2014) New York Public Library NYPL, (October 4th, 2013 – April 6th, 2014).	The exhibition needs to be perceived in connection with the exhibition ACT UP NEW YORK: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis 1987 – 1993, White Columns gallery, New York, organised by the Carpenter Center for Visual Arts a Harvard Art Museum (September 9th. 2010 – October 23th, 2010) [9].
The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic started a period of instability.	To quote: <i>"The COVID pandemic has inevitably drawn parallels of fear and stigma with the HIV/AIDS crisis. The virus does not discriminate. Would you say that the pandemic has brought back buried stigmas and collective traumas for the LGBTIQA+ community? – PM: I think it has; I do [10]."</i>

**Table 2:** Definition and indication of the key phases of the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on culture and arts (specifically on visual arts, theatre and literature).

Period	Phase title	Notes
1981-1988	Apocalypse within view: culture and arts overpowered by direct existential anxiety.	
1988-1994	Apocalypse as surmounted apocalypse: Peak of the cultural and artistic reflection of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.	

1994-2000	Post-AIDS period: no apocalypse happening.	The title post-AIDS period used for this era was clearly inspired by the exhibition: Post AIDS, District Museum Kladno-Chateau (7 <sup>th</sup> June - 7 <sup>th</sup> July 1994) [11].	
2000-2013	Forgetting the HIV/AIDS Pandemic.		
2013-2020	Retrospection and the emerging notion of future risks.	The restaged drama Angels in America by Tony Kushner clearly has an analytical value. For example, in 2018, on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Swedish national theatre Dramaten staged both parts of Kushner's play: Millennium Approaches and Perestroika [12].	Reinaldo Arenas (1992) Antes que anochezca, Tusquets Editores, Barcelona [15].
Third decade of the 21st century	The HIV/AIDS pandemic changed its character without being significantly reflected by culture and arts to date.		The HIV/AIDS pandemic markedly frames the 1980s as the period of culminating Cold War between the USA and the USSR and their allies. In a certain sense, the HIV/AIDS pandemic became an instrument in the ideological clash of the two main axes in the essentially bipolar world. The HIV/AIDS pandemic developed into a peculiar form, which excluded objective assessment. The socialist block more or less joined certain conservative and religious authorities of the West, which described the HIV/AIDS pandemic as the God's punishment for decadence and lack of restraint in the society. The remaining parts of the Western societies then had no other option than to face HIV positivity as an expression of freedom, or more precisely an expression of a free lifestyle. Nearly anarchist freedom in sexuality free of social correctives gained major legitimisation and canonisation potential in culture and arts probably also due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

**Table 3:** Supplementary table of major cultural and artistic feats framing the HIV/AIDS pandemic from the cultural and artistic perspective (specifically in visual arts, theatre and literature).

Author, year, title of work, description of work	Notes
Susan Sontag (1986) The Way We Live Now; The New Yorker.	This text was the first text focusing on the topic of the HIV/AIDS pandemic to appear in a mainstream periodical. It was included in the "Best American Short Stories 1987" and in the "Best American Short Stories of the Eighties [13]".
AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power and AIDS Memorial Quilt (1987) Second National March for Lesbian and Gay Rights, Washington D.C., National Mall; quilt with 240 panels.	
Hervé Guibert (1990) A l'ami qui ne m'a sauvé la vie, Gallimard, Paris [14].	

			Two female characters or, strictly speaking, just one female character appears in Mitterer's play: it is the prostitute Gábi. A transvestite uses the second woman's name, Judy. A quote from a paper by Beth Watkins "Women, AIDS, and Theatre: Representations and Resistances" is fitting in this context: <i>"The many plays written about AIDS in the past dozen years form a kind of radical canon, which establishes gay men as the locus for public attention. The "mourning" plays in the early years of epidemic offered account of personal tragedy, tremendous loss, and the need for education and prevention strategies. More recently, second generation playwrights have used political discourse to further the understanding of civil rights issues, appropriate (and inappropriate) government interventions, and the insidiousness of homophobia... Yet they are all but silent in their representation of women with AIDS... I would like to fill the silence with the naming the names, those few women who lived with AIDS have been represented in theatre: Angel, Anna, Kimberly, and PWA (person with AIDS)...[17]"</i> .

Felix Gonzales-Torres (1995) Untitled (Water); strands of beads and hanging device; dimensions vary with installation; The Baltimore Museum of Art.	
The Circle of Friends is the central, heart-like feature of the National AIDS Memorial Grove in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, a circular area paved with flagstones engraved with over 3,500 names of people lost to AIDS, their loved ones, and donors, serving as a profound memorial for remembrance and healing in nature. (adopted from Wikipedia).	<i>"Ground breaking with the mayor had taken place in September 1991; a team of 22 landscape architects and designers volunteered to develop a basic design and master plan. A full-time city gardener started working in July 1995 and on World AIDS Day that year a granite boulder inscribed with the Grove sign was placed at the entrance terrace of the "Main Portal. In February 1996, the "Circle of Friends" feature was added".</i>
Wolfgang Tillmans (2002) AIDS Memorial; a monolithic stele in blue colour presenting information on the HIV/AIDS pandemic; Sendlinger Tor, München.	
Warren Chapman, Jeff Byrne-Daniels (2006) Beacon of Hope; AIDS Memorial Stele; light sculpture as a spiralling stainless-steel column rising from a mosaic plinth; Sackville Gardens, Manchester, UK.	
Fabrice Hyber (2006) L'Artère, le jardin des dessins; work of garden and park architecture, ceramic tiles with the author's original paintings to commemorate victims of AIDS and to honour those who dedicated their efforts to the struggle against this epidemic; Parc de la Villette, Paris.	

## Result (3)

As described above, the HIV/AIDS pandemic is gradually becoming the "forgotten pandemic" in the 21st century in the context of rapid progress in treatment and prevention. Yet, the pandemic continues to spread in particular in Global South countries. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic represents a certain breakthrough in "forgetting the HIV/AIDS pandemic", as we recollect this pandemic despite the continued progress in treatment and prevention.

The entire course of the HIV/AIDS pandemic is distorted by the fact that it is played out in a relatively stable international environment, except for individual crises. Global control of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which has been successful to a certain extent since the pandemic is currently under control in the USA, is highly demanding from the economic and organizational perspective. Any systematic consideration of the further development of this pandemic in a deep international crisis is probably missing. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how the global control of the HIV/AIDS pandemic may be unsteady even in the stable political environment of the West.

This "forgetting" about the HIV/AIDS pandemic represents a massive unsuspected risk, which is demonstrated in the overall apocalyptic atmosphere of the pandemic [18]. In a thriller by Harlan Coben, one of the characters, Reverend Sanders says the following:

"In the end," Reverend Sanders yelled into his microphone, "AIDS is a modern version of the seven plagues of Egypt. It will destroy all immoral without any mercy. Yes, my friends. The God is preparing for the final battle. For Armageddon [19]."

## Conclusions

a) The proposed structure of phases shows that as the HIV/AIDS pandemic continues, the discourse will increasingly deviate from the original outline defined in the 1980s and 1990s. The discourse will be returning to the fact that the African continent is the origin of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and that this pandemic was caused to a great extent by factors including major demographic changes, such as migration of African population to cities, as well as social inequality. The HIV/AIDS pandemic is undoubtedly a scene behind which the conflict between the North and the South is played out. Ruth J. Prince mentions this in his paper entitled The Diseased Body and the Global Subject: The Circulation and Consumption of an Iconic AIDS Photograph in East Africa: "As such the poster is positioned not only with neoliberal developments but also within colonial and postcolonial histories of public health campaigns and health education posters, which sought to interpellated viewers as citizens and subjects of modern regimes of knowledge, science and governmentality [20]."

b) Culture and arts use metaphors to express things that science cannot express in its positivistic language. When studying the two previously mentioned eras of epidemics and pandemics, i.e. plague in the 14th century and the Spanish flu, in more detail, certain peculiar phenomena and difficult-to-explain occurrences come to light, generating the odour of conspiracy. The study of cultural and artistic performances associated with the HIV/AIDS pandemic reveals a surprising extent of artistic approach stemming from mystery or even the idea of an extensive human conspiracy. However, as these works are not included in the canon of culture and arts inspired by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, they are practically forgotten as marginalized rarities. Yet, they ought to be mentioned as something typical for the influence of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on culture and arts (specifically visual arts, theatre and literature). At the same time, it is essential to point out that mentions of HIV being an exceptionally effective killing instrument that has no precedence in history are included in the official canon of literature on HIV/AIDS.

c) The retrospective view of the past decades surprises with the finding of a peculiar mixture of apocalyptic, yet at the same time euphoric character of cultural and artistic performance accompanying and expressing the HIV/AIDS pandemic, mainly in the first wave of artistic perception of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the 1980s and early 1990s. Where does the author of this paper find the euphoric character? It is the fact that while the discourse on the HIV/AIDS pandemic includes mourning in the traditional dramatic sense, the ancient tragic pessimism that deviates from mourning and strives to live in the tragic contradictions of life, as well as certain glorification of the victims. This may be seen as a consequence of the ideological contest between the USA and the USSR and their allies in the 1980s, which affected the cultural and artistic perception of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, as mentioned previously. Looking at the ACT UP poster from 1990, which is currently kept in the Gisela Theising collection in Hannover: the poster motivates

supporters to wear clothing with the sign ACT UP: "(WEAR – ACT UP is a diverse, non-partisan group of – ACT – individuals united in anger and committed – UP – to direct action to end the AIDS Crisis [21]". While the aim of this poster is to express the emotion of anger while facing a spreading pandemic of a perfect lethal infection, it is designed with warm, light colours evoking trust and fondness; four young and attractive (probably homosexual) men, virtually embodying youth, strength and optimism, are arranged in an elastic composition free of any inner tension or conflict. The poster could be easily used to recommend everyday jogging, weight training and healthy lifestyle in the quest for an irresistible appearance.

d) The entirely legitimate fight against stigmatization of HIV positive individuals seems to have overcompensated its original objective of expressing that sexuality is like dark waters that can hardly be lit or subjected to drill, that the virus picks its victims at random, or more precisely that the status of HIV positive individuals, which in the absence of an effective antiviral treatment leads to certain death, is not punishment for one's sins and must not be seen as such and become a reason for social exclusion. The author of this paper would like to note the following: Nobody is innocent and neither are HIV positive individuals. Most importantly, HIV positivity is not the sign of exclusivity or moral superiority. It is a sign of fate that became adverse or even tragic in the case of an individual carrying the virus. Overcoming this from the psychological perspective is only possible with full acceptance of the tragic character of the situation and tragic catharsis by the society and the infected individual. Biological specifics of HIV make the struggle against the sense of tragedy inevitable: HIV is unique due to its 100% lethality, yet allows the individual carrying the virus to live in the society on a long-term basis without having to be identified. HIV positivity means living with guilt in guiltlessness, with guiltlessness in guilt, presenting a highly ambivalent situation: I can take revenge, but doing so burdens me with more guilt, which may outweigh my guiltlessness. Alternatively, I can quietly accept the fact that I have not committed anything knowingly. Not having done anything wrong needs to be perceived metaphorically: the others also do all sorts of things, yet they are not HIV positive. As life of an HIV positive individual is full of choice between the good and the evil, it represents a major artistic theme. In a nutshell, it depicts the human fate in a developed technical civilization; hyper-collectivism combined with tragic loneliness.

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## Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest

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