ABSURDIST-ETHICS AND RADICAL AGENCY IN AIDS CINEMA:
EROTIC GENEALOGIES, ABSURD LAUGHTER,
AND GROTESQUE AESTHETICS

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ABSTRACT

SAMANTHA MICHELE RILEY: Absurdist-Ethics and Radical Agency in AIDS Cinema: Erotic Genealogies, Absurd Laughter, and Grotesque Aesthetics
(Under the direction of Juan Carlos González Espitia)

Absurdist-Ethics and Radical Agency in AIDS Cinema explores a queer theory of ethics based in a grotesque humor aesthetic. Trans-historical and trans-cultural in nature, this project focuses on key examples from cinema, literature, and popular culture, illustrating the ethical paradigm of a postmodern absurdist-ethics. Drawing on theories of the absurd as a form of metaphysical revolt and notions of ethical relativity, the dissertation argues that Absurdist AIDS Cinema imagines a postmodern ethics in which the representation of radical modes of behavior offers, however controversially, not nihilism but affirmation. The cathartic choice to live absurdly is embodied through radical engagements with HIV in filmmakers’ Rosa von Praunheim’s A Virus Knows No Morals (Germany, 1985), Laura Muscardin’s Days (Italy, 2001), and Samy’s Animal (India, 2007). The assessment of AIDS humor, barebacking, and the virus fashioned through an aesthetic akin with grotesque humor, shows that AIDS should not be read simply as a living death sentence void of agency and meaning, but as a reimagining of ethical discourses surrounding quality of life. Vis-à-vis a postmodern climate, this study proposes an absurdist-ethics signaling that humans who embrace the absurd may wield agency and yield harmony and catharsis. In essence, an absurdist-ethics offers readers an interdisciplinary tool through which to discover a positive and invigorating refiguring of aesthetics within a postmodern paradigm.
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INTRODUCTION
SEEKING RADICAL AGENCY & AIDS

The working title of this work was “AIDS is Absurd,” which should indicate that this study is not a typical one. In most contexts, reports on HIV/AIDS focus on how to quell, overcome, or move beyond the trauma of the epidemic. Countless studies aim to identify the nature of the virus and theorize how to control and, if possible, eradicate its presence in the body. There are also many narratives, rendered and recorded in all types of media, that relate the story of those who have succumbed to AIDS, as well as those who have survived. Narratives that lend perspective on certain subgroups are also to be found. Since the mid 1980s, over two hundred contributions from all over the world to the genre of Global Queer AIDS Cinema have narrated stories about gay men infected with HIV. What makes Queer AIDS films particularly unique is the fact that a handful demonstrates the possibility for radical agency in the face of a deadly epidemic. In contrast, most fictional and non-fictional scholarly and popular renditions do not allow for such politically precarious gestures.

A theory that promotes the negotiation of radical agency from HIV/AIDS is risky business. By agency, I do not mean activism or modes of survival. In theory, locating radical agency in HIV means the representation of politically potent and controversial images and ideas that engage with the aesthetics and ethics of death. Many people would surely find such depictions repulsive, politically dubious, and/or morally defunct. Indeed, the aesthetics of radical agency in and through death as I frame it here may be seen as equating to celebrating, indulging, and erotizing death. These may be extreme modes of engaging with the subject of
AIDS, and yet, I propose that there is precedence in their exhibition, specifically with regards to a theory of ethics concerning endgame engagements. I call this theory an *absurdist-ethics*, which I argue one may trace throughout time, exhibited in response to moments of greater cultural trauma, including during times of epidemics, war, and genocide, as well as a retort to even the most culturally minor moments of individual human engagement with death, and in particular as related to those who participate in high-risk behaviors as modes of community formation.

As I theorize in this paper, an absurdist-ethics is a theory of risk management, which equation includes the possibility of yielding a model of life lived more intensely by indulging in the absurd, in the grotesque, and in death. This viewpoint challenges hegemonic codes of ethics represented by ideals associated with the philosophical tradition of Western Enlightenment, rationalism, and Humanism, which dictates that life is to be valued above all, and that sickness and death should be avoided, possibly at any cost. At the same time, an absurdist ethics demonstrates a pervasive skepticism towards any transcendent notion of good or evil. Instead, my model relies much upon an existential philosophical stance, insofar as it explains why an individual would find humor in pain, erotize decay, and seek death, if it equates to finding agency, and/or as a means to foster community, and/or perchance to increase her or his quality of life.

A theory of an absurdist-ethics edicts that one risks one’s life in order to acquire a standpoint of agency that may in theory yield catharsis, pleasure, and possibly, a multiplication or increase of one’s quality of life for the price of intensity. Vouching allegiance to such a theory may mean that the individual risks being misunderstood, loosing
political standing, as well as social and familial support as a result of the exhibition of such a radically unorthodox stance on life.

I contend that a theory of an absurdist-ethics is not, however, unique to the AIDS epidemic, and must be set as well in relation to larger historical contexts of tragedy and catastrophe, times during which I believe this same code of ethics has been exhibited, at the very least in various cultural aesthetic forms of art. My project and its starting point focus on a specific cultural-temporal point of reference, with the subgenre of AIDS film in the corpus of Queer Cinema from the last thirty years. While conducting research in trends to the genre over time, I discovered the presence of instances of radical modes of agency, evidenced from the start, and up until the most recent additions to AIDS Cinema. I discovered three key films, each of which depicts a specific yet different metaphor of agency concerning HIV. These films may be dismissed as anomalies, but as I began to reflect on the political charge of each film, I came to the conclusion that the ethical core of each narrative is the same. When situated side-by-side, these films and their singular offerings of a narrative as a metaphor of agency via HIV render a comprehensive model that points to my understanding of an absurdist-ethics. When applying this model to the context of HIV/AIDS, one can better understand how the trauma of HIV and AIDS, individually and as a collective human epidemic, may be turned into an active production of complex forms of agency, a head-on engagement with the pain of one’s inevitable death and the body’s decimation: how and why one might, in forms of art and in modes of the ‘real,’ laugh, coddle, and/or acquiesce sexually to austere engagements with politically contentious narrations of cultural trauma such as the AIDS epidemic.
More specifically, from a Global Queer AIDS Cinema, I draw upon three metaphors of agency in HIV. The three images engage with the topic of the epidemic through an aesthetics of humor and the grotesque, as well as the eroticization of the virus marked by high-risk behavior, and instantiate my theory of a radical absurdist-ethics. In Chapter one, I introduce the first queer film that strikes me as belonging to the unconventional ethical tradition of an absurdist-ethics, German director Rosa von Praunheim’s *A Virus Knows No Morals* [*Ein Virus kennt keine Moral*] (1985). Through the placement of campy, controversial vignettes—AIDS concentration camps and live enactments of burials, for example—the absurd as represented in *Virus* embodies an ethical stance, whereby one would in theory embrace the horrific through a gallows humor in order to yield agency and invoke systemic change necessary for social activism. In *Virus*, AIDS as visualized through the aesthetics of the absurd is depicted largely by means of humor. I argue that in this film, the model of an absurdist-ethics draws upon laughter as a form of engaging with the affect that permeates the absurd. This humorous, absurd AIDS film therefore expresses at once a disavowing laugh in face of trauma and tragedy, which I contextualize trans-historically in the larger tradition of the absurd. I contend that the absurd permeates the art forms of those artists responding to, and expressing an absurdist-ethics.

*Virus* is one of the very first films produced about AIDS in the mid 1980s, and the message that may be gleaned from a reading of the absurdist-ethics of the film invokes a call to arms. In other words, I claim that von Praunheim made *Virus* in order to shock his intended spectators, largely of the gay community in Berlin in 1985, into reassessing their position vis-à-vis HIV. The absurdist scenarios surrounding the topic of the epidemic in the film suggest that von Praunheim felt that the German gay community he knew had not yet
fully understood the threat that the spread of HIV posed to them. By casting the most extreme circumstances in *Virus*, one may imagine that von Praunheim hoped that spectators, or better yet, a community of intended gay German spectators, would take heed and thereby situate themselves thereafter more proactively with regards to their safety and that of others. In turn, AIDS humor may induce community formation, which in theory, would be a community of AIDS activists.

In order to demonstrate the larger implications and applications of my ethical model, in this same chapter I compare AIDS humor to Holocaust humor, which I also identify as participating in an absurdist-ethics. I build upon other scholars’ descriptions of how Holocaust humor has been employed historically in order to explain more clearly the dynamics at play, and the value in representing the unrepresentable in my ethical paradigm. These depictions have in common the fact that most people may reject them as counter-enlightenment, and/or morally and politically defunct. Still, a topic such as the AIDS epidemic or the Holocaust may become so bogged down by the trauma of the event, that one may find no other possibility of engagement. An absurdist-ethics illustrates how one may, in theory, yield catharsis from the most extreme depictions of the unnamable by making use of the most radical aesthetic designs from which to step back, consider, and come to terms with that which may otherwise be inaccessible.

In Chapter two, I familiarize readers with the aesthetics of the grotesque as the second key element of an absurdist-ethics. I discovered the image of the grotesque invoked by a Hindi film from the Global Queer AIDS Cinema. Filmmaker Samy elucidates in *Animal [Mirugam]* (2007) how it takes a radically grotesque and notably absurdist shock to reawaken spectators from their political apathy towards HIV, and this, in the guise of a serial-rapist-
turned-philanthropist. This film exemplifies why certain cultural art forms may depict controversially what most would render a victimized, vulnerable body, such as the HIV mythical body, alternatively as an eroticized, grotesque body, represented by the director as an object not solely of disgust, but also largely of the spectator’s desire.

In terms of chronology, *Animal* is the most recent film produced, and the reading of the narrative via a model of an absurdist-ethics suggests the director chose to depict the disease through a radical, grotesque aesthetic in order to motivate spectators to think about how even and despite the dissemination of information and medications concerning the spread of HIV, there are still places in the world—and in this case, specifically those parts where AIDS is most rampant, i.e., India—where not much has changed as in comparison to North Atlantic countries in terms of controlling the spread of the virus. The film points at how the locus of the virus has relocated to the economically poorer Global South, while the Global North had the means to squelch the spread of the epidemic to a much larger extent. *Animal* is, in part, a critique of the ineffectiveness of the Global North in disseminating power and knowledge in order to halt the continued growth of the epidemic in the Global South. The narrative implies that an apathetic stance of governments and/or organizations operating specially from within larger cities in the Global South have overestimated the effectiveness of strategies they employ to educate persons living outside the center. The film shows how these policies are not able to account for the fact that transmitted knowledge may not be received as expected by those persons living in peripheral villages. As a result, minor communities suffer most of all from lack of information about protection from the spread of the virus.
Like in the previous chapter, I set the historical backdrop of the aesthetic tradition of the grotesque, calling upon similar cultural forms that also represent an absurdist-ethics. I begin by drawing upon the grotesque depictions of HIV in a German anti-AIDS campaign, which also notably summons up a comparison between Hitler and the virus. I glean from the paradigm of absurdist-ethics to show how this advertisement juxtaposes desire and the grotesque to prompt the viewer to challenge an assumed indifferent cultural stance towards the epidemic, in particular in Germany, where the rate of infection has slowed dramatically since the late 2000s in comparison to the ever-rising rate in the mid 1980s. Finally, I offer a comparison between the narrative in Animal and other depictions of the grotesque, which also employ the rationale of an absurdist-ethics.

In Chapter three and four, I approach a third and last image of an absurdist-ethics as represented through a model of a high-risk sexual practice that in theory eroticizes and embraces the virus. Presented in a third film of a Queer AIDS Cinema, directed by Italian filmmaker Laura Muscardin, Days [Giorni] (2001), it delivers an intimate portrayal of barebacking, which refers to a high risk gay sexual cultural practice in which gay or bisexual men in theory have sex with other gay or bisexual men in spite of and because of the possibility that a partner may contract or infect another with the HIV virus. Just like the game of Russian roulette, the enticement of the mythology surrounding the practice of barebacking lies centrally in the risk, and in this case, in one’s vulnerability and/or contagious status. This instantiation of an absurdist-ethics is perhaps the most radical of the three presented in this study, and the image of barebacking serves as a radical representation of my model of an absurdist-ethics. I set barebacking, as a metaphor of radical agency, to the backdrop of a history of the policing of sexual mores and behaviors. I examine examples of other culturally
specific models, such as Socrates and Foucault’s discussions on strategic relationships, as points of comparison and contrast to show how artists and thinkers may have historically invoked a model of an absurdist-ethics as represented in the mythical guise of death as possessing transmutable powers of agency.

While most people would only acknowledge the risk of having unprotected sex when HIV is in play, the model of barebacking in the film Days focuses instead more centrally on reward, which is crucial to my paradigm. I show how a theory of an absurdist-ethics explains how the reward in this scenario is that some gay men, through the act of barebacking, would feel a great amount of pleasure that goes beyond mere sex, whereby becoming infected with HIV equates to a form of initiation into a community of belonging. In the context of the film, and for the purposes of me elucidating on the model of an absurdist-ethics, this community may be understood as a mythical construction of the ‘gay community,’ and at the same time, a virtual community of barebackers in the Internet. Community in this vein would always be virtual and mythical. At the same time, the reward is coded as real, but so is the exposure from the risk, i.e., in this model, one may assume that most barebackers will eventually contract HIV, and likely die from AIDS.

Days is situated between Virus and Animal in terms of chronology, whereby the director’s stance towards the virus comes out a moment in time a few years after the introduction of more effective medicine therapies in the late 1990s in the United States and in Western Europe, and in the case of the film, in Italy. My reading of Days through a lens of an absurdist-ethics first suggests that director Muscardin focuses thematically on what some may read as an unconcerned, and therefore riskier or irresponsible position towards the epidemic as a result of the introduction and effectiveness of those medications.
As a comparison, in *Virus*, von Praunheim invokes a model of an absurdist-ethics, seeking radical agency in absurdist aesthetic depictions of HIV charging spectators with a bolt of energy to push them to acquire knowledge concerning the virus and take heed. In *Animal*, Samy gleans agency from the grotesque and its rendition of HIV, in order to jolt spectators out of any possible delusion that the dissemination of knowledge has somehow proved effective with regards to the Global South. Finally, as it is done in *Virus* and *Animal*, in *Days* Muscardin also draws possible radical agency from the provocations of her model of barebacking, which she ascribes to an absurdist-grotesque aesthetics. In a way, the representation of HIV in *Days* is the pinnacle of the most extreme and fullest representation of an absurdist-ethical paradigm put into film. Muscardin gleans agency from the intended epistemic shock the film’s thematic introduces. Even if seemingly mythical, the film exemplifies how an absurdist-ethics may actually look like on the ground through an aesthetic representation of the absurdist-grotesque model of barebacking. While a director may seek agency in radical models that depend upon an absurdist-ethics, in order to provoke spectators to reevaluate their own positions toward the epidemic, *Days* goes one step further in providing a model that is based on a minor community that may in reality put into practice this radical form of ethics.

Muscardin suggests in her film that even when knowledge, power, and medication are disseminated effectively in the portrayed society, the assumed or intended result of that distribution may still not take into account the choices of individual human agency. In other words, while one might expect that when individuals have the tools and knowledge to control the spread of the virus throughout the population as well as in the body, some will however still do the exact opposite. More exactly, while many people will participate in safer sex
practices and take medications to control the occurrence of opportunistic diseases, Muscardin offers the point of view of a model of a minor community, that of so-called barebackers, who react in an oppositional manner by continuing to spread the virus with purpose, in the name of the community, as well as in the name of rugged individualism. The director shows that barebackers choose to court death as a radical form of agency in the face of sickness, dying, and death.

I contend that the model of barebacking in *Days* provides an instantiation of the aesthetics of an absurdist-ethics, whereby to give or to contract HIV when barebacking would be read as a form of radical absurdist revolt. This model suggests, however problematically, that the participation in an absurdist and self-annihilating activity like barebacking may be read not only as a form of interpersonal enlightenment, as other scholars suggest (cf. Bersani, Dean), but also and even more significantly, as an intellectual and aesthetic experience grounded in an ethical core. To illustrate Muscardin’s model, in Chapter four I approach testimonies from blogs, chat rooms, medical journals, and scholarly books and articles on the topic of barebacking in order to give readers a better idea of some, but certainly not all, *real* models of barebacking put into practice. Following the logic of the philosophical framework of absurdist-ethics, I thus read barebacking, as represented largely through Muscardin’s viewpoint, as representative of a prototypical form of absurdist revolt. My study shows that this is one of the few possible ethical forms of living within the realm of a despotic and politically antagonistic, if not defunct climate of catastrophe and trauma, present in the wake of the AIDS epidemic, a time I characterize as belonging to a postmodern mentality.
In Chapter five, I identify and deepen my understanding of the nature of the particular aesthetic model that I argue goes hand-in-hand with the paradigm of an absurdist-ethics, which I denote as culminating in the aesthetic form of the esperpento, a term coined and illustrated in the works of early 20th century Galician writer Ramón del Valle-Inclán (1866-1936). The esperpento may be understood broadly as the representation of society [as] reflected in a concave mirror that distorts physical reality grotesquely, which reflection becomes a metaphor for internal deformity. This is part of Valle-Inclán’s technique and the concave mirror one of the tools he employs. In this perspective, he is allied to the aesthetics of Expressionism and Futurism: “Men and objects will be stripped as clean as possible and looked at through a magnifying glass for great effect …The easiest way to do this is through the grotesque.” (Lima, 33; Lima quotes Valle-Inclán)

I contend that works of art that engage with an absurdist-ethics deliver representations of traumatic events by drawing upon the tradition of both the absurd and the grotesque, oftentimes with the aim of provoking the viewer intellectually through laughter, disgust, or desire. In the context of HIV/AIDS, the affect of the esperpento as a politically charged form of an absurd-grotesque aesthetics, calls forth the deepest fears the epidemic invokes. Affect reveals itself visually as death, or more complexly in one’s psyche, as a schizophrenic multitude of affective forms. This paradigm opens channels, however controversial, for political agency and change in what may otherwise appear as a closed down postmodern space. In other words, change only occurs because the protagonist is physically and morally grotesque, and change is induced only when he is infected by HIV, dying, and ultimately, possibly only after he has succumbed to death. The visualization of the esperpento aesthetic, as configured in the absurdist-grotesque fashioning of the virus should, in theory, incite spectators to reassess their understanding of the epidemic.
The esperpento represents a way of signifying and understanding the visual and/or situational representations of a mythical body infected with HIV as something that has other facets beyond physically and psychologically distressing individuals and communities. When read through a theory of absurdist-ethics, the mythical AIDS body, as a gestalt of the esperpento, may be read as a representation of agency. This agency is incarnated through an intentional humorous and repellant engagement with death and decay, and even through its eroticization. The esperpento makes a production of the role of the depersonalization of the individual, in lieu of the collective mass, which Valle-Inclán felt could be described and explained through

Freudian evaluation of human behavior, disgust with the social and economic evils of industrialization, and the ravages of war [which Valle-Inclán depicted in a manner not dissimilar to the masks of Carnival players] in caricatures, stylizations, puppets or marionettes rather than psychologically developed characters. Such types are farcical rather than tragic, however, because the playwright’s desire is to satirize [as a] serious statement on the fallen nature of humanity, the resultant is no longer farcical. (Lima, 32-33)

From these cursory definitions of the esperpento, one may already visualize the role such an aesthetics plays in my aesthetic-ethical paradigm, in particular the reference to the use of mirrors that warp what is reflected in them—also an allusion to the carnivalesque, as a means of self-discovery and as a medium from which to glean enlightenment. This is the function of the lens of a model of absurdist-ethics as a philosophical tool. The warping mirror as a metaphor of my model is essentially a grotesque lens, signifying a doubling and a mirroring of reality, whereby the distorted images the spectator perceives are, in theory, a ‘truer’ representation of reality, which is distorted. Reality is distorted. Yet, the spectator is unable to make this connection until s/he looks into the mirror and then, looks back critically at herself or himself. I maintain that the warping mirror, as a lens in the tradition of esperpento
aesthetics, may be extended to other cultural moments of tragedy to understand the ethically complex possibility for agency, even though it may be considered by the status quo as counter-enlightenment, profane, immoral, and disgusting representations of death coded as forms of desire.

I emphasize that in the space of this study, in the case of barebacking in particular, while I do discuss some realities of the phenomena, versus the mythology surrounding it, I do not aim to provide here any psychological, cultural-anthropological, or sociological rendition or conclusions about its ‘real’ practice. More importantly, it is not my intention to present here a defense à outrance of the practice of barebacking, nor a heroization or glorification of those involved in its practice. I understand that the issue of barebacking has produced deep controversy among many sectors of society, as well as in different communities affected by HIV, but my interpretation of barebacking is one that sees it as a cultural practice that may be assessed to gain a new, complex perspective of ethics today. This evaluation is not synonymous with an encouragement or an apologia of barebacking. Instead, what I intend is to consider how our culture is more and more structured around the inherited idea of freedom, and that there are spaces, like barebacking, that test its boundaries. My analysis should be read in terms of the philosophical and literary as a work of comparative literature and cultural studies. I am interested in the cultural manifestations of this model of absurdist-ethics in the aesthetics exhibited in certain art forms, chiefly in queer cinema. Similarly, I am only interested in the work being done in terms of aesthetics and not the actual work a spectator and/or even director or author may undergo in terms of trauma work or trauma theory, two very complex realms that cannot be properly addressed in this space.
In terms of the discussion of films, I focus more on the narrative, but not without a discussion of their visual aspects. While it might be argued that mainstream works of film studies should or do focus more on cinematic techniques than narrative, in truth, many scholars that engage with minor cinemas, Queer Cinema included, find the narrative equally, if not oftentimes more important than cinematography. For example, Michele Aaron suggests that many films of the New Queer Cinema sport poor aesthetic strategies (Aaron, 3). The reason for this seemingly unorthodox approach, in the case of minor cinema, is that many directors are novices to the practice, have small budgets, and focus more explicitly on getting a ‘minor’ story across. The object of the queer film theorist is not necessarily analyzing only those films with sophisticated film techniques, but instead even those films, however artless in terms of cinematography, which suggest a gay subtext. As Susie Bright points out in \textit{Celluloid Closet} (1995), a documentary on history of queer cinema, “It’s amazing how if you’re a gay audience and you’re accustomed to crumbs, how you will watch an entire movie just to see somebody wear an outfit that you think means that they are homosexual. The whole movie can be a dud, but you’re just sitting there waiting for Joan Crawford to put on her black cowboy shirt again.”\footnote{This quote comes from the documentary film \textit{Celluloid Closet} (1995), listed in bibliography.} In other words, what defines queer cinema is not methods of cinematography but instead the queer narrative. Therefore, when I discuss queer films in this paper, I too focus actually more on the narrative, as that is central to my argument, but I will also highlight the cinematography when it impacts the narrative in compelling and sophisticated ways. Another caveat is that the characters depicted in the films, or the narratives that unfold around them, do not necessarily represent the \textit{real}. In the particular Absurd sub-genre of a Global AIDS Cinema, these are not fully developed characters, but
instead flatter ones, although in the complex guise of the comical, the absurd, and the
grotesque. In fact, in the case of the minor cinemas, as I discuss more completely in the
ensuing chapters, the mythical persona of persons with AIDS, particularly those represented
in these three films, must be understood as fictional, mythical, and fantastical, and in any
case, purely satirical.

While my own research started in film, and my theory developed in response to the
connections I made between the films *Virus*, *Animal*, and *Days*, I do not see this ethical
model as being limited to queer content, nor just to the medium of cinema. Instead, I want
my model of absurdist-ethics to be a wide-wielding interdisciplinary tool. My project is not
just to divulge the impetus behind AIDS humor, grotesque representations of the
eroticization of the virus, or barebacking, but also to display the wider historical legacies,
implications, and evidence of the framework this model supports and produces. To bolster
each chapter and to more sufficiently illustrate a comprehensive model of an absurdist-ethics,
I provide evidence and examples chiefly from literature, painting, the theater, and the digital
media of the Internet. In doing so, I want to demonstrate that an absurdist-ethics may be
applied to many endgame historical topics and events, not just to the AIDS epidemic. By
providing such exemplars as a work of comparative literature, this conglomeration should
supply a necessary well-rounded, interdisciplinary approach of cultural studies, which helps
readers grasp the widespread indications and implications of my model of absurdist-ethics.

Finally, I also theorize how the exhibition of an absurdist-ethics emerges during
periods of catastrophe or crisis, as part and parcel of a postmodern mentality, a time in which
metaphors of endgame engagement are more common, sometimes including radical
representations of sickness, decay, and death. These metaphors are controversially presented
as seductive, indulgingly disgusting, humorous, and even delightful. This course of action is set up in opposition to what some would read as the ideals of rationalism, humanism, and the enlightenment, which would dictate that fair and just representations of those affected by illness and catastrophe would and should only be read as victims, which oftentimes renders such subjects void of agency. Consistently, I argue that such moments of rupture express postmodern mentalities that arise in times of chaos and disillusion when hegemonic ideals go bankrupt. In such moments, I theorize, one can more clearly identify the simultaneous and non-coincidental emergence of an absurdist-ethics, which promises agency where it otherwise would not have been possible.

When I use the term postmodernity, I understand it as Fredric Jameson formulated. He defined it by the fact that people today live in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place. In that case, it either ‘expresses’ some deeper irrepressible historical impulse (in however distorted a fashion) or effectively ‘represses’ and diverts it, depending on the side of ambiguity you happen to favor. Postmodernism, postmodern consciousness, may then amount to not much more than theorizing its own condition of possibility, which consists primarily in the sheer enumeration of changes and modifications. Modernism also thought compulsively about the New and tried to watch its coming into being (inventing for that purpose the registering and inscription devices akin to historical time-lapse photography), but the postmodern looks for breaks, for events rather than new worlds, for the telltale instant after which it is no longer the same […].

(Postmodernism, ix)

The postmodern mentality or condition is not a new phenomenon, but an ahistorical event that can be traced along with the existence of the absurdist-ethical theory I am purposing, through the deliberations of a mode of what I would qualify more closely as existential philosophy. In the context of this study, I demonstrate most specifically how an absurdist-ethics may be traced in cultural art forms produced in the wake of post-AIDS culture, which is indeed a moment of intensity and collective rupture.
What ultimately is at stake in this study is my offering of a tool to better understand the instantiation of certain representations of the human condition under duress, aesthetic forms that appear politically radical and abhorrent, and yet suggest evidence of the possibility of radical forms of agency, underpinned not by absolute nihilism or destruction, but instead, however controversially, by an ethical paradigm that promises a moment of reprisal in the face of death, whether that be an epidemic, a holocaust, or the thought of one’s own inevitable death and demise.

While I argue that this model is not new, I am however the first to suggest this particular lineage of thought. I trace its origins through a path of thinking that philosophers have followed long before, including Kant’s theory of enlightenment, as well as Nietzsche and Camus’s conception of ethics. In order to expand the understanding of how the body is fashioned and erotized in death, read through the lens of the absurdist-ethical paradigm, I incorporate Deleuze’s ideas on the mythical configurations of the body as related to the aesthetics of the esperpento. More specifically, I insert my own rendition of a Kantian enlightenment, which I argue interconnects with my absurdist-ethics. When assessing absurdist AIDS films, and taking in absurd-grotesque representations of HIV, I propose that such art forms gesture towards and/or induce provocation, so that in theory a spectator might experience a moment of recognition and reevaluation in terms of her or his own position vis-à-vis moments of cultural crisis, as well with regards to his or her own relationship to death.

A more nuanced exploration of the key term of the absurd is required here, especially because I also draw my theory of an absurdist-ethics from specific considerations of Camus on the absurd, as a form of metaphysical and physical revolt, and its intersection with Nietzsche’s definition of ethics. I apply the concept of the absurd as an attitude that stakes its
claim on the belief that life has no moral value. But by taking into consideration questions of
agency, I also develop a derivative of Camus’s theory of the absurd that is more politically
potent. First, when I use the word *absurd*, I initially refer to what Camus insists on in *The
Myth of Sisyphus* (1942): “I judge the notion of the absurd to be essential and consider that it
can stand as the first of my truths,” which must be accepted in order to comprehend the
phenomenological and intellectual experiences of one’s world, to ultimately lay bare the
nature of consciousness and human existence (31). 2 Engagement with the absurd takes place
when the individual becomes aware of life itself through “Cartesian, solipsistic, existential
encounters with truth, morality, ethics, and theology” (Sagi 20). The absurd is a central
component to life but, as theorized by Camus, people do not or cannot come to this
conclusion unless they have suffered and found a vehicle, an absurd one, through which they
may navigate their state of suffering and discover its absurdist core. In Camus’ words:
“Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it” (*Myth
54*). Camus continues that the absurd man is one who “assured of his temporally limited
freedom, of his revolt devoid of future, and of his mortal consciousness, lives out his
adventure within the span of his lifetime” (66). For the absurd man, “the absurd is his
extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in that
consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance”
(55). Revolt, both metaphysical and physical, is the key form of action and agency in order to
accomplish the goal of seizing and sustaining awareness. In contrast, suicide would be the
negation of life and its value.

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2 This quote has been widely translated as: “The absurd is the essential concept and the first truth.” However, in
my research, not a single source actually cited the source of this translation. I have chosen to stay with Justin
To further my inquiry, I look to Nietzsche, who also provides a helpful illustration of ethics that complements Camus’ ideas. Nietzsche’s conception of an ethics of life relies on the master/slave dialectic—notably, a strategic relationship—whereby ethics or the “noble mode of valuation” is the will of the master according to his taste and preference (“Genealogy,” 10). The antithesis of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ is dependent on a bureaucracy of power. Nietzsche turns this constellation on its head improbably, reversing the valuation. As reported by Nietzsche, ethics are wielded not by the master, but in truth by the slave. In his work “On the Genealogy of Morals” (1887), he clarifies:

The slave revolt in morality begins when ressentiment itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the ressentiment of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge. While every noble morality develops from triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says No to what is ‘outside,’ what is ‘different,’ what is ‘not itself’; and this No is its creative deed. (472)

Forced to its furthest conclusion, Nietzsche provides a malleable code of ethics that does not hinge solely on ideals of good and evil, but instead on truculence or acts of revolt, crimes committed by the Untertanen or the disenfranchised minorities as represented by the masses. Their offenses are what Nietzsche deems the creative deeds of revolt. One therefore speaks of an ethics of difference; this exception circumscribes what is good and what is evil, and replaces it with the right to life that underpins the justification of the so-called enlightened, ‘Western’ cultural conceptions of human rights.

Finally, I rely on Deleuze to help me further explain the dynamics of an ethics that embraces an absurdist-grotesque aesthetics. I identify this dynamic in radical forms of exhibition of the human, visualized or portrayed in art as the inhuman, the animal, or the unrepresentable. Two Deleuzian concepts are particularly relevant here: a narrowed form of a Deleuzian becoming and the expression body without organs. Relevant to the former, and
specifically as a *becoming ethical*, Deleuzian scholars Ian Buchanan and Adrian Parr deduce that:

The qualitative leap through pain, across the mourning landscapes of nostalgia, is a gesture of active creation, one that affirms new ways of belonging. It is a fundamental reconfiguration of our way of belonging in the world that acknowledges the pain of loss whilst moving beyond this pain. This is the defining moment of *becoming-ethical*: the movement across and beyond the pain, loss and negative passions. The real aim of the process is to overcome the stultifying effects of passivity that pain can produce. In this way, the internal disarray, fracture and pain provide the ethical conditions for transformation. (89-90; my emphasis)

*Becoming ethical*, as I apply it in this study, is a becoming of an absurdist-ethics across the spectrum of human experience, including within the experience of those individuals and communities confronted historically with HIV/AIDS, such as the queer community. Becoming absurdist-ethical affects the course by which minor communities might metaphorically signify alternate allegiance. Becoming absurdist-ethical is also an expedient by which to visualize and reflect on the self as an individual and as a collective, and also as a minor subject, taking into account one’s body, tongue, and mind.

I rely on Deleuze and Guattari to extend my argument to humor, whereby humor is a mechanism through which a collective subject can be perceived through language, as a two-dimensional object; as a surface, and as a *body without organs*, as pure affect. Absurdist humor may be perceived as an ethical form, not one that is easily identifiable, but instead one that follows rules applicable only to a minor level. The source of origin, in a sense, is always displaced; and upon closer inspection, only chaos is to be found. Only by following the greater gesture of the system, does the chaos, which is made up of what Deleuze calls ‘nomadic singularities’ or ‘mad particles,’ also take shape in the form of signification, and thereby assumes real ethical value. Deleuze illustrates this point in his work on *The Logic of Sense* (1990):
The tragic and the ironic give way to a new value, that of humor. For if irony is the coextensiveness of being with the individual, or of the I with representation, humor is the coextensiveness of sense with nonsense. Humor is the art of the surfaces and of the doubles, of nomad singularities and of the always displaced aleatory point; it is the art of the static genesis, the savoir-faire of the pure event, and the ‘fourth person singular’—with every signification, denotation, and manifestation suspended, all height and depth abolished. (159-160)

In this case, one should not read the affect of humor, the grotesque, or the grotesquely erotic as nonsense, i.e., as that which is opposed to sense, but instead, as having one and the same makeup and structure as sense, in the same fashion as the warping mirror I mentioned when discussing Valle-Inclán’s esperpento. On the localized level, that which appears to be nonsense may be guilelessly recognized as only nonsense; but on the minor level, nonsense and sense together have a clear interdependent, dialectical relationship and purpose, whereby the product of that relationship is an absurdist-ethical stance towards enlightenment. They enact a mechanics by which the absurd expresses an ethical charge. Within an absurdist-ethical paradigm, one relies on radical forms of humor, the grotesque, or the erotic, to exact a call to an unorthodox, counter-hegemonic, yet for some, in theory, a more intense, and controversially, perhaps even more valuable, existential state of being in a professedly senseless historical postmodern state, in particular after tragic events in world history.

Deleuze would nevertheless not agree entirely with my interpretation of humor, because he believes that the absurd is a dichotomous appellation, whereby nonsense is diametrically opposed to sense, instead of both terms being categorized as part and parcel of the same body. He proposes that for the philosophy of the absurd, nonsense is what is always opposed to sense in a simple relation with it, so that the absurd is always defined by a deficiency of sense and a lack (there is not enough of it …). From the point of view of structure, on the contrary, there is always too much sense: an excess produced and over-produced by nonsense as a lack of itself. (Logic of Sense, 82-83)
As I espy it, Deleuze reduces the complexities of the absurd in comparison to how many other philosophers, present and past, have applied it productively. In my opinion, in the excess that a dialectics between sense and nonsense produces, one identifies much queer potential and energy. As an illustration, Wim Tigges in *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense* (1988) points out that: “In nonsense, language *creates* a reality, in the absurd, language *represents* a senseless reality” (128; emphasis in the original). This reality is not withal senseless itself. Put plainly, I do not read absurdist art as meaningless. I interpret those works as critical of greater social and political issues, but in a manner that is not immediately or easily recognizable. As it happens with any innovative art, one has to work oftentimes to unravel and decode the messages at hand. This intelligence is also often multiple and convoluted in its own right, but valuable, philosophically speaking, nonetheless.

Michael Holquist, in his essay on “What is a Boojum? Nonsense and Modernism,” also challenges Deleuze, putting his definition of the absurd on its head. He frames his argument as such: “The absurd points to a discrepancy between purely human values and purely logical values …The Absurd is a contrast between systems of human belief, which may lack all logic, and the extremes of logic unfettered by human disorder. Nonsense is play with order only” (129). The absurd reduces the human to an animal and demands that one ask fundamental questions about logic, reason, and above all the value of ethical assertions. In this configuration, one is looking for absolutes. What concerns me here again is the ethical that underlies the animal, even the non-living, the alien, the absent, the unthinkable, and the unrepresentable, all of which flourish only on a micro level.

Consequently, as Tigges invokes, “I think it is not so much the aim of the absurdist to free themselves from logic and conventions, as to describe a world that has lost its
meaning for man ‘(c)ut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots’ (Esslin 1968: 23, quoting Ionesco)” (129). This meaning makes more sense in light of what writers such as Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus, James Joyce, and Franz Kafka were doing, all of whom employed the absurd in their writing in one fashion or another, and which I reference and discuss further in ensuing chapters. These artists were not trying to tear down the world and make it nonsensical, nor depict it as void of sense, nor structure; but instead they endeavored to evince life’s complexities and paradoxes, its disappointments, and how this forever romanticized and oftentimes religiously-laden fate of death and dying is simply unavoidable and even, however bitter that sounds, candidly logical. Even if the world seems to have no meaning because signification is not to be found, and bodies appear beyond representation, humans will inevitably create structures of substance, and invent other modes of living to fill the psychological void, to disavow the meaninglessness.

In consequence, absurdist behavior can in part be described as a form of fatalism, whereby one tests the limits of the written or spoken word, the artist’s signature, or even the penetration and contamination of the flesh, as it happens in barebacking. As Stanford Lyman and Marvin Scott address in A Sociology of the Absurd (1989):

One response to the anxious and frustrating awareness of being on a fatalistic time track is the attempt to gamble with fate by seeking to alter the seeming inevitable. […] He or she can subjectively experience both personal freedom and active control over events. One manifestation of this phenomenon involves taking risks. Flaunting fate and history’s directive, a man or a woman may allow the free play of impulses to disorganize the predicted, frustrate the dictated, or wreak havoc in the ordered world.

(36)

At the same time, one must recognize the dynamic at work here with respect to gestures of fatalism and even realism as it applies to postmodernity, and in particular how it applies to my understanding of the absurd, which starts with Martin Esslin. Esslin coined the term the
absurd in his pivotal work on *The Theater of the Absurd* from 1961. In this essay, Esslin theorizes:

For [the absurdist artist,] there is no contradiction between the desire for realism and the basic absurdity of the situations that inspire him. Like Ionesco he regards life in its absurdity as basically funny—up to a point. ‘Everything is funny; the greatest earnestness is funny; even tragedy is funny. [We try] to get to this recognizable reality of the absurdity of what we do and how we behave and how we speak.’ (206)

One may think of absurdist art, therefore, as something that represents at once the inadequacy of language, the paradox of meaning and sense, as well as an alternate world that is tragic, grotesque, self-reflexive, and philosophical. This absurdist world must have at the same time its own logic and its own absurdist-ethics. This kind of ethics functions through a dialectics of living and death. That which pervades or fills up the body of this absurdist-ethics is the affect of laughter or humor, in the guise of the absurd and the grotesque, as well as that which shocks and scares, including high-risk acts of revolt.

I aim to provide a comprehensive model of an absurdist-ethics modeled on examples of HIV as represented in Queer Cinema, but I also hope that this new lens of ethics might find further application as a philosophical tool. An absurdist-ethics should prove useful to scholars considering more sympathetically why certain individuals and/or sub-cultural groups might whole-heartedly and in good conscience participate in radical modes of living that the rest of the world might find abhorrent. Specifically, my model of an absurdist-ethics should provide a means to better understand how some may justify ethically doing that which most people in the world would deem unthinkable, because in theory, and however risky, even the realm of the unthinkable may provide agency for some.

In conclusion, I claim that an absurdist-ethics in essence proposes that within the vicissitudes of the postmodern, humans who embrace the absurd can attain self-acceptance
and harmony. Therefore, at its most radical conclusion, laughing at that which is taboo, eroticizing decay and death, and invoking high-risk models of behavior such as barebacking might be read as metaphors for postmodern, consensual living, dedicated to certain kind of quality of life. In this context, such endgame engagements would not represent delinquency, immorality, or evil, but instead in fact possibly virtuosity, health, and the good. Within the logic of the model of an absurdist-ethics, even such radical mythical configurations could be considered moral agents within the theoretical parameters of postmodernity, and capable perhaps even of inciting a political charge in spectators, which at the very least may compel the viewer to reassess their own philosophical position vis-à-vis their own ethical stance on quality of life.
CHAPTER I

AIDS HUMOR: EIN VIRUS KENNT KEINE MORAL [A VIRUS KNOWS NO MORALS]
1985

Did you hear about the two Polack junkies? They were shooting up one day, and one of them took the needle and shot up. And then the second one took the needle from the first one and shot up with it. The first Polack said, “Are you crazy? Why did you shoot up with the same needle I used? Don’t you know I have AIDS?” And the second Polack said, “Oh, that’s OK. I’m wearing a condom.” (Goodwin, More Man Than You’ll Ever Be: Gay Folklore and Acculturation in Middle America, 84)

The death of 30 million people is no laughing matter. It is tragic, and the epidemic’s impact on human civilization cannot be described adequately; but that does not stop people from trying to put their thoughts, experiences, and emotions about that event into words, principally through media or the arts. To laugh or make jokes about HIV and AIDS sounds perhaps just as “barbaric” as Theodor W. Adorno deemed art after Auschwitz.

In order to demonstrate the larger implications and applications of my ethical model, in this chapter I compare AIDS humor to Holocaust humor, which I also identify as participating in an absurdist-ethics. I build upon scholarly descriptions of how Holocaust humor has been employed historically in order to explain more clearly the dynamics at play and the value in representing the unrepresentable in my ethical paradigm. In a second instance, I introduce the first queer film that strikes me as belonging to the unconventional ethical tradition of an absurdist-ethics, German director Rosa von Praunheim’s A Virus Knows No Morals [Ein Virus kennt keine Moral] (1985). Through the placement of controversial vignettes—AIDS concentration camps and live enactments of burials, for
example—the absurd, as represented in Virus, embodies an ethical stance whereby one would in theory embrace the horrific through a gallows humor, in order to yield agency and invoke the systemic change necessary for social activism.

Following this line of logic, one may better understand why Adorno suggested that there may be no other way to represent the aesthetics of a culture marked by atrocity or tragedy than besides through the lens of the barbaric. In his essay on “Cultural Criticism and Society,” published in 1955, Adorno implied that one must recognize the grotesque nature of the act of poetry writing in Germany after World War II (WWII) in order to understand the nature of aesthetics in the post-Holocaust cultural landscape:

Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. (Prisms, 34)

In other words, after WWII, any creation of art in the name of culture can only reify the barbaric culture that produced the Holocaust. Calling art culture, instead of a product of barbarism, is an act of denial that is symptomatic and at the same time reinforces the knowledge-power paradigm that participates in perpetuating the lie that German culture could be anything but barbaric after the fact. If one applies this dictum to the AIDS epidemic, one might say that anyone who could conceive of a comedy about AIDS is disrespecting the lives of those who have fallen victim to the virus. Even more, one could accuse such directors of being homophobic. Following this logic, to call a comedic AIDS film a work of art is just as nonsensical as calling a poem after Auschwitz a work to be commended as high Kultur. Adorno did of course modify this dictum a year later in his Negative Dialectics:

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream: hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living. (362-363).
Inevitably, from such catastrophic events arise questions about the ethics of life and death. In Adorno’s case, he exacts that “Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity and death” (Negative Dialectics, 362). The only viable solution to living after such a happening might oftentimes mean, in truth, behaving in absurd ways through habits that may discern themselves in cultural forms, more often than not, as something humorous; take the work of playwright Samuel Beckett for instance.

Many Beckett scholars, such as Lois Gordon, read his work as “a product of and testament to his times;” a time of devastation (5):

Beckett witnessed, literally, extremes in human destruction hitherto inconceivable to the civilized mind. He lived through two terrible depressions […]; two world wars; and virtually two civil wars […]. He witnessed the power of totalitarianism as it swept through the modern world […]. Throughout, one must speculate, he could not help but observe the degrees of caring and indifference, of pettiness and megalomania that accompanied each event—the panoply of human behavior, from self-sacrifice to utter barbarism, that were the personal and national responses to each of these occurrences. (6)

Gordon draws upon Beckett’s so-called “siege in the room,” a phrase he coined to describe his most creative period, after WWII. During this time, Beckett wrote his influential play, Waiting For Godot (1948-1949). One may reasonably accept Gordon’s hypothesis that one may trace “how the world from 1906 to 1946 formed the man who would create the definitive literary forms of our time” (6). Beckett was writing in a post-world war climate, which I would characterize as maintaining a postmodern mentality of political impassivity, in which people were trying to bespeak the atrocities of the Holocaust and the atomic bomb. It figures that Beckett does what I allege many AIDS films do; he uses humor as a means to express very serious issues of identity, life, and death in response to a time marked by incomprehensible absurdity, a time when the ideals of enlightenment seemed to have failed.
Beckett’s play *Endgame* (1957) is a good example of his writing that expresses a process of an impossible *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* [dealing with the past]. This drama, which Beckett considered one his darkest and most absurd, is set to the backdrop of a wasteland, a reflection of the post-WWII political climate. The main protagonist Hamm is confined to a chair, while his servant Clov must forever wait upon his master, always on his feet, wanting to leave, but never mustering up the energy. Hamm’s legless parents live in trashcans and continually bicker about banal issues. Beckett describes how *Endgame* was “rather difficult and elliptic, mostly depending on the power of the text to claw, more inhuman than Godot” (qtd. in Oppenheim, 290, fn. 8). Clearly, the author was not striving to write a text that was sympathetic, overtly mournful or soothing, but one that “clawed” at the truth of the near impossibility of conceiving of a viable ethics by which to abide after WWII. The narrative should be read as an allegory of the impossibility of agency in the post-war political climate. The palpable absurdist-ethical paradigm therein expresses itself as an affective product of humor evinced by the absurdist strain of comedy.

Nell, Hamm’s legless mother, delivers the telling line in *Endgame*, which makes no mistake about the drama’s correlation between humor and the absurd: “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness […] Yes, yes, it’s the most comical thing in the world. And we laugh, we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it’s always the same thing. Yes, it’s like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don’t laugh any more” (19). From the perspective of an absurdist-ethics, Beckett was able to express the philosophical conundrum experienced by many after WWII, when people inquired how a god could allow such destruction, such suffering, and the death of an estimated 53.5 million lives. Beckett thereby interrogated the paradigms of the ideology of the Enlightenment incarnated by the
shaken human relationship to values, morality, and the notions of right and wrong, or good and evil.

The war forced people to experience an existential crisis, compelling them to question and reevaluate the nature of human existence and human society. I argue that if one were only to accept the hegemonic dogma at that time of crisis, be it that of the Church, rationalism, and/or humanism, without questioning its core, one may not achieve a meaningful degree of reflection or catharsis. Only through a model of ethics that provides an alternative means to distance oneself from the subject at hand, such as the controversial yet viable absurdist-ethics, can one possibly engage philosophically with subjects that are shut down by a paradigm of ethics that has failed to save millions of people from death and destruction.

Nevertheless, an absurdist-ethics is not precipitated only on notions of anguish or grief. In the case of Beckett, one may also discern sentiments of hope. Beckett’s pessimistic dramas depend on an ethical framework that allows for the possibility of testing viable ways to live. In Aesthetic History (1970), Adorno, who was a contemporary critic of Beckett’s, discovered ethical value in the author’s craft and especially in his application of the absurd:

Beckett’s plays are absurd not because of the absence of meaning, for then they would be simply irrelevant, but because they put meaning on trial; they unfold its history. […] Today this is the capacity of art: Through the consistent negation of meaning of artworks. Works of the highest level of form that are meaningless or alien to meaning are therefore more than simply meaningless because they gain their content (Gehalt) through the negation of meaning. (201)

Just as an absurdist-ethics appears at first to prescribe a negation of life through the embracing of death, absurdist comedic art forms like Beckett’s dramas are in truth invested in discovering a meaningful existence in the face of total destruction.
Following Adorno’s lead, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe the existential transformation, which the Jewish people undertook as a devastating result of becoming exiled or becoming “nomadic.”

Let misfortune befall us: this formula punctuates Jewish history. It is we who must follow the most deterriorialized line, the line of the scapegoat, but we will change its sign, we will turn it into the positive line of our subjectivity, our Passion, our proceeding or grievance. We will be our own scapegoat. We will be the lamb. (135)

In a similar way, the mythical configuration of the ‘LGBTQ community’ may be read as deterriorialized, a condition some have called a ‘queer diaspora,’ part of what some consider a minor cultural diaspora. Absurdist art represents a facet of such minor diasporic cultures which have been metaphorically lost and which yet may possibly be regained through the belonging and allegiances within that same minor community. Such art forms would express, complex moments of subjugation, dislocation, and even death, and at the same time a reunion, overcoming, survival, and betterment in the quality of life as a result of active engagement, intellectually and/or spiritually, in the cultural construction of the minor community.

To better understand the dynamics of absurdist art as part and parcel of minor cultures, I look to how Deleuze and Guattari assumed the term as descriptive of Franz Kafka’s writings. The authors see Kafka’s work as prototypical illustrations of that which is humorous and yet deeply serious, anarchic, and yet still very potent politically as a mode of agency. They argue that from Kafka’s own relationship to minor cultural engagements stems a serious form of existential laughter, specifically Kafka’s position as a Czech Jew writing in

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3 The terms *becoming-nomadic* and *nomadic singularities* come from Deleuze and Guattari’s book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. See respectively, pgs. 136 and 45. Also, while Deleuze and Guattari do not use the term *becoming-ethical*, Deleuzian scholars, such as Ian Buchanan and Adrian Parr, do when discussing these concepts. See Buchanan and Parr, pgs. 89-90.
German, and living in Christian Germany. But there is one more element that is relevant to my discussion of an absurdist ethic and its relation to death; Deleuze and Guattari do not mention that Kafka was terminally ill at the time when he wrote his most influential works of literature, and that he had started the only serious sexual relationship in his life during the last few months of his life. Despite the fact that Kafka was dying, and his fiancé’s family warned her against staying with a sick morose man, the two engaged in what was possibly Kafka’s most intense relationship at his weakest physical state, in the face of his own demise.

While some might glean a surface reading of Kafka’s works, which delivers renditions of sinister tales that defy meaning, what Deleuze and Guattari discover in Kafka is an ethics of enlightenment through the medium of absurdist laughter that is spawned by his own minoritarian position. Kafka could only have produced such an intense form of aesthetics because he was already always a part of the periphery, the Other, and the outside. He could never write from an insider’s perspective or from hegemony because he was a part of minor cultures. He was an outsider linguistically, religiously, and socially, and also because of his failing health; in Deleuze and Guattari’s words:

There is a Kafka laughter, a very joyous laughter that people usually understand poorly. It is for stupid reasons that people have tried to seek a refuge far from life in Kafka’s literature, and also an agony, the mark of an impotence and a culpability, the sign of a sad interior tragedy. Only two principles are necessary to accord with Kafka. He is an author who laughs with a profound joy, a joie de vivre, in spite of, or because of, his clownish declarations that he offers like a trap or a circus. [It is an] enunciation [that] forms a unity with desire, beyond laws, states, regimes. Yet the enunciation is always historical, political, and social. A micropolitics, a politics of desire that questions all situations. Never has there been a more comic and joyous author from the point of view of desire; never has there been a more political and social author from the point of view of enunciation. Everything leads to laughter […] (Kafka, 41-42)

The untrained reader of Kafka may, at first, be struck by Deleuze and Guattari’s interpretation. Kafka has produced some of the most sinister stories, depicting the most
obscure and disillusioning situations in world literature. Most have read or heard of his
*Metamorphosis* (1915) and Gregor’s unanticipated transformation into a bug-like existence,
or Kafka’s short story, *A Hunger Artist* (1922), in which a circus performer is literally
starved for attention. The stories depict humans struggling with the auspices of a will to do
that which is moral or ethical, and both wrestle with a need to persevere and survive before
and in spite of the gaze of the *Other*. Both inevitably embody absurd-grotesque aesthetic
forms and die early deaths.

At first glance, these stories do not appear to be humorous, but we are not talking
about slapstick comedy. Absurdist laughter is an extreme form of psychic and bodily reaction,
which one can gage in different hues, from the darkest hue of the Kafkaesque laugh to a kind
of lighter Borgesian laugh. The latter sense of a Borgesian laugh I draw from Foucault’s *The
Order of Things* (1966), where he investigates taxonomies and genealogies of meaning and
sense. Foucault talks about confronting absurdist situations in his writing, from which the
absurd gives rise to laughter, but it does not necessarily make the context funny. Foucault
describes this type of laughter as essentially *disorienting* and *reorienting* because the absurd
artist explores end-of-world—dystopic and utopic—possibilities, as well as alternate and
fantastic realities. Foucault elucidates on Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges’ account of
reading a reference on how animals are categorized in a certain Chinese encyclopedia. The
thinking behind this ordering system is so radically different from the way Foucault thinks,
from ‘Western’ thought, that he experiences a philosophical crisis and at the same time, this
disorientation causes him to laugh:

This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I
read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—our thought, the thought
that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered
surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion
of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other. (xvii)

The passage Foucault references was taken from Borges’ “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins,” a piece of fiction on the idea of a universal language. In contemplating the absurdity of such an attempt, Borges crafts an encyclopedic entry:

This passage quotes a ‘certain Chinese encyclopedia’ in which it is written that ‘animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, […] (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.’ In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*. (qtd. in *The Order of Things*, xv)

Borges defines the role of laughter as a mode of enlightenment sparked by humankind’s encounter and engagement with its limited philosophical capabilities to understand paradigms outside that which one might consider rationalist thought. To laugh an absurdist laugh signals the philosophical recognition of such paradigms, and through the medium of laughter, one may in theory gain a stance of agency in the face of emotional or political bankruptcy or a climate of postmodern physical and/or intellectual defeatism.

I locate this strain of absurdist humor in certain AIDS narratives in fictional film that fall within the spectrum of the extreme logical consequences signaled by Borges. This type of film expresses a disavowing laugh while coloring, expanding, and enriching an ethics of life that re-inscribes those affected by the epidemic with a reason to live, attempting to raise their morale, even if this intention is not an apparent or conscious wish. AIDS, like other cultural traumas and catastrophes, has generated much humor since the epidemic began, not only in AIDS films, but also in other art media in which absurdist humor appears to frame the virus in new and rehabilitating ways.
For instance, gay magazines about AIDS in the tradition of ‘zines,’ oftentimes made by hand, and usually produced for a small group of readers, constituting the genre intrinsically as minor. Daniel Brouwer and Robert Asen explain how zines about AIDS, in particular, employ humor.

Topics, tones, and attitudes vary within and between zines. But humor, often macabre, biting, and absurd, abounds in both. Consider, for example, Wayne Karr’s promisingly empowering ‘The AIDS Survival Guide: A Long-Termer Shares His Secrets,’ in which he dispenses the following advice: ‘BE WHITE! ...BE MALE! ...HAVE A GOOD INSURANCE POLICY! ... BE RICH or GET RICH QUICK.’ These suggestions are (to varying degrees) out of range of individuals’ agency: their ludicrousness dramatizes material advantages conferred through structures of race, sex, and class privilege in the United States. Regardless of its form, humor plays an important role in making sense of AIDS. Echoing Emma Goldman, Aunt Kaposi, one of DNP’s most eloquent writers, affirms the power of humor in the fight against AIDS: ‘A revolution without laughter is like a wedding without love.’ (Public Modalities, 224)

Absurdist laughter in this case is not merely didactic; it is more perceptive and affective. When one first encounters such humor, the sense may evade detection, much as HIV does upon first entry into the cells of a body. But then, one surely is shook up, and in no medium does one perhaps enjoy doing this more than in film.

Absurdist humor has always played an important role in AIDS films. As early as the mid 1980s, when the first AIDS films were produced, German director and polemicist Rosa von Praunheim unleashed a shocking yet telling AIDS film, A Virus Knows No Morals [Ein Virus kennt keine Moral] (1985), which in no unclear terms demanded that gays start advocating for their own protection against attracting and transmitting the virus, as well as stand alert to the role governments and medical community were playing with their lives. This is one of the three films I attribute to an absurd sub-genre of an AIDS Cinema, the second film being again Animal and the third Days, which I present in later chapters.
Other critics have not always found von Praunheim’s work as enlightening. When the gay filmmaker directed *Virus*, he had already made quite a jolting impression on the New German Cinema film industry with his previous work. Many critics warned that *Virus* was yet another revolting addition to his collection of controversial films, such as the satirical *It is Not the Homosexual Who is Perverted, But the Situation in Which He Lives* (1970), a movie which documents the gay coming-out experience, and *Army of Lovers or Revolt of the Perverts* (1979), which examines the gay rights movement in the United States. He also produced a documentary trilogy on AIDS.

Von Praunheim’s work is, in many ways, self-aggrandizing and perverse, but at the same time bold enough to tell the story of marginalized groups, such as queers, immigrants, and the poor. Alice Kuzniar sees a clear legacy between the New German Cinema and the New Queer Cinema: “By candidly addressing gay issues in his oeuvre, von Praunheim has performed a groundbreaking task in widely opening closet doors for gay cinema. […] Another way of refiguring this history of New Queer Cinema would be to claim Rosa von Praunheim as the bridge between it and its largely unrecognized predecessor, the New German Cinema” (90-91).

The pseudonym “Rosa von Praunheim” also indicates an investment in queer politics and engagement with the legacies of the political aftermath of WWII. Born Holger Bernhard

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4 Von Praunheim’s work was considered part of The New German Cinema, a movement brought into force in part by the so-called Oberhausen Manifesto of February 28, 1962. This new generation of filmmakers wanted to differentiate themselves from the moral entrenchment of post-WWII conservatism out of which films like *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946), *Ben Hur* (1959), and in Germany so-called *Heimatfilms* or homeland films were produced, all of which stressed the importance of one’s honor to country and family. Twenty-six filmmakers, mostly German, proclaimed in their Manifesto: “We declare our intention to create the New German feature film. This new film needs new freedoms. Freedom from the conventions of the established industry. Freedom from the control of special interest groups. […] The old film is dead. We believe in a new one” (qtd. in Fowler, 73).
Bruno Mischwitzky, in the 1960s von Praunheim took on his new Künstlername “artist-name,” which stands in part as a symbol of the pink “rosa Winkel” triangle patch that gay prisoners wore in German concentration camps in the Second World War. From the controversial reception received by his films and documentaries, it is clear von Praunheim himself, like his film Virus, has a radical, unapologetic queer agenda. His work has been largely misread as political corrupt or altogether offensive, self-indulgent, or meaningless, and as a result his position in the queer community has been precarious. Von Praunheim openly criticized the lack of self-criticism by the gay community in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Germany, yet remained unabashed in the face of politically conservative resistance, and applied film as his medium of attack (Waugh, 267). His films were oftentimes rendered radically obscure due to audiences’ frequent inability to decode the ethical directives cloaked beneath their customarily absurdist shell. The German director is not only blunt and opinionated in his films, he is also known for his radical political opinions and his public ‘outings’ of people and topics that urgently needed to be brought to the table.5 Alice Kuzniar, in her book on The German Queer Cinema (2000), throws light on von Praunheim’s contingent political existence in the gay community:

The very best of Rosa von Praunheim’s work is engaged precisely in this queer visibility, where the gendered and sexually unconventional subject is placed center stage, such that his/her presence becomes an affront to the bourgeois status quo and an encouragement to all queers. When von Praunheim can capture the political edge to this histrionics his work excels; without it his movies run the danger of seeping into self-indulgence and silliness [...] (111)

Virus is also one such demonstration of his problematic works, for it too is an ‘outing’ of AIDS. Classified best as a mockumentary, Virus is fashioned around a montage of absurd

5 Von Praunheim revealed the homosexual orientation of several German celebrities on German television, including Hape Kerkeling and Alfred Biolek. For more details, see: Groebel, pg. 321.
vignettes. Each touches upon various facets of HIV/AIDS, addressing statistics, but more often contesting popular rumor, misnomers, and stereotypes about the at-that-time germinating epidemic. Von Praunheim’s camera leads spectators into different contamination zones, including the hospital and laboratory, a psychologist’s office, a gay bathhouse, the park at night, a drag party, and even deep into the jungles of Africa to the inner walls of an AIDS concentration camp.

Highly absurd and satirical, each sketch exposes contemporary prejudice and the ignorance surrounding the early stages of the epidemic in Germany. The sketches are woven together asynchronously, drawing spectators in and out of the different wards. The star of the film, at least as it is advanced by the credits—for the film is too disjointed to have a real protagonist—is gay bathhouse owner Rüdiger Kackinski, played by Praunheim himself. In various scenes in the film, Rüdiger hides safe sex posters and condom machines from customers, afraid the propaganda might be bad for business. Von Praunheim is addressing the problem of politicians trying to advise gay men on how to have sex. In one critique, entitled “‘Life is Very Precious, Even Right Now’: (Un)Happy Camping in the New German Cinema,” Bruce Williams illustrates how:

[One scene is] intercut with a ‘scholarly paper’ by Dr. Blut in which she demonstrates the importance of safer sex by dipping two dildos, one covered with a condom, into a vinaigrette of blood, urine, semen, and saliva. Dr. Blut’s plea stands in stark confrontation to the freedom and defiance of the sauna, of a discourse prior to the ‘encondomed’ rhetoric of the 80s. (54)

This situation mimics the fear generated around the topic of AIDS, whereby bathhouses were thought to be one of the main loci of infectious transmission. Panic spread, starting in San

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*The name Kackinski is surely a play on his own last name Mischwitzky, and a word for feces in German (*Kacke*).*
Francisco and New York in the early 1980s, and soon after in other major liberal cities like London and Berlin.7

In responding to attitudes prevalent in Germany in the mid 1980s, von Praunheim hints about the hesitation within the gay community towards being educated about safer sex. In his opinion, gay Germans, at least as he satirizes them, would rather engage in risky sexual behavior at their own peril. They did not want anyone coming and lecturing them on how to use a condom properly, especially within the sanctity of their own stomping grounds. Ultimately, the initial momentum within the gay community to help crack down on unsafe behavior in the bathhouses failed in many urban settings. As Raymond Smith writes in the case of the United States:

The drive toward bathhouse closure was led by a private ad hoc committee from within the lesbian and gay community, which called for inspections and self-regulation of bathhouses and sex clubs, to be overseen by lesbian and gay professionals. Although many managers did agree to such policies, volunteer inspectors organized by a committee on safer sex found disappointing results. As time went on, the resistance or indifference of some bathhouse owners regulating the behavior of their clients led to a more forceful position by the [government]. (125)

In Virus, such issues are raised indirectly through the foil of absurdist humor, in which the gay community does react with apathy, indubitably mimicking von Praunheim’s own experience in the Berlin queer community in the early 1980s.

In a side-sketche, for example, Professor Dr. Blut (meaning “Dr. Blood” in German), who works for the “Institute for Pestilence, Plague and Death,” (which is a spoof of the name of the CDC—Centers for Disease Control) cracks jokes about his seropositive patients,

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7 For specifics on the disputes around bathhouses in the United States, see Jason Hendrickson’s “Conflicts at the Tubs: Bathhouses and Gay Culture and Politics in the United States,” in which he elucidates the logic politicians purported to support such actions of policing and closing businesses of this kind.
reducing the malady to a psychosomatic symptom. He reasons, “Shame is the best defense!”

In the next skit, a gaggle of nurses in drag, bored as they no longer are able to have uninhibited sex time with their dying patients, play instead a game of dice to decide which of their AIDS patients will die next.

As a means to make emphatic the absurdity of fatalism, the camera also enters the enclave of the psychologist’s office, where a doctor convinces a patient that he should enact his own death by encasing himself in a coffin. Through such means, the patient is meant to combat the immediacy of his inevitable demise. Finally, a rogue band of revolutionaries, who call themselves “the Army of the Sick and Impotent” reenact ACT UP-type demonstrations for political activism and action, which testifies to the procedure by which von Praunheim straddles both absurdist, and oftentimes offensive and distasteful humor as trashy camp at its best with political ambition. These vignettes are not meant merely to disgust, but to shock his intended gay spectators back into their senses, as if to say: “Rise up and do something about this damn epidemic!”

When the film premiered in the mid 1980s, the nature of the virus was still under scrutiny by health officials, governments, and the public at large worldwide. Yet, von Praunheim already foresaw danger in the systematic way in which people strove to control the lives of gay and lesbians as a means of quarantining the virus. Lawrence Mass gives the details of an interview, in which von Praunheim provides some background to his motivations for the film in this respect:

When AIDS started, I wanted to go back to Berlin [from New York]. I was really scared and somehow I felt safer there. Then, when AIDS came to Berlin, I realized I couldn’t keep ignoring it and that’s when I really began to get politically active (with regards to AIDS). I got involved with fundraising and benefits, and attempting to

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8 The CDC has notably been officially renamed Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
explore AIDS issues on film. Now, I feel safer here in New York, because in Berlin people are still living with the illusion that nothing has changed. For example, the baths are all still open and very, very crowded. They don’t monitor for safer sex practices, but they do sometimes give out condoms. [...] The timid, let’s cooperate approach just isn’t going to work. (In A Virus Knows No Morals, a radical group of persons with AIDS presses its demands at gunpoint.) There have to be radical actions because just saying how bad things are isn’t enough. (35)

In Virus, von Praunheim also conveys the message that gay men are being used as scapegoats for the epidemic, and not necessarily in the manner depicted in the absurd humorous situational vignettes he portrays. He also submits spectators to an onslaught of real, current newspaper articles and their headlines, juxtaposed against a fictional radiocast, which foretells all too accurately the surrender of a larger portion of the gay population to an AIDS-related death.

Although rejected by their form of presentation, von Praunheim’s sometimes questionable contributions do oftentimes hit the mark. In one interview from the 1980s, he offers clairvoyant words of caution, “[it’s] not just this [situation, like sending gays away for quarantine], but many of the satirical situations are already real. And it is scary and happening now” (Mass, 26; emphasis in original). The director was able to accurately forecast the virus’s pandemic potential, as well as the formation of radical direct action advocacy groups such as ACT UP. Virus is von Praunheim’s own contribution as an activist; his viable and valuable message is made clear at the end of the film in the form of a chant, albeit one sung by a group of gay men, dressed in drag as nurses: “You have your fate in your own hands,” which is set ever satirically to the tune of American spiritual ballad “He’s got the whole world in his hands.” Von Praunheim’s goal is that spectators should interrogate what is real and what is fiction in order to usurp their apathetic stance toward the epidemic. It is true that von Praunheim presses spectators in politically questionable ways, pushing them
from the limits of satire into the realm of the grotesque to make his point, including drawing parallels between the methods employed by the Nazis to detain and eradicate the Jews, homosexuals, the disabled, and others.

In another politically questionable scene, the bathhouse owner taunts the spectators with his admission that “this disease makes me horny,” which one could read as the foreshadowing of the heated polemic around the practice of barebacking because it goes against the accepted idea that one must always participate in so-called safer sex practices. But more importantly, the portrayal of Kakinsky getting aroused by the terrible disease signals to the element of the grotesque that I develop with more detail in the following chapter. Through the mouthpiece of his actors, von Praunheim clarifies that horniness should not be equated with an unbridled urge to participate in self-deprecating behaviors such as barebacking at all costs. Instead, horniness is understood as a lust for life. Von Praunheim makes this clear when Kakinsky proclaims in the film “Sex is life and I believe in life.” In other words, von Praunheim is emphasizing how issues of gay sex and the politics of HIV/AIDS, and in particular in terms of barebacking, are more complex than meets the eye. Gay sex in the post-AIDS era is instead bound up not only in questions of queer sexuality, but also in those of identity, selfhood, and above all, are entrenched in an ethics of life and death—with the scales tipped toward life. He criticizes those who would suggest otherwise, those who would argue, and specifically those that interpret barebacking porn sites as places aimed at making people horny enough to have unprotected sex for the sake of horniness. Instead, I read von Praunheim’s proclamation of “sex is life” as a means to reimagine such loci of gay sex, whether it be gay bathhouses or porn sites, as places where one may in fact liberate their mere sexual horniness, and instead celebrate a lust for life. In this equation,
such places function to empower a deep connection to the Other and to the community as an iteration of identity. A reckoning with the philosophical groundwork of the absurd, an absurdist-ethics, and the aesthetics of absurdist humorous narratives may resolve this ethical quagmire, however complex.  

Even if a spectator cannot pinpoint the impetus behind the film’s panoply of absurdist images and dialogue, such as in the case of Virus, many still appear cautiously amused and struck by the depth they sense nonetheless. Although the use of absurdist humor may be misread, I interpret it in Virus as a call to arms and not as a tool to humiliate or disrespect victims of the epidemic. I do not, for example, rely on a theory of humor, such as that of Henri Bergson, who claims that humor as a tool may be used “above all, [as] a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it” (92). In the case of an absurdist-ethics, the affective manifestation of humor does not have necessarily a rude and vengeful nature in the Bergsonian sense; its humor aims to be productive, and it is meant to provoke insight, in this case into the topic of the value of life during the epidemic. My interpretation of humor is therefore more in lines with a theory thereof held by film scholar Noël Carroll, who conjectures how comedies can be smart and productive. Carroll also dismisses Bergson’s theory:

The Bergsonian idea, that laughter serves to humiliate the character in order to correct his behavior, is completely untenable because the [joke] is far ahead of the audience’s. Rather the audience laughs at these [jokes] with a variety of laughter akin to the laughter one indulges in when a particularly brilliant checkmate is executed or when a tricky mathematical puzzle is ingeniously solved. Sometimes we laugh at engines and

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9 Portions of the above section on A Virus Knows No Morals were previously published. See Riley, “Review: A Virus Knows No Morals,” in bibliography.
at puzzle solutions. That is, there is a category of laughter that is evoked when things ‘fall into place.’ (54)

I follow Carroll’s lead in matters of humor and therefore read laughter in the absurdist works in the genre of an absurd AIDS Cinema, not as distasteful, unethical, or nonsensical. I argue that von Praunheim’s intentions should be assessed as carnivalesque and certainly sometimes sadomasochistic, but nevertheless sincere. The film’s montage of sketches, together with the song and dance routines qualify it not as trash, but as the progeny of a kind of avant-garde musical. I read absurdist humor as part of the philosophical tool of an absurdist-ethics that may be read instead as an enabling force with which to reckon.

Many critics and spectators register Virus’s potential, in particular his intention to entertain and inform the public. For instance, in 1987, a writer of The New York Times stresses that Praunheim is resourcefully dealing “in doom:”

[Von Praunheim is] as caustic about AIDS victims who don’t hesitate to pass it on as he is about measures intended to comfort victims and to limit the spread of the disease. Mr. von Praunheim’s films look cheaply made and more or less pasted together, which works in their favor and is very much part of their conscious style. Technical niceties would only dilute the savagery of his social satire. […] Among agitprop film makers, Mr. von Praunheim is very rare. He doesn’t traffic in false hopes or positive images. He deals in doom. “A Virus Knows No Morals” has been called a black comedy, but it’s much rougher than that. […] [The film] is armed camp. (Canby, par. 4; 6) 10

Even as damning as the prognosis of “doom” might sound, Vincent Canby admits that von Praunheim delivers truths about HIV and AIDS. What is more, Canby bestows the film with

10 Canby’s comment on the budget of the film signals the fact that most films of early queer cinema were low-budget, oftentimes paid out of the director’s pocket. Even von Praunheim’s most bitter opponents, such as Bryan Bruce, commend the filmmaker on his camera style. He writes: “His camera style, for example, has clearly evolved out of a sense of avant-garde film language (the obsessive use of the zoom, the hand-held camera, a preference for compositional imbalance, and non-sequential montage), but is also strongly grounded in a narrative tradition and an appeal to theatrical and comedic convention (particularly cabaret and burlesque) which automatically makes his films more accessible and playful, less impeded by the weight of avant-garde seriousness” (Bruce, 27).
Canby is obliquely referring to the absurdist humor that pervades the film, which he connects with camp, one of the clear aesthetic styles prevalent in queer narratives.

Camp is not new to queer cinema, with or without the subject of AIDS. Scholars have long identified camp’s dominating role in queer cinema, but also in the queer lifestyle—one may think of drag queens and gay pride parades, which can be described as festive, colorful, and over-the-top. Bruce Williams helps understand the history and meaning of the label camp as a style or stylized mode of language that performs a primary function as a gay or queer use of humor, as in humor used by gay men or other LGBTQ persons:

[The] phenomenon had its origins as a ‘masonic gesture whereby homosexuals could make themselves known to each other during periods in which homosexuality was not avowable’(9). [...] [Even] today, camp remains not only a signal, but a ‘way in which homosexuals and other people who live double lives can find a lingua franca.’ [...] ‘There are only two things essential to camp; a secret within the personality which one ironically wishes to conceal and to exploit, and a particular way of seeing things, affected by spiritual isolation, but strong enough to impose itself on others through acts or creations; (9). (52)

Camp functions therefore like an organizing principle, a lingua franca, as a kind of queer code or secret language used between gay men to discuss and celebrate issues pertaining to gay sexuality and in the case of Virus, as a means to discuss emotionally contentious issues like HIV/AIDS.

Camp is veritably that which cannot be held in bounds. It is by very definition excessive, or that which exceeds the norm, and therefore cannot be logically normative either. This fact has always been central to definitions of camp in the history of scholarship tracing back to the most transitional pieces such as Susan Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” (1964), an essay that contains fifty-eight theses on the make-up of camp. Many scholars charge that this
essay helped establish the term *camp* within the academy, and some of her theses prove relevant to the topic of absurdist humor:

10. Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman, but a ‘woman.’ To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater.

41. The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to ‘the serious.’ One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.

44. Camp proposes a comic vision of the world. But not a bitter or polemical comedy. If tragedy is an experience of hyperinvolvement, comedy is an experience of underinvolvement, of detachment.

Following Sontag’s lead, one becomes more aware how camp performs alongside absurdist humor. Succinctly, camp is the mechanism that tenderizes the meat of those issues one cannot easily stomach, such as death and an epidemic. The affect of humor is the aftertaste that makes one aware of the true nature of one’s diet. In other words, to depict AIDS as simply campy would be unjustifiable and petty; but to use absurdist humor to remit truth-values is an ethical gesture.

Other definitions of camp also help the understanding of the role it plays in cinema.

In *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality* (1993), David Bergman offers his readers a multilayered definition, addressing camp with respect to style, pop culture, and minoritarian and (homo-) sexual politics:

First, everyone agrees that camp is a style (whether of objects or of the way objects are perceived is debated) that favors ‘exaggeration,’ ‘artifice,’ and ‘extremity.’ Second, camp exists in tension with popular culture, commercial culture, or consumerist culture. Third, the person who can recognize camp, who sees things as campy, or who can camp is a person outside the cultural mainstream. Fourth, camp is affiliated with homosexual culture, or at least with a self-conscious eroticism that throws into question the naturalization of desire. (4-5)

Following this definition, one can understand easily how films like von Praunheim’s *Virus* fall under the category of camp. The film’s style is exaggerated, artificial, and extreme. *Virus*
depicts the characters and their lifestyles in a way that exceeds boundaries of gender and sexuality normalcy, even within the realm of realistic possibility. Additionally, queer spectators who identify camp when watching such films implicate themselves—consciously or not—with camp; and in doing so, they place themselves outside mainstream culture as well. Consequently, they are arguably locating themselves, in a positive way, within the queer community affected by the epidemic.

As a result, a relationship between camp and a philosophy of ethics arises. Michael Hattersley explains that:

Camp encouraged a sense of play, in contrast to the humorless semiotics of the academy […]. Camp by contrast, preserved the possibility that works of art, including personalities, could have at least an ‘as if’ relationship to truth, […] Camp [mocks] something you take seriously, and herein lies its genius: Camp allows the thoroughly disabused and ironized individual to in fact take something painful or absurd seriously by engaging it in serious play […]. (165-166). Along these lines, camp is a product of minor cultures and cinemas, especially queer cinema, whereby the cultural paradigms presented in a film like Virus may never be entirely assimilated into mainstream culture, and/or in the hetero-normative status quo. Camp cannot be entirely commoditized because it is, by definition, that which overspends its assets, an excess.

In the case of an absurd AIDS Cinema, the individual and collective pain and grief of an epidemic are turned into the absurd, in a way transforming pain into something bearable. This mode of agency, which would not have been possible through forms of cultural hegemony, is however realized through the paragon of an absurdist-ethics. In reference to von Praunheim’s Virus, Bruce Williams entitles his critique of the film with equal campiness and absurdity: “One Must Have a Heart of Stone to Confront the AIDS Epidemic Without Laughing,” where he declares that:
Praunheim’s camp celebrates marginality with political style and humor. AIDS is not elevated to the level of an unimpeachable icon; rather it is demystified through travesty and lampoon. Were AIDS to be treated with reverence, it would be rendered sacrosanct and would hence remain incurable (One cannot heal the divine). […] As do homosexuals themselves, AIDS refuses to obey the conventional morality imposed by Dr. Blut and other reactionary characters. (54)

Williams also diagnoses humor in association with camp as the force that demands a reconceptualization of ethics around the issue of the epidemic. Through the mechanism of an absurdist-ethics at play, the affect of humor is able to divest AIDS of its threat. Similarly, Bryan Bruce, a writer for the long-running Canadian film journal *CineAction!*, puts his finger on humor as a tool for rendering the consequences of the virus more evident to spectators:

> In the face of the sensationalized and alarmist rendering of AIDS by the media, it is, of course, important for someone to look at the whole phenomenon with a sense of humor. [In this and other films, von Praunheim tends] to use comedy very consciously as an entry to dealing with the most severe and unpleasant aspects of membership in marginalized and oppressed subcultures. (29-31)^{11}

In an article written in 1995 titled “AIDS in Film and Theater” [Aids im Film und Theater], one anonymous author writes of the early skepticism of the film, calling von Praunheim a man who wields a decidedly complex sense of humor before his time:

> Von Praunheim is irritating and cracks jokes in *A Virus Knows No Morals*. He overdoes it shamelessly and perceptively, but he arrived some years too soon with his sarcasm and black humor. In 1985, people in this country [Germany] were still struck by the first wave of panic and news of catastrophe. It was a time filled with the greatest sense of consternation and helplessness. No one had yet to confront the sickness with jokes, satire, and irony. (37. My translation)

With a sentiment akin to pity, the critic grapples with the difficulties faced by von Praunheim before the tough crowd of queer spectators. Although film scholars like Kuzniar and Mass dedicate time to researching von Praunheim, not much has changed in terms of popular

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^{11} Bruce does condemn von Praunheim for his supposed misogynistic depictions of women as “monsters” in *Virus*. At a screening of the film in Toronto, von Praunheim responded to such claims, saying “‘gay men have the right to portray women this way,’ particularly their mothers, whose sons try so hard to please them, ‘…and all you get is shit’” (Bruce, 29). In *Virus*, an example of this would be the mother who dresses up as a gay man wearing a strap-on dildo, so that she may peek in on her son having sex in the bathhouse.
responses to the film in the last twenty-five years. Recently posted on Rottentomatoes.com, one anonymous reviewer complained, “A joyfully bizarre hodgepodge of surreal ‘WTF’ [‘What the Fuck’] histrionics, but as a satire, I don’t see how purposely putting off about 98% of your audience accomplishes anything.”\(^\text{12}\) Another anonymous reviewer at Imdb.com commented:

Comedy about AIDS. That’s right—a comedy. Nowadays this probably wouldn’t bother anyone, seeing as AIDS is no longer the death sentence it was, but in 1985 this was considered sick and tasteless. I caught it at a small art theatre in Boston back in 1986. The audience was wall to wall gay guys. Nobody laughed during it but nobody seemed real upset by it either. It was just too…strange. There are some incredibly depressing scenes involving a gay couple where one discovers he has AIDS and then we cut to a bunch of guys in drag singing songs! It was an uneasy mix of drama and comedy with the accent on comedy. The only good thing I got out of the movie was information about AIDS. There was a local AIDS activist group right outside the theatre. They supported the film and were handing out pamphlets to people that explained what HIV and AIDS were. Remember—the government ignored it completely back then until it became an epidemic. So it attempted something in 1985 that was unthinkable. Sadly I don’t think it succeeded. (My emphasis)\(^\text{13}\)

The spectator admits that despite his initial repugnance, or more exactly, his experience of cognitive dissonance at the outwardly absurdist-grotesque scenarios in the film, “nobody seemed real upset by it either.” It would appear that some gay audience members might respond in a manner of doubling; at first, they are shocked by the presentation of the subject matter; then, they are intrigued, but at a loss to explain why.

This particular spectator admits that the film drew in large numbers of gay men, he received vital information about HIV/AIDS from AIDS activists stationed there, and the film was memorable his life long. To assert that the film did not succeed, as he argues, is simply not accurate. This spectator, like others that day, were possibly not able to identify the reason behind von Praunheim’s use of blunt, absurdist humor; and yet, the director did succeed in so


\(^\text{13}\) See: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0090266/>.
far as bothering spectators to the core, enough to make them question why almost thirty years later. This is, in essence, the process of de-normalizing or reframing that is at the very core of art, as observed by Adorno after WWII. In this case, *Virus* forced many spectators to reevaluate their conception of the epidemic and gay sex, and re-view it through an absurdist-ethical paradigm.

Not all spectators were oblivious to von Praunheim’s intentions. In illustration, another reviewer at *Imdb.com* commended the filmmaker for his efforts, clearly understanding what was at stake:

> This, at the time, was a pioneering film. The always innovative and irreverent Rosa von Praunheim broke the ice on satirizing AIDS. This was later done by several other independent directors from Canada and the USA, also imitating the parody musical format which von Praunheim created. […] Von Praunheim was severely ostracized for poking fun at such a subject. But he insisted that given how the world had ignored AIDS up to then (1985; it took the Rock Hudson death to shake the US then), satire was necessary. He was right. Whatever would cause the most raucous would bring the most attention to AIDS. And it worked. So, don’t expect a landmark film. But it is a film that perhaps highlights von Praunheim’s career as a gay activist, not as a film maker.¹⁴

It is also important to note the difference here between what I call absurdist humor and satire, for spectators and critics alike use the word *satire* in cases I call *absurd*. In this regard, John Shillington in his work on *Grappling with Atrocity* (2002) makes a good distinction between the two concepts. Satire “presents an irrational world rationally in terms of a linear plot, understandable (albeit exaggerated) behavior, and ideas. The spectator is in on the joke. [While the absurd emphasizes] metaphysical anguish, puzzling images, and devaluation of language. The audience is often in a combative relationship with the concepts of the play where the darkness threatens to overshadow the humor” (157). One cannot therefore simply equate satire with the absurd; and if there is any indication that the legacy of absurdist AIDS

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films belong to this category of the absurd, it is indeed the spectators contested and
oftentimes love-hate relationship and response to those films that invoke the affect of humor.

Thomas Waugh, in *The Fruit Machine: Twenty Years of Writings on Queer Cinema* (2000), claims that those who willingly watch and enjoy von Praunheim’s films must have an
“acquired taste,” and that taste is no doubt for an absurdist gallows humor (165). Waugh
wonders why the film has not received real notoriety outside of Germany (231), and I answer
that it is clearly because of von Praunheim’s indulgence in an aesthetic of the “absurdist
gourmet,” a delighting in the delectable affect of a gallows-type humor, but one which
characteristically can only be appreciated through intellectual rigor. Von Praunheim
acknowledges this intention in an interview in 1986:

**Mass:** In *A Virus Knows No Morals* you’ve got plenty of political consciousness, and
there isn’t a hint of sentimentality, but to the point that I begin to wonder, where’s the
compassion? You know, I had lunch with Felice Picano recently, and I mentioned to
him that I had just seen the film, which I characterized as a kind of black comedy
about AIDS. Not having seen it himself and in view of the staggering pain and losses
and raw nerves we all share here in New York, where the epidemic is so much worse
than most Berliners—even now—you can imagine, he could only observe that maybe
comedies about AIDS need to wait a few years. But I should add that his tone of
understatement made us both giggle.

**Von Praunheim:** I think humor, especially black humor in a time of crisis, is vital to
survival. As a doctor, you, especially, must know this. In medicine, I think, having a
sense of humor often helps you develop the coolness, the distance you need to
approach things logically and realistically. As a gay man, you also feel this, I’m sure.
Humor is often a means of survival for minorities in times of crisis. I have Jewish
friends who survived the concentration camps. They’ve told me how, in the most
extreme and cruel situations, they would burst out laughing. It was the only way they
knew to endure to survive.

**Mass:** That’s fascinating. Jews are well known for their sense of humor, but I had
never heard much about Jewish humor under the Nazis or in the camps. (That would
be a good subject for research, for a book, if one doesn’t already exist.) (*Dialogues,*
Mass, 25-26)
And indeed, such books on humor and the Holocaust do exist. For instance, David Danow talks about laughter in the concentration camps in his book *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque* (1995):

Curiously, a fine sense of what is meant by laughter in [the context of a concentration camp] is provided by an unlikely source, Eli Wiesel’s classic work of Holocaust literature, *The Gates of the Forest*, in which the twin manifestations of madness and laughter are treated poetically and philosophically. ‘Behind every tree and within every shred of cloud someone was laughing. It was not the laughter of one man but of a hundred, of seven times seven hundred’ (1967:17) True to the carnivalesque tradition, this depiction of laughter is collective at the core, belonging not to a single individual but to the world’s inhabitants at large. It is rendered not in response to what is funny but in answer to what might otherwise (without its healing power) be frightening.

This sentiment, and in particular as it relates to WWII and the Holocaust, is further expressed in a number of cinematic productions. The specimen that immediately comes to mind is, of course, Roberto Benigni’s romantic comedy *Life is Beautiful* [*La Vita è Bella*] (1997), winner of three Oscar awards in 1999 and which expresses humor as a mode of survival.15 *Life is Beautiful* calls to mind Danow’s invocation of Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the therapeutic power of laughter, approached on *Rabelais and His World: Carnival and Grotesque* (1965). Bakhtin relates how he reads François Rabelais’s theories on laughter, as based off of postulates of antiquity, namely from Hippocrates and Aristotle, who claimed that humor is a universal, philosophical form. Bakhtin theorizes that “[Hippocrates’s] prestige [was] founded on the comments contained in his medical treatise concerning the importance of a gay and cheerful mood on the part of the physician and patient fighting disease” (67). For Bakhtin, “laughter [is] a whole philosophy, a certain spiritual premise of the awakened man who has attained virility” (67). Similarly, he invokes Aristotle’s aphorism that

15 For further analysis of the film and criticism on the use of humor as risking having the simple effect of a cathartic, see: Riley, “Fantastical Cinematic Disavowals of War.”
“Of all living creatures only man is endowed with laughter.” This formula enjoyed immense popularity and was given a broader interpretation: laughter was seen as man’s highest spiritual privilege, inaccessible to other creatures. As we know, it concludes Rabelais’ introductory poem to Gargantua.

Mieux est le ris que de larmes escrire
Par ce que rire est le proper de l’homme. (68)

In this vein of thought, I identify humor in the context of an absurdist-ethics as a way to engage the spectator (or reader, or viewer), via a thinking, philosophical, ethical point of view and as a psychological means to deliberately deal with issues of death and destruction— in other words, as an unavoidable push to get one’s hands and face dirty in the mud of it all.

Many of the visual and/or situational comical scenarios in Virus may be identified as belonging to the genre of a gallows humor, the understanding of which takes us closer to conceptualizing the way absurdist humor is fashioned through the aesthetics of the absurd. In Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious (1905), Freud helps to explain the dynamic at play in a gallows humor, as it would apply to absurdist humor:

To the classes of tendentious jokes that we have considered so far—exposing or obscene jokes, aggressive (hostile) jokes, cynical (critical, blasphemous) jokes—I should like to add another, the fourth and rarest, the nature of which can be illustrated by a good example: “Two Jews met in a railway carriage at a station in Galacia. “Where are you going?” asked one. “To Cracow,” was the answer. “What a liar you are!” broke out the other. “If you say you’re going to Cracow, you want me to believe you’re going to Lemberg. But I know that in fact you’re going to Cracow. So why are you lying to me?”’ (137).

For Freud, the key to the joke is the revelation of a truth through the concealment of such.

Important for me is the way Freud ties this double entendre in with the absurd:

This excellent [joke], which gives an impression of oversubtlety, evidently works by the technique of absurdity. [...] [The] serious substance of the joke is the questions about the condition of truth [die Frage nach den Bedingungen der Wahrheit]. [...] What they are attacking is not a person or an institution but the certainty of our knowledge itself, one of our speculative possessions. (Jokes, 138)

16 “Better a laugh to write of than a tear; For it is laughter that becomes man best.” The Complete Works of François Rabelais, 2.
In Freud’s opinion, such jokes are made to disavow or repress a traumatic event; yet, at the same time, one yearns to flush out its truth and the logic behind it, even if there is not one. Therefore, an absurdist joke appears in a form that one also recognizes as repulsive or disrespectful; and those who are trained to look for trauma, like the psychoanalyst or the literary theorist, will discover its shadow. While those who do not know how to unearth subversive meaning may simply imagine the joke in poor taste.

Yet, more importantly, those that partake in humor in the face of trauma are doing so, according to Freud, as a means to obtain “pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that disturb it; it acts as a substitute for this emergence of affect, it takes its place” (220). Therefore, instead of someone responding to a traumatic situation through crying or screaming, which would further deepen one’s pain, responding through laughter enables one to experience pleasure instead. For Freud, “the pleasure of comedy arises—there is no other way of putting this—at the cost of this release of affect that did not happen. It comes from an expenditure of affect saved” (220-221). What one suppresses, of course, is one’s knowledge of death, thereby entailing the meaning behind the classification gallows humor.  

The absurd is, in essence, a shaggy-dog story meets gallows humor, a story that goes on and on and ends without a punch line, except in this instance one knows that death can be the only final pun. For Samuel Weber, who appears not to get the joke, Freud is “ensnared in

17 Another of Freud’s jokes to help illustrate this point:

The most crass instance of humour—known as gallow-humour—may be instructive. The rogue who is being led to execution on a Monday exclaims: “Well, that’s a good start to the week.” That is actually a joke, for the observation in itself hits the mark, though it is absurdly misplaced, for there is not going to be anything further happening for him this week. But it takes humour to make a joke like that […] I must say, there is something like greatness of spirit hiding in this “blague,” in clinging so fast to normal nature and disregarding everything that was meant to cast him down and drive him to despair. This kind of grandeur in humour makes an unmistakable appearance in instances where our admiration is not inhibited by the circumstances of the humorous figure. (220-221)
this shaggy-dog story which he cannot bring to a satisfactory conclusion’” (qtd. in Cornwell, 15). Such readers do not espy the value of gallows humor. Similarly, such readers might miss the agency and value to be gained from reading absurdist AIDS films like *Virus* through the lens of an absurdist-ethics. But others do unpeel the layers of the joke to pluck at the valuable meaning at its core. Maurice Charney suggests that the traumatic event with which one deals in such jokes is in fact modernity itself. He asserts: “In order to deal with modernity, literature has to deal with the faces of determinism, absurdity, and death. Coping, in a literary sense, with modernity while maintaining the hopeful outlook of comedy requires an exquisite balance of humor and pathos, comedy and tragedy” (177). Nevertheless, Charney’s proposition is too optimistic and idealistic to be extended to a gallows humor and certainly not to AIDS films. Instead, one should understand that one is dealing with a postmodern mentality when accessing gallows humor, and above all an absurdist-ethics.

Post-modernity may be understood as Fredric Jameson formulated it in his pivotal book on *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1993):

> Postmodernism, postmodern consciousness, may then amount to not much more than theorizing its own condition of possibility, which consists primarily in the sheer enumeration of changes and modifications. […] [The] postmodern looks for breaks, for events rather than new worlds, for the telltale instant after which it is no longer the same […]. (ix)

This approach helps to understand absurdist humor today in general, and in particular the radical depictions I draw from cinema, as narratives of disruption from which one may glean agency, when experienced through a reading with the lens of an absurdist-ethics as a philosophical tool of enlightenment. In early cinema, one encounters Charlie Chaplin’s ability to shock the spectator into laughter and contemplation in his allegorical role as Hitler in *The Great Dictator* (1940). Peter Conrad explains how for Chaplin, “Comedy is
aggression by other means. There is something funny as well as menacing [in his humorous use of] absurdity” (qtd. in Cornwell, 17). In her book *Slackonomics: Generation X in the Age of Creative Destruction* (2008), cinema scholar Lisa Chamberlain has termed this kind of humor a “comedy of discomfort” (71). Many AIDS films, starting from Rosa von Praunheim’s *Virus*, follow this tradition of transmitting a kind of comedy of discomfort. The epidemic is the event, and the historical repercussions therefrom is that which one is trying to repress; and yet, it is exactly this trauma that compels one, through absurdist humor, to theorize the conditions of possibility vis-à-vis an ethical life.

As a conduit to my next chapter on the aesthetic of the grotesque as it applies to an absurdist-ethics, I explore how Kierkegaard, like Freud, also appeals to a form of gallows humor, which displays the interdependency of the affect of humor and the grotesque. Thomas Oden depicts Kierkegaard’s absurdist sense of humor through the analysis of a passage by the Danish philosopher:

Kierkegaard tells the story of a horsefly that ‘sat on a man’s nose the very moment he made his last running leap to throw himself into the Thames’ […] The extreme seriousness of suicide is here utterly incongruous with the entirely accidental landing of the fly. […] Kierkegaard does not hesitate to push his comic analogies to gross extremes: he imagines a man who pretends to let ‘himself be skinned alive in order to show how the humorous smile is produced by the contraction of a particular muscle—and thereupon follows this with a lecture on humor’ […] (10)

Kierkegaard’s jokes validate how an indulgence in morbid, grotesque formations (that which is almost unbearable to represent) demand a questioning of basic assumptions and ideologies in order to reorient oneself to acquire a more viable mode of living ethically. As a result, one needs to also embrace the comical in order to defuse this tension and make the absurdity of a postmodern life not only bearable, but also something to celebrate and from which to reap pleasure and joy. Kierkegaard’s theory on humor emphasizes its ethical foundation as well as
the possibility for it to be a philosophical tool, in instances of so-called “cerebral philosophical humor” (Oden, 24). For Kierkegaard, that which is philosophical in the comedic, “is always a sign of maturity, and then the essential thing is only that a new shoot emerges in his maturity that vis comica [comic force] does not suffocate pathos but merely indicates that a new pathos is beginning” (281). Humor in Kierkegaard has a transcendent quality that is required of those who strive and most nearly obtain an ethical and virtuous lifestyle.

Engaging with politically contentious topics, such as the AIDS epidemic, is a philosophical struggle, because it relates to experiences closely related to suffering. Yet, this kind of engagement offers the opportunity of becoming aware and coming to terms with one’s own philosophical and political positioning vis-à-vis traumatic historical and/or personal events—which ultimately may only be endured through the comical, and which ends in one’s acceptance of the absurd. Indeed, Oden writes specifically how Kierkegaard’s conception of humor may be used as a philosophical tool to work through trauma:

Humor offers [a] salve even while aware that there is no way out of the inexorable contradiction which constitutes selfhood. […] Tragic consciousness remains fixated on the pain. But comic consciousness focuses on the contradiction, the absurdity, and the incongruity to which pain points. In this way it transmutes pain into jest. (Oden, 30-31).

For Kierkegaard specifically, spiritual and philosophical suffering enabled him to think in such sophisticated ways about selfhood, and this through the lens of humor and the absurd. Kierkegaard’s illustration highlights for me the fact that, through such cerebral philosophical means, not just those infected by a deadly virus, but humankind stuck in a postmodern moment, can meet with peace through recognition of their suffering and transcending it through an absurdist humor. Following Kierkegaard’s lead, one may truly discover the
meaning of an absurdist-ethics, put into practice by some through radical actions of revolt such as barebacking, but also through engagement with aesthetics in line with an absurdist gallows humor and the grotesque. Such a philosophical investigation, which ultimately revokes suffering in the form of jest, is at the very core of Virus, the film I studied in this chapter. That dynamic is also clearly reframed, this time in the form of the grotesque, in Animal, an AIDS film I explore in the following chapter.
CHAPTER II
GROTESQUE AESTHETIC: MIRUGAM [ANIMAL] 2007

In 2009, coinciding with World AIDS Day, Regenbogen e.V., a German non-profit organization, introduced their new AIDS campaign. The promotion depicted posters and a video with images of scantily clad, attractive women sleeping with none other than some of world history’s mass murderers: Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, and Saddam Hussein (fig. 1). The organization also bought a radio spot that reworked a famous speech made by Joseph Goebbels, the well-known Nazi propagandist. The campaign was provocative and, for many critics, tasteless. Supporters of the campaign argued nevertheless that “up until now 28 million people have died. And every day there are 5,000 new cases. Which is why AIDS is one of the most effective mass murderers in history. We wanted to give the virus a face, not the victims of the virus” (qtd. in Hans, par. 6). Dirk Silz of Das Comitee explained to Spiegel Online, “we expected that the campaign might overstate the case somewhat—we wanted it to attract attention” (pars. 6-7). Silz explains how the advertisements were made in response to the ineffectiveness of previous campaigns, including one with condoms on cucumbers and the slogan “Fits onto Every Cucumber: Don’t Give Aids A Chance” (par. 7) (fig. 2).

Overall, the media has been very critical of Regenbogen’s efforts, calling the campaign barbaric. A spokeswoman from the National AIDS Trust, which organizes World AIDS Days, commented: “I think the advert is incredibly stigmatizing to people living with

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18 The campaign was sponsored by Regenbogen e.V in cooperation with Hamburg-based advertisement agency Das Comitee.
HIV who already face much stigma and discrimination due to ignorance about the virus” (qtd. in M. Moore, par. 5).
Figure 1: AIDS is a Mass Murderer Poster

This poster, reading “AIDS is A Mass Murderer: Protect Yourself,” was part of a German anti-AIDS campaign in 2009. Posters like this one were put up on billboards all over cities in Germany.

Figure 2: Fits on every cucumber!

Funded by the German Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung (BZgA) [Federal Center for Health Education (FCHE)], this poster was part of an Anti-AIDS campaign that goes back to 1987. At that time, the slogan was “Gib AIDS keine Chance” [‘Don’t Give AIDS a Chance’]. In 1994, the campaign added the slogan “mach’s mit” [‘Join Us’]. The FCHE supplements this slogan with many comical additions, including the one shown here: a picture of cucumbers with condoms on them and a jingle to match, which says “Passt auf jede Gurke!” [Fits on every cucumber!] This slogan implies that condoms fit every size of phallus, i.e., no one has a reason NOT to wear a condom.19

19 “Kondome für jede Gurke;” 1.
Carolina Vierneisel, spokesperson for Deutsche AIDS-Hilfe [German AIDS-Help], Germany’s biggest AIDS organization, judged the video as “disgusting,” beseeching the organization to pull the ads. *Time.com* reports:

“The video ridicules all victims of the Nazi regime, and it equates HIV-positive people with mass murderers,” says spokeswoman Carolina Vierneisel. “The advertising campaign just relies on provoking anxiety among people. That’s the wrong approach. Successful HIV prevention is based on factual information about the risks of HIV transmission and encourages people to use condoms.’” (qtd. in T. Moore, par. 3)

In response, Hans Weishäupl, the creative director of the new AIDS campaign, remarked in an interview that

“We need to warn young people about the dangers of AIDS and the risks of unprotected sex,” [...] ‘AIDS is the mass murderer of the 21st century, and we have to show people how awful it is.’ He adds that he’s received a lot of positive feedback on the commercials from young people and their parents. Weishäupl agrees that his agency’s methods are controversial but insists that the end justifies the means. ‘It’s the message that counts, and of course it was provocative to use the picture of Hitler,’ he says. ‘But how would you visualize a terrible virus?’” (qtd. in T. Moore, pars. 5-6)

Jan Schwertner, the press officer for Regenbogen, also commented: “We are not the first who have linked the topics of AIDS and dictators. [...] We are working with the shock effect. The sensory overload through the media means that many things fall under the radar. [...] The strategies for HIV/AIDS prevention have to be reassessed” (qtd. in Hans, par. 7).

While representatives of non-profits appear to judge the advertisements as overall distasteful and ineffective, opinion on the streets was more positive, as Weishäupl suggests. In a poll in the online newspaper *The Telegraph*, for example, readers were asked what they thought of the campaign. Surprisingly, a majority of the voters, 60.47% percent, checked the
option: “I like the video, it’s not offensive to me, and it makes the right statement.”

Apparently, drawing a parallel between Hitler and HIV is obnoxious, but effective.

To equate the epidemic with the atrocities and genocide that occurred in WWII is nothing new. I have already drawn comparisons on several occasions between the epidemic and the Holocaust as a way to ask how an event, as traumatic and deadly as the AIDS epidemic, can be visualized and processed through the medium of the cinema and humor. Each person has her or his own idea of how one might best represent a virus or an epidemic, especially on an AIDS campaign poster. Yet, however politically incorrect or objectionable the idea might appear, few would deny that the AIDS pandemic has acted in some ways like a ruthless dictator with a taste for genocide.

In Chapter one, I suggested that an absurd AIDS Cinema was created symptomatically as a way to cope with the trauma associated with the AIDS epidemic. The coping mechanism is made possible through what I have christened an absurdist-ethics. I also introduced a representation of AIDS, invested in the affect of a gallows humor, with the example of German director Rosa von Praunheim’s A Virus Knows No Morals, a film that provides evidence that an absurdist-ethics may invoke philosophical reflection from the epistemic encounter with sensitive topics colored by an absurdist aesthetics. In this chapter, however, I move specifically to that which lies at the furthest edge of humor, its flipside and companion, the aesthetic of the grotesque, which I present chiefly through the narrative from Indian filmmaker Samy’s Animal [Mirugam] (2007). This film exemplifies why certain cultural art forms may depict controversially what most would render a victimized,

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20 This poll was posted, as of August 2011, on the website: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/6138037/Adolf-Hitler-sex-video-condemned-by-Aids-charities.html>. As of June 2012, the poll is no longer there.
vulnerable body, such as the HIV mythical body, alternatively as an eroticized, grotesque body, represented by the director as an object not solely of disgust, but also largely of the spectator’s desire. Like in the previous chapter, I set forth the historical backdrop of the aesthetic tradition of the grotesque, calling upon similar cultural forms that also represent an absurdist-ethics.

Animal’s narrative logic works in a similar fashion as Virus, as it depends upon the affect of a gallows humor, but even more through the aesthetic paradigm of the grotesque. Here, one confronts the more melancholic and fearful margins of one’s contemplations over an absurdist-ethics with respect to a mythical body infected with HIV. I begin this discussion by first evaluating the place where humor and the grotesque collide. Martin Esslin’s seminal essay The Theater of the Absurd (1960) explains how, in the realm of the absurd, humor and the grotesque go best hand in hand when trying to express the human condition:

Everything is funny until the horror of the human situation rises to the surface: ‘The point about tragedy is that it is no longer funny. It is funny and then it becomes no longer funny.’ Life is funny because it is arbitrary, based on illusions and self-deceptions, … because it is built out of pretense and the grotesque overestimation each individual makes of himself. But in our present-day world, everything is uncertain and relative. There is no fixed point; we are surrounded by the unknown. And ‘the fact that it is verging on the unknown leads us to the next step […]. There is a kind of horror … and I think that this horror and absurdity go together.’ (Esslin, 242)

Similarly, Vivian Mercier states that “it is true that life is cruel and ugly, but the macabre and the grotesque do not become humorous until they have portrayed life as even more cruel and ugly than it is; we laugh at their Absurd exaggeration, simultaneously expressing our relief that life is, after all, not quite so unpleasant as it might be” (i; emphasis in original).

Following this logic, in order to represent something more terrible than HIV/AIDS, the
images one conjures up must truly be grotesque and unbearable such as a picture of Hitler in sexually compromising positions.

It is not uncommon for a sense of absurdity to surface when trying to represent a traumatic event such as an epidemic or the Holocaust. In his book *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler: How History is Bought, Packaged, and Sold* (1999), Tim Cole wants to know what tourists are thinking when they walk through the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, or what he calls “Auschwitz-Land” (112). He looks for answers in James Young, who wrote *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (1993):

What has the viewer learned about a group of artifacts, about the history they represent? On exiting the museum, how do visitors grasp their own lives and surrounding anew in the light of a memorialized past? [...] What precisely does the sight of concentration-camp artifacts awaken in viewers? Historical knowledge? A sense of evidence? Revulsion, grief, pity, fear? That visitors respond more directly to objects than to verbalized concepts is clear. But beyond affect, what does our knowledge of these objects—a bent spoon, children’s shoes, crusty old striped uniforms—have to do with our knowledge of historical events. (128-129; 132)

One may ask similar questions about absurdist AIDS films in terms of what spectators might draw from such extreme and unsettling examples of persons with HIV/AIDS. I argue that what happens in the examples of a radical AIDS Cinema I analyze is not the same as the process of memorialization of traumatic events, such as that of the Holocaust Museum. However, I want to defend that the paradigm of an absurdist-ethics, through the fashioning of the topic of AIDS and in the shape of a grotesque aesthetic, does in fact help to break the spectator and the thematic of AIDS out of this otherwise reifying shell. Esslin suggests that the grotesque is an annexation of humor in the crux of the absurd, and I concurrently contend that the affect of the grotesque, in addition to humor, builds the heart of the absurdist-ethics I propose. In order to construct my case, I must first lay the groundwork of that which has
traditionally been called the *grotesque* with relation to the designation of the absurd, humor, and ethics.

The denomination of *the grotesque* originated from a discovery made in 1480 by Renaissance excavators, of what appeared to be caves and underground passages in Rome. It turned out that those *grottos*—the word for *caves* in Italian—were actually ruins of the palace of Roman Emperor Nero (54 to 68 BCE). Nero had the decadent palace built after he declared he was in fact a Sun-God (Harpham, 28). As Geoffrey Harpham documents, the Renaissant antiquarians who found the caves initially did not know what they had discovered, and therefore did not know how to interpret their findings. His description is comical and telling:

In these ruins, scholars and artists beheld the ancient past suddenly revealed in the form of an awesome enigma, a vast labyrinth of passageways, rooms, and supporting pillars to structures that no longer existed, and a great mass of utter junk. (27)

To Quattrocento eyes, many parts showed every effect of nearly 1500 years of subterranean decay; other parts—wall designs, for example—were almost perfectly preserved. What a sight this must have been, a circus of formidable but uncertain significance. At the time of its disinterment the very palace was an architectural palimpsest, an optical jumble much like objects we have learned to call the grotesque. (29)

It was not, however, the junk in the *grottos* that became famous, but the artwork. Scholars deduced that Nero’s Domus Aurea [Golden Palace] had been adorned with frescos and stucco art, decorated with images of humans, animals, and other mythological creatures of ambivalent genus. After the discovery of the *grotto*, the moniker *grottesche* emerged to describe the anomalous artistic style:

[The grotesque style is convincing] evidence of the artist’s liberty, his unconstrained possession of the space, which confounds the view […] of art as a model of systematic order and piety. […] This art is a boundless reservoir of humor, spirited play, and untamed vitality. The ape is everywhere, inviting the viewer to recognize the animal core of human behavior in the easy translation of all the higher forms of
social life—learning, religion, law—into simian games [...] No other art in history offers so abundant an imagery of the naked and clothed as a physical engine. Free from classic norms, the artist experiments with the human frame as the most flexible, ductile, indefatigably protean, self-deforming system in nature. (qtd. in Harpham, 41)

The legacy of the grotesque as a style recycled in the classical visual and plastic arts can be traced from the Renaissance up until present day, from the decoration of the Vatican Loggias by Giovanni da Udine under the masterful hand of Raphael, to the architecture of medieval Gothic cathedrals, early opera, images in Gothic manuscripts, Romantic artwork, and many derivatives of ornamentation through the years, in Modern art, and even in that of postmodernism. The style has grown and developed over the last half of a millennium, and one could claim that human beings are simply intrigued by excess, which is a key characteristic of the grotesque.

Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) addresses relevant aspects of the grotesque aesthetics and his contributions to the style of the grotesque later apply to my discussion of the esperpento. Specifically, in his essay on “Of a Monstrous Child” (1603), Montaigne describes a grotesque scenario, ripe with meaning:

I saw a child which two men and a nurse, who called themselves the father, the uncle, and the aunt of it, carried about to get money by showing it, by reason it was so strange a creature. It was, as to all the rest, a common form [...]. Under the breast it was joined to another child, but with a head and that had the spine of the back without motion, the rest entire; [...]. This double body, and several limbs belonging to one head, might be interpreted a favorable prognostic to the king, or maintaining the various part of our state [...]. (330).

Not only does Montaigne describe the child as being grotesque, but he himself participates, along with the guardians in the tale, in their grotesque scheme of shocking others through the spectacle of the child—an action one might deem equally grotesque. The shock of the story is meant as an absurdist-ethics dictate, to evoke a philosophical re-positioning towards the subject of parenthood and by extension greed, selfishness, and child abuse.
Harpham describes how Montaigne did not actually believe in the grotesque as a sign of a true monstrosity or an abomination of nature that should be destroyed and shunned, on the contrary, “for Montaigne, there was no true grotesque [...]. And this is the final paradox: really to understand the grotesque is to cease to regard it as grotesque” (104). Montaigne tries to redeem his gluttonous descriptions of the unfortunate individuals, by stating that “those that we call monsters are not so to God, who sees in the immensity of his work the infinite forms that he has comprehended therein” (330). Through this clarification Montaigne, like Freud, attests to how the abnormal is part and parcel of the spectrum of that which is normal or rather that which is human. In the same way, one may better fathom how a discussion of traumatic events, which also invites the notion of an absurd and comical-grotesque, is not necessarily meant to humiliate or further demean the victims of such an event. Instead, the grotesque opens the possibly of addressing trauma in a light-hearted way, whereby such discussions might have been impossible, bogged down otherwise by the affect of fear, sadness, and anger.

Following Montaigne’s normalization of apparently repulsive ideas, I incorporate the contributions of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) in order to gain an understanding of the grotesque through his treatment of the uncanny, an idea that has been dubbed a model within which scholars read the grotesque (Greenberg, 10). In his study on “The ‘Uncanny’” (1919), Freud defines the concept as belonging “to all that is terrible—to all that arouses dread and creeping horror” (368). An important aspect of the uncanny, which also coincides with the grotesque, is the individual’s sense and fear of doubling. Freud likens the notion of the uncanny to the idea of a man seeing himself in a mirror; when he fails to recognize himself, he considers the reflection repugnant—not because the man is unattractive, but instead
because the misrecognition itself triggers a sense of revulsion (402). Freud spends much time focusing on E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *The Sandman* (1816), and his description fits into the genre of the grotesque as a narrative of doubling and misrecognition.21 While Freud never gives a bold definition of the word *grotesque* in any of his writings, he does employ the appellative when describing conditions of abnormal psychology and sexuality in ways analogous to how he describes the uncanny. In particular, he uses the word to describe monstrous figures that stand in as a double for another, and especially the father figure.22

Like Montaigne and Freud, Thomas Mann (1875-1955) helped in defining the grotesque style and employed it in his own writing. In his essay “From Grotesque Disharmony to the Vision of an Abstract Weltbild,” he defines the grotesque within a social context:

> For, if I may say so, the grotesque is the genuine anti-bourgeois style; and however bourgeois Anglo-Saxondom may otherwise be or appear, it is a fact that in art the comic-grotesque has always been its strong point. Modern man no longer accepts the meaningful, moral universe of tragedy; he derides the rational social order inherent in comedy. The logical blend, then, yields a meaningless, chaotic existence abounding in the incongruous, often irrational actions and devices of comedy. Man, however, attempts to cope with the diverse alien forces, which confront him, and despite his absurdity, he may attain a measure of nobility. (713)

Mann’s definition marks another key characteristic of the grotesque, the focus on dystopic narratives that expose the obsessive and self-consuming behavior of the hero, who ultimately revolts against the norms and forms of bourgeois society. At the same time, Mann

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21 In the story of *The Sandman*, the protagonist Nathanael falls in love with a mechanical doll, which is introduced to him as the neighbor’s *real* daughter. Nathanael fails to recognize that the doll, named Olympia, is not human, but in her empty gaze, he sees his own ego reflected. Through this process, Olympia becomes *real* to him. The narrative is obsessed with other doublings, all attributed to trauma in Nathanael’s childhood, an event that Freud uses as another analogy to describe his theory of the Oedipus complex.

22 In “Neurosis of Demoniacaal Possession” (1923), Freud writes that “to be sure, it is by no means easy to demonstrate in the mental life of the individual traces of this satanic conception of the father. When a boy takes to drawing caricatures and grotesque figures, it may be possible to prove that he is making a mock of his father…” (279).
emphasizes that this position of revolt may still hold a measure of “nobility,” that is, that the grotesque act can still be an ethically viable mode of expression.

A good example of the ethical viability of the grotesque in Mann’s own work is his book *Death in Venice* (1912). Mann describes the adventures of an older man, Gustav von Aschenbach, who while vacationing during an outbreak of cholera in Venice, indulges in the decadent world of the drowning, dying city, and his own insatiable desire for a poor, young village boy named Tadzio. By means parallel to those in barebacking, Aschenbach decides to remain in Venice, although he knows that staying ensures his own death at the hands of cholera. Faithful to the style of the grotesque, Aschenbach comes to the realization, upon hearing that Venice is suffering from an epidemic, that he cannot leave, and remains captivated by the grotesqueness of a carnivalesque troupe of musicians, as well as by his own obsession with Tadzio, who he realizes will probably not live long.

Aschenbach was no longer reclining in his chair; he sat upright as if to ward off an attack or take flight. But the laughter, the hospital odor wafting up to him, and the proximity of the beautiful boy coalesced in a trancelike spell that, indissoluble and inexorable, held his head, his mind in thrall. […] ‘He is sickly and has probably not long to live,’ he thought with the objectivity that strangely enough breaks free on occasion from intoxication and longing, and his heart swelled with pure concern and a concomitant profligate satisfaction. (116-117)

This passage demonstrates many of the dichotomies relevant to the grotesque style, including flight/flee, sickness/health, and sympathy/selfishness. There are also elements of the intoxicating lure of the carnivalesque of the musicians, the gaze of the Other represented by Tadzio’s look that is never equally returned, and even the sick body of the boy (and Aschenbach’s own), which Aschenbach interprets not with disgust, but with empathy and a sense of solidarity. The relationship between Aschenbach and Tadzio, although one sustained
in Aschenbach’s imagination, may be described as a strategic relationship, comparable in part to the relationship between barebackers, in which sickness plays a seductive role.

While Montaigne and Freud offer an interpretation that normalizes and naturalizes the grotesque, and Mann narrates its ethical viability, I deem Bakhtin’s definition and discussions of the grotesque the most productive and fruitful. In *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Bakhtin conceptualizes the grotesque in the context of his study of Rabelais, and in particular his novels *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, as well as the study of medieval folk traditions and carnivals, which I referenced earlier in Chapter one as it applied to humor. Bakhtin stresses how the grotesque body is an “unfinished and open body (dying, bringing forth and being born) […] blended with the world, with animals, with objects” (27). This definition summons the mythical body infected with HIV, and sheds light into the genealogical and procreative lingo characteristic of communities of barebackers (cf. Dean, Bersani). The notion of the body being unfinished and open recalls Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the *body without organs*, which refers to a way of thinking about the subject, the normal human body, and how human consciousness is made up of fragments of stimuli and virtual affects on “planes of consistency or the field of immanence desire” (*Thousand Plateaus*, 183). In terms of the absurd-ethics I am developing, Bakhtin’s open body idea means that humans can and are both singular and part of a collective, whereby the plane of desire that encodes barebacking as a model, for example, is more tactile and real than the dying human body itself. Such a bundle of virtual affects would be fashioned through the stylization of an aesthetics of the grotesque and the absurd.

Bakhtin explains that “the material bodily principle in grotesque realism is offered in its all-popular festive and utopian aspect. The cosmic, social, and bodily elements are given
here as an indivisible whole. And this whole is gay and gracious” (19). This definition runs along with an absurdist-ethics, in particular as it applies to the mythical cultural construction of the gay community, which harbors both utopic and dystopic notions of life and death after the epidemic. Since then, but even before, gay men have been seen by society at large as not wholly human, because to the cultural eye they are always lacking. It is in this avenue that Bakhtin’s understanding of the grotesque style is so productive; at its philosophical core, it supports ideas of “community, freedom, equality, and abundance,” even if, and in spite of the fact, that that community is made up of minor individuals (Makaryk, 88). The language in which this grotesque style is expressed may be abusive, but for Bakhtin, the language is important because

[The] grotesque concept of the body forms the basis of abuses, oaths, and curses. The importance of abusive language is essential to the understanding of the literature of the grotesque. Abuse exercises a direct influence on the language and the images of this literature and is closely related to all other forms of ‘degradation’ and ‘down to earth’[…]. Modern indecent abuse and cursing have retained dead and purely negative remnants of the grotesque concept of the body. (27-28)

This abuse also acts as a way to counteract the damage individuals or communities have received at the hands of the powers that be. On this point, Bakhtin brings up the importance of laughter, for “no grotesque [style], even the most timid, is conceivable in the atmosphere of absolute seriousness” (38). To illustrate his point, Bakhtin introduces E.A.F. Klingemann’s “Nachtwachen” [Night Watches] (1804) in which a night watchman, believing himself to be the son of the devil, asks himself: “Is there upon earth a more potent means than laughter to resist the mockeries of the world and of fate? The most powerful enemy experiences terror at the sight of this satirical mask, and misfortunate itself retreats before me, if I dare laugh at it!” (38). This is the same scenario of someone facing the terror of becoming or being infected by HIV. In situations in which fear of HIV may overpower one’s
facility to think or act other than out of fear, i.e., fear of becoming infected, of infecting another, or even the fear of the likelihood that one may die eventually once one is infected, laughter may be the key to the dissolution of this fear. What remains after anxiety and dread, “the mockeries of the world and of fate,” are removed is the possibility of discovering pleasure and joy in the face of death—the most powerful enemy—, as well as the prospect of accepting one’s fate more gracefully. In this regard, a mixing of the affect and aesthetics of humor and the grotesque is a necessary tool of an absurdist-ethical paradigm, functioning as a defense mechanism against fear, and as an agent of and a means to catharsis and enlightenment.

I summarize the characteristics that can be garnered from the previous tracing of the grotesque style because they are relevant to the discussion of an absurdist-ethics and will aid in my ulterior study of AIDS film Animal. The grotesque is an aesthetic style, composed of affect in the rawest form, derived from an excess of fear and pleasure. The reading of Montaigne points out that the grotesque is related to what is out of proportion or excessive, and is expressed by qualifiers that signify that which is terrible, monstrous, wondrous, marvelous, comical, carnivalesque, repulsive, burlesque, dystopic, insane, deformed, chaotic, humorous, ornate, decadent, or hysterical. Freud signals to the fact that the grotesque becomes problematic because, although it is a natural part of the human being that looks at himself in the mirror, it is perceived as sinful, sharing the qualities of the ignoble, playful, sexual, sensual, lustful, ecstatic, destructive, vulgar, campy, trashy, of kitsch, demonic, disgusting, deadly, or intoxicating. In relation to the origin of the term as the strange artistic creation found in an interred place, a grotto, the grotesque style is linked to the unknowable or unidentifiable, that is, the exotic, mysterious, fantastical, mythical, spiritual, supernatural,
ambiguous, that which evades representation or detectability, the irregular, the Other, the cryptic, the secret, or the obscure. From Freud’s discussion of the topic in “The Uncanny” and Thomas Mann’s use of the grotesque in his literary work, we understand that the grotesque style frames duality (the masked, the doppelgänger, the hybrid, or fragmented), but through a mirroring that shows reality as artificial, plastic, inanimate, mechanical, caricaturesque, or affected. Bakhtin’s theorizations and Beckett’s more radical and aspiring theater show the power of the grotesque when representing nature at its rawest form, showing the animalism of the human being, assessing critically the complicated balances of generation and degeneration, and not shying away from engaging with topics such as death, birth, blood, sweat, tears, semen, bile, phlegm, or scat.

My second example of an Absurd AIDS film in this study focuses on Animal [Mirugam] (2007) by Indian director Samy [R. Saminathan]. Animal fulfills all the conditions of an absurd AIDS cinema: it is queer; the main character contracts HIV; and it educates its spectators about HIV. Animal also follows in the footsteps of von Praunheim’s humor and grotesqueness in Virus, and tweaks the grotesque to an extreme degree. Animal exposes a rich engagement with an absurdist-ethics, plausibly just as much as the film Days I study in the next chapter does in deliberating the ethical considerations of barebacking.

Animal relates the story of a misogynist, violent man named Ayyanar, who acts like an animal, eating like a pig, raping the women of the town, and beating up anyone who gets in his way. The rural town in which he lives in India does not do much to curtail his behavior, and even in a way condones his overt masculinity. Only after he is infected with the HIV-virus does a change occur. Society suddenly shames his new identity as HIV-positive, and in particular as his body begins to fall apart and he starts to die. In turn, Ayyanar begins to
finally act more civil, learning to behave endearingly and selflessly towards his wife, child, and mother. He even facilitates the building of a well for the town. Yet, nothing elicits the sympathy of the townspeople, who are too caught up in their own fear of the virus. At the end of the film, the crowd converges on Ayyanar’s sick body and spears him like an animal.

*Animal* incorporates a grotesque aesthetic on multiple levels, including the depiction of the protagonist’s sexuality in a way that even queers queer sexuality by incorporating the disquieting desire for and/or desire of an animal. When dying of AIDS, the body of the protagonist is portrayed as so visually repulsive and deformed by illness, that he remains largely cloaked in order to prod the spectators to imagine that which cannot be shown or represented visually. The role of the doppelgänger is also invoked insofar as a second actor is used to represent the actor’s sick body after he is infected with HIV in order to illustrate the physical and emotional transitions of the protagonist. Initially, he is a man portrayed excessively in terms of his physical attractiveness, sexuality, violent behavior towards others, animalistic nature, and selfish qualities that reduce him to a predator. Thereafter, Ayyanar is depicted as having morphed into a man characterized as physically excessive in terms of his illness and the destruction of his body. At the same time, his nature is recuperated in this grotesque body with the emergence of a saint-like disposition. Even this new mental constitution is excessive in terms of Ayyanar’s overt generosity to help the people of his village, who will eventually mistreat him. Ultimately, he delivers himself willingly into their lethal hands, and Ayyanar is martyred in the name of the village people’s own unmasking as a mass ignorant of the nature of the virus and of their own hypocrisy; they reveal themselves to be just as monstrous as Ayyanar in the way they murder him. The village’s grotesque

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23 Ayyanar’s mother in the film is actually his adopted mother. His biological mother, who was a prostitute, was killed by the brothel owner when Ayyanar was a child.
naïveté mirrors the city’s own in its thinking that simple knowledge and injunctions might control sexuality and sexual nature of human beings, and by extension the spread of the virus. In this constellation, the people of the village, as well as the peripheral, minor humans who live in the neighboring towns, represent metaphorically the grotesque excessiveness of sexuality and disease. The will to live equates, as it does in Virus, to the will to have sex in ways that cannot be controlled, and sexual desire is instead coded as a means to self-actualization. Consequently, the spectator must come to realize that the virus cannot be effectively quarantined in this way either.

*Animal* is a queer film and, by comparison, challenges the notion of queer more so than the other two queer AIDS films I examine in this paper, *Virus* or *Days*. In *Animal*, sexuality is both queer and grotesque, and yet, neither denotation is tabulated as explicitly negative or simple. Ayyanar’s grotesque sexuality should be read instead as complex and indicative of a more nuanced and truer nature of sexuality, i.e., polymorphous, exceeding the bounds of normative classification. In contrast, in *Virus* and *Days*, the male protagonists are individuals who are outwardly and simply, openly gay. In other words, the characters make their gay sexual orientation known in the space of the narrative, and this fact comes as no surprise to the spectator.

Ayyanar, in opposition, challenges the spectator to continually reassess the nature of his sexuality. First, he has a wife, and at first sight, one might allege that Ayyanar is straight but, while he is not overtly gay, he does express unbound desire that ultimately challenges and redefines the boundaries of hetero-normative sexuality. This blurring of his sexuality makes his character more potent, grotesque, and relevant for an absurd example of AIDS film, and even more importantly within the corpus of Queer Cinema. The inclusion of this film as
queer expands and enriches the critical understanding of what is deemed as queer. As a consequence of this reframing, the definition of Queer Cinema should categorically showcase minor narratives about individuals whose sexuality evades heteronormativity, even if that move challenges traditional classifications of what one might consider to be queer or gay.

*Animal* belongs to the reframing of such a queer categorization in the realm of the grotesque as animalistic. For instance, when Ayyanar sees a woman, he snorts like a bull, and the film delivers a superimposed caricaturesque sound to stress that exaggeration of his masculine sexual desire. Ayyanar flares his nostril and attacks. In general, he is attracted to women, of all shapes and sizes, prostitutes, healthy and sick, young and old. He also has sex with men, as is revealed through the course of the narrative. His possibly first experience with a man is in jail, where he has sex with another male prisoner while drugged out on heroin. From a first impression, one may imagine that Samy is sending the message that HIV is transmitted through male sex in prison, and that Ayyanar has had sex with a man only because he was on drugs. But later in the film, after Ayyanar has contracted HIV, he goes in his mind through a list of all the individuals with whom he has slept. This includes not only images of women, but also several images of men. At this point, spectators come to the realization that Ayyanar’s encounter with the man in jail was either not his first or his last. In other words, Ayyanar’s desire is indeed unbound by heteronormative notions of straight sexuality that dictate that a man may only desire a woman. It is also worth observing that one never detects exactly from whom Ayyanar contracted HIV, making it clear that the director found this detail unimportant, while what is important is his voracious, raw, untamed sexual desire. In this vein, there is an additional condition of Ayyanar’s desire worth noting. By trade, Ayyanar is a bull breeder. In an establishing scene, he is called in to help the animals
breed. He smacks the (male) bull on the ass and it appears as his touch sexually stimulates the bull, like a doubling of the protagonist, and responds by mounting the (female) cow. This specular representation may be interpreted as that not only does Ayyanar act like a bull when he is sexually aroused, but that his desire can be felt not only by humans, but also by animals as well. This does not necessarily mean that Ayyanar has participated in acts of bestiality, but the cinematic suture suggests that this possibly cannot be excluded either.

In comparison, in Virus, gay sexuality is presented in a cliché way. One encounters gay men, straight couples, and a mother who desires to watch her son have sex. These presentations do not challenge stereotypical notions of desire. Animal does per contra take on a new connotation because Ayyanar becomes a new kind of ‘breeder.’ He breeds the virus. He contracts it and continues having sex after he is infected. He is a breeder whose desire is so queer it may extend to the animal kingdom. Nevertheless, Ayyanar’s queer desire is not depicted in a negative way throughout the film, even in his relationship to men and/or animals. Instead, his desire is normalized or naturalized simply matter of fact. In this way, the film suggests that queer desire unbound is the natural state of human desire, which must also be understood as grotesque excess. The critic cannot simply dismiss Ayyanar’s desire as animalistic in a simple or underdeveloped fashion. Instead Ayyanar is to be interpreted as a powerful man, who commits unforgivable acts of rape, but whose desire to touch and be touched by other living beings, his unbridled desire, is reflective of his ethically viable potential as an aesthetic representation and product of a paradigm of absurdist-ethics. Only the hero exhibits this type of queer desire, which ultimately proves to be the vehicle through which he chooses to seek pleasure in life. Through his sexual relations, he also courts death.
and attracts and continues to infect others with HIV. Through such endgame engagements, Ayyanar also eventually gleans intellectual and emotional enlightenment.

The role of HIV and the modes of conveyance of information from the city to the periphery also draw on the grotesque to make a point about the ineffectiveness of trying to control human sexuality in order to halt the transmission of the virus. In *Animal*, doctors come from the city to test the rural people for HIV, and later Ayyanar and his wife learn more about the virus by going to the city to visit the doctors. Ayyanar and his village represent the ignorant masses. They do not just exemplify a small village next to the city that tries to copy urbanite ways. This village is architectonically ‘primitive,’ made out of simple huts, and with no well for water. They are also presented as a culturally backward, grotesque people, in so far as they employ for example a shaman, instead of the doctors accepted by a Western scientific system. Most obviously, Ayyanar represents the ignorant man, who in turn is the most enlightened of all the characters by the end of the film. He is able to negotiate the well for the village, and comes to understand the nature of the human being as grotesque in a higher degree than anyone depicted in the film.

This village represents a minor people. One can deduce from the Tamil language and customs of the people that the village acts in the ways of the peripheral groups of India. The town is situated in the southern most part of the Indian peninsula in the coastal state of Tamil Nadu, near the city of Ramanathapuram. As Samy reveals, he chose the town because it reminded him of the conditions of AIDS. In an interview, he said: “I chose this village with the barren, parched landscape because when I visited an AIDS patient at an AIDS hospital, he was malnourished and had nothing but skin and bones, and I felt the setting for the film should reflect this desolate condition” (qtd. in Sreenivas, 160). In comparison, the city is not
necessarily any more sophisticated than the rural village. When the city doctors explain what HIV and some of its symptoms are, or when they announce that Ayyanar will inevitably die, it appears as if their lessons do nothing in terms of educating the people of the village. In spite of this top-down handing of information, Ayyanar still contracts HIV and continues transmitting it. The townspeople are afraid of being near Ayyanar for fear of catching the disease. Even when he is dead, the townspeople refuse to help bury his body, denying him one of the most important, solemn, and human moments of a person’s existence. They too are reconfigured in the end as grotesque, turning inwards to the most animalistic instincts for survival: eliminating the threat, and learning nothing from the city doctors. And yet, order is reestablished. In other words, the grotesque must be read as part of the natural balance of this community.

Enlightenment and change stems not from following the advice of the doctors in the city, but instead from an alternative source of information: through phenomenological experience, which may also be read as grotesque. The protagonist is a sensitive man, not only as concerns his boundless desire, but also in the fact that he can acutely feel the development of the virus in his body. The film provides a digital animation of the virus infecting Ayyanar’s body, and the public witnesses how the virus attaches to his lungs, moves into his blood stream and takes command of his body. Because they are stylistically pasted, the technological capabilities of computer animation work as a strong contrast, and provide perspective to expose both parts of the human body that would otherwise never been seen, that which is unrepresentable visually, but also that the problem of education is epistemic. One of the critical questions raised by the film is that if the city is incapable of understanding how to educate effectively, then how are the minor populations supposed to know any better.
The issue of education runs along many absurdist HIV films. In the previously analyzed *Virus*, which depicts Germany in the early to mid 1980s, von Praunheim shows how official attempts at pedagogy in the form of condom machines and literature fail, similarly as in *Animal*, because the message is not attuned to the reality of the intended population. Those affected refuse to listen when approached in a top-down, imposing manner that is supposed to work by means of controlling human sexuality and desire. As I will show in Chapter three, in the film *Days*, the best information and the best medications may be readily provided but, ironically, all HIV-positive persons in the film still question the authority and reliability of the doctors. In fact, one of the main characters in the film refuses to ingest any medication at all. As an act of revolt against that system that wants to extend life in a way that he deems inauthentic, he clearly manifests that he will not heed the input of doctors.

The three films demonstrate a progression of the availability of education and medicines, yet, the effect it has on the protagonists remains relatively the same, which can be understood best within the framework of an absurdist-ethics, namely that what is valuable in the films is the condition of the body and mind *after* infection and not before it. In all cases, the hard lessons are learned and an intense life is experienced at the edge of death; agency is yielded from the lessons learned through infection. I would still debate that none of the directors would openly admit to such an agenda, as it would be costly to their careers, but I find this sentiment present and palpable in the films nonetheless.

*Animal* also relies on the vehicle of camp to convey a sense of the absurd through grotesque humor. There are two ways that camp is commissioned, first through the use of a grotesque gallows-humor, and second, through performance. In observation of humor, the narrative never takes itself seriously. The film follows the features of comedy from start to
finish, and even Ayyanar’s violence is portrayed as humorous and grotesque. In a kind of whirlwind, Ayyanar dances through the town, snorting like a bull, raping women, which for all intents and purposes makes rape look like something droll. His best friend follows him like a loyal dog, only to be beaten up by Ayyanar in every other scene. All of the fight scenes—and there are many—are choreographed like in a Kung Fu movie, including a soundscape full of grunts and groans, whereby Ayyanar takes on literally every man in the town. He throws men with unrealistic force onto rooftops and they bounce off of walls. The film is packed with such fight and chase scenes, and if Ayyanar is not fighting, then he is employed in Bollywood-style dances and clichéd love scenes with his wife. Even at the dramatic end of the film, when Ayyanar has died, the wife manages to comically and however grotesquely throw this great man over her shoulder to take him to his burial pyre. Similarly, Virus is crafted as a string of black humor and jokes. There is no serious scene in that entire film, coming even to jokingly include dipping condoms in blood, nurses rolling dice to guess who will die next, or radical activists stealing the jewelry from drag queens. As I will show, Days may prove the exception to the three films in terms of humor, but there are some jokes about death and dying of HIV exchanged between the main protagonist Claudio and his HIV-positive friend, Giuseppe. But, camp is employed in another way, namely through performance.

In all three films, death becomes a performance itself, and even a celebrated performance. In the scenes evoking death, Animal incorporates music and Bollywood-style dancing.\textsuperscript{24} Virus also includes many elements of camp performance, including glittery parties with dozens of men dressed in drag wearing gaudy jewelry at funerals. In Animal, Ayyanar’s

\textsuperscript{24} Bollywood is however generally understood as a Hindi-language popular cinema coming out of the city of Mumbai (Gopal and Moorti, 4).
body is a vital part of the visual expression and performance of his unbound queer desire, which is depicted as grotesque from start to finish. In the beginning of the film, his body is shown as overtly muscular, exhibiting super strength and a viral healthy glow. In fact, Ayyanar looks healthier than any other man in the village, or even more so than the doctors in the city. Towards the end of the film, the director chooses to have another actor play Ayyanar in his last days to emphasize the physical and emotional changes the protagonist has undergone—a play on the doppelgänger motif I already mentioned discussing the idea of the grotesque. With this move, Samy dramatizes the grotesque, emaciated body, giving the protagonist a black-face, presumably covered entirely with lesions, and a constitution that resembles representations of Jesus in his last moments. The cloaked actor demands that spectators use their imaginations to visualize that which remains unrepresentable in illness, especially in an epidemic, in the demise of the human body. Samy clearly wanted to showcase a dramatic change. The Indian actor named Adhi, who played Ayyanar earlier, is a robust, large man, and his replacement is just as tall, but half his weight. Their faces are also radically different, and the new Ayyanar is notably also blind, a feature that further propels the representation of the all-seeing blind holy man. In turn, the masking of the visual reveals the unveiling of Ayyanar’s emotion strength. In Virus, as I mentioned earlier, a psychiatrist helps his gay patient go through the motions of the infected’s death, even enclosing him in a coffin. This performance is both comical and deeply grotesque. In Days, the performance of death is not physically grotesque, but it is instead the sentiment that eats away at Claudio in imaging and learning of his lover Andrea’s death. All three films nevertheless make death a spectacle to shock and to educate.
*Animal*, like *Virus* and *Days*, also engages with an absurdist-ethical framework, meaning that the narrative offers a vision of the future of the epidemic and introduces some element of agency or change. The objective of this element in an absurdist AIDS film is that the spectator may be incited to produce change after the show, especially because the framework must be gleaned through a critical engagement with the film. The possible failure of this constellation is that, on average, spectators tend not to understand the underlying message of the film, but instead find it revolting and politically offensive. Samy, the director of *Animal*, has been criticized, for example, of pounding spectators over the head with his over-the-top message, which makes it clear in a shocking, grotesque, and actually comical way, that people are still in general ignorant, unenlightened and brutal about the virus.²⁵

Read more critically, the film does have the goal of persuading spectators to believe in a politics of tolerance, but a tolerance for the virus and not necessarily for people. While the virus may elicit sympathy from the audience, Ayyanar never really does, even after he is infected with HIV. Yet, the virus in this case acts as the catalyst to turn Ayyanar’s life around. The virus *is* in truth *the* benevolent addition and agent of change in Ayyanar’s life, and by extension in his family’s life, because the familial unit is solidified through the virus. His wife learns to stand up for herself, Ayyanar learns to act like a father to his child, and as kindly son to his mother. His mother’s untimely death—she dies of thirst—is the reason he travels to the city, although he is very sick and dying of AIDS, to convince city developers to come to his village to build a well. The shifting of the role of the disease into something positive may be seen as an absurd and grotesque scenario, but when read through the lens of

²⁵ See Kumar’s article and “Mirugam—Powerful Portrayal,” in bibliography for negative reviews of *Animal*. There are no scholarly reviews of *Animal* published thus far, save a dissertation from 2010, which discusses the film in a formal perspective that follows the prescriptions of a method developed by Russian formalist Vladimir Propp. See Sreenivas in bibliography.
an absurdist-ethics, becoming infected ends up being the only real ethical change having taken place in the film.

Spectators generally do not recognize such complex readings of the film—certainly not in terms of ethics pertaining to the HIV virus. The average spectator might simply not want to acquiesce that a grotesque figure like Ayyanar, who acts like a wild, animal-like rapist, could actually turn out to be a moral figure. One reviewer complained that “[while] we do sympathize for the man for the agony he undergoes, we cannot identify with him, as he shows no sign of humanness in his behavior” (“Mirugam—Powerful Portrayal,” par. 3). Spectators may admit that Ayyanar attempts to turn his life around, after he realizes he is dying and would like the help of others, but the damage Ayyanar ultimately causes throughout the film is truly hard to reconcile in the end with his last good deeds. Still, when the film is read critically through the lens of an absurdist-ethics, a more positive message may be gleaned, revealing that the director is trying to make his spectators understand that the HIV/AIDS virus has become a banal subject. Samy uses rural townspeople to provide a contrast to the mythical ‘civilized’ person, who should know better how to act and how to protect her or himself against infection. The doctors from the city do not represent these civilized people either, for they also do not know how to properly educate a significant portion of the population. Jailers from the city prove just as brutal as Ayyanar, even if they are supposed to represent law and order. After so many official, condescending information campaigns about HIV/AIDS, Samy demonstrates how many people still do not know the nature of the virus, or refuse to liberate their behavior from ingrained misconceptions: they are still afraid, even when they learn that there is no reason to be afraid. Samy punctuates the grotesque nature of human beings who, simply put, are brutal and ignorant, but still enjoy
life and seek pleasure in and through an indulgence in many forms of sexual desire nonetheless, even in the face of danger, disease, and death; it takes the absurd and the grotesque through humor to make that point. It takes such a radical and grotesque figure as Ayyanar to jolt spectators out of their comfort zone, to force them to ask why they tolerate certain behaviors and not others, and to ask about how people are being educated about the virus, in particular in places where the epidemic is so rampant, such as in India and the Global South.

In comparison, von Praunheim’s *Virus* received many similar scathing reviews, and in general his work has been widely misread and underappreciated. Still, at another level, beyond scholarly or academically informed criticism, *Virus* is a film that pushes the spectator not only to question her or his own position vis-à-vis HIV and AIDS, but to examine the limits of acceptability in engaging with these issues. *Days*, the film studied in the following chapter, is also underappreciated by critics because of the intense, open, and controversial nature of its discussion of barebacking, whereby Andrea’s character is willing to accept an early death versus taking AIDS medications to prolong his life. This type of film asks if you, the spectator, find certain grotesque and comical scenarios in the film unreasonable, and will revolt against *seeing* this irreal situation on the screen, why would you tolerate or turn a blind eye to the horrors of the reality before you. This type of film also demands that one ask what quality of life means and what role desire and sexuality, and even risk plays in the mix. In the chapters that follow, I will describe how this scenario acts as a radical instantiation of an absurdist-ethics.
CHAPTER III
BAREBACKING IN CINEMA: GIORNI [DAYS] 2001

With the goal of concentrating my critical effort on the analysis of content and message of the films treated so far, I have purposefully avoided tracing a filmic genealogy by movements, waves and sub-genres in Queer Cinematic history. But the main features gathered from my assessment of Virus and Animal, in conjunction with the subsequent work on Days [Giorni] (2001), make it appropriate now to outline how all three films belong to a sub-genre of Queer Cinema I name as a Global Queer AIDS Cinema. After tracing that genealogy, I approach Italian filmmaker Laura Muscardin’s Days as a last cinematic image of an absurdist-ethics that illustrates a model of a high-risk sexual practice that in theory eroticizes and embraces the virus. This instantiation of an absurdist-ethics is perhaps the most radical of the three presented in this study, and serves as a radical representation of my model of an absurdist-ethics.

Film scholars have established the connection between the New Queer Cinema and AIDS (cf. Aaron; Arroyo). Although not all films included in the New Queer Cinema deal with the subject matter of AIDS, the introduction of the epidemic into the lives of queer culture altered that culture systemically, and scholars contend that the New Queer Cinema begot an AIDS Cinema. An AIDS Cinema proper would include all films from around the globe that deal with the topic of HIV and AIDS as it affects all persons, regardless of sexuality, gender, and/or classifications of identity. In this sense, even if barebacking is a highly controversial and generally taboo topic in the queer community, Queer Cinema and by
extension AIDS Cinema, like all minor cinemas, have provided a venue for directors to explore even the most minor practices, represented oftentimes in fantastical and mythical formations. *Minor cinema* is an expression Tom Gunning adopted from Deleuze and Guattari and their use of a *minor literature* with respect to Kafka. Correspondingly, Deleuze and Guattari frame a minor literature as:

that which a minority constructs with a major language. […] The first characteristic […] is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization. In this sense, Kafka marks the impasse that bars access to writing for the Jews of Prague and turns their literature into something impossible—the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise. […] In short, Prague German is a deterritorialized language, appropriate for strange and minor uses. (*Kafka*, 16)

*Queer cinema* may be read as a minor cinematic language for queer directors. Gunning extends the term minor to cinema explaining that

Minor literature remains aware of, and celebrates, its marginal identity, fashioning from it a revolutionary consciousness. […] A minor cinema reshapes our image of the avant-garde, moving away from its image of shock troop battalions. […] Much alternative filmmaking and theory of the past decade declared its intention to break down the ghetto of avant-garde film. The recent films that I find exciting proudly wear the badge of the ghetto. This is a dangerous statement, of course. (“Towards a Minor Cinema,” 2-3)

The crux of Gunning’s argument is that minor cinemas and their films represent marginal identities that “maintain a position outside the major cinematic languages;” and even more significantly because for Gunning the cinema is parasitic of itself:

Minor cinema recognizes—cannot ignore—the existence of another cinema. Its attitude is both creatively parasitic (e.g. the use of found footage) and insistently oppositional (none of these filmmakers dream of a commercial breakthrough film—breakthrough to what?). But these filmmakers also manifest no desire to supplant dominant cinema. (3)

Film is a citational medium that is ever changing and adapting to new cultural forms just as culture and identity mutates along with it, dynamically and simultaneously. It may also be
said that cinema is parasitic of popular culture, of minor cultural instantiations, or of the human subconscious and identities.

This dynamic may be better understood by using the appellation *viral*, an adjective that illustrates the function of queer cinema insofar as it is a minor, yet significant form of expression. The appellation of *viral* also points to the distribution of many of these films via the Internet. Filmmakers of minor films oftentimes do not have the budgets to market their films for a mainstream venue and theaters, and the Internet oftentimes proves a better means of distribution of their work than local theaters in big cities. Via the Internet, minor filmmakers can also reach a wider number of spectators, especially those who may not or cannot watch such films otherwise due to issues of social stigma or for monetary reasons.

Queer Cinema as a minor cinema can be defined as films made typically by and for queers, at least symbolically speaking, because film productions are made up of dozens to thousands of people, the sexual identities of which one cannot possibly quantify. Following Gunning’s use of the word, Queer Cinema as a minor cinema also has a ghetto of its own, even if that ghetto is illusive and imaginary. What this amounts to, in terms of a minor cinema, is that the cinema of minoritarian groups, whether Jewish, gay, black, Latina/Latino, or otherwise, are invested in more than just notions of the *real* but also in particular abstract representations, myths, and fantasies, even if they may be deemed as absurd or grotesque by some sectors of the status quo. Minor cinemas, like queer cinema, participate simultaneously and ever dynamically in constructing and deconstructing identity and cultural meaning—collective and personal—for a particular group, and even for other groups. Cinema is not just some detached source, which one may tap at will. Instead, when literally placed face-to-face with a minor cinema, and in particular, those with which an individual may partially identify,
such as a gay man may do when watching a queer film, the film invades the consciousness of the individual and even the individual’s physiognomy, in many ways analogously to the way pornography does. In this respect, when Deleuze posits that the cinema produces reality, one may take this to mean that cinema functions in the same mode as pornography does to induce real reactions. This same mechanism would apply to spectators watching any and all films, because films can induce blushing, tears, and goose bumps, as well as erections and orgasms, sometimes working with and sometimes against the individual’s own conscious will.

In the case of queer cinema, directors entice spectators with the promise of scenes of gay, lesbian, and/or queer desire and sexuality. As copious films do, queer cinema frames sexual imagery, consonantly to pornography—admittedly many queer films could be and in fact are categorized by some as both porn and queer cinema. All queer films, and I say this with caution, cater to certain kinds of sexual situations, whereby audio and visual stimuli invade the spectator’s senses to provoke cognitive and oftentimes bodily reactions, be it pleasure or disgust. This source of stimuli is not exclusively an isolated, individual experience either. Feona Attwood’s *Porn.com: Making Sense of Online Pornography* (2010), while appealing to other queer scholars such as Richard Dyer, outlines how pornographic images play a defining role in the make-up of queer culture, as well as the queer aesthetics that circumscribe that culture:

Dyer has argued that gay porn is ‘analogous … to aspects of gay male sexual practice…’ [...] for example, where porn viewing and public sex are combined in visits to gay porn movie houses, but in its visual embodiment of a utopian view of a gay sexual lifestyle which combines romanticism with promiscuity […]. (161)²⁶

Not only is porn important to the way some gay men define themselves, or others define them with respect to visibility, but also porn is arguably part and parcel of queer cinema at its basic core:

[Gay] male porn must be understood, not only in terms of its textual conventions, but its place within the context of gay men’s cultural and social practices […] Gay porn has been culturally important for gay men, working to make them visible; as Cante and Restivo note, ‘gayness is unquestionably much, much more commonly represented than in any other category of U.S. moving-image product’ […] 27 (161, emphasis in the original)

Richard Cante and Angelo Restivo make a good point in reminding readers that the New Queer Cinema, even if a minoritarian cinema, is not an isolated form, but a part of that which is thematized and represented in the cinema as a mediated form in general.

Queer Cinema really made its claim in cinematic history with the introduction of the genre of the New Queer Cinema. The phrase “New Queer Cinema” was coined in 1992 by feminist scholar B. Ruby Rich to describe what she witnessed as an influx of new queer films on the international film festival circuit. Just as the traditions of the New German Cinema in Germany and the Nouvelle Vague in France were spawned in response to a time of post-political upheaval—as in after WWII, the New Queer Cinema matured out of the impetus of HIV/AIDS activism. 28 Furthermore, the New Queer Cinema’s pro-genesis was dependent on the legacies of other budding minor cinemas, including the avant-garde, independent, and race-based film traditions. Additionally, the inheritance of the Third Cinema was crucial to the New Queer Cinema in so much as this Latin American film movement of the 1960s and

27 Attwood references Cante and Restivo’s article “The cultural-aesthetic specificities of all-male moving image pornography.” See bibliography.

28 This section of the dissertation on the New Queer Cinema and the Global Queer Cinema is adapted from a previously published article. See Riley, “A Transnational Queer AIDS Cinema.”
1970s stood as an exemplar of a viable political and theoretical framework within which queer filmmakers could generate their own messages.

Queer films, or at least films with queer subtexts, have however notably always existed in film since its start; yet, the New Queer Cinema was the first film movement that presented a united front to the cinematic world. It also revolutionized the modes of production and psychology of queer spectatorship. Rich was an eyewitness to the New Queer Cinema’s birth:

The queer film phenomenon was introduced a year ago at Toronto’s Festival of Festivals, the best spot in North America for tracking new cinematic trends. There, suddenly, was a flock of films that were doing something new, renegotiating subjectivities, annexing whole genres, revising histories in their image. […] Check out the international circuit, from Park City to Berlin to London. Awards have been won, parties held. At Sundance, in the heart of Mormon country, there was even a panel dedicated to the queer subject, hosted by yours truly. (15)

Many directors of the New Queer Cinema endeavored to depict positive and affirming images of gays, lesbians, transgendered persons, *queer* for short, as main protagonists on the silver screen. These films sought to challenge the stereotypes that bound gays and lesbians to the roles in film, for instance, of the sissy, serial killer, or child molester. Films of the New Queer Cinema appeared in many forms, including feature films, shorts, and creative performance pieces.

Queer characters that are HIV positive were also introduced for the first time in film history, and HIV and AIDS played a key role in the development of this new minor cinema. In *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture* (1995), Cory K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty explain that

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29 A solid documentary about the representation of gays and lesbians in cinema is the film *The Celluloid Closet* (1995).
For many members of a generation coming into political consciousness haunted by AIDS but collectively strengthened by AIDS activism, queer has become an attractive and oppositional self-label that acknowledges a new cultural context for politics, criticism, reception-consumption, and production. (6; emphasis in the original)

The queer activism of which Creekmur and Doty speak includes activities by politically queer groups like ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), Queer Nation, Lesbian Avengers, and Outrage. The energy and passion of such groups compelled filmmakers, actors and spectators to produce, act in, and watch films that became the New Queer Cinema, making visible cinematically their political goals, as well as the realities of the epidemic in the early 1990s at home and on the streets.

While films of the New Queer Cinema are most solidly attributed to the timeframe of barely two years between 1991 and 1992, film scholars have incorporated other films made before and since that time into the movement. Almost fifteen years since the introduction of the New Queer Cinema, room has been made for the next major wave—the Global Queer Cinema, appearing arguably for the first time in 2005 in the context of an international LGBT art exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Fifty-six films were shown, including nonfictional, fictional, experimental shorts and feature films from filmmakers around the globe. In a press release, the exhibitors outlined their goals, including their aim to address and reconsider the Anglo- and Euro-centrism in queer cinema:

North America and Western Europe are often recognized for their prolific output of gay, lesbian, and transgender film and media. Yet over the past 20 years a wide range of works falling into the sub-genre of New Queer Cinema has emanated from sub-Saharan Africa, India, New Zealand, Thailand, Argentina, Bolivia, Mexico, Israel, and China.

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Queer filmmakers have traditionally tested the possibilities and boundaries of film and media aesthetics. Some of the boldest experimentation in narrative and visual form has been made by filmmakers whose films have used gay themes, narrative, or imagery to bolster or subvert existing conventions in cinema. The new wave of Queer Filmmakers presented in this exhibition investigates cinematic form in relation to the complexities of their sexual identities and the world in which they live.  

AIDS made its appearance in the wave of the Global Queer Cinema as well. For instance, Chinese director Cui Zi’en’s feature-length film *The Old Testament* (2002) was screened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. This is possibly China’s first openly gay, underground film to delve into the topic of AIDS, sexuality, and homophobia. Also exhibited was Argentinean director Anahi Berneri’s *A Year without Love* (2005), which relates the quest of an AIDS-stricken artist, searching for love and comfort, and chancing in the world of sadomasochism.

In the same year that the Museum of Modern Art had their exhibition, the University of Iowa sponsored a film series and a seminar around the subject of the Global Queer Cinema. Like in New York, organizers of the Iowa film series sought to expand the spatial parameters of the New Queer Cinema. One sponsor, Rosalind Galt, clarifies: “Queer cinema has become a contemporary global phenomenon, reflecting the increasing visibility of gay, lesbian and transgendered people around the world.”  

Corey Creekmur, Director of the Institute for Cinema and Culture, defined their efforts:

This series should fully demonstrate that the relation between non-normative sexual identities and cinema has a long and truly international history: in many countries films representing gay or lesbian life in specific cultural contexts have played a key role in the political liberation of queer people in those locations. […] This series offers a rare opportunity for students and the local community to compare and contrast representations of queer people in different eras and societies. At the same time, the films in the series also present a hopeful vision of the global future.”

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time, these films do not simply function as propaganda for the acceptance of a minority lifestyle: they are complex works of art and cultural significance as well.\textsuperscript{33}

The Global Queer Cinema recognizes and brings together queer communities worldwide, uniting them in as a collective political, intellectual, and artistic force.

Films promoted in the Iowa film series included fictional feature length films, shorts, and documentaries as well. As with the New Queer Cinema, not all films in this collection dealt indicatively with AIDS. In fact, the only film in the Iowa collection that broached the topic of AIDS openly was Indian film director Sridhar Ragnayan’s \textit{The Pink Mirror} (2003). This campy film explores non-traditional kinship relationships and other issues including AIDS in the Indian queer community. Notably, the fact that few films in the Global Queer Cinema engage with AIDS may testify to a trend indicating that fewer such films are being made worldwide. However, the most recent additions to AIDS films are being produced in or pertain to developing nations. This is not surprising, given that over 95\% of people infected with HIV today live in developing countries.\textsuperscript{34}

At the same time, the study of the Global Queer Cinema, and with that, minor appearances of AIDS, has extended beyond exhibitions and into the academy as well. For instance, film scholar Alice Kuzniar has offered a film series and several courses on the Global Queer Cinema at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and at the University of Waterloo. Those films in her series/courses depicting queer AIDS include American filmmaker John Scagliotti’s documentary \textit{Dangerous Living: Coming Out in the Developing World} (2003), as well as French filmmakers Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau’s \textit{The Adventures of Felix} (2001). The latter film relates the story of an HIV-

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{34} Source: <http://www.nowfoundation.org/issues/health/whp/whp_fact5.html>.
positive young man, who takes to the road in France to discover catharsis, community, and hope.

Consequently, the Global Queer AIDS Cinema combines, builds upon, expands, and also narrows the project of the New Queer Cinema. First, it takes the energy, attitude, and defiance of the 1990s that filmmakers invested in films about AIDS. Admittedly, films of the Global Queer Cinema also mimic those of the New Queer Cinema in terms of submitting to low budgetary constraints, as well as sporting poor narrative and aesthetic strategies (Aaron, 3). Michele Aaron outlines the characteristics of the New Queer Cinema, as a point of comparison:

First, despite the fast rules of acceptable subjects dictated by western popular cultures, these films give voice to the marginalized not simply in terms of focusing on the lesbian and gay community, but on the sub-groups contained within it. Second, the films are unapologetic about their characters’ faults or, rather, crimes: they eschew positive imagery. [...] Third, the films defy the sanctity of the past, especially the homophobic past. [...] Fourth, the films frequently defy cinematic convention in terms of form, content and genre. [...] Finally, the films in many ways defy death. [...] The key way in which death is defied is in terms of AIDS. Death is defied as the life-sentence passed by the disease: the HIV+ leads of *The Living End* instead find the ‘time-bomb’ to be ‘totally’ liberating. [...] It is not simply that a sense of defiance characterizes these films, but that it marks them as queer. (3-5)

Aaron emphasizes three central points in her definition of Queer Cinema. First, in the new millennium, scholars like Alice Kuzniar recognize the limitations of the New Queer Cinema, including its deeper Western ethnocentrism. Scholars of the Global Queer Cinema, having taken corrective measures, lifted queer cinema to a new level, emphasizing the local and global implications of this project. Second, as I explained in the introduction, what is at stake in queer cinema is not necessarily cinematography but the narrative. There are, of course, some queer films that demonstrate sophisticated cinematography, but oftentimes directors of queer cinema are novice to the practice, have small budgets, and focus more explicitly on
getting a ‘queer’ story across. Third, many queer films “eschew positive imagery.” All three films I discuss in this paper, Virus, Animal, and Days, follow suit. They are unapologetic representations of situations that most audiences find distasteful, repellent, if not morally reprehensible. As the present study deals with the focused area of queer theory, it appeals to the most minor, that which is oftentimes ignored or obscured, especially those topics usually eschewed because of their political contentious nature. There are other films that may be tangentially related to these three, such as A Year Without Love in which sadomasochism is presented as an outlet for pain. However, even this film tows an ethical line that would never condone a celebration of life or hope through infection such as in Days, or support grotesque representations of AIDS that treat the subject as comical, such as it is done in Virus and Animal.

Days is the only narrative fictional film produced thus far that explicitly brings into dialogue issues of gay sex, barebacking, and HIV as a utopist/dystopic alternative in a scheme that unsettles the viewer’s understanding of safety, livable life, humanity, death, and pleasure. Italian director Laura Muscardin explores the world of homosexual men who engage in barebacking to intentionally contract HIV with the objective of feeling a part of a mythical, HIV-positive, gay community. In Days, barebacking constitutes free, queer love,

35 In this Argentinean film, A Year without Love [Un año sin amor] (2005), director Anahi Berneri relates the tale of an HIV-positive poet named Pablo who seeks love and companionship in the world of BDSM (i.e., bondage, discipline, sadism, and masochism). Given Pablo’s relative good health, he is able to test the limits of his body through this erotic means, and particularly through blood play, when he allows his S&M partner to cut his flesh. Within this context, HIV takes on a fetish identity, and through the practice of S&M, Pablo is able to experience a cathartic release from the trauma and pain associated with having HIV — Pablo even pens a book to document his journey. The world of S&M becomes a safe shelter for Pablo from the tyranny and prejudice of his family, as well as alienation of his friends. I do not, however, think this film adheres to an absurdist-aesthetics in that the blood play is not presented as a means of possible transmission. In other words, S&M is only used as a safe means of release, which in all actuality replaces the option for Pablo to have sex. Therefore, it appears Pablo becomes celibate to be safe, and S&M is depicted, as it has been often portrayed and studied, as a form of pain management (as in pleasurable pain), for the psyche and the body. (See Chefetz in bibliography, for one such study). It just happens that Pablo’s pain is related to HIV.
which comes with a surprisingly acceptable price of infection and inevitable death. This political precarious scenario is framed controversially as a welcomed, serendipitous, life-altering encounter between gay men, with a message that makes evident that a life worth living excludes one with safer sex. While safety is a key factor in the logic of the narrative, the protagonists appear to feel somehow safe enough to contract or transmit the virus, and for one at least, safe enough to die.

*Days* has comical moments, and includes some humor and AIDS jokes, but it was marketed, remarkably and controversially, as a romantic melodrama. The cover of the DVD version of the film advertises it almost as a comedy, asking “Are these guys completely nuts, or just hopelessly in love?” The story is about two men, seropositive Claudio, who is wooed by young seronegative Andrea. Claudio betrays and ultimately abandons his long-term, monogamous relationship with another man, in which safety had played a central role. Although Claudio is reluctant at first, Andrea convinces him to continue to bareback (after they already barebacked in their first sexual encounter), so they can experience sex and love more deeply. When Andrea receives notice of his HIV-positive status, he surprisingly refuses medication, pronouncing that he wants to live life exclusive of medication. Upon Andrea’s early death, Claudio reflects back on his own predicament as a powerless one. He regrets his choice to take medication and *live*. Instead, he seems more convinced that one may be better living life to the fullest, as Andrea had done being HIV-positive without medication.

The title of the film “Days” implies that Claudio had only a few good days, and not namely years in his relationship with his lover, Andrea. The film poses the question of the quality and value of those “days,” as well as the value of Andrea’s last days. The film puts what would generally be conceived as a dominant ideology of ethics, or at least a model
therefore, into question, arguing that one should challenge a theory of living that values extending life at all costs, one that venerated the search for more days and more years of living, even when one’s quality of life may suffer through safer living practices, through practicing safer sex, or even from being on HIV-medication with possible side-effects. Alternatively, the narrative supports a radical ethics that values the individual reaping the benefits of a heightened sense of pleasure and love, all the while embracing death as it approaches.

It is clear that this kind of ethics, as it is represented in Days, largely if not entirely disregards the history of the epidemic, the millions of lives that have been lost, and the possibility that the practice of barebacking continues to spread the virus to others. It could be understandably argued that a model of a postmodern absurdist-ethics as I read it is selfish and focuses solely on the individual’s pleasure and the individual’s value of life; and by extension, that it only values life for the individuals collectively in that community. This line of argumentation is important, but in order to approach the film more systematically I will defer to its discussion in a broader cultural context in the chapter to follow. Still, the idea that the virus could eventually be spread to someone not seeking the transmission is not discussed in Days nor in this paper. That does not mean that this topic is irrelevant. I acknowledge and agree that it is vitally important to human society at large to rid the world of HIV. But within the space of this paper, safer sex and the eradication of HIV is controversially secondary because what is relevant to the argument is not the actual practice of barebacking, nor the representation of the real. I am not talking about anyone’s real experience with HIV. Instead, I am only interested here in the possibility and logic that barebacking and grotesque-absurdist aesthetics may suggest metaphorically. Indeed, I argue that a model of barebacking is a
radical instantiation of an absurdist-ethics from which, in theory, one might glean radical agency.

This revolutionary and controversial model of ethics is clearly present in Days. While the protagonist Claudio chooses a life that values the quantity of time, Andrea prefers the opposite, an existence that values quality at the price of death. What makes this argument even more potent and controversial is that both avenues of choice are mediated through a discussion that follows the course of the narrative, debating whether taking medication equates to submitting oneself to the powers that be, and to an ethics of dying. In other words, even while barebacking and ascribing to an absurd-ethics until the moment of contagion, if the individual takes medication, this would constitute a submission to the system. By this logic, the choice is a forfeiting of an ethical position in order to gain access to medications, and by extension a longer life. I start by discussing the argument on medicine first, as it enriches my deliberations of the possibility of living by a code of absurdist-ethics.

Medicine acts as a leitmotiv throughout the film, and symbolizes the ethical position of the powers that be as represented by the medical community and judicial law, that is, institutions that prescribe a proper code of conduct for living because the individual must follow the health regime the doctor prescribes. Related to the practice of barebacking, the film proposes a discussion of whether or not the medical regimes doctors prescribe are always in the best interest of the patient. When not, the option to revolt against the system is open for debate.

At the beginning of Days, Claudio refers to his own HIV-positive status as “an unexpected event” which he had until now kept “under control.” His voice narrates this impression while on screen he swallows a number of pills from three bottles, which one

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assumes his HIV medications. The three bottles suggest Claudio is taking the standard
so-called triple therapy, the ‘gold standard’ for AIDS treatment.36 Viewers are privileged to a
medium shot of Claudio naked from the chest up after showering. On screen, the camera
zooms in to reveal that Claudio’s body is strong, muscular, and healthy looking, albeit a little
thin. Notably, both Claudio and his HIV-positive friend Giuseppe are shown as healthy men,
who exercise regularly. Claudio runs, the two friends lift weights together, and Giuseppe
even works as a high-energy aerobics instructor at the gym. Overall, neither person’s body
bears the typical signs of sickness one might associate with AIDS, like Kaposi’s sarcoma
lesions, Candida, pneumonia, or facial-wasting.

Throughout the movie, the high-pitched chime of Claudio’s watch alarm acts as an
ever-present reminder that Claudio is HIV-positive. Typically, when the alarm sounds,
Claudio takes out a silver pillbox, removes several pills, and swallows. During these scenes,
Claudio displays no real emotion, as if taking these pills has become an almost unconscious
habit, requiring no reflection. Claudio always takes his pills, on screen, with water from a
plastic, disposable cup. The pill-taking routine is not represented as an aesthetic act, and such
a portrayal is relevant to how Claudio’s life is depicted contrastively after he stops taking
medication. The film presents life with HIV as if one were dealing with other typical bodily

36 “The mono-drug regimen of AZT (the first effective HIV-medication to go on the market, FDA-approved in
1987) has evolved to HAART therapy (highly active antiretroviral therapy, also known as the triple cocktail
therapy), which was approved in the late 1990s/early 2000s. “The treatment of HIV/AIDS has evolved in the
last 20 years since the beginning of the epidemic from no treatment to treatment with a single drug (AZT) to
dual-drug therapy and, now, to highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART). HAART is defined as treatment
with at least three active anti-retroviral medications (ARV’s), typically two nucleoside or nucleotide reverse
transcriptase inhibitors (NRTI’s) plus a non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitor (NNRTI) or a protease
inhibitor (PI) or another NRTI called abacavir (Ziagen). HAART is often called the drug ‘cocktail’ or triple-
therapy. HAART affords us a potent way of suppressing viral replication in the blood while attempting to
prevent the virus from rapidly developing resistance to the individual ARV’s. Suppressing viral replication with
HAART allows the body time to rebuild its immune system and replenish the destroyed CD4 or T cells.
HAART has been clearly shown to delay progression to AIDS and prolong life. Note that a curative treatment
of HIV/AIDS is not possible at the present time, or in the near future, and when HAART is stopped, HIV
becomes detectable in the blood once again” (“HIV Treatment Options,” par. 1).
functions. Taking pills keeps the person regular, while they certainly provide no pleasure. One could suggest that the film implies that Claudio’s life is just as disposable and dreary as the cup from which he takes his medicine.

At the start of the film, Claudio admits to having felt “comfortable,” before he met Andrea. He felt he had “tamed life” and it “obeyed him.” He compared his situation to someone sitting in a car, living without awareness of the dangers that mode of transportation portends, such as those who fool themselves into thinking that flying is more dangerous than driving. Barebacking is presented as offering Claudio an alternative to the set and planned life he leads with Dario, his long time lover. After the initial encounter with his new lover Andrea (which he keeps to himself), Claudio begins to complain to Dario that he does not appreciate always having his life planned ahead. Claudio clearly yearns for a life that is less predictable, more spontaneous. Dario, on the other hand, expresses his wish to simply and effectively plan their time together as a couple, and even strategize ahead for the time when Claudio is no longer alive. Dario is under the assumption that Claudio will eventually die of AIDS, long before he will die, and as a result, Dario expresses his desire to move in with other gay men before that time to help make the process of Claudio passing more bearable.

To further contrast Claudio and Dario’s divided positions, Claudio’s sister Laura is introduced. Laura is unable or rather unwilling to maintain any long-term relationships with men. She tells Claudio over dinner that she leaves her relationships most often because she loves her lovers too much, and yet, there is still something missing. After a discussion of Laura’s situation, Claudio delivers some sarcastic remarks, making it clear that he does not care one way or the other. Dario remarks “If I did not love you anymore, I could not be with you. What about you?” Claudio scoffs bewildered and looks in the other direction, signaling
to his personal predicament at having a secret lover. The scene cuts to the next, leaving the question unanswered. The spectator is reminded that Dario could leave Claudio at any moment, were his love to wane, even and despite the fact that Claudio is HIV-positive.

Laura’s choice to leave her lovers also foreshadows Claudio leaving, not Dario, but Andrea, also due to the reason that he loves him too much, or rather loves too much the idea that barebacking offers him. The discussion around relationships invokes and mirrors the Socratic fear that the lover indeed will leave the beloved when his love wanes. This notion is reflected in Claudio’s second encounter with Andrea, when Claudio backs out in the end for reasons revealed only through the image. Claudio looks critically at his face in the mirror, as if he were looking for signs of disease and age, although there is none clearly apparent to the viewer. In other words, Claudio is afraid Andrea might reject him because of his HIV-positive status.

His fears are not confirmed in his own relationship with either Dario or Andrea, but they do manifest in his best friend Giuseppe’s relationship. Giuseppe, who is also HIV-positive, is courting a man who has supposedly never been with another man “aside from the priest when he was little.” Giuseppe does not want to reveal his status to his new lover Piero, but instead lies when Piero happens upon him wearing a Band-Aid after getting his blood tested. Giuseppe argues: “It’s too early to tell him.” Claudio: “Then it will be too late.” G: “Meanwhile, I will enjoy it!” Ironically, Claudio calls Giuseppe crazy and asks in a manner to scold, if Giuseppe was “careful.” Giuseppe replies: “I can’t even give a blow job without a condom.” This opens a conversation to the topic of barebacking, although the word is never mentioned. Claudio asks: “Did you ever screw up?” Giuseppe replies despondently: “I already did and I don’t want to repeat it.” Of course, Claudio wants to gather Giuseppe’s
opinion on barebacking, and ultimately his approval, but the topic is clearly too taboo, even amongst friends. In a later conversation between the two, Giuseppe reveals that he still has not told his new boyfriend about his status. He admits that he is still afraid, and although he has gotten to know this other man, he believes his lover will certainly leave if he discovers the truth. Claudio suggests that maybe the lover will stay. To this assertion, Giuseppe responds: “Nobody gives a shit about how you feel.” Here, he means, no one cares about people who are HIV-positive. C: “That’s not true.” Claudio is of course referring to his new lover, Andrea, of whom he has not told Giuseppe, but it’s clear that Giuseppe knows something is up. Giuseppe insinuates as much, reminding Claudio that he is lucky to be with someone who has the so-called “good Samaritan syndrome.” Giuseppe is referring to men like Dario, who are willing to be with someone who is HIV-positive. After all, the narration makes clear that this kind of relationship exhibits sentiments of self-sacrifice on the side of the HIV-negative person, whereby the positive person may feel resentment towards his lover, never knowing if he is with him only because he is trying to be that “good Samaritan” rather than because he loves him “genuinely.”

Dario reveals later that indeed he is a “good Samaritan” lover, when, after Claudio admits to barebacking, he is angry with Claudio, and complains. Dario: “All that effort. Being afraid to feel good.” Dario makes it clear to Claudio that he feels he has had to sacrifice pleasure in order to be with Claudio, because of his HIV-positive state. On a certain level, Dario is unhappy that Claudio is able to find more pleasure than he has felt during their relationship, although Dario is HIV-negative. In this configuration, the film suggests, again controversially, that as long as the HIV-positive lover suffers more, the HIV-negative “good Samaritan” lover is satisfied. But, once the HIV-positive lover discovers ways to experience
pleasure again, all bets are off. The “good Samaritan” needs to search for someone else to save because the HIV-positive lover no longer needs saving, that is, once he becomes a barebacker. Finally, Claudio is enlightened by barebacking when he discovers ways to enjoy life and sex again. Dario is equally enlightened about the kind of person Claudio is and what his own position is/was in their relationship, a bond that depended on desexualizing his lover, and on his lover’s HIV-positive status. Ultimately, their relationship is coded as one of simple codependence.

Meanwhile, Giuseppe’s situation finally resolves. In a dramatic scene, he confesses his HIV status, not to his lover, but to a group of strangers at the gym. As they stare blankly at Giuseppe, waiting for him to begin their aerobic routine, he makes his proclamation: “I’ve been gay for 20 years. For 10 years I’ve had short flings and for 3 years I’ve been HIV positive.” The crowd does not respond, not knowing what he wants them to respond, having shared this private information with strangers. Giuseppe gets up frustrated and leaves in a huff. He later tells Claudio that he had revealed his status to his lover Piero and that the lover found some random excuse to leave the scene of the discussion. While Giuseppe is not certain Piero has left him, Giuseppe decides to instead leave Piero, choosing not to seek him out again, but instead to accept a fate of being essentially a celibate male, who will die eventually of AIDS, alone, without a partner. Instead of getting mad at himself or Piero, Giuseppe takes his anger out on Claudio. Giuseppe suggests that he knows that Claudio has been barebacking. He says: “You think you’re superior, different? Maybe just because nobody ever told you to go to hell.” C: “Stop it.” G: “[Andrea] isn’t afraid because he has nothing to lose.” C: “How do you know that? At least he never backed away, saying a load of bullshit.” G: “You are ridiculous. Both of you are! Both of you!” Claudio gets up and leaves.
in anger. In so doing, Giuseppe demonstrates his own hypocrisy by the fact that he is a man who claims to follow the rules, and yet, he too enacts an ethical breach in having sex with Piero without revealing his status, even if he used a condom. Through this contrast, the film depicts barebacking as a consensual behavior, whereby not revealing their status to a partner is the unethical alternative.

Claudio and Andrea’s relationship is presented as the most intensely pleasurable and fulfilling one in comparison to the others in the film. It begins as a seemingly spontaneous encounter. It is not clear how the couple first meet, whether it was online or just a random encounter at a club or otherwise. After their first sexual meeting, during which they bareback, Andrea discovers Claudio’s bankcard and calls him at work to let him know he has it. But instead of calling Andrea back and meeting up with him, Claudio asks his secretary to call and tell him to tear up the card and forget it. Claudio would rather get a new card than see his one-time lover again. The film magnifies the stereotype, whether founded or not, that anonymity plays a solid role in barebacking, as well as in the gay male community in general. Although one of many implied encounters, Claudio’s rendezvous with Andrea proves to be a game changer because they bareback. The film demonstrates this through a clear rupture; in one scene, Claudio is running on a treadmill and stops his exercise program—the words “Stop…Termina” in red letters appear on the screen of the treadmill. The scene cuts to Claudio stopping by Andrea’s workplace to meet him again. This “stop” signals metaphorically the end of Claudio’s relationship with Dario, and the start of a new one with Andrea, as well as the end of the old regime of ethics to which Claudio previously ascribed, which dictated safety, monogamy, and quantity of life over quality. Instead, the new model of absurdist-ethics I read through the image of barebacking is called into force, dictating that
the individual may yield more agency and satisfaction in life by living dangerously, but intensely.

Moments before the couple barebacks for the second time, still in the throws of passion, Claudio asks if Andrea has a condom. He replies in the negative: “No. It doesn’t matter.” But Claudio insists: “I can’t.” Andrea: “Don’t you trust me?” Claudio: “You don’t understand. I can’t do it.” A moment of silence, and then Andrea takes Claudio’s chin in his hand, pulls it up to his mouth, and kisses him tenderly, reassuring him softly: “It doesn’t matter.” Claudio cannot resist. His voice-over narration makes clear that since his first barebacking experience with Andrea, Claudio has experienced an existential crisis. He cannot think of anything else but barebacking. Claudio proclaims that Andrea is unlike other previous lovers, not because of his physique, but because he has sanctioned this practice. Now, for Claudio, there is no turning back, at least not yet. But before Claudio plunges headlong into the world of barebacking, he experiences a moment of recognition about his own ethical position on quality of life while visiting his mother. In the scene, the mother insults her daughter Laura’s tendency to move from one lover to another, and then compares Laura to Claudio, and commends him: “You haven’t changed. You’ve always been calm and sensible.” A look of shock and then enticement comes over his face. The viewer realizes Claudio did enjoy “changing” and shedding his old skin through barebacking, and that he will most likely do it again.

There are a number of meaningful double entendres in the film referring to the ethical viability of the new position of power gained through barebacking. When Claudio has a realtor come over to look at the summerhouse he wants to sell, she explains that it’s hard to sell a house on the ocean in the fall. She reassures him that it may be possible: “there is
always someone who is more original than others.” After the realtor leaves, Claudio turns to Andrea and affirms: “We are original.” They both laugh and nod knowingly. Metaphorically, a traditional paradigm dictates that one ought to start relationships in the spring of life, during the season of birth and/or renewal. While Claudio and Andrea are building a home instead in the late fall season of life, foretelling the soon to arrive death of life in the winter. Their affirmation also acts as a verification of their newly chosen lifestyle of barebacking. In their eyes, they are no longer doing something perverse or dangerous, instead, they are innovative, “original.” Andrea insinuates that they are practicing a new kind of ethics that may be preferable, if not more philosophical than others. Later, Andrea suggests to Claudio not to sell the house, but instead that the two of them move in together. Claudio looks disconcerted, distinctively torn between his regulated life with Dario and this new risky but pleasurable one with Andrea. Andrea calls Claudio amusingly a “chicken,” for not daring to keep the house. This conversation not only evokes the idea that Claudio should fully embrace their new relationship and the barebacking lifestyle, but also builds an analogy to the act of barebacking as equivalent to an economic purchase, as in he is “buying in” to becoming a member of a barebacking community, a sentiment evoked by some barebackers, which I will discuss further in the ensuing chapter. In this case, Claudio is not yet emotionally ready to invest his “life savings,” as Andrea is, and literally plans to do, with his own life. Finally, when Dario catches on that Claudio has a serious relationship with another man—it is made clear that Claudio has had many flings, which were acceptable within the parameters of their relationship—Claudio confesses that he has been barebacking. Dario is upset by what he sees as Claudio’s carelessness.

Claudio: “We didn’t use anything, Dario.”
Dario: “Why didn’t you tell him?”
C: “I told him right away. It’s been like this from the start.”
D: “What are you saying?”
C: “I don’t know how to explain it. He’s not afraid.”
D: “And you?”
C: “I don’t know. I like being with him like that. I like it.”
D: “You like it?” (He asks sarcastically.) “What the hell does that mean? You mean the two of us were jackasses? All that effort. Being afraid to feel good.”
C: “I know. I’m afraid now too. For me, for him.”
D: “Who the hell is he? Who knows him? Maybe he’s like that with everyone?”
C: “No! I am sure….”

Of course, Claudio cannot be entirely sure that Andrea has not barebacked before. Andrea admitted earlier that Claudio was not the first HIV-positive person he had met. If anything, the narrative suggests that barebackers ascribe to a community, which entails one having multiple partners.

Dario cannot accept Claudio’s explanation for why he barebacks. Although Claudio decrees that he barebacks out of love, Dario refuses to see Claudio’s actions as anything other than a selfish action, if not a sign of delusion. Dario demands: “I don’t understand what goes through your head. Tell me why at least. Tell me why.” C: “I don’t worry about it. When I’m with him, I don’t worry about it. He makes me feel invulnerable.” D: “You’re not.” Like Giuseppe, and probably most people, Dario cannot accept that a practice that promotes the spread of an infectious disease could be ethically viable, morally justifiable, or deemed as an act of love. Such reactions mirror the gay community’s backlash to the practice of barebacking, reactions which are in line with hegemonic ideals of enlightened, rationalist thinking that underpins Western European society today. Yet, the narrative reveals most provocatively a perspective of how such a radical practice may be conceived, however controversially as the opposite, as something viable, transcendental, and ethically justifiable, albeit only to a very minor community of individuals, and even if only in the space of a fictional narrative. I will discuss the realities of this practice as the radical instantiation of an
absurdist-ethics in the ensuing chapter, as I find it relevant to put this model into a greater
cultural context. While in this chapter I deliver and analyze the logic behind the narrative of
Days and its model of barebacking, I want to later deliberate even further the real world
implications of such a practice. That subsequent step will show the wider applications of an
absurdist-ethics as a philosophical tool, so that the dynamics at play in other manifestations
of an absurdist-grotesque aesthetics may be found and discussed in terms of ethics.

Going back to Muscardin’s work, the film also tests a model of absurdist-ethics in
ways that a work of Cultural Studies could not, because fiction has nothing to lose.
Muscardin’s depiction of barebacking is an extreme model, which I argue she crafts in order
to prompt spectators to think about what ‘quality of life’ means to them. Muscardin also does
this with respect to the issue of the ethicacy of taking medication in order to extend life, if,
for example, one might experience certain reductions in quality of life as a result of the side
effects of those medications. In the film, before Claudio meets Andrea, the thought that he
might not take his medication appears to never cross his mind. Later, the sound of the timer
becomes an important diegetic (and sometimes even non-diegetic) signal for those times
when Claudio chooses not to take his medication, when he is potentially in danger of
becoming ill as a result of refusing medication. Why Claudio chooses not to continue to take
his medicine regularly has to do with an argument the narrative slowly builds against HIV-
drug regimes. The film does this through the careful placement of four counter-arguments: 1)
HIV-medications are toxic. 2) HIV-medications are ineffective. Therefore, 3) the
pharmaceutical companies (and the governmental laws that protect them) are conspiring to
use drugs as a means to control the sexuality of gay men (and by extension other persons). 4)
Taking drugs equates to a life less lived, whereby one must submit control of one’s selfhood
to the powers that be. One surrenders to a slow agonizing death, as opposed to dying quickly, which consequently means having to suffer less.

Claudio first has his doubts about the effectiveness of such medications when he meets Irene, who is another HIV-positive patient at the hospital he attends. She looks healthy as well, but she too carries a larger grocery bag of pills home, like Claudio. She complains to Claudio about the side effects of the drugs. “They keep on telling me not to worry, but I can’t see anymore.” Her statement reflects the critique some HIV-positive persons have launched against drug companies in terms of the dangerous side-effects of the drugs. From the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, some AIDS activist groups avow that HIV/AIDS patients, and above all gay men with HIV, have been guinea pigs for drug companies seeking to make a profit off the epidemic, all the while possibly providing medications that do more harm than good. To further this argument in the film, Irene complains that the hospital makes her drive clear across town every day to receive her medication. They will only allow her to take some medications at home. In other words, the individual’s livelihood is in the

37 Irene also acts as the token reminder to the audience that HIV affects all genders and sexualities of people, and not just gay men. She identifies as a straight woman, i.e., she mentions her husband. Irene’s inclusion in the film may have been little more than a political gesture on behalf of this fact.

38 In the late 1980s and early 1990s, patients already expressed their fear of the ineffectively and dangers associated with the first real HIV-medicine on the market, AZT. In an article on “AIDS: Words from the Front” published in 1993, one patient writes: “‘Everyone I know has come off AZT,’ he said. ‘It’s happening in a big way here. There is a patient rebellion going on, in part because we’ve finally been allowed to call AZT what it is, in the press, which is a killer drug. They can’t just keep calling us loonies; we’re talking about our own experiences’” (Suchit, 116). Health policy scholars Kathryn Whetten-Goldstein and Trang Quyen Nguyen explain the stigma or what they call a ‘conspiracy theory’ commonly associated with the medical community vis-à-vis the HIV-drug regimens: “But as helpful as these medications have proven to be to numerous patients, many poor and minority individuals still believe that medications are part of the overall conspiracy against them due to their behavior, race, or financial burden on the ‘system.’ [In one case study] nearly all also took medication holidays without informing their providers, and some […] stopped taking the medications altogether because [they were] concerned about the side effects. As powerful as the medications are, the side effects are also often powerful, frequently causing exhaustion, nausea, and weakness. The medications are seen as harmful, while some believe that the FDA-approved medications are still under clinical study and that impoverished people are being used as guinea pigs. Other patients say that, if they take the drugs, then their HIV will progress to AIDS faster; they believe the drugs are part of a conspiracy effort to cause faster decline in minority HIV patients” (179).
hands of the doctors, who have say over who receives medication, which medication, where, when, and how. For the protagonists, it appears the doctors’ rationale is random. Irene finds it incomprehensible why she is allowed to take certain drugs at home, but others only in the hospital. Later in the film, Irene does go blind, presumably as a side effect from the medication. Claudio also becomes increasingly more suspicious of his doctor’s motivations and the effectiveness of the drugs. This comes to be more apparent later, when Claudio stops taking his medication. In a later scene, after Claudio’s immune system has weakened as a result of having stopped taking his medication regularly, he goes to his doctor to check in. She explains that his test results have not come back as positive as expected. He must increase the strength of his medication regime to compensate, a change that will make him sicker at least for weeks or even months to come. His doctor questions him on why he chose not to take the medication, and he replies: “I took a holiday.” The doctor replies in anger: “Good. I hope you had fun at least.” She asks him how he feels: “At times it becomes really difficult. You have to be so careful about everything. Always!” Doctor: “Don’t stop being careful now. I know it’s burdensome, but you have no choice.” C: “All this effort… with no end.” The doctor imports how, in her point-of-view, that of the medical community and society at large, there is no other option for HIV-positive persons: they are expected to take medication. Veritably, this relates to the ethical model based on a rationalist-based ideology that prescribes that life must be extended at all costs, regardless of quality of life. This issue stirs up similar debates over assisted suicides, mercy killings, or even by analogy, abortion or the death penalty versus a life sentence in prison. Alternate ethical models, which are undoubtedly generically related to an absurdist-ethics, put into question who has the right to decide if a person may end their own life, and/or how a person spends life, especially if the
individual decides to participate in risky behavior that could increase her or his chance for an earlier death.

Until the high point of his relationship with Andrea, Claudio resists the medical system and does not take his medication. But not coincidentally, as Claudio’s guilt grows for having neglected his medication, he begins to question his feelings for Andrea or more accurately Andrea’s feelings for Claudio—for Claudio projects his own insecurities onto Andrea, and eventually gives in or gives up, depending how one reads this, and begins taking his medication as prescribed. Ultimately, he does return to better health. In comparison, Andrea represents the uncompromising position of one who refuses to submit to the system as a representation of control. It is Andrea, in proactively chasing the “bug” of HIV through his barebacking activities with Claudio, and ultimately in preferring to die without medication, who expresses the execution of an absurdist-ethics metaphorically most explicitly and fully.

One discerns this in the narrative when Andrea watches with sympathy as Claudio takes his medication. Andrea’s negative reaction to the possibility of taking drugs seems to prompt Claudio, for the first time, to question the effectiveness of his own medications, the reason behind why he is taking them, and the side-effects attached to the medical regime. In the dialog, Andrea asks Claudio: “They’re disgusting, huh?”

Claudio: “These are real shit.”
Andrea: “How many do you take?”
C: “Lots…I don’t know.”
A: “I wouldn’t be able to do it.”
C: “Don’t tell me I’m the first [HIV-positive person] you’ve met.”
A: “Of course not.”
C: “You’ve a soft spot for men like me, or is it a one-off?”
A: “I have a soft spot for you.”
C: “But with the others…”
A: “No, not with others.”
C: “It’s never happened to me.”
A: “I have never loved someone like you. It’s wonderful, huh?”

The adjective “wonderful” may have several meanings here, beyond the joys of being loved, as in: “isn’t wonderful to bareback and isn’t it wonderful that I am willing to be infected by you?” Claudio responds in voice-over narration: “Suddenly, I didn’t know how I’d managed to live without him. How I’d been able to live, to eat, to sleep, to make love. It was like taking off a heavy cover, those very warm ones that heat you up, but when the sun comes out, they are heavy and you can’t breathe. I didn’t care about anything else.” While it is signaled that Andrea uses Claudio’s body as a vehicle to enter the tribe of barebackers, it is equally revealed that Claudio also must open and permit Andrea to enter his own system with no barriers.

Claudio narrates his new perspective to the spectator, while walking through the hospital hallways, his head held high. He spots Irene through a window. She sits, looking despondently, receiving some kind of fluid drip. Gazing in from the outside through the window on Irene, one gets the impression that Claudio feels invincible, as if he were immune or free of HIV. Not like Irene. He continues: “That boring, insignificant, obsessive life that I lived before him. For the first time after so long, everything seemed simple and natural.” At the end of this monologue, Claudio decides not to attend his monthly check-up at the doctor. He watches another patient go into the doctor’s office, and then picks up his briefcase and walks away resolutely. In the meantime, Andrea already shows the first signs of being HIV-positive. He relates to Claudio that he was “out of it” at work and mixed up customers’ orders.

Later in the film, while taking care of Andrea, who is infected with HIV, and possibly already has AIDS, Claudio runs out of medication. When he finally decides to go to the
hospital in Rome to get more drugs, which Claudio does not do immediately because he does
debate his options regarding quality over quantity of life for the first time, he learns they
have already been shipped to his new home in Milan. Therefore, he is not legally allowed
more drugs unless he goes to Milan to get them. He is furious with the system, and his doctor
scolds him judgmentally; Doctor: “You just made another one of your stupid moves.” The
film suggests that the doctor acts as if she is in a position of high-level authority, holding
sway over Claudio’s decisions like a parent or even a warden, who would remind the
prisoner of how he has violated the (unspoken) law associated with following the doctor’s
orders. His doctor does eventually decide to give Claudio drugs leftover from a patient who
has just died, and who happens to have been his acquaintance, Irene. He demands to know:
“Who do they belong to? She’s dead, huh?” [Referring to Irene]. The Doctor does not answer
his question, but continues to issue orders on how to take the medication. C: “You make
fools of us and tell us a load of bullshit.” Doctor: “No, Claudio. You know that’s not true.
Irene had complications you don’t have. She didn’t react to the therapy. Don’t look for
excuses. Your situation is different. And don’t tell me it’s useless. That is not true!” The
difference between Claudio and Irene’s reactions to medication articulates the fact that some
people do feel side effects of certain medications more intensely than others and indeed, as
the film wants to point out, some people do not respond to HIV-medications as well as others,
or at all.

Towards the end of the film, Claudio decides to cut ties with Andrea. He makes this
decision after a telltale visit to his doctor, who declares that Claudio’s state of health is
deteriorating. When Andrea seeks Claudio out to see why he has been ignoring him, Claudio
replies: “Maybe there’s still time.”
Andrea: “For what?”
Claudio: “To not make the situation worse.”
A: “A little late, no?”
C: “Maybe not. Maybe…”
A: “If you want to go away. Fine. Don’t worry about me.”

Andrea leaves and Claudio lives on, depressed and weak. A new stronger drug regime makes him sick. He vomits and has lost weight. His cheeks are sunken in and his face is paler. No smile crosses his face from this point going forward. The lighting turns shaded and grainy. Similarly, the scenery becomes dismal and out of focus. These visual aesthetic techniques cast the argument that those who choose not to take medication like Andrea enjoy life more fully. They are shown as sexually active and enjoying sex most pleasurably through unprotected sex. They even appear healthy, when compared with possibly fighting a long list of opportunistic infections and the side effects of using medications on a daily basis over the course of an extended lifetime. In other words, the film suggests that an individual’s life may be drawn-out through a drug regime, but that the quality of life decreases as a result.

In the end, the narrative argues, the subject in question must decide what is more important, quantity of life or quality of life. To revolt against the drug regime means to embrace quality, and to adhere to it means extending a life sentence of a mediocre and almost unacceptable quality of life that demands that HIV-positive persons become non-sexual and regimented at the exclusion of serendipity. The narration wants to offer the assertion that this kind of life, the life that does not embrace an absurdist-ethics when an individual is HIV-positive, equates to little more than a life sentence in prison—a life void of pleasure and meaning, without personal liberty.
Despite Claudio’s sentiment of shared invulnerability with Andrea, he finally confronts him about not taking medication, trying to persuade him that there is still time enough to recover from the lapse in treatment.

Claudio: “Enough. I can’t stand it.”
Andrea: “But I can.”
C: “Is everything ok with you?”
A: “Yes.”
C: “What we do, the way we are together. It’s all normal?”
A: “I like being with you.”
C: “Although you risk so much? It’s not romantic. It’s tough, and you feel terrible.”
A: “I didn’t do anything to avoid it.”
C: “Why?”
A: “You know why? You know how it feels to be with me. It’s different from everything else. Just that. Nothing else. I won’t give that up. I love you.”
C: “That’s all?”

Claudio does not deem Andrea’s answer satisfactory. In truth, Andreas’s answer is significant because it emphasizes how the motivation for Andrea barebacking Claudio is not just about being with Claudio, or about Andrea’s love for Claudio, but about “how it feels to be with me.” In other words, Andrea admits he is or rather was what in the terminology of barebackers is called a ‘bug chaser,’ and likes the feeling of barebacking. Chances are, Andrea also barebacks with others and has now become a “gift giver,” in the same terminology of barebackers. Allegiant to his own absurdist-ethics and the community at large, Andrea is secure and satisfied in his choice to bareback until his death. It is important in this scene to see how it feels for Andrea to make Claudio realize his own stance in relation to the pathogen. Andrea’s self-projected ‘selfless’ act creates for Claudio the momentary fantasy and impression of invulnerability; for Andrea, it is a form of power to generate this feeling in Claudio. In this sense, paradoxically, Andrea has become a gift-giver to Claudio.

It appears that only Claudio is stranded at a crossroads. On one hand, he hates the controlled life he feels he must lead in order to adhere to the code of conduct the medical
community and society expects of him. On the other hand, he finds it hard to adjust his mentality to embrace Andrea’s life of barebacking and to let the disease take its natural course. In one scene, over dinner with his sister and mother, Claudio declares his anger and frustration: “I have to watch how I breathe, how I move, how I screw. How I spend my time.”

Claudio cannot contrive a way to embrace this new code of absurdist-ethics, which would have enabled and supported him in this new lifestyle and would have arguably given him the freedom and pleasure he sought.

In the final scene between the two main characters, Claudio seeks Andrea out at his job. Claudio is surprised when he sees that Andrea looks healthier again, despite the fact that he is not taking any medications. This is contrasted with an earlier shot of Claudio vomiting, miserable from his new medication. Andrea asks why Claudio looks so earnest. Claudio explains that he just learned of Irene’s death. Andrea urges him not to let it “get to him.”

Claudio asks “But how?,” but Andrea leaves the question unanswered, and rushes to serve a table. Instead of waiting to hear an answer, Claudio decides to walk away. In a voice-over narration that serves as the epilogue for the film, he says: “Then I ran away. I still don’t know what made me decide. Maybe what they call survival instinct. A year has gone by and I’ve resumed my life again. I live in a different city and have a different job. Now I live alone.”

Ironically perhaps, Claudio becomes the one who abandons his lover in his time of sickness and need. The role of the Good Samaritan does not seem to hold sway over the relationship between Claudio and Andrea at all, because neither is fundamentally co-dependent on the other. They are free agents in terms of sexual relations and even in terms of love. Claudio returns then to the ocean summerhouse, where he had spent his best days with Andrea and shares his emotions in the voice-over:
I had eliminated Andrea so well from my thoughts that I thought I had forgotten him. Sometimes I felt like calling him, I always found a good excuse not to. I was frightened. A few days ago I just happened to find out he died. He didn’t want to do any therapy. That I am sure of. Everything else seems suspended. Even the memories of those days spent together. That which remained hidden, and which I never understood. The doubts and unanswered questions that arise. I want to believe that since death comes for everyone, he decided to get it from me because he loved me. I will slowly convince myself. I will end up believing it and it will hurt less, as always. Time helps. Time.

Although the film leaves the question of whether barebacking is an option or not unanswered or at least ambivalent, there is an unambiguous overarching message that shines through. Andrea represents that person who by my theory ascribes entirely to a model of an absurdist-ethics, and reaps the benefits of enjoying his life as much as possible up until his death. On the other hand, Claudio at first embraces, but later rejects this ethical code, and in the end, lives what is presented as a lonely life, void of pleasure, love, or fulfillment. The film defends the notion that the price for taking medication and ending his barebacking activities costs Claudio more than Andrea’s choice, which cost him his life.

In contrast to Virus and Animal, Days is the only film in which I can read an absurdist-ethics as being taken to its most postmodern conclusion, and this via a model of barebacking as a radical instantiation of this ethical paradigm. In other words, Days explores what happens when humanity embraces life at the expense of prolonging it. Within the logic of this model, as suggested in Days, when a subject embraces an absurdist-ethics, she or he may experience a moment of agency, catharsis, and enlightenment, but also this instant signals impending death, which, within the paradigm of rationalism, appears as both absurd and grotesque.

In contradiction with the controversial nature of the film, many reviews of Days are surprisingly positive, although the interpretations presented generally tend to focus less on
the ethical considerations for life, and more on the ethics of love, which many reviewers
deem more interesting in terms of the narrative. I would argue that such reviews are avoiding
the issue of barebacking altogether, perhaps dismissing it as an anomaly without
understanding the cultural backdrop and realities of the practice. In other words, while the
film is a radical appeal for an ethical stance that confronts death head-on, sidelines safety,
and puts other people at risk for infection, some reviewers appear drawn or distracted by the
love story at the expense of tackling the more serious issue at hand—infecution and death. For
example, in the periodical *The Advocate*, one critic writes: “The people with HIV in this
movie are neither glorified nor demonized, and it’s up to the audience to decide how to feel
about the characters’ actions” (Duralde, 65). The reviewer also contends that Italian cinema,
in comparison to other national cinemas, can somehow present ethically neutral cinema.
Another reviewer focuses on the entity of love as some transcendental force that almost
appears to absolve the characters of intentionality, as if individuals were not in use of their
will to control their own actions, and as if love could control that will and ethically justify
Andrea’s actions:

[Andrea] who perfectly captures the emotional intensity of love, one so strong that it
overpowers his sense of self-preservation, having sex sans condoms so as not to ‘ruin
the moment’ with the HIV+ man he adores. Only the central theme of the piece
overshadows their efforts, given this disturbing feature is dominated by both the
medical and personal ramifications of unsafe sex and *how in loving someone so much,
many it would appear are prepared to put their own life at risk.*
(Hall, par. 4; my emphasis)

Here one witnesses the limitations of such fantastical, absurdist celluloid representations,
where the moving image draws spectators in, narrowing their focus on certain images and
meanings, at the expense of others.
In the other direction, but in the same trite path, one may also find the inveterate response of repulsion at the absurd and grotesque aesthetic of the model of barebacking presented in *Days*. One skeptical viewer admitted to being “nervous” to watch the film, as he is “as anti-‘barebacking’ as you can get” (“A Real World View,” par. 1). Yet, he reveals that he “approached it with a more open mind because [he] recently experienced [his] first significant ‘slip’ in [his] own behavior” (par. 1). Watching the film changed this reviewer’s perspective on barebacking positively. Even such reviews contain a kernel of apprehension at something redeemable in the presentation of materials. This kind of approach senses the absurdist-ethical paradigm, but without being able to identify its nature. Nevertheless, after viewing *Days*, the reviewer perceived the subject matter of barebacking as less central to the film, and instead empathized with the characters’ behavior, as a habit to absolve himself of his own guilt and ethical dilemma for having participated in this practice:

We hear various characters voice a variety of opinions and judgments, yet we also get a clear view of the protagonist’s confusion, desire for change, wish to escape. A variety of tools are used to show as how time can control us, define our expectations and behaviors, and, how we sometimes want to escape that. The consequences are clear. […] I never felt lectured. Instead, I cared about the characters, all of them. Somehow, in the meantime, I came to understand myself a little better. And to be a little less harsh in my judgments. I still hate barebacking. But I better understand slipping, and also how I can recognize the triggers and avoid them for myself. (par. 3)

It would appear that the typical agenda that one expects from an AIDS film is circumvented in *Days*, whereby that which is characteristic would be, as I have argued in another paper, to challenge “viewers to identify with those infected and teach us better avenues by which to have safer sex, and yes, enjoy sex nonetheless. Through [AIDS] films, we have learned to mourn the deaths and the lives of those infected. They have also provided us with hope for longer lives and perhaps one day a cure” (Riley, “Transnational Queer AIDS Cinema,” 44).
Or, as Peter Jobst describes in “Notizen zu Film und AIDS” [“Notes about Film and AIDS”],
an AIDS film should be a kind of Bildungsroman, it

should be unobtrusive, fierce, and educate—a sexual bildungsroman, that paints a
positive picture. How the image of a sickness, how AIDS can be shaped in a positive
way, that is a matter of opinion. Films about AIDS are works of mourning. Messages
for the afterlife, an attempt to find clarity in one’s last years of life. (20, my
translation)

Days is nevertheless not a typical work of mourning. Instead, this Bildungsroman delivers
quite another story, in which sickness is pursued and embraced over health. Mourning takes
on another shade of grey, whereby the affect in mourning is colored in some sense by the
potency of life itself.

Some spectators, who witnessed the death of a friend or family member from an
AIDS-related illness, found the film less than insightful. One anonymous reviewer chastised
the film calling it “Tragic:”

This movie was slow and depressing. It’s not about the triumph of the human spirit,
it’s about how truly mean lonely self-absorbed people can be. This is the type of
realism I can do without. In the final analysis there was a point to this movie, and
without spoiling it, well, the point is offensive. I’ve witnessed too much real love and
courage to pretend that this movie has any kind of meaningful voice. (“Tragic,” par. 1)

Whether positive or negative, despite initial hasty reactions to what would generally be
conceived as an ethically corrupt scenario, reviewers almost always perceived the core of the
film as founded on principles of a traceable, queer love. Another anonymous reviewer
informs:

And, yes, this is a film about ‘living with Aids,’ how it can in some ways ‘robotize
one’s behavior, cut one off and harden one in his/her interactions with others…and
Trabacchi (as Claudio) is excellent in showing us every facet of such a ‘throwaway’
man (for in the end he does just that). However, I am more interested in another of the
players…the one who shoves in our faces the purity and certainty of simple love:
Salerno (as Andrea). He gives such a pure performance that we come face to face
with a love so strong that it overpowers any thought of self-danger…so strong that it
overpowers wisdom and any sense of self-preservation. [...] Never have I seen pure love transmitted more powerfully than through this man’s eyes and facial expressions (would that many of us ever have been able to have had a love such as his). What he is feeling is projected so strongly that your need is to reach through the screen, grab, and tightly hold him. (“The ‘Eyes’ Have it,” par. 1-2).

On this point, I diverge from the reviewer. In my opinion, it is not Andrea who represents the lover, but instead the beloved. Claudio is the one who seeks out Andrea, then runs away from him several times, only to be overcome by his love for him—or at least by the way Andrea makes him feel through barebacking. Andrea, on the other hand, is satisfied to be without Claudio. Every time Claudio leaves him, Andrea makes it clear that he will be fine without him. In the end, Claudio leaves Andrea and Andrea does not seek Claudio out again. While Claudio pines, Andrea easily moves on with his life. Andrea’s resolve is not the sentiments of someone madly and passionately in love with another. Instead, Andrea is loved intensely by Claudio. Andrea is the non-lover. The critic of this last review is understandably attracted to Andrea’s refreshing simplicity in his position with respect to his life. In my opinion, the reviewer is enticed by the effervescence emitted by Andrea’s absurdist-ethical stance, and not actually by the fact that he observes a “pure love transmitted” through Andrea’s character.

Perhaps spectators and reviewers, such as the ones I have presented, wrestle explicitly or implicitly with notions of shame comingled with pride. Mixed feelings for being gay, for participating in dangerous sexual acts, and perhaps for belonging to a (part of a) queer community that in part (even if it is only a sub-population) condones such an ethically precarious behavior. At the same time, some queer reviewers express pride for belonging to a gay community, even if that may be a mythical construction. Many are also proud of having a tradition of a minor cinema, to the point that many of them put in the time to write reviews of queer films, even if some films of the Queer Cinema are so ethically complex and
controversial. Perhaps the collision of these notions of pride and shame is part of the educational purpose of this kind of minor cinema.

The model of barebacking in *Days* can be read as a radical instantiation of the practice of an absurdist-ethics. This paradigm reveals the tension in the ways people have historically dealt with the trauma of the AIDS epidemic along the lines of pride, shame, fear, or revolt. The model does, however, prescribe one mode of living over others; it is most supportive of agency in revolt, which often takes the form of absurdist and/or grotesque representations, situations, and aesthetics. At the same time, the model devalues those courses of action that follow lines of hegemony, that is, those that equate to the ideals of rationalist behavior and that support actions for the betterment of the human community as a whole, even at the expense of minor ones. An absurdist-ethics demands the opposite, that the individual may celebrate the minor, by participating in cultural practices that serve minor cultures, even if, and partly in spite of those practices being dangerous and threatening to the hegemonic values of a society as a whole. Muscardin’s model of barebacking, as an absurdist-ethical practice, offers two options in dealing with the AIDS epidemic as a gay man:

The first option is that the individual can resolve to be celibate, basically stop enjoying life, and wait to die. This is the most extreme form of a response and replicates early responses to the pandemic, a feature I will discuss further in Chapter four. This mode of living is prescribed by an ethics of dying that has been held by society at large since the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. It mirrors the mentality of those countries that contemplated (and even tried) to quarantine HIV-positive persons. This mentality is also in line with some of the ideals of the Enlightenment and of religions that have traditionally
dictated that illnesses, and above all epidemics, are signs of a sinful mind and soul. The idea that some people have expressed, that AIDS is the gay plague, reflects this mentality. The Enlightenment promised that scientific progress could cure anything with time. In this formation, death and dying are associated with illness. The idea of progress meant that eventually someone like the scientific character of Frankenstein would come to understand exactly how the human body works and one day be able to sustain life, instead of understanding the possible value of illness, suffering, and ultimately letting those dying die. To further the analogy, because Frankenstein could not appraise the value in illness, malformation, and perversion, he could not recognize his creature as a viable human being. When the creature dares to dream of a life worth living, with a companion by his side, Frankenstein refuses him this opportunity. Instead, he demands that the creature commit suicide. This mode of response to the epidemic is not, however, encouraged in Muscardin’s model of an absurdist-ethics, in particular as the narrative questions the pharmaceutical companies’ philanthropic mission and the effectiveness of AIDS medications. Sexual fulfillment is equally valued in barebacking, which would be eliminated in this model of abstinence. Muscardin’s model of barebacking makes it clear that sexual fulfillment is equivalent to one’s quality of life.

The second option is that prescribed by the kind of response to the AIDS epidemic represented by Muscardin’s model in Days. It embraces the paradigm of an absurdist-ethics in its radical instantiation of barebacking without medication. In this option, barebacking is read as a conscious, rational, consensual act on the part of all participating individuals, who seek and glean a greater quality of life through that which many or most would consider a risky relationship to death. Barebacking here is a deliberate conscious act, practiced by gay
men, with the purpose of combating the AIDS epidemic and the consequences of sickness, dying, and death, on their own terms.

Where cinema ends, the cultural, theoretical, and philosophical threads continue. As a product of a minor culture, and in terms of the real, it is necessary to offer further discussion of the cultural implications of a model of barebacking put into practice. It is equally necessary in this regard to provide a philosophical framing of my theory of an absurdist-ethics. In the next chapter, I offer the cultural background to the practice, along with the philosophical lineage I announced in the introduction. My discussion incorporates Foucault’s conception of strategic relationships, Nietzsche’s theory of transcendental ethics, and Camus’s take on the absurd.
CHAPTER IV
IN CULTURAL PRACTICE: BAREBACKING AS RADICAL AESTHETIC
INSTANTIATION

THIS SITE DOES NOT CONTAIN any material, either written or visual, that constitutes child pornography, violent sex against the will of another, the promotion of sex for hire, demon worship, bestiality, or the engaging in the sale or distribution of illegal or controlled substances. - www.barebackjack.com

After the critical assessment of the issue of barebacking in Laura Muscardin’s Days in the previous chapter, in this chapter I study how the enticement of the mythology surrounding the practice of barebacking lies centrally in the risk and vulnerability of the individual in relation to the disease. The model of barebacking serves as the most radical instantiation of an absurdist-ethics. I study barebacking as a representation of radical agency, to the backdrop of a history of the policing of sexual mores and behaviors, and examine examples of other culturally specific models, such as Socrates and Foucault’s discussions on strategic relationships, as points of comparison and contrast. I show how artists and thinkers may have historically invoked a model of an absurdist-ethics represented in the mythical guise of death as possessing transmutable powers of agency.

Even pornographic sites, such as the one referenced above, barebackjack.com (BBJ), set ethical parameters: no child pornography, bestiality, or devil worshiping permitted.39

These condemnations act threefold. They function as a campy foil against the stark taboo of

39 See figure 3 for an example of how BBJ reminds parents it is their job to police their children’s Internet viewing habits, and not the duty of the website.
barebacking: satire may soften the impact of the prohibition. The re-regulated ethics concurrently feed and dismiss possible fears that the website openly anticipates, and outline as much in their “terms and conditions.”

If you are a member of any right-wing or religious organization which agendizes anti-homosexual sentiment, or if you personally feel that such explicit adult homosexual content, or content embracing sex without condoms will be offensive to you, PLEASE EXIT NOW!

This ethical statement also implies that even those who participate in the most radical of social practices can be encompassed by the norm, at least in part. In *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (1999), Michael Warner calls this form of negotiation with the status quo a queer ethics of sexual shame. Warner advances that all social groups attempt to justify their existence, to develop a normalizing discourse, in this case one dependent on sexuality, by casting other so-called deviant groups to the periphery.

People who are defined by a variant set of norms commit a kind of social suicide when they begin to measure the worth of their relations and their way of life by the yardstick of normalcy. The history of the [gay] movement should have taught us to ask: whose norm? … The problem, always, is that embracing this standard merely throws shame on those who stand farther down the ladder of respectability. It does not seem possible to think of oneself as normal without thinking that some other kind of person is pathological. (59-60)

For this same reason, barebackers too, as in the case of this website, may cast to the periphery other sexual habits sanctioned as deviant, even if they do so only to accentuate the strong and disparaging, and what some might argue, morally prescriptive views of their enemies. Such declarations do not render barebacking any more justifiable to the greater public. The mode of argumentation does underscore the way in which many barebackers try to legitimize their unsafe sexual activity of explicitly unprotected consensual anal sex between gay men.
Although barebacking is in essence unprotected, consensual sex between any number of persons, regardless of gender identity, sex, gender, or sexual orientation, social norms, as well as countless barebacking communities, dictate that barebacking is defined as the former—a purely homosexual act. The self-proclaimed “longest-surviving” barebacking website on the Internet (since 1998), BBJ has received recent scholarly attention, due to its politically neoliberal, quasi-intellectual, ethical stance. Sharif Mowlabocus, author of *Gaydar Culture: Gay Men, Technology and Embodiment in the Digital Age* (2010), debates the extent to which BBJ’s investment in “a neoliberal critique of contemporary discourses” adequately addresses issues of safety (165). As stated by Mowlabocus, BBJ “provides a forum in which unprotected sex can be interrogated using the situated truth of the barebacking community. As such, it offers a counter-discourse to prevailing hegemonies” (162). BBJ reasons that their underlying motivation for the creation of the site is health and information on safer sex practices. They remind users of the risks of unprotected sex, thereby demonstrating that even a pornography site devoted to barebacking “[will not ignore nor] sweep HIV under the carpet.” Still, this is a social-networking site that encourages users to meet other barebackers in person and have consensual, unprotected sex. Their motto: “You’re not a true Barebacker unless you’ve got someone to bareback with, right?” They argue that while one may fantasize about barebacking, the danger and thrill derives from the physical threat of contamination through a real exchange (not only a virtual one) of bodily fluids—semen, blood, and urine—all of which may or may not be infected with HIV, or other sexually transmitted diseases for that matter.

As I stated briefly in the introduction, the porn industry is important to the cultural understanding of barebacking. The practice did emerge chiefly out of the rise and
development of the Internet, and ultimately in the establishment of porn websites. Those who work in the porn industry, who engage in the practice of barebacking, such as actor Tony Valenzuela, to whom I will refer later in this chapter, not only act as porn actors in this
Figure 3: Satirical Warning

An image posted on the homepage of www.barebackjack.com. The satirical announcement anticipates viewers, whom the comic portrays as a 1950’s nuclear family, including mom, dad, son, and daughter, all settling down to watch television. The content of the television show is not so conservative, but instead a black and white image of two barebackers. Possible viewers that aim at preserving the status quo, and looking to point fingers at pornographic sites for the corruption of family members, are warned: “It is our steadfast opinion that the welfare of your children is your responsibility, not ours.”
milieu, but also as cultural actors with a voice and power of representation, and in that sense relevant for an academic discussion. Regular mainstream actors oftentimes become emblematic figures for certain political positions, like Clint Eastwood or Sean Penn, and in that perspective, they are engaged in a cultural discussion. The same can be claimed of an actor like Valenzuela. I am therefore not talking merely about barebacking porn, but about a place where the dynamic of the cultural practice of barebacking is centrally represented.

Insofar as I claim that the ethical dimensions of the dynamics at play in barebacking and its community provides a metaphor to better understand a postmodern conception of an absurdist-ethics, I find it necessary to offer a cursory introduction to the historical development of the term barebacking. First, I want to address a question that those unfamiliar to the concept of barebacking oftentimes ask regarding why the word sodomy is not simply used to talk about gay male sex. Although sodomy is historically a word attending negative connotations, gay men could have conceivably ‘taken back’ the word and recuperated it as something positive, just as the gay community has reclaimed the word queer to have positive and empowering associations. The same cannot be said for the word sodomy, at least not in any larger cultural context. However, the origins and development of the word sodomy are not entirely unrelated to the meaning and coinage of the term barebacking, especially those connotations of sodomy that communicate ideas of decadence, as well as sodomy’s historical association with the priesthood, and the legal and moral prescriptions that many persons in power have written in order to control and eradicate the practice of gay male sex. There is a vital distinction between the terms sodomy and barebacking. Although the latter is by definition an act of sodomy, not all acts of sodomy are barebacking. Barebacking is solidly bound to the history and culture of HIV and AIDS.
In *Sodomy: A History of a Christian Biblical Myth* (2004), Michael Carden explains that historically speaking the word *sodomy* did not originally “signify sexual sin but rather arrogant self-indulgence and luxurious living,” a “soul lapped in luxury” (123). This connotation was derived from the story of the city of Sodom (and by extension Gomorrah) in Genesis 18.1 through 19.38 in the Old Testament. Following the moral of this story, the word *sodomy* derived at least conceptually from the word to mean a citizen of the city of Sodom, a “Sodomite” (Spong 127). While the word *sodomy* was not used until the fifth century, texts of the second and third century did address and condemn the behavior of the citizens of Sodom as sexually immoral. Sodomites were chided for their participation in what Carden calls “unspecified wickedness” (117). In the fourth century, the biblical acts performed at Sodom were identified as explicitly homosexual. Possibly the earliest illustration of this interpretation is found in the *Apocalypse of Paul*. In this text, on a trip through hell, a group of men are identified as “those who have committed the iniquity of Sodom and Gomorrah, men with men” (qtd. in Carden 125). In 538 C.E., during the reign of Roman Emperor Justinian I, the story of Sodom took on a political force, when sanctions that condemned acts of homosexuality were issued,

> to ensure ‘that the city and the state may not come to harm by reason of such wicked deeds’ because the scriptures say ‘that because of like impious conduct cities have indeed perished, together with the men in them.’ (qtd. in Carden 126)

The first person to write a word that could be roughly translated as *sodomy* (or rather “sodemitic” or *sodomia* in Latin) was possibly a fifth-century abbot named St. Nilus, who was referring to the Sodomites as the archetype of a decadent way of living. Although, Carden asserts that St. Nilus did not intend for the word to have a sexual connotation, let alone a homosexual one, Christians in the fifth century did read the story of Sodom as having
a homosexual significance nevertheless (123). The sex-hungry crowd in Sodom (as the Bible suggests as well) was made up of all of the town’s citizens, from all walks of life and of all ages, including those men married to Lot’s daughter. This was not a crowd of gay men, but instead characteristically a stereotypical group of straight, ‘normal’ men, who were apparently indulging in the “excessive pleasure” of anal sex, although notably the sex in this case was non-consensual.

One may attribute the modern-day connation of the word sodomy, as in the act of men having anal intercourse with other men, to the eleventh-century monk, and later a saint, Peter Damian, in his Book of Gomorrah, the translation of which bears the subtitle An Eleventh-Century Treatise against Clerical Homosexual Practices. Damian formulated his condemnations to be enacted as ecclesiastical law. Biblical scholar Mark Jordan illustrates Damian’s design:

The booklet begins by identifying the vice’s four species: self-pollution, mutual grasping or rubbing of ‘manly parts’ (virilia), pollution ‘between the thighs’ (inter femora), and fornication ‘in the rear’ (in terga). The order of these four is an order of increasing offense, but each belongs to Sodom and each merits suspension from ecclesiastical office and deposition from priestly orders. (46)

From this point onward, including throughout the early modern period up until today, the word sodomy has mostly been used in similar ways, primarily in reference to laws and sanctions prohibiting male-to-male sex, consensual or not. Sodomy has been also applied to describe anal sex between a man and a woman, oral sex, any non-procreative sex, masturbation, sex with animals, and even in some cases cross-dressing, pedophilia, and other assorted “crimes against nature.” One finds these definitions prevalent in so-called “sodomy laws,” written primarily in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the United States,

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Europe, and elsewhere by bodies of governance, including the church, the state, and the medical, psychiatric community.

Between the colonial period and the 20th century, in the United States and Western Europe, there was a distinct shift in the larger cultural understanding of gay male sex as sodomy, from total prohibition and widespread intolerance to a more tolerated (although never unequivocally normative) part of a healthy functioning society. As noted by Jonathan Katz, author of *Love Stories: Sex Between Men Before Homosexuality* (2001), “homosexuality in the U.S. changed from indicating a behavior (sodomy), to an abnormal personality (the homosexual) [in the 19th century], and [according to Katz] finally to an affirmative social identity (gay/lesbian) [in the 20th and 21st centuries]” (qtd. in Seidman, 11). Katz also invokes the term sodomy in reference to barebacking, and in particular as a word synonymous with “condomless sodomy;” this term being applied to the cultural backlash against the risky practice.41

The introduction of the condom into the discussion of sodomy indicates the point of divergence between the practice and definitions of sodomy and barebacking, as the later designation did not appear until the onset of the AIDS epidemic. Before that time, pre-1980s, advocates of the belief that homosexuality is a sin spoke out largely against male-on-male sex, but not specifically against the actual logistics of the act, e.g., whether or not gay men used protection or whether they infected each other with venereal diseases or not, unless of course, their sexual ‘misconduct’ lead to the spread of a contagion such as syphilis to heterosexuals. It was not until gay men coined the word *barebacking* as a positive and empowering activity, that opponents of the practice of anal sex even considered that gay men

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41 For an informative, Christian fundamentalist example of the use of the phrase “condomless sodomite” to delegitimize homosexuality, see Fox and Virtue, 206.
might want to intentionally have unprotected sex with other men precisely because of and in spite of the risk of consensually contracting or transmitting the HIV virus.

While it is clear that gay men practiced a form of barebacking at the start of the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s, the term barebacking did not appear in writing at least until June of 1997, in a still controversial article entitled Riding Bareback in an HIV-Positive publication entitled POZ. In the article, the author Stephen Gendin, AIDS activist and journalist, expounds on what he sees as the joys and thrills of having sex with someone HIV-positive without a condom, a practice he refers to as “fucking raw,” “riding bareback,” and “skin-to-skin” (“Riding Bareback,” par. 3):

A year and a half ago at a conference, I heard a talk by a really cute positive guy on the fun of unsafe sex with other positive guys. He was beautiful, the subject was exciting, and I soon ended up getting fucked by him without a condom. When he came inside me, I was in heaven, just overjoyed. I’d had unsafe sex before, but never intentionally. Those experiences were guilt-ridden because I worried—both during the sex and afterward—about exposing my partner to HIV. (“Riding Bareback,” par. 1-2)

Gendin identifies a positive change in the way he had perceived unprotected sex at the onset of the epidemic, and now, at the time he wrote the article in the late 1990s. Not interpreting his change in attitude to the development of a reckless spirit, Gendin instead defines this new way of barebacking as a cathartic, consensual experience, open expressly to HIV-positive men:

This was different. Knowing the guy was positive made it empowering, not guilt-inspiring. I relaxed into my desires instead of fighting them and felt good doing so. On a purely physical level, the experience wasn’t extraordinary, but emotionally everything purred so fine. (“Riding Bareback,” par. 2)

To validate that he does not stand alone in his proclivities, Gendin discloses a search he supposedly conducted on AOL personals (this was back in the late 1990s), looking for gay men who indicated their willingness to have sex sans condom. He was happy to discover 188
men who were into “condomless sex.” twenty-five of which identified as HIV-positive, and five as negative. While the last number indicated that at least a part of this culture included negative men, popular opinion voiced at that time, Gendin included, generally considered barebacking only a viable possibility between HIV-positive men. Gendin outlines the benefits as follows:

The physical sensation is much better. The connection feels closer and more intimate. The sharing of cum on the physical level heightens the sense of sharing on the emotional and spiritual planes. Then there’s the satisfaction of knowing that seroconverting has its advantages (Or, to use American Express-speak, ‘Membership has its privileges.’) It’s a tasty revenge. (“Riding Bareback,” par. 4)

Gendin’s use of the economic illustration of American Express, calls attention to barebacking’s exchange value and communal nature. The individual must pay a price to become a member, in this case risking becoming infected. That barebacking could be a kind of “revenge,” implies that the practice is also a means of revolt against a system of laws and sanctions that prescribe that HIV-positive men are essentially dead to the world, and therefore, asexual and/or non-viable sexual subjects. Gendin’s sexual encounter appears to provide proof, to himself at least, that this was not the case. He stands instead emboldened, and even discovers an unspoken sanctioning within the barebacking community through this encounter:

There’s even something empowering about the idea of sharing someone else’s HIV. It’s like being thrown into jail for life and then, while serving your time, having the warden threaten to extend your sentence. The threat has no power because nothing can make a life sentence any worse. You can laugh at the threat, even spit in the warden’s face. That time I got fucked by another positive guy, I felt I didn’t have to fear HIV any longer. I could taunt it, challenge it by taking it into my body without being further hurt. (“Riding Bareback,” par. 5)

One can also garner from the above passage evidence of the two manifestations of an absurdist-ethics, which are central to an understanding of barebacking as a metaphor for a
postmodern perspective of ethics today. These two manifestations are the indices of the affect of an absurdist gallows humor and the aesthetic of the grotesque, upon which I have expounded in the previous chapters. Gendin imagines himself at a crossroad, whereby he may take one of two paths. The first leads to death, in accepting having been dealt a life sentence. In other words, and I openly rely on extremes for the sake of the metaphor, an HIV-positive man may give up on life, knowing he will most likely soon die of AIDS anyway (at least in the 1990s). Just as Muscardin represents barebacking in *Days*, giving up entirely would entail choosing no longer to have sex, because to have sex would mean, following this model of barebacking, putting others at risk of infection and ultimately death. This approach is however, of course, a fatalistic one, which dictates that the individual has no power over his or her fate. The alternate road leads to life, in this case through barebacking. This model, and this choice imply that while the individual faces the inevitability of impending death, she or he may still yield power from the determination to embrace death’s inescapability.

In the face of opposition, which Gendin exemplifies in a Kafkaesque fashion in the portrayal of “the warden” threatening him with an *even longer* life sentence, Gendin chooses the position of life, and embraces his death. When Gendin imagines his dilemma, choosing an ethical position of life or death, as a metaphorical one between a prisoner and a warden, he is basically confirming a pattern of modern structures of power that HIV and AIDS summons. While the powers that be, such as the CDC (Center’s for Disease Control), did not explicitly prohibit positive men from having sex in the 1980s and 1990s, it stands to reason that the eye of the state and the pressure of the medical community was ineffably palpable and powerful, perhaps so much that some HIV-positive men considered not having sex for good.
Franz Kafka’s telling parable entitled “Before the Law” comes to mind as an allegory for the way a system of power might passively encourage the submission of an individual unto death. In terms of a call for individual agency, especially with regards to sex for those HIV-positive, I see Gendin indirectly conjuring Kafka’s demand that one discover room for agency even in the face of such a power that may work largely to deny an individual agency. In Kafka’s book *The Trial* (1925), in which the main character K. is accused of an unspecified crime, he meets a priest who relates the parable as a means to explain to him his seemingly inexplicable predicament. A man, not unlike K., goes to court to find answers to questions the reader knows not. When he arrives at the court, he finds the door guarded. The guard refuses the visitor entrance for an unspecified reason, but suggests the visitor may gain entrance in the future. The visitor then spends the rest of his life waiting to be allowed into the court. At the end of his life, literally at death’s door, the visitor asks the guard why no one ever went through the door in all the years he had waited there. The guard replies: “Nobody else could have got in this way, as this entrance was meant only for you. Now I’ll go and close it” (155). The reason the visitor did not enter was not because the guard always prohibited him to do so, but instead because the “visible” structure of the court, and by extension the door and guard, in addition to the “unverifiable” power of the court (and not knowing exactly who could actually give him permission to enter), compelled the visitor to never ask to enter again. He was also constrained from ever trying to physically, forcibly or not, enter through the doorway. What the guard reveals in his last words is that the visitor could have entered the court through this doorway at any time. The visitor himself, his own resolve, was in fact the only obstacle.
When applied to a model of barebacking, by acknowledging the power structure and yet still seeking agency, Gendin’s position vis-à-vis HIV outsmarts the guard in Kafka’s parable. Instead of becoming an asexual man, defeated emotionally and physically by the prospect of dying from AIDS, Gendin courts death and life by barebacking, just as Andrea and Claudio do in Days. Feeling a sense of empowerment, which I anticipate comes from the inherent understanding of his newly acquired, ethically viable position, he indulges in the possibility of revolting against that threat, either through the affect of humor, by laughing at the warden, or through the grotesque, by spitting in the warden’s face.

Gendin may have been Fooling himself into thinking that he may outsmart death. Some may argue that Gendin is selfish, evil, dangerous, or even emotionally ill, that he is not representative of gay men or of barebackers at large. However, it is important to keep in mind that the goal of the present discussion is theoretical, and aims at testing the realm of the hypothesis of the model of an absurdist-ethics. Therefore, the model of barebacking is in part a metaphor, if not a mythical cultural construction, which has some basis in the real, but at the same time cannot be entirely accounted for in the real, and certainly cannot predict how all men may act in the community of barebackers or in the gay community at large. Beyond testimony, my discussion of barebacking is by no means a reflection of the real, nor based on any actuality or real person. Taking into account this caveat, one may set aside such otherwise understandable considerations in the name of working through the potentially rich ethical model presented through this particular philosophical conundrum.

Even Gendin, who spoke from first-hand experience, was pressured ultimately to qualify his predilection for barebacking. Although he ends his article on barebacking on a cautionary tone, warning readers of the possibility of re-infection, his support of the practice
did garner much negative criticism from the gay community at that time (Shernoff 14).42

Others like Gendin who expressly and publicly condoned the practice of barebacking have also received retorts from the general public and academic communities. For example, also in 1997, at the annual Creating Change conference sponsored by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, HIV-positive porn star Tony Valenzuela boasted of his participation in unsafe sex on the job. Co-chair and speaker of the event, Valenzuela declared before 2,000 people how “The level of erotic charge and intimacy I feel when a man comes inside me is transformational, especially in a climate which so completely disregards its importance” (qtd. in Gendin, “They Shoot Barebackers,” par. 3). Valenzuela qualified his proclamation like Gendin as a positive-on-positive activity. Gendin, who captured the event, describes the debacle:

His cautionary caveat—‘When I talk about having unprotected sex, I am speaking for myself, and not as a proponent of condomless sex for all’—was undercut by his defiant assertions—‘I am a sex gourmet in a community serving sexual TV dinners… and I have placed myself in the middle of HIV anarchy.’ Even I still feel a chill up my spine when I recall his words. It was too much information, too fast. The personal had become more political than he could have imagined. (“They Shoot Barebackers,” par. 3).

It is ironic that Gendin finds Valenzuela’s proclamations almost too personal and too political, given his own defense of the practice. Notwithstanding, Gendin’s surprise exemplifies the truly dual nature of barebacking, being all at once an intimate, collective, and largely anonymous act. Each individual embraces a personal experience of barebacking, and although a barebacker clearly knows that he shares this experience with others, his lovers for

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42 Gendin deliberates the perceived drawbacks of barebacking, including re-infection from multiple strains of HIV (e.g., HIV-1 and HIV-2) as well as the risk of acquiring other STDs. The consequences of contracting multiple strains of HIV include the possibility of acquiring a strain that is more virulent than other. Early on, scientists began to understand that HIV subtypes differ in their progression time to AIDS (Kanki et al., 73). One study published in 2007 found evidence that persons infected with so-called subtype D have a higher mortality rate and a faster rate CD4 cell count decline than do those infected with subtype A (Baeten et al., 1177).
example, he is at the same time taken aback to hear the personal tale of the involvement of another. This is parallel to the model of barebacking suggested in *Days*, whereby barebackers supposedly participate oftentimes in anonymous sex; as a consequence, the person does not truly know his partner, nor will he speak to him again about their shared sexual encounter, although at the same time, the individual may claim to belong to the community at large.

Like any other cultural critic, Valenzuela and Gendin had to wade through the backlash of their radical political position on barebacking. In a later interview with Gendin, Valenzuela offered his apologies to his public, not for having spoken about barebacking, but instead for having not addressed the loss of millions of lives to the virus—a criticism, along with blatant ostracism, he sustained from the gay community following his speech. Gendin transcribes Valenzuela’s remorse:

‘I realize I failed to acknowledge the huge amounts of loss people have gone through,’ he says quietly. ‘So it was shocking for many of them to hear about a behavior that essentially wiped out a generation of men they had loved.’ He pauses. ‘I should have let the audience know that I feel that loss too, painfully and directly.’ (“They Shoot Barebackers,” par. 5)

While Valenzuela backtracked to appease the normative voice of those touched by his claims, his tone indicates his understanding, as an HIV-positive man, of the intangible yet present value of uncovering an opportunity to reinvest libidinal energy into his (sex) life. For Valenzuela, the ethics of barebacking did not pertain to death nor to an epidemic, but just like in *Days*, to life and living again. It is this model of agency I find most provocative, which makes up the radical crux of my own theory of an absurdist-ethics. In the spirit of abstract discussion, it is relevant to debate how the pieces would fall if one were to conceptualize the ethical implications of such a model, and if one were to follow it to its furthest conclusion, when it is put into practice. As I will signal later, the corollaries of this discussion may apply
not only to the practice of barebacking, but also to other contentious and risk-taking cultural practices.

Throughout the late 1990s, barebacking remained largely a buzzword synonymous with selfishness and death. Political figures and popular culture caught wind of the phrase. In 1997, *Newsweek* published an article on barebacking calling it “A Deadly Dance.” In the article, Marc Peyser relates the details of an interview he had with a gay man who conceded that, after the initial scare of HIV and AIDS was over, condom use was no longer prevalent in gay clubs. Peyser affirms:

Though he’s been doing it for years, Hilburn, 32, says he’s recently noticed a change: it’s much easier to find men willing to have unprotected sex. ‘I’ve been to clubs where there’s sex all over the place and they have a little fruit bowl full of condoms and it’s covered with dust,’ says Hilburn, a computer analyst in a New York hospital. ‘The taboo has worn off.’ (par. 1)

Peyser attributes the rise in barebacking activity to a growth of apathy due to the development of the protease inhibitors/triple pill therapy (Henkel, par. 4). This medicine regime is popularly known for its “Lazarus-effect,” which references the biblical figure who became fatally ill from an unspecified disease, although commonly interpreted as leprosy, which produces sores all over his body. Lazarus famously rose from the grave to live again. Due to the effectiveness of such medications and prevention efforts, 1997 became a significant year in the trajectory of AIDS. In the United States at least, the death rate dropped by forty-seven percent. Also, for the first time since 1990, AIDS was no longer part of the top ten causes of death in the United States (Henkel, par. 6-7). One survey published in 1997 in *The New England Journal of Medicine* informs that, after the introduction of drug cocktails, some gay men became less concerned about having safer sex. In this survey, twenty-six percent of surveyed gay men admitted to being now “less concerned about
becoming HIV-positive,” thirteen percent “‘somewhat’ or ‘strongly’ agreed with the statement ‘I am more willing to take a chance of getting infected when having sex;’” and fifteen percent of the men surveyed stated that they had already engaged in higher-risk sex (Dilley, 501). On one questionnaire, a participant wrote: “If I am exposed to HIV, I can take the new drugs […] that will prevent me from becoming infected [with opportunistic infections]” (Dilley, 501-502). Therefore, if these results are any indication of a change in gay men’s perception of the virus, then the popularity of barebacking appears to have come in bloom, not coincidentally, at least initially, as a result of the development of such cocktail drugs.

The rise and growth of the Internet in the late 1990s seems to have also contributed significantly to the evolution of the community of barebackers, and a handful of papers have been published on the connection between the practice of barebacking and the Internet.43 In one study from 2003, looking back at the growing practice of barebacking in the late 1990s and early 2000s, authors P.N. Halkitis and J.T. Parson’s nod in agreement towards studies that suggest that “sexual risk taking is related to high levels of sexual compulsivity and cybersex compulsivity among gay men who seek partners using the Internet […] and the men using the Internet are likely to demonstrate more sexual risk than those not seeking sex in this venue” (368-369). Halkitis and Parson reduce barebacking to a thrill-seeking behavior of addiction and mental illness. Their assumptions do not, however, explain why those who do not contrive to meet other barebackers via the Internet may also participate in this same behavior. The authors do not take into consideration all motivations, and their conclusions

43 See Halkitis, “Intentional Unsafe Sex,” pg. 368-369, for a list of studies linking the rise in barebacking to the growth of the Internet.
exclude the possibility that gay men might seek to engage in risky sexual behavior for reasons that are not necessarily to be interpreted as unhealthy. Instead, like most doctors and analogously most of today’s ‘Western’ normative, rationalist-based culture, there is a tendency to pathologize risky sex. Yet, a counter-argument could be made that risk is a natural dimension of any kind of sex, and part and parcel of human belonging, whereby the antithesis could mean a life without pleasurable sex, which for many people is a necessary part of a livable life. It might argued that the antithesis corresponds in fact to a kind of emotional and even partial physical death void of bodily pleasures. That does not mean that barebacking is not a dangerous and deadly practice. It is.

This line of abstract argumentation of barebacking as a space of representation renders a particularly fruitful model of conceptualizing a postmodern absurdist-ethics. Nevertheless, its implications may demonstrate the opposite of that which one might reason to be safe, logical, healthy, legal, good, and moral. In order to draw out the fullest implications of this space of representation, it is necessary to provide an alternative to the otherwise normative, moralizing, and pathologizing stance concerning barebacking. Although controversial, a proof of its representational power is that barebacking has not remained a hushed concept confined to private encounters facilitated neither through the Internet nor to the medical scholars attracted to the study of this risky behavior. In 1998, the practice of barebacking entered popular media, making one of its first débuts on the television series *ER*, in an episode with a side story of a teenaged gay sex worker who is paid extra by certain clients for unprotected sex.\textsuperscript{44} He is found badly beaten after a sexual

\textsuperscript{44} See *ER*, episode 5.6 “Stuck on You.”
encounter—a picture that carries a moral warning in no unclear terms: those who engage in risky sex court death, and as this narrative suggests, some possibly deserve it.

The implications in public policy ensued. In 1999, the neologism was introduced to President Clinton’s AIDS Advisory Council by then Vice President Al Gore (Scarce, par. 3). Former Miss America, Kate Shindle also intervened, giving her opinion in America’s top-selling gay magazine, *The Advocate*, in an article entitled “Barebacking? Brainless!” Shindle asserts: “Given the knowledge of what causes the spread of HIV and what we need to do to stop it, how can we put ourselves in grave danger and then give it a cute nickname like “barebacking”? (par. 5). Similarly, in an article entitled “In Search of Death,” published in *Rolling Stone* magazine in 2003, several sources estimated that 25% of new cases of infection between gay men in the United States could be attributed to barebacking. In the article, one interviewee, who went by the name of Carlos, grants that the lure of barebacking lies in his wish to be a part of a unique, gay community: “I think it turns the other guy on to know that I’m negative and that they’re bringing me into the brotherhood. That gets me off, too” (Freeman, par. 1). The interviewee’s comment marks a moment in history, when in the early 2000s, the practice of barebacking began to include both positive and negative gay men, as a more intricate cultural practice that had begun to establish its own niche and whereby the chance for infection became a desired risk. At the level of representation, it is also significant that the interviewee points to the issue of belonging to a brotherhood, a viewpoint that has very relevant ramifications in ethical terms, given that ethics are inevitably ingrained in a communal system that shares the same goals.

This change of intentionality is not an inconsiderable event, but in fact a particular one that signals a revolution in the way some gay men approach life and death. This is
perhaps the most intriguing development in barebacking culture, and includes the moment when some barebackers began to name the strategic positions of power, namely, “he, who will be infected by the other,” is commonly called a “bug chaser,” and “he, who will infect the other,” goes by the name of “gift giver.” This is how Gregory Freeman, the author of the article in Rolling Stone magazine, responded to this new positioning:

Carlos is part of an intricate underground world that has sprouted, driven almost completely by the Internet, in which men who want to be infected with HIV get together with those who are willing to infect them. The men who want the virus are called ‘bug chasers,’ and the men who freely give the virus to them are called ‘gift givers.’ While the rest of the world fights the AIDS epidemic and most people fear HIV infection, this subculture celebrates the virus and eroticizes it. HIV-infected semen is treated like liquid gold. Carlos has been chasing the bug for more than a year in a topsy-turvy world in which every convention about HIV is turned upside down. The virus isn’t horrible and fearsome—it’s beautiful and sexy—and delivered in the way that is most likely to result in infection. In this world, the men with HIV are the most desired, and the bug chasers will do anything to get the virus—to ‘get knocked up,’ to be ‘bred’ or ‘initiated into the brotherhood.’ (Freeman, par. 3)

One can trace the use of this terminology in two of the main scholarly works on the topic of barebacking several years later: Leo Bersani’s and Adam Phillips Intimacies (2008) and Tim Dean’s Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking (2009). Dean applies the lingo that was already prevalent in the barebacking community in the early 2000s, including phrases such as “‘impregnatin’ men or ‘plantin’ seed” (45). One can glean how there was already a notion of romanticism embedded in the terminology surrounding barebacking that would suggest that one might upon closer look discover an underlying system of ethical justification, which not only condones barebacking, but that also valorizes it in the name of a more refined system that might be deemed comparable to heterosexual, romantic, procreative love.

In the “topsy-turvy” world presented in Days, there is one further development in the culture of barebacking that none of the authors of books and articles on the topic address,
namely the fact that a barebacker may consider not only that being HIV-positive is a gift, but also that he may revel in the belief that those who become positive need not necessarily be ‘cured’ by medications. Instead, as Andrea’s attitude suggests, some barebackers might believe that infection and dying make up the wholly anticipated, and even welcomed and expected, consummation of the act. Some barebackers may refuse medication and embrace the moment of infection, acquiring opportunistic infections, and the raw experience of pain and dying. I have found a small amount of testimony of this viewpoint in gay advice columns, but I cannot guess how many men in the barebacking community actually choose to follow this model such as it is presented in Days, nor can I guess how many refuse to take medication. 45 This development in barebacking may seem inexplicable. However, in the realm of a theory of an absurdist-ethics, this choice makes sense. For argumentative purposes, I want to demonstrate along the same line how this particular scenario would abide by a code of an absurdist-ethics put fully into practice, although it may be argued that both Muscardin and myself deal with theoretics and in fantasy, that is, at the level of abstraction, as a means to generate a productive philosophical debate about life in the presence of more eminent death.

The history of barebacking reviewed thus far illuminates how, as representation, this cultural practice is an enterprise charged with notions of gay sexuality and issues of

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45 However there are studies on HIV-positive persons refusing medication, as well as anecdotal evidence in online blogs and chat rooms that indicate that people have chosen this path. For example, one study links mental illness, such as bipolar disorder, to reasons why people would intentionally not adhere to medical regime protocol. See Clatworthy in bibliography. Other studies seek other reasons for non-adherence like alcohol and drug abuse, and even lack of literacy. In an “Ask the Expert” column on the website The Body: The Complete HIV/AIDS Resource, on March 23, 2010, a man writing into the column says that he has barebacked a man three or four times, who he knows is HIV-positive, and has a low Cd4 blood count, which qualifies him as having AIDS. He also adds: “I know this person does not take medication.” See: http://www.thebody.com/Forums/AIDS/SafeSex/Q207495.html.
vulnerability, as well as with the history of the AIDS pandemic in toto—a heavy burden to bear, which renders barebacking as a construct arguably one of the most radical possible activities, or at least one may envision that it is culturally constructed as such. An individual willingly and consensually partakes in an event whereby he may infect and/or become infected with a deadly virus; this moral dilemma is one that a few gay men are willing to interrogate with their own bodies. The social stigma that burdens this risky activity cannot be removed, and neither can the desire it animates. Even if, in a simplistic, generalizing approach, this practice may be interpreted as a selfish and dangerous game of chance, it is a fact that in the world of barebacking with HIV, a few gay men challenge the frontiers of their bodies and face death head-on. More complexly, and what is clearly more difficult to fathom, barebacking may be conceptualized in abstract terms as an exertion of free will or even procreation, as well as part and parcel of the pursuit of the death drive.46

In his discussion of enlightenment, Immanuel Kant distinguishes between the private and the public, markedly in the propinquity between private and public reason, and introduces a theoretical discussion of the ethical dilemma of barebacking. It is my supposition that the practice of barebacking is a form of enlightenment [Aufklärung], insofar as this practice may be read as a proposal of sexual—individual and collective—liberation. Rereading Kant’s stake in the paradoxes of the private and the public helps illustrate my point. In his essay on “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” (1784), he asks:

Which restriction is hampering enlightenment, and which does not, or even promotes it? I answer: The public use of a man’s reason must be free at all times, and this alone can bring enlightenment among men: while the private use of a man’s reason may often be restricted rather narrowly without thereby unduly hampering the progress of enlightenment. (136-137)

46 Freud characterizes the death drive as the compulsion “to return to nonliving,” whereby “the goal of all life is death” (“Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” 77).
At first, barebacking appears to fit squarely into the realm of the private. In theory, gay men come together ‘behind closed doors’ to participate in a private, sexual act, which normatively is deemed unethical, narrow, and even corrupt. But following Kant’s definition, barebacking might not hamper the progress of enlightenment, although many may suppose that the sexual custom could never be a means to promote it.

Yet, if one considers barebacking as a representation of a postmodern ethics, the practice and rationale behind why gay men bareback may be read as much more complicated and meaningful than calling it simply a degenerate, private act. The risky practice can also be read as a private AND public act that is prescribed not by private reason alone, but in fact largely by a public rationality. Within the dynamics of this form of representation, the freedom that barebackers seek through this act would not just be sexual freedom but also, more importantly possibly, ethical enlightenment itself. I call enlightenment that which lightens one’s load of the weight of one’s impending death by prescribing the conditions and possibilities of life and living before and into the course of one’s death.

A model of barebacking as an instantiation of a postmodern absurdist-ethics is not dissimilar to Kant’s own model of enlightenment, which also inscribes the existence of both normative and dissenting representations of ethics. Kant’s archetype of enlightenment requires first, like an absurdist-ethics, both individual agency and the autonomy of thought. Kant reproaches those who let systems-that-be circumscribe one’s life, including for example “a pastor who acts as my conscience, a physician who prescribes my diet, and so on—then I have no need to exert myself. I have no need to think, if only I can pay; others will take care of that disagreeable business for me” (134). The path to enlightenment, according to Kant, is not that difficult: “Now this danger is really not very great; after stumbling a few times they
would, at last, learn to walk. However, examples of such failures intimidate and generally
discourage all further attempts” (134). Yet, just as Kafka’s parable “Before the Law”
illustrates, it is not any actual physical presence or force that is key, but in fact the power
dynamic that holds sway over an individual.

Kant anticipates how difficult it is to actually go against a system of power. In the
model of barebacking as ethical instantiation, revolting means becoming a being other than a
being for death, or as Heidegger invoked, a being-toward-death, when one is faced with
HIV.47 Instead, one engages wholly with life. Within this paradigm, in order to be courageous
and invoke Kant’s motto of enlightenment — “Sapere Aude! [You must have] the courage to
use your own intelligence” (134)—, it is important not to submit to the plain idea that sex
with HIV equates death, but instead try to understand, try to know, how a participant of such
a practice may find pleasure and even a sense of kinship in such relations. Kant too inserts
the element of death into the equation of becoming intellectually enlightened. He deems that
those who seek enlightenment must “make an uncertain jump over the smallest trench
because he is not accustomed to such free movement. Therefore there are only a few who
have pursued a firm path and have succeeded in escaping from minority by their own
cultivation of the mind” (136). I am not suggesting that Kant would have considered
barebacking a concept definable or worthy of a kind of enlightenment. If anything, one could
argue that barebacking, even as abstract representation, might go against everything that
enlightenment is supposed to conjure because it goes against “the spirit of a reasonable

47 Heidegger’s position regarding the individual’s living on the edge of death more authentically helps to re-
locate the core of an absurdist-ethics. He suggests that “when one has an understanding Being-towards-death—
towards death as one’s ownmost potentiality—one’s potentiality-for-Being becomes authentic and wholly
transparent” (307). I pull from this sentiment its contrario. One is not a being-for-death, but a being-for-life.
Within the paradigm of an absurdist-ethics, only if the individual embraces her or his own death, is it possible to
live ethically and authentically as something other than a being-for-death.
estimate of their own value,” (136) which is a stance enlightenment is supposed to uphold. In that sense, it might be argued that a model of barebacking cannot be considered in terms of value or even ethics. Yet, as Kant makes clear, those in positions of power impose their prescribed values on society at large, whether they agree with those values or not. In fact, following Kant, for those that are not enlightened, they may not even know what they value because they have not sought to think for themselves. Therefore, there may be many different alternative models of ethics that could be deemed viable, but which are not supported by society as a whole. I argue consequently that barebacking may be read as an abstract representation of one such alternative ethical model: a postmodern absurdist-ethics.

Kant supports such abstract experiments in the name of what he considers the most important ingredient in enlightenment: freedom of thought in terms of “the public use of a man’s reason,” which he defines explicitly as “the use which a scholar makes of it before the entire reading public” (136-7). In opposition, the realm of the private is a rule of order that prescribes and maintains normativity, which is also equally necessary but distinctly different than one’s use of public reason. Kant describes this duality in the enlightened human, for instance, through the example of a pastor.

Likewise a clergyman is obliged to teach his pupils and his congregation according to the creed of the church which he serves, for he has been accepted on that condition. But as a scholar, he has full freedom, in fact, even the obligation, to communicate to the public all his diligently examined and well-intentioned proposals regarding the better institution of religious and ecclesiastical matters. There is nothing in this for which the conscience could be blamed. (137)

In this constellation, the pastor can and should ideally be both clergy and scholar, whereby certain modes of thought and behavior belong either to the dimension of the public or alternatively, the private. While the pastor may challenge the norm as a scholar, s/he must conform to the moral code of society in her or his duties as spiritual guide.
In this same way, this would explain how one may use the word *ethics* generally to describe a code of living consented to and agreed upon by much of society, while the model of ethics that barebacking may metaphorically portend is by no way a paragon of normativity. If this constellation were reversed, the human race would indeed go extinct. Yet, there are people today who embrace such an absurdist-ethical model. This model does not in theory apply just to barebackers, but also would include people who partake in other kinds of life-threatening, high-risk behavior for the sake of finding fulfillment in life, that is, for the sake of personal enlightenment. Therefore, an absurdist-ethics is not just illustrative of barebacking in theory, but in fact may provide a practical way of understanding how one could conceive of ethics in a postmodern guise.

Kant’s conception of enlightenment allows for extreme challenges to normativity, such as an absurdist-ethics suggests. He vindicates that “succeeding generations are entirely justified in discarding such decisions [made by figures of authority in the past] as unauthorized and criminal. The touchstone of all this to be agreed upon as a law for people is to be found in the question whether a people could impose such a law upon itself” (139). To question traditional models of ethics does not mean to displace them by and large, especially because most humans abide generally by an ethical code that favors life over death. This same code also dictates that persons with HIV do not spread around contagion, and that persons that are not yet infected do not go seeking to change their status to positive. An absurdist-ethics is not a code for the every-person, but instead one that might theoretically be followed by people who live in the face of death, in end-times, and who choose still not to accept disability, stasis, and defeat when encountering the seeming unconquerable or even the unknowable. Instead, within the terms of this paradigm, a model of an absurdist-ethics
sees the individual as courageous, finding her or his own way to live a life that is *dignified* despite every obstacle, every force of resistance, every voice that claims that such a life, or even life itself is impossible. Kant ends his essay on enlightenment precisely demanding dignity: every human being should be free to think freely and equally, to be treated “according to his dignity” (141). Within this paragon of a postmodern absurdist-ethics, some people find value in belonging to a community of consensual adults who share a commonality of risk, even if this means consensually contracting or infecting another with a contagious disease. This positioning may happen even if normativity may deem such a way of life amoral; the case of barebacking functions as one possible instantiation of its premises.

Freud and Foucault demonstrated how modern, and by extension postmodern, configurations of the public and the private are not so rigid, nor clearly dichotomous. Both authors also certify how the reasoning behind participating in private sexual acts is never just an issue related to the private sphere, but also to the public. While the public demands openly that individuals follow sexual norms, Freud and Foucault illustrate how, at the same time, the dynamics of the public sphere encourage and depends upon deviations from the sexual norm, therefore paving the way for ethical models that challenge normative models. Freud speculated for example on the role of the so-called “Oedipus complex,” which establishes a dynamic of power relations not only within the family unit, but also within the community of human beings at large:

What began in relation to the father is completed in relation to the group. If civilization is a necessary course of development from the family to humanity as a whole, then—as a result of the inborn conflict arising from ambivalence, of the eternal struggle between the trends of life and death—there is inextricably bound up with it an increase of the sense of guilt, which will perhaps reach heights that the individual finds hard to tolerate. (“Civilization and Its Discontents,” 763)
Freud also explains how sexuality (and deviations from the sexual norm included) is imperative to the framework of the public, in its cultural activities and one’s public contributions:

all of these affectionate impulses were originally of a completely sexual nature but have become inhibited in their aim or sublimated. The manner in which the sexual instincts can thus be influenced and diverted enables them to be employed for cultural activities of every kind, to which indeed they bring the most important contributions. (*An Autobiographical Study*, 24)

Barebacking as a model would be included as a part of the private sphere of a human’s sexuality, since it is also a mechanism that prescribes the behavior of consenting adults (with each other) in the public sphere, and is therefore not simply a behavior flaunted in private. In postmodernity, the break between private and public has become more and more blurred. In addition, as I mentioned before, electronic media has become a combination of private practice with virtual public ramifications. Foucault praised Freud and his theory of psychoanalysis not only for being a “project of a medial technology appropriate for dealing with the sexual instinct,” but also for having “sought to free [sexual instinct] from its ties with heredity, and hence from eugenics and the various racisms” (*History of Sexuality: Vol. I*: 119). The French thinker may be seen as a precursor to an absurdist-ethics that would support a theoretical model of barebacking. For Foucault, sex and sexuality are so important to the public expression of human identity, in which sex is so intrinsically tied up with the notion of one’s identity, that it becomes more important than life:

The Faustian pact, whose temptation has been instilled in us by the deployment of sexuality, is now as follows: to exchange life in its entirety for sex itself, for the truth and the sovereignty of sex. *Sex is worth dying for. It is in this (strictly historical) sense that sex is indeed imbued with the death instinct.* (156, my emphasis)
One may say that, as an abstract model, the barebacker would take this pact seriously, indeed through the exchange of the virus, inviting the possibility of a sooner and more calculable time and means of death.

Furthermore, Foucault avows that “now our business is to realize sex,” which spotlights an additional important dimension to his theory of sexuality and power along with the co-mingling of the private and public spheres, and perhaps most decidedly as it applies to a postmodern mentality (157). Foucault explains how economy and labor are intrinsically bound up in sexual politics, and how with the evolution of capitalism, society has reached the so-called “threshold of modernity,” when

the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies. For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being into question. (143)

Foucault is explaining how life (and by designation, sexual identity) has changed from being a matter of the private sphere, as Kant would understand it, to becoming a commodity, weighted by society as a “value and utility” within the public sphere (144).

Recent economic theorists such as Teodoro Dario Togati also give prominence to the breach of the mythically divided public and private spheres, precisely as culture is equated to a commodity, and advertised and sold as such:

Indeed, whereas modernist social science regards society as being sufficiently differentiated to proceed to autonomous analysis of its subsets based on different principles, post-modernism claims that the lines of demarcation between various realms of society or between nature and society or culture have broken down. This can be seen, for example, in the increasing role that advertising plays in contemporary culture, in the increasing influence of cultural industry in advanced economics and in the fact that ‘nature is gone for good’ as Jameson (1992) puts it. (50)

Togati’s reference to advertising in particular relates acutely to the case of barebacking as a model on several levels. First, some barebackers seek other sexual partners in the anonymous
public sphere of the Internet. Once a viewer enters a barebacking website, he does not
however always just look passively at images or short clips of barebackers, but also
oftentimes barebacking sites encourage viewers to rate and comment on a public ‘wall’ space
and in blogs on the sexual attractiveness of those images and videos of barebackers. In
encouraging viewers to respond in a public forum on their own personal, private, and sexual,
aesthetic experiences, the divide between the public and private breaks down.

In essence, the model of barebacking has become commoditized online, and in
particular in pornography. This dynamic would relate to what Gail Hawkes, in her book on
_Sex and Pleasure in Western Culture_ (2004), calls a kind of “commodified eroticism.” She
speculates how

commodified eroticism breached the public-private divide in two senses. First, it
offered the viewer a virtual entry into the intimacy of the bedroom—once the most
private of spaces. Second, opening this space offered a legitimate context within
which to condone sex disengaged from any commitment or emotional ties. […] [In]
the postmodern world this stigmatized connection has been severed by the
fragmentation of contexts. (7)

This “fragmentation of contexts,” and this unchaining of desire from the realm of the private,
and even the commodification and public exposure of bodies, sex, and sexuality through such
means, is still by definition a means of enlightenment. In other words, recalling the previous
approach to Muscardin’s _Days_, barebacking as a metaphor for an ethical model of
postmodern engagement may be apprehended not just as a disengaged gesture motivated by
raw sexual desire, but a practice, at least conceptually speaking, that is steeped in great
emotion, levied by private and public reason as a means to spiritual and bodily
enlightenment—within Kantian terms. Additionally, in a postmodern sense, the space of
transformation would not just be haptic nor psychic, it would not and could not just be
captured solely in the private sphere, nor just in the dominion of the public, but on the liminal
space of the *virtual* and anonymous public, as can be seen in online chat rooms and blog spaces of barebacking websites.

The representational model of barebacking flourishes in the postmodern era, as exemplified by the virtual public gestalt that barebacking upholds. Calling barebacking a form of enlightenment, following Kant’s decree, is an essential part of the anatomy of the absurdist-ethics. Just as there may be resistance to the idea that the practice even as mere supposition might have an ethical core, it may also meet opposition invoking a system of a postmodern ethics altogether. I understand the word *ethics* in connection with those in capacities of power, who appear to submit to a code that claims to protect minority populations, a rationalist and humanistic tradition that draws its ideals from the Enlightenment. Alain Badiou calls one’s attention to an illustration in his book, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2001):

> The International Tribunal is clearly prepared to arrest and try, in the name of ‘human rights,’ anyone, anywhere, who attempts to contest the New World Order of which NATO (i.e. the United States) is the armed guard (1v). ‘Ethics’ is a matter of busying ourselves with these rights, of making sure that they are respected. (4)

Within this configuration, ethics as a concept emerges as a system that demands merely its own replication and obedience to that same system. Those persons in positions of power identify the deservingness of a group of so-called ‘victims,’ while the ruling country or normative status quo provides and protects their chosen disenfranchised group(s). If another country or normative status quo gets in the way of one’s ‘protecting’ of their minority group, as Badiou points out, any opposition will be punished (at least socially) in the name of ‘human rights.’ Those who oppose these supposed humanitarians are therefore by definition human rights ‘violators,’ and this behavior is deemed unethical. Meanwhile, countries will go against their own moral codes in order to guarantee their assets.
Badiou decries this class of ethics, and entreats his readers to consider an ethical human who is “precisely something other than a victim” (166). For Badiou, this kind of self-victimization engenders fatalism and apathy, whereby the victim becomes again a Heideggerian “a being-for-death” (166). Badiou puts forward a position in which one should aim to be the exact opposite, as in “something other than a mortal being,” one who is immortal and faces death directly, yet is divested of fear (166). I apply this perspective to the genre of ethics that characterizes barebacking as well.

Richard Schacht, in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality* (1994), captures the dynamic of this seemingly paradoxical architecture, as it would apply to Nietzsche’s theory of ethics, bringing the discussion of an absurdist-ethics back full circle:

Here an imposing (and preferably metaphysically sanctified) ‘law’ is not what is required. What is needed is the very opposite: newly imagined devices of individual encouragement, enticement, and inspiration—conceivably images like that of Nietzsche’s ‘overman,’ designed to give people the heart and stamina, but also the irreverence and the sheer truculence needed to persist in the awesome task of peeling themselves out of their pulp. (emphasis in the original; 94)

In a way, this take on Nietzsche has many romantic resonances, related, for instance, to the romantic rebellion—the same resonance that can be drawn from the ethics that underpins an ethical model of barebacking. This is not the Romantic in some dichotomous sense as an outright rejection of the ideals of the Enlightenment, but more complexly it describes the moment when the poet refuses to differentiate reason from sentiment, and it is in this sense that the term “Romantic” is used in the present discussion. The result is freedom à outrance, existential, and many times brought to the limit with the individual’s determination to commit suicide or to render his own vitality to the course of nature. The writings of some
romantic poets, as well as those writings that influenced the Romantic period (from previous centuries) elicit this density.  

Yet, one may too hastily draw parallels between the element of suicide and a model of ethics as related to a paradigm of the practice of barebacking. Barebacking is not, in principle, a suicide pact, as I discussed in the previous chapter, because the act of taking one’s life is not supported. In other words, barebackers are not encouraged to become infected with HIV in order to kill themselves. The model of the ethical paradigm I am developing here is instead related to the intense moment, associated with the spirit of romanticism, of living between the time of infection up until the death of the individual. This intensive form of living is romantic, even if repellent and disastrous for all parties involved, as is the case with Goethe’s iconic Werther, a character who willingly sought his death because he could not be with the one he loved. In fact, because of the precarious and dangerous nature of the romance it supports, I argue that this model is characteristically postmodern.  

Many scholars have also noted the ties between Romanticism and Postmodernism, and the intersections between the two mentalities feed into an absurdist-ethics. In The Postmodern Turn (1997), Steven Best and Douglas Kellner explain this connection:  

In one way or another, 18th- and 19th-century conservatism, romanticism, and existentialism form the backbone of a counter-Enlightenment tradition and are important influences on some versions of postmodern theory. Kierkegaard, for instance, anticipated postmodern theory with his critiques of reason and the Enlightenment and his insights into how the emerging mass were producing a new

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48 Further illustrations of Romantic writers expressing the romantic ideal of revolt or rebellion, and in particular sexual revolt or revolt for sexual reasons, include Alfred de Musset’s poem “Rolla” (1878), Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s Paul et Virginie (1787), Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary (1856), and Leo Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina (1877).
realm of social experience and a ‘phantom public’ that lost its individuality and capacity for critical thought. (29)

Here, one can recognize the foreshadowing of a virtual public sphere, which does manifest itself today in the Internet. Additionally, scholars have addressed Nietzsche’s romantic influence in his forewarning of the possibilities that would develop as a result of a kind of postmodern-like turn:

Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche carried out a radical critique of reason, the Enlightenment, and modern philosophy, a critique that anticipated the postmodern turn in thought and also argued that modern society had become so chaotic, fragmented, and devoid of ‘creative force’ that it had lost the resources to create a vital culture, thus demanding a break with modernity and the creation of a new society and way of life […]. (Best and Kellner, 29)

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are crucial to my theory of an absurdist-ethics, because they introduce moments in their theory that provide room—even in the face of the ‘phantom public’ or the idea of fragmentation—, for the development and employment of the romantic notions of love and reason, of self-fulfillment and self-effacement, and the possibility of an intense, however momentary futurity that might yet spark the seedling of a “vital culture.” I contend that a model of absurdist-ethics as demonstrated through barebacking, in particular as it is represented in Days, could be thought of as this kind of new culture.

Following Nietzsche in this sense, ethics becomes a means of transformation. A Romantic will-to-knowledge of the self, an execution of self-actualization at the same time as self-annihilation, is possible in the postmodern. If the individual is supposed to become who the individual is, as Nietzsche commands, in order to live an ethical life, then the actions of the barebacker, figuratively speaking, may mirror what could be assessed as an illustration of those humans who take Nietzsche’s challenge to heart, by revolting against the will to life itself, as a channel through which to engage in an ethics of living life fully, by aiming at the
futurity of their selves and their bodies, individually and collectively within a community of imagined barebackers, as foreshadowed by Nietzsche in aphorism 270 of *Gay Science*:

> What does your conscience say? — ‘You should become who you are,’ which implies that we should become that which we will become—our future selves. This is an ethics of death, as we will all be dead in the future. Yet, in striving for death, with more celebratory care, we are arguably enjoying an ethics of living *up until* the point of death as well. (219)

This is not about undertaking an act of aimless refusal to conform, but rather a use of free will to be free—to live and die as one wills it, communally and as part of a brotherhood, although this theoretical claim may have little bearing in reality. If I were to lay forth this theory in practical terms, the conclusion would mean that people who spread HIV might be described as heroic bareback rebels. Yet, I am not making this claim, nor am I able to judge the practice of barebacking here. What I intend with this discussion is to flesh out a theoretical model of ethics that I see as instantiated by the mere conjecture of barebacking.

Hypothetically, barebacking is largely an anonymous act of sex. A barebacker meets other men online. Potential barebackers may exchange a picture of themselves, as a filter to judge whether the couple should meet for sex, but also they hypothetically also only learn the online pseudonym of the other person. Alternately, a couple could meet in a bar, and have anonymous sex. These types of rendezvous, while they may depend in part on mutual attraction, in theory would not do so exclusively. Put simply, my theory of barebacking envisions a scenario whereby a would-be lover within a community of barebackers, seeks to have sexual exchanges with multiple partners. In this sense, the ideal relationship would not be co-dependent, but independent, yet still mutually fulfilling. Additionally, this metaphorically invokes the *exchange* of the virus, over the will to suicide and death, i.e., as in the ultimate *expenditure*. I argue that, in this instantiation of a postmodern absurdist-ethics,
there is a much more equitable power relation because the positions of power are occupied by two non-lovers, which would not mean the entire dissolution of power per se, but it would render relations more communal, fraternal, and consensual. In this scenario, neither the bestower of the pathogen nor the one who is receiving it necessarily has more power than the other, because what is being courted on both sides (the virus aside) is in fact the experience of radical awareness to life through the lens of death. This awareness is a kind of enlightenment that characterizes my theory of an absurdist-ethics.

Socrates’ theory of the lover and the beloved is fruitful when he envisions an aesthetic rapport between them, whereby the relationship between two men could be compared to an act of reading, an instantiation of an aesthetic ideal. John Peters, in Speaking into the Air (1999), outlines this argument well.

More specifically, reading for the ancient Greeks was often figured as the sexual relation between penetrator and penetrated. [...] To read—which meant to read aloud—was to relinquish control of one’s body to the (masculine) writer, to yield to a distant dominating body. To write was to act as an erastes; to read, as an eromenos. (40)

This love between philosophical lovers is related to communication and mirrors particular dilemmas of post-modern communication:

Socrates provides a checklist of enduring anxieties that arise in response to transformations in the means of communication. Writing parodies live presence; it is inhuman, lacks interiority, destroys authentic dialogue, is impersonal, and cannot acknowledge the individuality of its interlocutors; and it is promiscuous in distribution. Such things have been said about printing, photography, phonography, cinema, radio, television, and computers. (47)

Similarly, within a model of barebacking, browsers of barebacking pornography on the Internet might rouse many of these notions. Online communication above all other media “parodies live presence,” and along with anonymous acts of barebacking, both can be called
impersonal, favoring the collective over the individual, and of course, both are promiscuous in nature and distribution.

In order to further the idea of a postmodern absurdist-ethics, I turn now to the ideas of the gift and sacrifice as related to barebacking, and its connection with the two chapters on the roles of the absurd and of the aesthetic of the grotesque. If one thinks about giving a gift as a contingency of power that imposes certain obligations on an individual or group, then giving another body HIV may be interpreted in the same fashion. If one understands a gift as Pierre Bourdieu does in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972), as a deferral in time, then one is no longer playing a correlative game. In my model of barebacking, this gift does not come with a disavowal of expectations. Instead, participants are hypothetically fully aware of the price they pay when they play such games. Veritably, in this case, this is why the game is played. There might be a moment of ‘don’t mention it’ during the act itself, but the presence of this obligation or the repercussions of these actions are evident; and it is this heightened difference that categorizes the representational model of barebacking as a postmodern, impersonal, and *absurd* and *grotesque* gesture, instilled with great expectations, whereby what the individual expects as the gift is in fact the absurd sacrifice.

This absurdist-grotesque expression of sacrifice that barebacking portends is closely related to what enthralls Kierkegaard, and by extension Derrida, in their responses to the biblical story of Abraham and his son Isaac. In the Bible, God asks Abraham to kill his son; and Abraham intends to carry out this act, only to have his son saved by God in the end (Genesis 22.9-10; 22.12). What fascinates Derrida, as well as Kierkegaard, is Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, to embrace his death because someone [God] asks him to. In his crucial work *Fear and Trembling* (1843), Kierkegaard maintains: “[Abraham] did not
believe that he would be blessed one day in the hereafter but that he would become blissfully happy here in the world. [...] He believed by virtue of the absurd,” for all human calculation had long since ceased (30; my emphasis). I prefer to read this scenario, as Derrida does in his essay *The Gift of Death* (1991), as the theory of one’s responsibility to the Other. Derrida suggests:

> As soon as I enter into a relation with the absolute other, my absolute singularity enters into relation with this on the level of obligation and duty. I am responsible to the other as other, I answer to him and I answer for what I do before him. But of course, what binds me thus is my singularity to the absolute singularity of the other, immediately propels me into the space or risk of absolute sacrifice. (68)

Being for the other, as happens hypothetically in the practice of barebacking, will always be an absurdist, grotesque and romantic act of revolt, a gift of death, and a betrayal of the other and the self. One sacrifices one’s ethics in the name of another—that is, one embraces the responsibility of living in this postmodern moment at the expense of fearing for the future. In this representational model, a barebacker no longer holds back, because at that moment he must invest his fear of death into an arguably ethically viable, libidinal act, which is at once a paradoxical form of destruction and creation.

The cultural ties that emerge through this process of the ‘gift of death’ have clear consequences in the conformation of communal cohesion. In *Using Social Theory in Educational Research* (2008), Mark Dressman invokes Bourdieu in this regard:

> [Bourdieu] argued that the supposedly free choices people make [...] are reproductive, that is, they signify membership in a particular cultural or social group to others and to themselves, and in so signifying, they limit also the social and cultural parameters of the individuals’ aspirations. (43)

What some only esteem as acts of free choice or preference are invariably signs one imposes on the Other. Such transmissions are not always traceable, but they are infinite; and as Badiou proposes in his essay on “The Subject of Art,” this is not a transcendental infinite, but
an immanent one (par. 17). Introspection into the corporeal consequences demands a metaphor of an epidemic, and not one that relies on morality per se. The afterlife of the community of barebackers may trust instead in the absurd and grotesque performances that by definition threaten and simultaneously ensure an inevitable “plague [on all their] houses.”

The importance of community and belonging is not only hypothetical within a barebacking community, but also in practice. In 2000, in Österreichs Magazin für Schwule [Austria’s Magazine for Gay Men], the author of an article relates: “There are HIV-negative gays, who proclaim that they would like to finally be positive, to finally ‘belong.’ When he is ‘finally’ positive, he need no longer be afraid about becoming positive, and he can once again enjoy sex without fear” (Bussi 59; my translation). The proclivity to belong to this group—this queer genealogy of men—may be halted nevertheless, even if only temporarily, by the consideration that this knowledge and pledge comes with a deadly price. For those men who overcome this hindrance, jouissance is most simplistically the death drive exteriorized through actions of the flesh.49 Jouissance here also suggests a surplus of pleasure in the pleasure economy, whereby bodily pleasure combines with pleasure of risk, such that it becomes an incandescent and annihilating act of pleasure, the kind that sends one to obliteration, just as barebacking may do in the ethical model proposed here: to bareback is absurd, thereby fashioning the body as grotesque, infected and dying. More enigmatically, within a postmodern absurdist-ethics, the pursuit of jouissance, as menacing as it may seem, is in point of fact an ethical schema by which to live; otherwise, the individual would be arguably unceremoniously surrendering to a joyless life.

49 In the words of Lacan: “This track, this pathway, is familiar to us. It’s ancestral knowledge. […] Knowledge is what brings life to a halt at a certain limit on the path to jouissance. For the path toward death […] is nothing other than what is called jouissance.” (18)
Such model of a postmodern absurdist-ethics is evidently controversial, but the ethics behind a practice that confronts death and the restrictions of the body head-on has a long lineage of philosophical interest. Alain Badiou’s discussion of the ethics of bodies helps illustrate this paradigm.

But finally, what is a limit of the body, a limit of the living body? […] So we can say that in the form of the subjective paradigm the subject is experimentation of death as final limit of the body. […] and the real and final experimentation in the field of body art can be to commit suicide in public. And it’s a philosophical determination, because a long time ago Heidegger said that finally Dasein or subject is a subject for death. I can name, in general, the subjective paradigm which is experimentation of the limits of the body something like enjoyment because enjoyment is the name of experimentation of death in life, experimentation of the big thing (das Ding) as death in life itself. (“The Subject of Art,” par. 8)

What Badiou also suggests here is again Lacan’s conception of jouissance, which for Badiou is the first paradigm of the human’s subjectivity as enjoyment of anticipating one’s own death. One experiments with one’s own life and the limits of the body as a way to tweak pleasure (“The Subject of Art,” par. 8).

The experimentation of the body, and the ultimate absurdist act of such for Badiou, is perhaps the most grotesque form of aesthetics, which goes hand in hand with an ethics of life through death, an absurdist-ethics. If the “real and final experimentation” of our bodies would be “to commit suicide in public,” then barebacking as an instantiation of the ethical model I propose here may well be an example of such. Nevertheless, the public suicide would not be a literal one, but instead the choice to live HIV-positive and bareback, and consider and defend that choice as a viable, ethical choice. Badiou suggests that in postmodernity, such radical absurdist acts are the only ones that bring meaning to life, although I am not suggesting that Badiou anticipated this model applying to something as radical as barebacking. Still, the model supplies one possible reading of a grotesque aesthetic
ideal, which raises the stakes philosophically and politically. This absurdist-ethics allows room for life and sexual and emotional fulfillment, while the previous only dictates asexuality, insularity, and ultimately a spiritual death, even before one’s time. The result of this viewpoint is paradoxical, as when Nietzsche speaks of the paradox and even absurdity of the capacity of some individuals to deliberately set the perimeters of life so that they are always confronted by thresholds of pain and the thought of death—a situation many individuals might regard as intolerable, the lateralization of which would be grotesque.

But for the ascetic priest, who Nietzsche sees in the role of philosopher, it is his job and his life to live on the brink, always acknowledging the possibility that life is pain, that life could end at any moment. Nietzsche classifies he who chooses this vocation as one who is the “apparent enemy of life, this denier—[yet] precisely he is among the greatest conserving and yes-creating forces of life;” and congruently, he adds that

The sick animal, [… ] the great experimenter with himself, discontented and insatiable, wrestling with animals, nature, and gods for ultimate dominion—he, still unvanquished, eternally directed toward the future, whose own restless energies never leave him in peace, so that his future digs like a spur into the flesh of every present—how should such a courageous and richly endowed animal not also be the most imperiled, the most chronically and profoundly sick of all sick animals? […] The No he says to life brings to light, as if by magic, an abundance of tender Yeses; even when he wounds himself, this master of destruction, of self-destruction—the very wound itself afterward compels him to live. (“Genealogy,” 557)

Accepting the nature of Nietzsche’s ascetic priest acts as a foil of an absurdist-ethical model of HIV via barebacking, a paradigm of endurance and survival emerges from this crux, and one that is compatible with the seemingly Thanatos-striven core of barebacking. If one adopts this framework, within the constraints of this model as a representation for a postmodern ethics, one may conceive the barebacker as one whom openly tackles the human condition and the perception of the inevitability of death. Forced to wrestle with HIV and
AIDS, *the sick man*, the grotesque human body, which Nietzsche defines as one infected (he references historical epidemics), as one who tests the absolutes of life and gratification, engages in the practice of barebacking, and collides and battles in the interstice of ethics, placing himself at the heart of the philosophy of the *absurd*, which defines an absurdist-ethics.

Following the philosophical lineage that frames the model of an absurdist-ethics, Albert Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) is also a relevant signpost. In the preface, he explains that

> The fundamental subject of ‘The Myth of Sisyphus’ is this: it is legitimate and necessary to wonder whether life has a meaning; therefore it is legitimate to meet the problem of suicide face to face. […] This book declares that even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism. […] It sums itself up for me as a lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert. (v)

Camus turns to the absurd as an ethical position, and philosophical revolt as the only viable action through this position:

> [The absurd] is that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints, my nostalgia of unity, this fragmented universe and the contradiction that binds them together. […] I am not interested in philosophical suicide, but rather in plain suicide. I merely wish to purge it of its emotional content and know its logic and its integrity. Any other position implies for the absurd mind deceit and the mind’s retreat before what the mind itself has brought to light. (*Sisyphus*, 50)

The instantiation of barebacking as it interplays with HIV connects an absurdist-ethics to Camus’s understanding of the absurd. He defends the absurd as an act of revolt, and as one of the only possible coherent philosophical positions:

> It is an insistence upon an impossible transparency. It challenges the world anew every second. Just as danger provided man the unique opportunity of seizing awareness, so metaphysical revolt extends awareness to the whole of experience. It is the constant presence of man in his own eyes. It is not aspiration, for it is devoid of hope. That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it. (54)
For Camus, in order to stay alive, the absurd must be experienced deliberately again and again, as if it were “at the extreme limit of the condemned man’s last thought, that shoelace that despite everything he sees a few yards away, on the very brink of his dizzying fall. The contrary of suicide, in fact, is the man condemned to death. [...] That revolt gives life its value” (54-55). The consequence of Camus’s premise is that the absurd and the grotesque must be realized as something ethically positive, for together, the ethical paragon stands as the will to life. Indeed, the barebacker is a rebel who challenges the limits of life. Pursuant to Camus, rebels are not just mavericks who strive without purpose, history, or reason. Instead, such individuals are largely compelled and driven by history’s collective memories. They rebel in order to experience true consciousness, in order to exist, and to survive. Camus discloses in The Rebel (1951) that:

> In our daily trials rebellion plays the same role as does the ‘cogito’ in the realm of thought: it is the first piece of evidence. But this evidence lures the individual from his solitude. It founds its first value on the whole human race. I rebel—therefore we exist. (62)

Camus lays down rules for this kind of rebellion, an absurdist act, which is a not just any and all unbridled and radical action. Instead, a rebel must be mindful of community, of history, guided by principles of reason, by what I contend is an absurdist-ethical code of conduct.

Camus continues:

> In order to exist, man must rebel, but rebellion must respect the limit it discovers in itself—a limit where minds meet and, in meeting, begin to exist. Rebellious thought, therefore, cannot dispense with memory: it is a perpetual state of tension. In studying its actions and its results, we shall have to say, each time, whether it remains faithful to its first noble promise or if, through indolence or folly, it forgets its original purpose and plunges into a mire of tyranny or servitude. (109)

Rebels, like barebackers in the theoretical model I propose here, are those who live on the precipice of enlightenment. Only in engaging with the limits of one’s body and mind, as
Camus stresses, can one transition from accepting the mundaneness and apathy that goes along with a cursory understanding of the absurdity of life, to the discovery of the value of the absurd and the grotesque. Only then, after suffering, can the individual come into her or his own right and identity as a rebel, only then does one begin to truly exist in an ethical manner.

This suffering is not, after all, something that must be done alone. Camus maintains that suffering, just like cultural memories, are collective, and collectivity, that is, the social bond, is at the core of an understanding of ethics:

In absurdist experience, suffering is individual. But from the moment when a movement of rebellion begins, suffering is seen as a collective experience. Therefore the first progressive step for a mind overwhelmed by the strangeness of things is to realize that this feeling of strangeness is shared with all men and that human reality, in its entirety, suffers from the distance, which separates it from the rest of the universe. The malady experienced by a single man becomes a mass plague. (22)

Camus likens the human condition to a mass plague, but one that may be managed by individual struggle through cognition of the matrix of the struggle of the collective. To Camus, the allegiance to the absurd, and by extension its most grotesque manifestations, as in he who is infected by the plague of the humanity and assumes a grotesque form, is accepting of the fact that life is absurd, and that by living according to an absurdist-ethics, which sanctions such a radical lifestyle, one may locate comfort and satisfaction. The connection to AIDS is easily summoned in my own representational conception of the barebacker, his own struggles with his positive status, his culturally constructed infected and dying body coded by grotesque aesthetics, and the comfort he may attain in a community of his equals.

Although one may grasp one’s own state of insularity among mankind, one may still discover a sense of belonging and solidarity within a community. The dynamic is thus explained between, hypothetically, the isolated barebacker and the virtual collective of the
barebacking community in the Internet. Both need each other in order to glean consolation and resignification of the conditions of possibility of living in the moment, in the shadow of death. In “Restoring the Self as Subject,” Stanford Lyman helps elucidate the role that agency plays in configurations of the absurd:

The Absurdist position holds that the world makes no ontological sense but nearly always is socially constructed and reconstructed to give it a sensibility. […] Thus the sociological investigation [of the absurd] proceeds by finding out whether, how, and to what extent the particular human agents under investigation are able to transform space into territories, convert duree into disparate time tracks, and render accounts, employ disclaimers, or develop aligning actions in the course of securing, maintaining, or shoring up the sometimes stable, sometimes fragile, and sometimes fractured sociations in which they find themselves. (17)

The absurdist individual may obtain a more valuable life experience, and yield agency, specifically through border engagements, which also include, perhaps surprisingly, art and aesthetics as something that necessarily go hand in hand with the ethical in this regard. If life is absurd, and engaging in absurdist behavior is necessary to live an ethical life, and if this grotesque form of aesthetics makes an absurdist life bearable, then by extension those who seek an ethical life must necessarily scout out ways to configure their absurdist behavior in an aesthetically grotesque, complex fashion in order to disavow the inevitable and the always unavoidable presence of negativity, as a mark of death that evades life. In effect, an ethical life, as my model portends it, must embrace the absurd and grotesque aesthetic simultaneously, that is what a postmodern absurdist-ethics calls forth. The embodiment of this negotiation takes form in the esperpento, which I discuss in the ensuing chapter.

I maintain that the practice of barebacking can be represented as absurd, which I have illustrated above, and at the same time may be depicted in art in an aesthetically complex form, the grotesque, as a way of engaging spectators philosophically. This unique manifestation of art can also be seen, just as one may view barebacking itself, as a symptom
of postmodernity, whereby postmodern citizens desire to deconstruct the metanarrative of life in more paradoxical, complex, intellectual, and enriching ways. As Ian Ward explains in his *Introduction to Critical Legal Theory* (2004): “Whereas Plato and Aristotle feared poetry for its disruptive potential and challenge to the sovereignty of reason, postmodernism has returned to the aesthetic in an effort to reinvest some sort of intellectual unity” (155).

Following this definition, my approach to barebacking as an instantiation of an absurd-ethics, although controversial, may be seen as an ideal form of absurdist-grotesque art, as the fashioning of the body through disease.

To further understand the mechanism behind an absurdist-ethics in the films I presented in an absurd AIDS Cinema, and in order to explore the consequences of the theoretical framework I have laid out in the present chapter, it is necessary to assess the way the grotesquely fashioned, mythical body with AIDS might be represented in its most philosophically developed form. For this purpose, I invoke in the ensuing chapter the figure of the esperpento, a politically compelling aesthetics whose metaphorical representation seeks agency in radical, absurdist acts, dressed in a grotesque aesthetics. The esperpento’s figure foils most poignantly that of the barebacker as rebel and revolutionary, that is, as the agent of an absurdist-ethics. As the most complete culmination of my theory of an absurdist-ethics, the esperpento also helps to explain how an absurd AIDS Cinema can be described as a schizophrenic, postmodern cinema, which makes it evident how it would be possible, logical, and even necessary to laugh at AIDS jokes in *Virus*, to discover a saint in a rapist in *Animal*, and to refigure a barebacker as a noble rebel in *Days*, all of them acting in relation to and through the vehicle of the HIV virus. The esperpento explains ultimately how one may
act in an ethically justifiable manner, and seek agency, within a postmodern philosophical landscape.
CHAPTER V

ESPERPENTO AS RADICAL AGENT

In this chapter, I identify and deepen my understanding of the nature of the particular aesthetic model that I argue goes hand-in-hand with the paradigm of an absurdist-ethics, which I denote as culminating in the aesthetic form of the esperpento, a term coined and illustrated in the works of early 20th century Galician writer Ramón del Valle-Inclán (1866-1936). I contend that works of art that engage with an absurdist-ethics deliver representations of traumatic events by drawing upon the tradition of both the absurd and the grotesque, oftentimes with the aim of provoking the viewer intellectually through laughter, disgust, or desire. In the context of HIV/AIDS, the affect of the esperpento, as a politically charged form of an absurd-grotesque aesthetics, calls forth the deepest fears the epidemic invokes. Affect reveals itself visually as death, or more complexly in one’s psyche, as a schizophrenic multitude of affective forms.

Ramón María del Valle-Inclán’s Luces de Bohemia [Lights of Bohemia] (1920-1924) is a story of the last moments in the life of Máximo Estrella, a poet who, slowly dying of alcohol poisoning, wanders until dawn through the streets of Madrid with his drinking companion Don Latino. They stir up trouble through their encounter with prostitutes, gambling, and violence. Eventually imprisoned that night for causing a riot, and later upon his release, Max walks home and in the early morning hours on his doorstep, he dies, but not entirely without reflection. Indeed, in this night of murky intoxication and misdeeds, sensing his impending death, Max stumbles almost haphazardly and apathetically, and altogether
comically and grotesquely upon moments of philosophical clarity and epiphany about the human condition.

Early on in the night, after contemplating the wonders of his distorted reflection in the mirrors of the Callejón del Gato, Estrella has a revelation:

Max: Distortion determined by strict mathematical norms is no longer distortion. That’s my aesthetic creed from now on: to transform all the classical norms with the strictly mathematical impartiality of a concave mirror.

Don Latino: And where do you find your mirror?

Max: At the bottom of a glass.

Don Latino: You’re a genius! I take my head off to you!

Max: Latino, we must distort our expression of reality in the same mirrors that distort our reflections and the whole miserable charade of Spanish life.

Don Latino: We’ll go and live in an amusement park.

Max: [Feeling ill]. My hands have gone numb and my fingernails hurt. I’m a sick man!

Don Latino: […] You’re just trying to make me feel sorry for you.

Max: Idiot, take me home and let me die in peace. (123)

The aesthetic creed, to which Max ascribes in the face of his imminent death, is the esperpento. Although he is blind, he knows that the image in the mirror is distorted. His blindness has been “the gift of Venus,” for Max is ill with syphilis. Still, he has the insight to realize that the deformity before him is reality. Human nature is grotesque and comical, and entirely absurd, although it can be explained through a mere mathematical calculation. I contend that the aesthetic of the esperpento helps to illustrate and reconcile the pairing of the absurd and the grotesque in the mythical body of AIDS in an absurd AIDS cinema.

Furthermore, Max’s epiphany that the esperpento can be mathematically contemplated is also telling with reference to an absurdist-ethics. Through the esperpento aesthetic it is possible to fully open up and explain the mechanism of an absurdist-ethics, that I contend is more clearly understood through an absurd AIDS cinema. In this context, the genre is also best accessed
as a schizophrenic, postmodern cinema, that explains how an absurdist-ethics can prove an ethically viable vehicle in film today.

The simplest translation of the word esperpento is a “slovenly person” (Hess, 151). It has even been translated as “eye sore.” The term is also analogous to “the scarecrow,” and has been translated as such, but it is important to note that this kind of scarecrow may be more than just a bag of straw.

To put my understanding of the absurdist-grotesque body into context, I begin by thinking about popular cultural references to bodies that are meant to scare and at the same time may be scared themselves by society at large, such as scarecrows, monsters, and other minor border creations that, as is the nature of the esperpento, have no designation. This approach will pave the way to consider more complexly, as one manifestation of the esperpento, the cultural fears of images of a body infected with HIV or a body with AIDS in its mythical configurations. The potent figure of the esperpento, and the philosophical paradigm that underpins it, provides a mode of radical political agency that facilitates hope. At the end of a campy and carnivalesque night on the town, he who comes home infected with HIV will die with a grotesque, yet enlightened smile at his doorstep.

The esperpentic scarecrow is a grotesque figure “filled with twisted, fragmented bodies often integrated with mechanical parts” (Johnson, 158). The scarecrow is first and foremost that which one uses to scare away those agents (birds or wild animals) that destroy the objects one holds dear, e.g., crops to feed the family in order to survive. The esperpento scarecrow is scary, as the name suggests; he is meant to rouse fear in humans. The material form of the scarecrow (stuffed clothes with hay, a hat, and a pitchfork) comes to embody fear itself. He is familiar, yet uncanny: grotesque. The esperpento is also a monster, one that may
never be considered fully human, but that may act as a doppelgänger for the real, for the human. One encounters such an esperpentic representation in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), a story in which a near human-like creature struggles with his own trials of becoming human. In the novel, the body of the creature is defeated, even before his mind—that importantly appears to be the one obtaining the human ideal. That is, in the process of becoming human, the misshapen creature acquires a profound ethical-philosophical understanding with which he has to come to terms. This individual gathers value in living an existence he knows can only lead to his ostracization and his death. And yet, he still finds solace in the presence of the grotesque mind of human beings and in their absurdist actions, inversely mirrored by his own grotesque body that has been created out of absurd circumstances. Ironically, it is a master of scientific process, following the rules of progress promised by the Enlightenment, who makes the deformed creature in Frankenstein. Yet, it is not the master who experiences a true philosophical, existential awakening, but the creature who, after experiencing the shock of the relative incongruence and seeming inhumaness of humanity, must in turn ultimately reject those ideals.

A third comparison, again to scarecrows, brings me closer to the sense of the esperpento in the context of HIV as the absurdist corporal signification of the virus. I am referring to American children’s author L. Frank Baum’s story *The Wizard of Oz* (1900), and more pointedly the 1939 filmic version from American director Victor Fleming. The scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz* is known for the circumstance that he has no organs, but is instead only made of stuffing. Consequently, in the tale, the scarecrow seeks a brain, just as the tin man longs a heart. These mechanical and inanimate objects-turned-animate is what Deleuze and Guattari would call a *body without organs*:
The body without organs is nonproductive; nonetheless it is produced, at a certain place and a certain time in the connective synthesis, as the identity of producing and the product: the schizophrenic table is a body without organs. The body without organs is not proof of an original nothingness, nor is it what remains of a lost totality. Above all, it is not a projection; it has nothing whatsoever to do with the body itself, or with an image of the body. It is the body without an image. (Anti-Oedipus, 9)

For the authors, “The body without organs, the unproductive, the unconsumable, serves as a surface for the recording of the entire process of production of desire” (12). With this concept in mind, I image how the role of the esperpento scarecrow as a body without organs might also compare to one’s fear of an image of HIV that one can never see or visualize, and yet can be manifested into multiple grotesque forms in the cultural mind eye. That does not mean that one should view individuals infected with the virus as grotesque. I am not talking about real lives or even people, but instead about how the virus across the body is represented or imagined, insofar as it evades representation. In these scenarios, as an aesthetic of an absurdist-ethics would prescribe, the body is represented oftentimes as doubled, fragmented, and disembodied, as well as grotesque and dying, whereby its decay is celebrated and eroticized. I extend this metaphor to the mythical body with AIDS in absurd AIDS films, that I have hypothesized is a body without organs, depersonalized, but also filled up with affect of the humor and fashioned by a grotesque aesthetic, which helps navigate and trace the bearings of the loss and death that occurred through the event of the pandemic. An absurd AIDS film reanimates the faces of the deceased in a macabre, yet oftentimes humorous, but always provocative way through the mechanism of the absurd and the grotesque.

Valle-Inclán’s literary contributions are clearly a form of aesthetic and political revolt. In a period of time when Spain confronted deep crises derived from the loss of its former colonies, the dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera, and the rapid dwindling of its international influence, Valle-Inclán coined the designation of the esperpento and developed
its aesthetic characteristics in his writings, which are known for being grotesque and radically political. Valle-Inclán was a forward thinker, famous for his boisterous and adamant manner, and his dialectic, which sought to expose the grotesqueness of bodies of power, such as the dictator, the church and the state, and their corruption as mirrored in the trickling down effect of venality from above into the community and the behavior of the individual.

Much of the inspiration for the development of the esperpento came from Valle-Inclán’s involvement as a member of what critics have called Generación del 98 [The Spanish Generation of 1898]. This was a group of intellectuals who lived during the time of the Spanish-American War. Dealing with the trauma of the events of social and economic turmoil, namely the loss of the last Spanish colonies, and their dissatisfaction with the political moves made by Spain in the years of restoration that ensued, they voiced radical dissent in their writings. These authors were not however like an avant-garde group signing a common creed. They wrote following their own agenda, but they were also in contact and exchange with their counterparts from other Spanish speaking countries. María Delgado describes Valle-Inclán’s style after the events of the Spanish-American war:

[The] author springs from purely artistic considerations to such sociopolitical concerns as the succession of inept governments [that] could neither better the miserable state of the peasant in the countryside and the worker in the city, nor rectify the many inequalities of daily life in a nation that had not learned the hard lessons of 1898 when Spain lost the remnants of its once-vast empire through incompetence and an unrealistic belief in the viability of past glories. It was such concerns that formed the rationale for the new aesthetic of the grotesque and the absurd. (Spanish Theatre, 39-40).

Valle-Inclán also expressed this sentiment, stating that

Ours is a harsh paternity … Because we are ever accompanied by indignation at what we see taking place around us fatally. Spain is a vast stage selected by tragedy. […] Our entire populace is worth less than a gang of trivial players set on staging the genial drama of Spanish life. The result, of course, is an esperpento. (qtd. in Delgado, 40).
In this context, esperpento has the meaning of a shoddy, farcical, and grotesque representation of an imagined identity from which almost competing and contradictory drives can be derived. The esperpento, as a political agenda, yearns for the dissolution of corrupt governments and an enlightenment of the common folk, but at the same time, must exhibit the incongruent sense of nostalgia within this society for a lost past. The esperpento mirrors the preposterous sense of entitlement of a society that cannot measure to standards and illusions that are out of touch with testing present reality. This splitting of the cultural identity at the core of the image of the esperpento is very problematic, and summarizes the chiasm between reality and warped reality I mentioned in the introductory chapter.

The paradigm of the esperpento in my own absurdist-ethics, in particular as it applies to the practice of barebacking, also portends to the cultural differences, sometimes major, sometimes minor, in films of a Global Queer AIDS Cinema. As I have shown in the previous chapters, spectators are exposed to German-Berlin bathhouse politics of the 1980s in Virus, to Indian village micro-politics of poverty and lack of tools for education and dissemination in Animal, and to Italy’s endorsement of European and American pharmaceutical companies in Days. Inside the local differences, there is a community of members who rely on nostalgic notions of a mythical, bygone past—for example a time when gay men could copulate without protection or fear of HIV. But that is not the real situation; HIV and AIDS happens, the disease happens, death as a result of the disease happens, and still people are there, trying to live, living because and spite of that reality. The interstice between reality and desired reality is a warped reality: esperpento, barebacking. This great capacity of interstitial representation of the esperpento helps to illuminate the aesthetic corporal signification of the
grotesque experience and mythical body with AIDS in cinema, as a radical agent of revolt in an absurdist-ethics.

The barebacker, as represented in Days for example, has chosen his ethical position, and has found peace and standing in his reflection within an absurdist-ethical paradigm, just as Ayyanar does with respects to his own contagion and state of dying in Animal. Also, in Virus, many bodies are depicted as defaced or deformed by affective notions of the grotesque and humor. All three films demand that viewers take up their own viable positions vis-à-vis the virus, and choose what is their own image in that warping mirror that reflects those passing by in the street, that is, those who witness what happens in the silver screen. What is at stake ultimately is a process of discovery and enlightenment that portends to the individual’s acknowledgment of the power dynamics at play in respect to her or his ethical position to life and death, the personal station in relationship to minoritarian cultures and the powers that be, such as doctors, scientists, and law makers, who control how humans live and die. HIV is only the catalyst in this particular context. I maintain that, through this process of engagement, one may achieve enlightenment, and thereby reach a form of catharsis.

The symbol of agency is the grotesque figure of the esperpento and his absurdist actions, which make him in turn an agent of an absurdist-ethics, and what some might call an anti-hero, not unlike other (post-)modernist heroes such as James Joyce’s Leopold Bloom. Valle-Inclán’s Lights of Bohemia has often been compared to James Joyce’s Ulysses (1918-1920), and the figure of the esperpento to Ulysses’ protagonist. María Delgado explains how “the episodic form, as in Brecht’s work, functions as a dramatic statement, which like James Joyce’s Ulysses, charts the journey of an anti-hero through a capital city—‘un Madrid absurdo, brillante y hambriento’ ['an absurd, brilliant, and hungry Madrid’]” (1986). In the
opinion of some scholars, the journey Max undertakes is one of seeing, that is, esperpentic in terms of the visual and visibility. In *Reading Culture at the Threshold: Time and Transition in Modern Spain (1800 - 1990)* (2008), Jonathan D. Synder conjectures that for Valle-Inclán the esperpentic lens “distorts and deforms to reveal its concrete object of reflection” as would the mirrors in a funhouse. Valle-Inclán had specific mirrors in mind, the concave and convex mirrors once featured in a busy market street in Madrid called the Callejón del Gato (142). These mirrors referenced in the definition of the esperpento aesthetic no longer exist in Madrid. During Valle-Inclán’s time, they were full-body size and the people would look either tall and skinny or short and fat, like Cervantes’ Sancho and Don Quixote. For Valle-Inclán, the misshapen mirrors and the aesthetic within their reflections worked well as an analogy for how one might see reality, otherwise distorted by ideology and dogma, now unmasked through the lens of its reflection. In other words, that which was distorted is restored to its true nature in the looking glass, via a doppelgänger effect. Vision in this sense is not however merely an individual activity, but a collective one:

Goya invented esperpentism. Classical heroes have gone to stroll in the Callejón del Gato. [...] The Classical heroes reflected in the concave mirrors become the Esperpento. The tragic sense of Spanish life can only be rendered through a systematically deformed aesthetic. [...] The most beautiful images are absurd in a concave mirror. (123, My translation)

These mirrors represent the classical image of the grotesque, as expressed through the configuration of the esperpento, which the author also associates with the works of renowned Spanish Romantic engraver and painter Francisco de Goya (1746-1828). A good example of Goya’s affinity with an esperpento-like aesthetic is his etching titled *Disparate alegre* [*Grotesque Dance or Merry Folly*] (ca. 1819-20) (fig. 4). This etching, along with the others in what was to be Goya’s last series of prints—the *Los Disparates-Proverbios* collection—
was not released to the public until well after his death. *Disparates*, which means *the absurd, nonsense*, or *the follies*, and in a more literal sense “that which has no pair” in Spanish, was a collection of grotesque etchings that supposedly represent Goya’s disillusionment of the Spanish uprising of 1808 against the Bonaparte regime (Clair, 83). In this image, a carnivalesque dance of death appears to be taking place. Men dressed in drag and some dressed as “bobalicones” (‘Silly idiots’) contort their bodies in uncomfortable angles, which renders a queasy sense of momentum. The most grotesque in this image is the mere excess: excess of gender and sexuality, costumes, shadows, and *human* bodily movement.  

Art scholar Jean Clair asserts that the entire collection, which represented many similar grotesque images of clowns and costumed figures, does relate specifically to the Spanish Carnival. She illustrates:

> In spite of the surreal atmosphere and incongruous aspects of the images, […] the subjects, while unconventional, relate to Spanish Carnival customs practiced in Goya’s days, such as the dance of the giants, the wearing of two-headed masks, and the display of monstrous figures in public places. All of them, he believes, serve to question authority, Carnival being the one period during which the reversal of social hierarchies and traditional values was permitted. (83)

But in Goya’s etching, the landscape is not of a folk festival, but instead a wasteland full of inexplicable shadows and light, which makes the image only apparently one of irreality and illusion, but aesthetically one of all too real desolation, depicting a group of individuals incapable of taking action, or of making sense of their situation, prone to silliness, and convinced of the bliss of their ignorance.

When contrasted with the reality at Goya’s time, the bobalicones, the esperpentos, are perhaps not the characters engraved in his work, but those he saw as his public, that is, the

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50 The bobalicón comes from Spanish folklore. According to one source, the bobalicón is “represented as a very tall humanoid being with an enormous head and a horrible leering grin that hovers terrifyingly over potential victims. But the fear of the bobalicón is countered by his potential for being duped by a human being” (Rose, 54).
society to which he belonged. Images such as Goya’s *Disparate alegre* are a grotesque representation of a philosophical revolt against traditions of art and the powers that be. This
Figure 4: Disparate alegre

From the *Disparates- Proverbios* collection (ca. 1819-20), Francisco de Goya
esperpentic mirroring of society is an agent of radical revolt that follows a creed of an absurdist-ethics. Given that the mythical body infected with AIDS has also been represented in a comical-grotesque way in an absurd AIDS Cinema, Goya’s grotesque partygoers act as an appropriate transition into my discussion and understanding of the absurdist-grotesque body.

The monstrous figures in Goya’s etching are mirroring the other dancers and the viewers as well; they dance together in formation and incorporate the unwilling public into the circle they conform. But this dance is one that disobeys harmonious order because the images are slanted and incongruent. These characteristics recall Max Estrella’s definition of esperpento in *Lights of Bohemia*, and his invocation of the Callejón del Gato and the funhouse mirror as not just an image separate from reality, but a true image of reality in all its contradictions and deformations, as that which gazes into the surface of the mirror. The focus is not only on the individual body reflected in the mirror, but the collective. In this vein, one may contemplate how the AIDS figure—the mythical person infected with HIV, close to death’s doorstep and dying of AIDS—may be depicted in AIDS films as a personal instantiation of a single doomed man, as well as a body that represents the entire social collective. The grotesqueness is never just regulated to one individual, but is always reflective of a collective that, for example, actuates and explains the emphasis on the community of barebackers versus the individual. The mirrors presented in this passage are also no ordinary mirrors. Not only do they reflect reality, but they also show depth in their distorted nature. This is a positive characteristic insofar as depth stands metaphorically for depth of (collective) character, and however shallow, it indicates room for intellectual, social, and/or political growth. The mirrors in the Callejón del Gato depict the public reflection of
‘normal’ people, of which one has no access to in their private sphere. Yet, it is also an ‘outing’ of the reflected individual’s inner self, which is perhaps monstrous or at least grotesque: *esperpentic*.

The Callejón del Gato, as a public space of commerce, also witnessed the flux and constant exchange of cultural products. Valle-Inclán’s clever use of the urban space conjures Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcade Project [Das Passagen-Werk]* (1927-1940), which invokes in part the on-goings and commerciality of the Parisian arcade district, where goods were bought and sold, and the citizens of Paris met face-to-face in the realm of the public. Consumers encounter in the arcade a dialectical, double image of themselves, which according to Benjamin goes through various stages that remind one of the esperpentic experience in the Callejón del Gato. Notably, Benjamin calls forth both the images of mirrors and the importance of the collective, as is relevant to the esperpento.

The outermost, merely quite peripheral aspect of the ambiguity of the arcades is provided by their abundance of mirrors, which fabulously amplifies the spaces and makes orientation more difficult […] it remains—in the sense of mirror world—ambiguous, double-edged […] The space that transforms itself does so in the bosom of nothingness. In its tarnished, dirtied mirrors […] it is an utterly equivocal wink coming from nirvana. (878).

Benjamin’s description of mirrors, like those of the Callejón del Gato, tellingly reflects the phasing distortion of reality and the passersby’s moment of transfiguration through recognition of the self and the collective. Benjamin envisions the arcade undergoing two distinct dialectical stages. In the first, the veil of splendor is lifted to reveal a place of decay (907). In the second, the viewer himself now experiences an unveiling, whereby “the arcade changes from an unconscious experience to something consciously permitted” (907). The viewer then becomes aware of what Benjamin calls a
Not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been. Structure of what-has-been at this stage. Knowledge of what has been as a becoming aware, one that has the structure of awakening. Not-yet-conscious knowledge on the part of the collective. All insight according to be grasped according to the schema of awakening. (907)

Similar to Benjamin’s process of awakening, Valle-Inclán’s notion of the esperpento, and by extension the absurd as a grotesque distortion before the dissolution of the distortion of reality, describes a moment of self-recognition that pertains to all humanity. We all will pass in front of the mirror at some point, and in that sense, an idea of an absurdist-ethics finds grounds of universality, that is, of human-ness. One should remember that the *Lights of Bohemia* in general, and the passage of the Callejón del Gato in particular, are conceived by Valle-Inclán as a piece of theater, which is a re-presentation of reality with vivid, immediate consequences. The cathartic and spectacular qualities of theater are replicated in this sense in the direct experience of the senses when seeing films.

While the term *esperpento* was originally coined in the narrative of *Lights of Bohemia*, one may valuably trace the paragon of the esperpento through Valle-Inclán’s other literary works (Sinclair, xi). For example, his *Sonatas* emulate this aesthetic paradigm in its “embryonic form” (Foster, 173). In all four Sonatas, the main protagonist is a character called the Marqués de Bradomín, a controversial figure that represents and at the same time attacks the corrupt government, and which establishes a critique of the nature of Catholicism as a religion saturated by a grotesque aesthetics of sexual desire and pleasure. Nöel Valis comments how in this vein the religion of the Marqués de Bradomín “is of a modern variety that worships at the altar of sex and beauty more than at the cross [whereby] religious references [always appear] within a context of physical pleasure” (158). Valis calls attention

51 Other major works of Valle-Inclán include his plays, *Divinas palabras* [*Divine Words*] (1920), his *Sonatas* (1902-1905), and his novel *Tirano Banderas* [*The Tyrant*] (1926).
to a passage that is not unlike the passage I mentioned in chapter two from Mann’s *Death in Venice*, in which Aschenbach draws satisfaction from the sickly condition of his love object Tadzio; in the *Sonata de otoño* [Sonata of Autumn], Bradomín’s lover Concha is also described similarly as having a “delicate, sickly pallor of a mourning Mary, and she was beautiful in that weakened, emaciated state that my eyes, lips, and hands found all their pleasure in the very thing that saddened me.” (qtd. in Valis, 158). Bradomín’s relationship to Concha is imbiber with an esperpentic framework within which Concha’s sickness is romanticized and eroticized. Bradomín’s response to the knowledge that she is dying evokes nostalgic regret and bitter-sweet romanticism, complicated with irony, which makes it evident that Bradomín’s mourning over her condition may be in part a selfish contemplation over his own experience of love, and mourning of his own impending death, rather than of hers (Valis 146, 148). In this scenario, the female body is broken down into individual parts, which “miniaturizes Concha’s presence, turning her into a kind of bibelot or decorative object” (148). As I read this, Concha becomes a part of the grotesque artwork on the periphery of Bradomín’s existence. I argue that this same process occurs in absurd AIDS films, in which, through cinematic means, the images of the virus, i.e., persons infected by the virus, are also fragmented, depersonalized, and made alien through absurdist actions, sometimes colored by the affect of humor, and of the grotesque. The combative reactions of critics to the self-conscious process of these works, a process whose goal is to demand the spectator’s attention, proves that this is a very effective method of critique.

Alternately, in *Sonata de primavera* [Sonata of Spring], it is Bradomín’s character interestingly, who is grotesquely miniaturized as a kind of decorative object. Here, Bradomín tries to seduce a young girl about to take the vows of the convent. To prevent him, her
mother relies on the work of witchcraft. In one scene, a witch draws from the ashes of her fire a “literal idol [of Bradomín] in the hex shape of a small wax figure [which] bears a grotesque resemblance,” calling forth a doppelgänger motif that stresses “the connection between the imagistic fragmentation of the body and death” (Valis, 148). In the end, even Bradomín starts to believe he is the devil. This doubling scenario draws comparisons between the Sonata of Spring and other literary works: the previously discussed Frankenstein by Mary Shelley, Oscar Wilde’s story of The Portrait of Dorian Gray, and French author Rachilde’s (1860-1953) novel Monsieur Vénus (1884). The Dorian Gray figure too “clearly takes on a spectral life of its own, worshipped as a kind of idol of the self. But this strange vitality of the portrait also points to the death of a soul” (Valis, 148). A similar motif of doubling is conjured in Rachilde’s story of cross-transvestism that questions the boundaries of gender and sexuality in their excess. In this novel, Raoule—a woman dressed in drag as a male, seduces Jacques—a young man with feminine features. At the end of the novel, Raoule makes a wax figure, molded in the likeness of her deceased lover, out of artificial and real body parts (including Jacques own hair, teeth, and nails). The wax figure is also endowed with a mechanism that simulates kissing and possibly more. Raoule makes love to the wax figure, and through this act, brings Jacques back to life. Such analogies put Valle-Inclán’s early notions of the esperpento into perspective, especially on the subject of the Deleuzian concept of a body without organs to which I have referred to in Chapter two and early in this chapter. I will return to this concept when discussing the relevance of the idea of schizophrenia as a useful way of approaching postmodern reality.

A third example of Valle-Inclán’s development of the notion of the esperpento is present in his earliest dramas, the so-called Comedias bárbaras [Savage Plays] (Delgado,
Spanish Theater, 38). One of them, Divinas palabras [Divine Words] (1920), recalls Montaigne’s essay on “Of a Monstrous Child,” which I discussed in Chapter two in relation to the grotesque, and which introduces the sentiment of the esperpento. Divinas palabras is a story about country folk exploiting the spectacle of a deformed child to make money, even in the child’s death. The story is also about sexual excess and corruption. In the end, the main protagonist, a man named Pedro Galio, who is sexton of the town church (but described as a non-believer), is asked to stand up and talk to the angry crowd, who ultimately wants to stone his wife for the exploitation and untimely death of the child, along with other charges of her infidelity. Pedro, in completing this task, delivers his “divine words,” asking the crowd to reflect: “He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone!” (88). Upon Pedro’s first proclamation, the crowd, against the normative teachings of the New Testament, begins to stone his wife. But, then he repeats the call, this time in Latin: “Qui sine peccato est vestrum, primus in illam lapidem mittat,” and the crowd, as if looking finally into a mirror, perhaps hearing the voice of God in the Latin language (however inauthentic coming from secular, non-believing Pedro), or perhaps bewildered by a language they simply cannot understand, and recognizing their own culpability in relationship to the crimes committed, stand down and walk away. The power of the anomalous speech act provokes the moment of crisis of the esperpento, in which the crowd, even if only momentarily, understands, acknowledges, and accedes to a new absurdist-ethical stand, which for a moment, salutes a state of enlightenment, even though that knowledge bears witness to the fact that they all, as a community, are or rather were invested in the joy gleaned from the exploitation of the child for money and entertainment. They are grotesque, but they are finally pushed to see their image in the mirror of their self, and decide if it reflects someone that is authorized to cast a
stone. It may not be a pretty acknowledgment, but it is a true one of revelation. Thus is the power of the esperpento.

The theatrics of such scenarios in which the figure of the esperpento is depicted also recalls the Brechtian drama. As María Delgado suggests, one may draw parallels between Brecht’s “theater of alienation” and the “theater of the esperpento,” or what I appraise better defined as the “theater of the absurd” or the “theater of absurd tragicomic.” More precisely, a Brechtian drama, following the principles of drama developed by German dramatist Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), dictates that, in order for spectators to fully empathize with the characters on the stage in a play, the drama must first ensure that the spectators are initially estranged from sympathizing with them. This can be done by a process Brecht called the Verfremdungseffekt [effect or process of estrangement]. One scholar describes the objective of this distancing: “Brecht’s innovation is to detach the audience from serious characters with whom we would normally feel sympathy so that we may better judge the social and political circumstances which govern their lives. [Through this process], Brecht not only makes his audience think critically about the causes of their suffering, but he also creates the simultaneous engagement and detachment that defines the quintessential tragicomic response” (Foster, 160). The esperpento’s mode of transmission functions similarly by a technique of estrangement of reality and a process of reorientation and seeing as epiphany or enlightenment. Cardona and Zahareas describe this process, stating that “the historical events grotesquely projected are intrinsically absurd, farcical and even bizarre yet always imbued with serious or disastrous consequences—there is a tragic potency in burlesque situations and vice-versa” (198). The motif of a distorted reflection is elicited as a lens through which to see reality in all its true grotesqueness and absurdity. In terms of the process of reorientation, I
disagree with Cardona and Zahareas insofar as they suggest that seeing truth depends on one viewing the object at hand “distinctly, coldly and objectively [so that … it removes] all possibility of traditional catharsis; anticipating or paralleling Brecht” (198). I would argue that catharsis may be gleaned when operating within the framework of an absurdist-ethics. The esperpento serves as a vehicle with which to provoke, promote awareness and enlightenment, and by extension, provide the means for philosophical revolt. In other words, the esperpento creates room for collective human agency.

In an absurdist tragicomedy such as Lights of Bohemia, the world presented is not real, but metaphysical. There is no real motivation beyond bodily needs and simple pleasures. The characters appear oftentimes flat, superficial, driven by animalistic motives, and given to excess, particularly in their relationships to desire. In this case, the real processing work is in the hands of the spectator, and that is why the esperpento belongs to a “dialectic theater,” which describes the way that the audience would engage with the aesthetically fashioned character, and as a provocative manifestation of the interplay between historical reality and fiction (Cardona and Zahareas, 192). Similarly, Priscilla Meléndez describes how the esperpento is also related to an “anti-tragic theatre” and a “theatre of protest” (67). More importantly, Meléndez explains the difference between the “theatre of the absurd” and that in which an esperpento would play, whereby both theaters focus on problems of communication. The absurd is guided by “word-play and a search for words” to describe reality, and the esperpento on the “deformation of reality through language” (57). Moreover, the esperpento’s “popular and caricaturesque language takes center stage, and is linked to […] humorous and vulgar language and double entendres [which] carry a desacralizing tone and the appearance of lack of meaning” (57).
While the distinctions between the two genres might hold true for some narratives, those in absurdist AIDS films really combine elements of both the theater of the absurd and of the esperpento. Spectators are bombarded with word-play and humorous, vulgar language, while also encountering problems with communication and caricature. All of these elements, as I demonstrated earlier, are necessary characteristics of the style, and a combination of both is a needed manifestation of a comical-grotesque nature in an absurdist-ethical framework. Because any representation of a non-human entity—such as a virus—will ultimately be both a reflection of reality and at the same time a gross “systematic deformation,” as Valle-Inclán described the esperpento (123), this ethics also demands a conception of an image that is absurd and circular, such as the doppelgänger and double entendres that express excess, along with an image which the esperpento signifies as a grotesque deformation of reality.

Beyond Brecht, in the theorization of esperpento, Valle-Inclán openly identified with creators from different time periods and styles who applied forms of a grotesque style in their art, including Spanish writers, and plastic artists like the already mentioned Goya. Valle-Inclán describes how the esperpento emerged from the legacy of the struggle of the Spanish artist to capture a Spain bogged down by its own drama:

We Spanish authors, youthfully deified, love to sprinkle a bit of pain into the realities we create. […] There is always a dramatic moment in Spain, a drama beyond the abilities of the performers. These puppets, made out of cardboard, without idealism and without courage, look ridiculous to us harnessed as heroes. They gesticulate the most sublime, tragic situations with the clumsiness of itinerant comedians. Don Quixote must become incarnate in a simpleton Quixote. Doctors declare that the dramatic impetus of Don Juan is in truth ambiguous physiology. Our entire registered population is not worth the value of a gang of comiquillos, who are determined to represent the great drama of Spanish life. The result, of course, is an esperpento. (qtd. in Lyon, 210, my translation).

The esperpento may, therefore, be read as a portrayal of a collective and historical absurd, comical, and grotesque body, intended to be perceived more clearly and in its rawest and
truest form through its estrangement in various art forms. For the case of the AIDS epidemic, the representation of HIV and AIDS must be necessarily absurd, comical and grotesque in order to capture the full philosophical impetus of the social and political agenda of that image, and in order to gain the attention of the audience. This forced entry into the social stream aims at giving new, radical tools so that those affected by it may struggle and ultimately and hopefully attain the moment of recognition that might bring an instant of enlightenment or clarity, if not even possibly a tenor of catharsis to their own mêlées with that traumatic event. If spectators fail to recognize the philosophical and agentive undertones of the film or image as a work of art that expresses the absurd, then they will inevitably falter and discover nothing but meaningless atrocity before their eyes. Alternatively, individuals might just imagine such films as amusing, getting superficially captivated by the carnivalesque and the campy nature of the comical and the grotesque, without realizing their greater concealed significance.

Both elements, the carnivalesque and the camp, are necessary characteristics of the esperpento aesthetic and not foreign to absurd AIDS films either. Going one step further in the analysis of the passage of the Callejón del Gato in *Lights of Bohemia*, I had claimed that the esperpento is experienced through the malformed reflections in the street warping mirrors. Being in the public realm, the streets become a sort of funhouse. As passersby cast their gaze momentarily, they see their individual images reflected in the mirrors. But upon careful attention, the mirrors do not reflect just the individual, but also the collective. Together with their image, the passersby looking in the mirror are forced to grasp the grotesque reflections of their neighbor as well. The carnival, the folk festival, the Internet, the cinema, are all uniquely grotesque configurations of the social, and may be equally understood as funhouses
of reflections and doublings for a community of spectators. In this same manner, I adjure that one can more easily and even more intimately visualize a mythical body infected with HIV through such a collective, through the vehicle of this carnivalesque house of mirrors.

I explained in earlier chapters that Bakhtin relied on the concept of the carnivalesque in his discussion of the grotesque. Spanish literature critic David Gies furthers the connection between esperpento and the carnivalesque giving a series of carnivalesque features in Valle-Inclán’s work that will offer new insight into the relationship of an absurdist AIDS cinema and the esperpento. He calls our attention to the fact that the title of three of Valle-Inclán’s literary works marked as esperpento include the name *carnaval*, and as is characteristic of carnival Valle-Inclán’s literature involves the mixing and parody of genre and styles, the comic and the grotesque (485). The esperpento also depends on the representation of people through puppetry, whereby characters are depicted as two-dimensional. Gies summarizes the connections between the esperpento and puppetry as a list of features: “ridicule and debasement of characters; *esperpento* as a poetics opposed to official culture; puppet-characters are the ‘fools’ of carnival; inversion of hierarchies” (485). Excess is celebrated in forms of “attraction to the decadent (but also to melodramatic popular culture); erosion of the borders dividing the serious from the comic” (485). Language is a tool through which one may manipulate reality, whereby esperpento also encourages “polyglossia (simultaneous presence of several languages interacting with each other) of the marketplace; profanation [...] and the ubiquity of laughter” (485). I would add in the latter sense that laughter should be understood as non-verbal communication.

These affinities are equally present in camp aesthetics and their associations with gay culture, as indicated by Bergman in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality* (1994), a book
I discussed in Chapter one. Bergman describes how in an English translation of Bakhtin, one of the most common words used to translate the word “carnivalesque” is “gay” (99). While he acknowledges that neither Bakhtin nor the translator surely applied the word carnivalesque to mean “queer,” but instead “lively,” “carefree,” and “light-hearted,” he argues how Bakhtin did depict the word “in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. … triumphant, and at the same time mocking and deriding” (99). He argues that since the carnivalesque enjoys

punning especially in sexually provocative ways, and since the homosexual subculture has carried in its celebration of Mardi Gras and Halloween the very traditions of the carnivalesque, the two meanings blend in a form Bakhtin virtually licenses. (99)

While it appears that the terms camp and carnivalesque are interchangeable, there is an important difference. Camp is about playing with and poking fun at reality with the goal of having a laugh. The carnivalesque can take on alternately more serious and grotesque forms as a process of estrangement in order to challenge and rebel against established orders of power and ideologies. Sherry Marie Velasco points out how camp

keeps its audience at too great a distance from the reality […] to inspire real revolutionary impulses. It is not that camp does not desire change, but rather that it refuses to specify which shape change should take, […] while carnivalesque humor has the potential for overturning status quo. (124)

These two elements, the camp and the carnivalesque, should however be seen as equal partners accompanying the esperpento paradigm, and underpinning an absurdist-ethics as applied to what I have called Absurdist Queer AIDS Cinema. The works may at times appear as minor instances without a clear agenda, or simply with a gesture of a warning, but under this new revealing light, their message is definite. The mix and mash of the absurd, the comical, and the grotesque style, of the carnivalesque and camp aesthetic, and of the
embodiment of AIDS fashioned in the dress of the esperpento, has as its most powerful goal the creation of a fertile space for ambiguity and slippage that ultimately allows radical political agency.

My discussion of camp and the carnivalesque expressed through the grotesque notions of dressing up, masks, puppets, and scarecrows works as a bridge to address the connection of the esperpento to a disembodied materialization and a mirroring of the grotesqueness of humanity. I maintain that the esperpento aesthetic, as presented through the body of a puppet, can be read poignantly as a postmodern visual representation. Valle-Inclán originally conceived the esperpento to be played out by theatrical puppets, and not by human actors. In essence, it was important for him that the characters were shown as being driven by the strings of society. Cardona and Zahareas highlight how the esperpento applies particularly to various art forms, including cinema, whereby this aesthetic style may mingle “effectively the grotesque plasticities of Goya, the farcical tone of the puppet show, the ritual of traditional theater, and the fragmented montage of cinematography” (93). For the case in point of absurdist AIDS films, in helping the spectator separate the visual of the epidemic from the image of an actual human being, a unique foil is created that engenders a philosophical space in which the spectator may engage with fantasies and fears that may extricate him from a view of life as wretched, but only through an initial drastic obliteration of the comfort provided by uncritical identification. Valle-Inclán did not do this, however, because he was disenchanted with the theater, as Lyon emphasizes, but for aesthetic reasons in order to create most effectively a lens of disengagement and estrangement. Lyon explains further how puppets also afford directors “a whole new range of dramatic possibilities, visual and linguistic, to express what Valle increasingly came to see as the manipulated condition of
One could say that the puppet as doppelgänger may present an absurd and grotesque rendering of the world much more easily than could a real actor, whose face and body (even of the best actor) are subject to the stresses and manipulations of human emotion. At the same time, the audience can laugh more easily at a puppet’s response or grotesque fashioning of a serious issue, rather than responding to an actor doing the same.

There is no doubt that there is something uncanny and even absurd about puppets. Cardona and Zahareas write: “The esperpento is structured as the true spectacle of a fake tragedy whereby Spanish puppets in the very attempt to appear tragic, gesticulate more than ever as the puppets they really are” (191). Not just the movements, but also the ventriloquism, the uttering of a viewpoint through a puppet, produces a schizophrenic experience, which is not always simply reducible to “I am speaking,” because the puppet is inanimate.

Psychologists describe the usefulness of puppets or dolls to help children talk about traumatic events. Through the process of disassociation, when using the puppet as an extension of their own voice and body, children are more willing to talk about taboo subjects, rather than simply talking face-to-face to adults. One scholar describes how the schizophrenic role of the psychiatrist in fact transforms the voice of the child, the supposed psychotic patient, via the imagined body of the puppet:

The puppet takes on more and more of the qualities of the therapist. [...] The puppet seems to try to reconcile the interest of the girl and that of her therapist. The girl, through the mouth of the puppet, plays with a variety of identifications. At a point where the puppet displays some insight in comparing the patient’s experience with that of a dreamer and suggesting that the therapist knows, as does the puppet, that the girl was not actually dreaming, the therapist took this as a cue and joined the conversation as an active partner. (Esslier, 85-86).

Relevant from this particular study is that the puppet’s voice does not come from the therapist, but instead from a recording made by another psychiatrist, who is absent on the
scene. This signifies an even further doubling of the experience of deferment, for both the patient and even the therapist must trust in the intangible authority of the voice on the tape, as well as the medium of technological process, and the puppet by extension as the mouthpiece, to serve its psychotherapeutic purpose. Psychiatrists relate how the schizophrenic individual may experience, in her or his illness, a hint of “deanimation,” a term related to Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of *becoming inanimate* in relation to the mental processes of the schizophrenic and their connection to descriptions of human consciousness. One psychiatrist describes how this feeling of deanimation, or literally fear of dying or becoming dead, correlates to the sense that the individual’s humanity has been taken away from him, that he has been turned into a thing, and that he can experience no actively functioning self (Lifton, 223). For instance, a person suffering from schizophrenia may make “reference to himself as a toy, puppet, or slave,” or as “a doll [who moves] like a mechanical toy, [whereby] the deanimation and desymbolization are accompanied by a sense of being controlled or manipulated” (Lyon 223-224).

The possible combination of puppetry, and by extension of the esperpento, with HIV/AIDS, and the corporeal significations thereof, produces a parallel way to express the tragedy of the virus from a removed psychological position. In this schizophrenic, detached way, the spectator can laugh at and be horrified or disgusted by the puppets’ behavior, instead of responding directly to her or his own particular conception of the virus and the epidemic. Spectators can respond to traumatic events, much like the child does with the puppet, from a safer distance.

The use of puppetry is not new to ways in which people have presented issues of HIV and AIDS. Scholar Marcia Blumberg, in her article entitled “Puppets doing Time in the Age
of AIDS,” relates a story from 2011 of a puppetry troupe in South Africa called *Puppets against AIDS*, and another used in prisons under the emblem of *Puppets in Prison*. Both troupes used puppets as a means of promoting AIDS awareness. Puppets in the latter play included, for example, a puppet representing a gay man in drag. In one scene, the gay puppet is brutally raped by a “straight” HIV-positive puppet. Blumberg describes the scene:

Biza’s act of rape accompanied by the youngster’s screams for misery loses none of the horrific violence when enacted by puppets. The lack of physical and emotional inhibitions of puppets adds to the potential for increasing the severity of the violence, yet the human involvement is never forgotten, as the actors manipulating the puppets are fully visible; this linkage emphasizes egregious modes of behavior in and out of prison. (261).

Additionally, the director takes the provocation through puppetry one step further by having the puppets directly address the audience: “the intervention of the former guerilla fighter, Sporo, who has lost a friend to AIDS, provokes a fight in which Bra Biza stabs Sporo […] and triumphantly declares to the audience, ‘I am boss.’” (261). Through the disassociation and distancing made possible through puppetry, the AIDS activist puppeteers hope that spectators, in this case the prison inmates, will be able recognize and negotiate their own issues of violence and the seriousness of HIV. As Blumberg describes, “The message is always one of fear and spells out the equation, AIDS=death” (261-262).

It is possible to visualize HIV more cogently in its corporal signification as an absurd, comical-grotesque body without organs, who fashions himself in the paradigm of the esperpento, and is persuasively incarnated in the body of a puppet. This presence that has become inanimate is the body of a gay man with HIV in the streets of New York, San Francisco, Berlin, London, Mumbai, maybe even in Philadelphia and all streets in the world beaten by the epidemic, but not defeated ethically speaking. One should imagine this figure rather as a puppet on a stage. The esperpento as a puppet is at the same time the corporal
incarnation of the virus at its most realistic, in terms of death and dying, and at its most unrealistic, with regards to the absurd, which manifests itself in the form of a mere fantastical analogy or symbol of something or someone just as dangerous, shocking, or grotesque. One encounters the HIV-positive esperpento in the visual media, and especially in film. Its presence is observable and perceptible—both the sound and the image—, and its appearance sends a wakening jolt to spectators’ bodies and minds. This shock gains spectators’ attention, and demands the viewer to arbitrate the reality of imminent death, regardless of whether one is healthy or sick.

When one engages productively and philosophically with the art of an absurd AIDS Cinema, one not only learns the value and potency of an absurdist-ethics, but also dialectically tackles issues of one’s own life and death. Even if one does not adopt this mode of ethics—and few surely do, for it demands much of the individual; an engaged spectator should not leave the cinema unchanged. The spectator should leave thinking more critically about the epidemic, more so than before s/he arrived. In this way, spectators are forced to view and identify themselves, in the face of the esperpento, just as one would in the warping mirrors of the Callejón del Gato. The esperpento in its ideal form can confront viewers/readers with philosophical impressions that demands that they reconsider their own positions vis-à-vis how they visualize HIV/AIDS, and the ethical value of life on the fringe, but always at the margins between the public and private sphere. Through this same manner, the barebacker or the mythical grotesque body with AIDS garners new life through the engagement with death. What is at stake here is the projection of many socially collective fantasies of the epidemic on a schizophrenic, and even postmodern body. In a funhouse, one looks into mirrors to appreciate one’s own face in an endless loop of the mise en abyme. As I
suggested earlier, this is a kind of schizophrenic experience that the spectator confronts specifically in the cinema, but it is also easily found in a social existence marked by a postmodern mentality. Consequently, one may visualize a mythical, absurdist grotesque body with AIDS as a social and schizophrenic collective.

As studied before, Deleuze and Guattari were especially invested in the theory of “schizoanalysis” to describe new ways of being and phenomenology. In developing their theory of a body without organs, the authors took their cues from Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) and Freud. The designation body without organs was coined originally by French playwright Antonin Artaud in a radio play entitled “To Have Done with the Judgment of God” (1947), in which a celebration, a dance of death, takes place through the negation of the corporeal body. The play reads:

When you have given [a human] a body without organs, then you will have delivered him from all his automatisms and restored him to his true liberty. Then you will teach him again to dance inside out as in delirium of our accordion dances and that inside out will be his true side out. (qtd. in Genosko, 71)

This radio performance belongs to the genre of the “theater of cruelty” developed by Artaud, and which one might interpret as a kind of “theater of menace.”52 “To Have Done with the Judgment of God,” which is extremely vulgar and exhibits notions of the grotesque and the carnivalesque, was banned in 1948 until 1973. It starts by talking about the capturing of a

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52 Artaud compared the theater to a plague: “If the theater is like the plague, it is not because it is contagious, but because like the plague it is the revelation, the bringing forth, the exteriorization of a depth of latent cruelty by means of which all the perverse possibilities of the mind, whether of an individual or a people, are localized” (qtd. in Plunka, 42-43). For Artaud, the theater was meant to provoke the spectator violently into action, by “furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitates of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism, pour out, on a level not counterfeit and illusory, but interior” (qtd. in Plunka, 43). Through this experience, the spectator was supposed to experience a sense of catharsis, not unlike what I suggest absurdist AIDS films do on a functional level.
boy’s sperm to produce good troops for the homeland. He cracks jokes about all sorts of bodily functions, feces and flatulence. Beyond this, the piece is deeply antagonistic toward Christianity. Only one master copy of the original radio performance remains; all others were erased (Cull, 51). In other words, Artaud’s grotesque performance, as later happened with von Praunheim’s Virus, was clearly underappreciated, at least at the time of its nascence. Artaud crafted the designation of a possibility for a new way of conceptualizing becoming inanimate or becoming illegible, and becoming unrepresentable politically. He was prophesying a radical new way of being a part of the social collective.

Deleuze and Guattari also amassed much insight from Freud, who was fascinated with Daniel Paul Schreber, a German judge who suffered from schizophrenia. In 1884, at the age of forty-two, Schreber began psychiatric treatment, which he continued throughout the rest of his life. At the age of sixty-one, Schreber published his Memoirs of a Nervous Illness (1903), which Freud used to write his famous study on paranoia, “Psycho-Analytic Notes,” published subsequently in 1911. In this passage, Freud recounts the nature of the delusions Schreber wrote of in his memoirs how he believed, although he had suffered no real disease, that he had been “subject to the sort of damage to various organs of his body that would have quickly been the death of any other mortal” (9). He claimed to have lived years “without a stomach, without intestines, almost without lungs, with an esophagus in shreds, with no bladder, with smashed rib bones, had sometimes eaten part of his larynx with his food, and so on, for as long as he remained a man, he was quite immortal” (9-10). Furthermore, Schreber underwent a crisis of gender in which he believed he “had the feeling that large masses of ‘female nerves’ had already passed over into his body, which would produce new humans through direct fertilization by God. Only then would he be able to die a natural death” (9-10).
From Schreber’s descriptions, Deleuze and Guattari took their interpretation of the term a *body without organs* as “The model of death. As the authors of horror stories have understood so well, it is not death that serves as the model for catatonia, it is catatonic schizophrenia that gives this model to death. Zero intensity” (*Anti-Oedipus*, 329). Just as Schreber believed he was subjected to losing organs, or rather that his body rejected them, so too do Deleuze and Guattari describe how their “death model appears when the body without organs repels the organs and lays them aside: no mouth, no tongue, no teeth—to the point of self-mutilation, to the point of suicide” (329). Deleuze and Guattari associate this model of death akin with one of life, as ethical counterparts. In other words, they suggest that one cannot know life until one experiences dying and death because the experience of death “occurs in life and for life, in every passage or becoming, in every intensity as passage or becoming” (330). In turn, death “is what is felt in every feeling, *what never ceases and never finishes happening in every becoming*—in the becoming-another-sex, the becoming-god, the becoming-a-race, etc., forming zones of intensity on the body without organs” (330). The authors read life itself as a kind of becoming-death, whereby “every intensity is extinguished at the end […] every becoming itself becomes a becoming-death!” (330). Yet, Deleuze and Guattari go perhaps too far, for in all that time one is living and dying, but certainly not dead until the final act is over; and this is the point emphasized in the configuration of the esperpento.

The schizophrenic, like the esperpento figure—the agent of an absurdist-ethics—lives as such, metaphorically at the edge of life and death and thereby elicits value in embracing suffering, in the same way that the barebacker does, in the same way the grotesque AIDS joke functions, and in the same way one may visualize HIV/AIDS in its most horrible forms,
and yet locate ethical value in such endgame encounters that arise at moments of cultural
catastrophe and postmodern political bankruptcy. In the same path, Deleuze and Guattari
surmise that “the schizophrenic is the one who lives the enjoyment and suffering of
experience most intensely: ‘Far from having lost who knows what contact with reality, the
schizophrenic is closest to the beating heart of reality, to an intense point identical with the
production of the real’” (qtd. in Holland, 132-133). Living on the periphery of life and death
is, for Deleuze and Guattari at least, the only ethical way to live, and their model follows
mine as well.

The schizophrenic, multilayered universe and the many-masked individual describe
the political. This line of argumentation is directly related to my understanding of the
absurdist grotesque body of the esperpento insofar as the contemporary era is mirrored by the
political carnivalesque. In this history, the epidemic plays a key role, just as Schreber’s own
body stood for a kind of esperpento-fashioned figure in relationship to his own time. For
Schreber, that factual reality was the growing political presence of fascism in Germany at the
turn of the century. In an esperpentic fashion, Schreber projected “a storehouse of
protofascist fantasies” onto his body. In doing so, he subverted and rebelled against National
Socialism (Jagodzinski 17). But as Eric Santner notes, “one should not, as they say, try this
at home” (qtd. in Jagodzinski, 17). Schreber was not privy to the distance of circumspection
to offer him enlightenment, but instead fell deeper into a deteriorating mental state of decay.
While in comparison, art, whether that be theater or cinema, may offer the viewer both an
engagement, audio and/or visual, of a topic colored by an absurd-grotesque aesthetic, all the
while providing the distance necessary between screen/stage and spectator as an effective
catalyst for estrangement and moments of vision.
After Deleuze and Guattari, other authors have already taken the leap in making a connection between the viral and schizophrenia, and even more have mused on how one can re-conceptualize HIV within this configuration, although not in the way I imagine it here. Robert O’Toole, in his article “Contagium Vivum Philosophia: Schizophrenic Philosophy, Viral Empiricism and Deleuze,” describes the state of a schizophrenic man (and his partner) after learning that he contracted the virus. The man had a psychotic break. O’Toole calls the patient’s erratic and destructive behavior after the fact, a Deleuzian “schizo-HIV positive assemblage” (175). I subsume the denomination of schizo-HIV positive assemblage, but not in the woeful way as O’Toole. Instead, I interpret this concept as a productive gesture, extending it to my own understanding of the mythical, grotesque body with AIDS as being a collective locus of multiplicity. This concept can also be used as a springboard off of which to describe how Deleuze saw his relationship to philosophy, which underscores my own theory of an absurdist-ethics as being a framework within which one may arguably obtain a sense of philosophical enlightenment through a genealogy or legacy of thinkers viewed in front of a warped mirror. Deleuze postulates how he imagines his relationship to other philosophers as a sexual act of copulation, albeit a queer one whereby the product of that encounter would be a grotesque “immaculate conception” not unlike the description of Frankenstein’s own creation:

I would imagine myself approaching an author from behind, and making him a child, who would indeed be his and would, nevertheless, be monstrous. That the child would be his was very important because the author had to say, in effect, everything I made him say. But that the child be monstrous was also a requisite because it was necessary to go through all kinds of decenterings, slidings, splittings, secret discharges which have given me much pleasure. (‘I have nothing to admit.’ 117)
What Deleuze describes as an impregnation recalls Bersani and Dean’s idea of establishing a grotesque genealogy through the transmission of HIV, an approach to which Deleuze adds a philosophical value.

One may extend this metaphor further in terms of thinking about the schizophrenic nature of cinema. Within the context of representing on screen altered states of consciousness, such as that of someone suffering from schizophrenia, Anna Powell explains how the cinema may function like a virus, mutating into schizophrenic multiplicities of possibility, infecting the viewer with alternate perceptions (185-186). In an absurd AIDS film, one beholds meta-cinematic images in their ripest, absurdist states of becoming. Such images are grotesque, shocking, politically potent, bridging as result the association between an AIDS cinema and the paragon of the esperpento. As I addressed in Chapter three, the absurdist AIDS cinema is part of a postmodern cinema. But postmodern cinema is still another hybrid of the modern cinema, insofar as it may be defined more distinctly as that which is made up of minor cinemas. In particular, in reference to a Global Queer AIDS Cinema, the budgets for some films might be small, as initially might be the market. Yet, because of the powerful and wide-spreading hand of the Internet, the market is thereby diversified and expanded. The qualities of the postmodern spirit also have other implications for an absurd AIDS cinema, in particular in terms of the existence of political agency, upon which my theory of an absurdist-ethics hinges, and which controverts the view of scholars that complain that the postmodern period is marked by a lack of agency. Robert Stacey calls this concept, humorously, a

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53 The HIV virus does have multiple mutations. See the article, “Drug designer: New tool reveals mutations that cause HIV drug resistance,” in bibliography.
‘pessimistic pomo’ [which is a position that spawns an] ideological manifestation of nihilism, and that rather than rejoicing in the lack of epistemological center and seeing this absence as a site for liberation and reconstruction, despair[s] at the futility of existence and lack of agency toward social and cultural change. (105)

The resolution to this dilemma is contained in Stacey’s definition. One must appreciate absence as opportunity for agency. I concurrently detect political agency in a postmodern era, but it requires grotesque moves that can be described as having a similar function and force as the product of Bakhtin’s “carnival laughter [which] forces attention on the belly and the body’s reproductive functions,” calling attention to the role of laughter in the style of the grotesque (Velasco, 124). Bakhtin explains that the carnivalesque laughter functions by means of degradation, but not in a traditional sense of destroying the object of the laughter. Instead, he emphasizes that “to degrade an object does not imply merely hurling into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place” (21). By this token, carnivalesque laughter incites enlightenment on the topic that is being abused and distorted. Once the object of laughter has been effectively degraded, what emerges is a state of “Grotesque realism, [which] knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving” (21). Out of this productive spirit re-conceptualizations of ideology and accepted dogma emerge.

This brings me full circle to consider the body of the barebacker in Chapters three and four as the radical instantiation of an absurdist-ethics, a grotesque body subject to and debased by a reproductive virus through which it establishes legacies, as Dean and Bersani also suggest, between gay men through barebacking. Bakhtin calls attention to Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of the body with organs as it ties to the infected, grotesque-absurd esperpento-styled figure of AIDS as emblem of ultimate degradation, corruption, and decay.
when he states that “The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming. [As well as,] the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis” (24).

Such a “politics that deals with life (Greek: bίος)” and by extension, of course, death is known commonly as bio-politics (Lemke, 2). AIDS and its impact on the political, social, and even medical culture (i.e., epidemiology), for example, have everything to do with bio-politics, for it aims to provide a model of the intersections between the biological and social body. In a Foucauldian sense, bio-politics is particularly compelling with respect to the esperpento because it works to discover “a ‘nature’ of the population (e.g., rates of birth and death, diseases, etc.) that might be influenced by specific incentives and measures which is the precondition for directing and managing it (Lemke, 5-6). HIV and AIDS fit as part of the fold of bio-politics, and ultimately as part of the fear the epidemic incites, which can manifest itself in the forms of the absurd-grotesque, on the border of the collapse of a campy style and the unfolding of the carnivalesque as its dipole.

Slavoj Žižek captures the political essence of this ripe connection of bio-politics as it would apply to Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque, the postmodern period, and capitalism. He blasts: “My God, if you need a carnival, today’s capitalism is a carnival. A KKK lynching is a carnival. A cultural critic, a friend of mine, Boris Groys, told me that he did some research on Bakhtin and that it became clear that when Bakhtin was producing his theory of carnival in the 1930s, it was the Stalinist purges that were his model: today you are on the Central Committee, tomorrow…”54 Scholar Anna Klosowska further iterates how in this regard “According to Žižek, the work of ethics must be conducted on two levels as dictated

by both the written rules and the obscene rules that become operative in the episodic space of the carnival” (114). These rules represent the particular ethical spin of the biopolitics at play. One can read by analogy how this model would apply to issues of ethics from a new point of departure for HIV and AIDS, and in particular with reference to queer cinema. Not surprisingly, Klosowska also suggests that queer camp might be a strategy for such a biopolitics that “paradoxically both unlocks and maintains boundaries, and it is in that sense a suitable answer to Žižek’s call for discipline” (Klosowska, 114).

In other words, Žižek’s conception of a bio-ethics is in line with the embracing of an absurdist-ethics, whereby his understanding of discipline, the direct attack together with the desire for normalcy, might be emblematic of this kind of ethics, which may be enacted through a battling with the epidemic of HIV head-on, even if only philosophically speaking. Bakhtin’s own conception of bio-politics is equally arcane to the discussion about AIDS. He invokes an aesthetics of the grotesque within the context of a plague, and the different kinds of ethics it engenders. He refers for example to the work of Italian poet Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), who wrote the Decameron (approx. 1350-1353) during a time of plague.

Bakhtin attests:

[The plague] grants the right to use other words, to have another approach to life and to the world. Not only have all conventions been dropped, but all laws “both human and divine” are silenced. Life has been lifted out of its routine, the web of conventions has been torn; all the official hierarchic limits have been swept away. […] And in accord with the general turnover, the problems of life may be discussed not in churches and schools but in whorehouses. (272-273).

This is exactly what is happening when the “AIDS is a Mass Murderer” campaign I approached in Chapter two exploits Hitler’s and other grotesque images of bodies in sexually compromising positions with women. This grotesque message does come from the brothel in a way. On the subject of barebacking, it comes most certainly largely from pornography on
the Internet, and it is highly effective—it may repulse, but it does its job of starting a meaningful and urgent conversation.

Bakhtin also establishes a viable relationship between the absurd-grotesque and the sexual body as a necessary component of a bio-ethics, whereby “the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (26). This connotes an excess in terms of “apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose” (26). One can identify a touch of Valle-Inclán’s concaved and convexed mirrors in Bakhtin’s description of the “convexities” of the body, in its undesired, although human and natural deformation. Moreover, “the body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation” (26). This espermantic theory of biopolitics as excess applies also to the cinema, whereby like a set of 3-D glasses, an absurdist-ethics can shift the spectator’s perspective philosophically. The absurdist-ethics lenses in these glasses make visible a new perspective that could not normally be conceived of otherwise. One may now more clearly visualize the esperpent as radial agent in a time of cultural dissolution, as the mythical infected gay man with AIDS, staring as hero and revolutionary against the backdrop of a postmodern political wasteland of the post-AIDS era. As comically grotesque and absurd as it may sound, an absurd AIDS cinema is a postmodern funhouse.
CONCLUSION
CIRCUS

In economics, there is a high probability trading strategy called a risk-reward ratio, and in business there is a field of study called risk management. For economic theorists, the idea of someone exposing herself or himself to a risky deal in order to gain an economic advantage is nothing new. This risk-reward ratio informs my theory of an absurdist-ethics, which is also bound up in notions of risk, reward, and risk management:

Any investment made entails exposure to a risk component. [...] One must weigh the risk-reward ratio when making investment decisions. The idea is to acquire an asset with a well-balanced risk-reward ratio. In extremely bullish times if one pays 80 times the earnings for a stock, then one is buying more risk rather than reward. The risk-reward ratio is in that case against the investor. (Parikh, 319)

The postmodern period is a bullish time, and similarly an absurdist-ethics does call for a risk-reward ratio that may appear out of proportion and excessive.

This theory is also about living life intensely, which boils down to the idea that an absurdist-ethics is about acts of social revolt. This does not usually entail a full-out revolution. Even the smallest gestures can be acts of revolt. The group of directors and their films, as well as the works of the artists, writers, philosophers, and thinkers I present in this study, or those who are willingly involved in the cultural practice of barebacking, have participated in their own way in acts of revolt through their medium of choice. These are in a small way, acts of civil disobedience, although in most cases, no one is breaking the law per se. The embodiments of an absurdist-ethics, such as barebacking, a gallows humor, and the aesthetic of the grotesque and the esperpento, make it clear that a certain amount of
resistance to public, societal norms is required in order for people to feel like life is valuable in some way. In essence, one does not want to feel *normal*. In a true postmodern fashion, one wants to be *abnormal*, or more crudely, feel like a freak.

In some way, all the abnormal figures I presented in this study make people feel more human, more grounded; a more complete subject. This is not because one does not identify with the images, but in truth because one does. In this fleeting moment of identification, one recognizes one’s perceived sense of abnormality and grotesqueness reflected, as well as the recognition of one’s impending death, seen as if through a warping funhouse mirror—the body distorted and contorted as if in the throes of death. In that moment, one cherishes feeling as if one is losing control of oneself, that one is beyond representation, becoming a *body without organs*, or perhaps that one has been a *body without organs* all along.

In an article entitled “Organizing the Circus: The Engineering of Miracles” from a business journal on *Organization Studies*, Martin Parker provides some unusual perceptions into the history and functioning of the circus. He explains why people are drawn to spectacle and the grotesque, and ultimately to that which shocks. He reveals: “Stunts will only work if our understanding is stunted, if our imagination is constrained and our prejudices in place” (560). In other words, the absurd and grotesque spectacles of life that one glimpses at the circus, in the news, or in a film attract the common person because one’s intellectual understanding is stunted. Parker suggests that such audience members would ask themselves, if a bearded woman can be so strong, then what else could women do (561). In other words, the freakishness of the circus performers is not just in their deformed nature, or the stunts they can perform, but also their ability to traverse and test the boundaries of social norms. “[A] circus [challenges] conventions, perhaps even self-consciously engaged in ideology
critique, and not simply reproducing the dull routines of racism and sexism” (561).

Otherwise, as Parker asserts in a true Foucauldian fashion, the circus performers have power over the masses, because they know how to provoke “the gasps and laughter not found in the boredom of the factory or the office” (563). In other words, the average circus-goer cannot break out of their mundane life or their stunted intellectual position therein, and so they go to the circus to experience wonderment.

If this logic is followed, some people yield agency from the seemingly absurd act of high-risk behavior, while they are mere guests in what appears to be a grotesque spectacle of a suicide pact or of hearing a tasteless joke about AIDS. At the same time, the showcasing of such high-risk practices, like circus performers shooting themselves out of a canon, attracts many individuals, while many people fight to shut down such thrill shows in the name of rationalist ideologies. No sane person would subject her or himself to the threat of death.

Parks reminds readers of something Karl Marx said about spectacle:

When we see the back of an individual contorted in fear and bent in humiliation, we cannot but look around and doubt our very existence, fearing lest we lose ourselves. But on seeing a fearless acrobat in bright costume, we forget ourselves, feeling that we have somehow risen above ourselves and reached the level of universal strength. Then we can breathe easier. (qtd. 562)

One way or the other, not every man is willing to walk the tightrope if given the chance.

Only the rebel has the guts: the esperpento.

Parker reminds readers of the historical connection and affinity between the circus and film. The cinema was born out of the tradition of spectacle and attraction, of the carnival and the circus. Film scholar Tom Gunning famously characterized early cinema as a “cinema of attractions” because of its focus on spectacle and not necessarily on narrative. Some of the first films were marketed and shown at such fun parks. In this same way, it is not surprising
to discover that many of the earliest actors performed in the circus or in Vaudeville sideshows before they became part of the cinema:

Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton made the switch from circus to cinema early, and the growth of the film industry in the 20th century turned film stunts into special effects. [...] Why pay to watch someone jumping around on a horse when you could stay in and watch battles involving mythological creatures, or superheroes flying into buildings? (566)

Masters of exaggeration, even of grotesque physical bodily movements and gestures, both Chaplin and Keaton used their circus talents to draw laughs on screen. This legacy explains why the medium of film is so fitting for a minor genre such as Queer Cinema, which also banks on providing a certain spectacle of desire, and even more so an absurd AIDS cinema. In the latter case, one may say that both desire and death are on display, just as they are in the circus. The myth also carries that early film viewers were so shocked by the image of a moving train on screen that they ran out of the movie theater; one might expect that viewers might react similarly towards the shocking and grotesque images and/or scenarios in the absurdist films presented in this work. However, truth be told, no one left the cinema on the day the Lumière Brothers’ film *Train Pulling into a Station* (1895) was shown. Just the same, as an early spectator of von Praunheim’s *Virus* admits, as I described in Chapter one, he and others were shocked by the absurd content of the film, and yet no one left the theater. Grappling with what he deemed inexplicable, the spectator concluded” “It was just too…strange.”55 In both cases the spectacle functions to jolt the spectator out of her or his seat, and incite them to reevaluate their perception of reality. In the former case, the emergence of cinema asked people to reimagine what technology could do and how one can see reality through this lens. In the latter, and particularly in the case of the films of the

absurd AIDS cinema, spectators are asked to see images and scenarios that estrange them from more common perceptions of reality, and instead through the lens of an absurdist-ethics, to envision alternate modes of living, to question what it means to be human, to live, and to die. Even more, a few people, and perhaps these are the outliers in society, the esperpento, may glean solace and enlightenment from the engagement with the absurdist subject matter.

Parker explains how those who might be deemed abnormal by society are the type who might join a circus, seeking solace in a minor community. They are usually sick, deformed, poor, or of minority status, and he even mentions gay people. Persons infected with HIV or with AIDS would also fall into the spectrum of social abnormality in this respect. The circus is understood as a place that offers a life that is not mundane, but marked by risk. One may be attacked by a lion, fall from the tightrope, or be cut into two in the magic box, “[we] are left with a version of the circus as a place where the romantic outsider can find fellow travelers. The grey stabilities of normal life can be escaped, and a life lived with danger and authenticity” (562). But sequins, contortions, and fireworks aside, the most important element to those involved in the circus is the sense of community. Circus is etymologically derived from the Greek word that means “circle.” After millennia, it preserves all its levels of signification. One may imagine equally the importance of the collective circle of life in minor communities, such as the gay community, those who are infected with HIV, or even barebackers. For Parker, the communitarian social relation is a key structural feature of the circus (562). Similarly, barebacking could not be conceived of as anything other than a community, just as humor and by extension AIDS humor expects that more than just the director is in on the joke, however tasteless or offensive. All films seek spectators. Similarly, those involved in a peripheral practice seek multiple partners who
ascribe to the same lifestyle, or frame of mind or reference, in order to sustain the practice.

Following Bakhtin insight in the contradictory normativity of the carnival, the circus community, like any community, has its norms and forms, which in this case, accepts abnormality as the norm. Parker talks about how people historically have thought of fleeing to join the circus because they wanted to escape perhaps from “prejudice and history, and into some sort of tolerant community—a place where there will be no credit checks, qualifications, drug tests. So the travelling circus brings to mind refugees, a straggling line of the disposed, at the same time as it is a romantic gypsy caravan” (562). This is a place where “even freaks were paid differently depending on their relative freakishness and rarity” (565). No one is excluded, as long as they can work.

When the individual invests in the collective she or he is no longer necessarily an individual. It is about the collective feeling of belonging and spitting and laughing in the face of the Man, or the warden, who threatens to extend your life sentence. The circus collective is also “a rolling show,” not only because it is always on the move, given its diasporic nature, but also because many circus performers have physical deformities or mental illnesses that make them so-called freaks (563). Because of these ailments, or as a result of the high risks they take in the life they have chosen, they may have shorter life spans. If one performer dies, even if it be a grotesque death, e.g., a lion eats a man, the circus collective keeps on moving, order is restored as they pick up new people in the next town. Something similar happens in a community of those involved in the practice of barebacking. It must inevitably happen that members will die, but the Internet forums do bring in new members, and the community continues to thrive; the individual is no longer central to the equation of the circus, and by extension of this metaphor, he is not of great importance to postmodern society. The
collective is key, and is the collective of barebackers that produces the bitterest reactions from the status quo.

This crisis of the individual is not new, it is a sentiment expressed in every culture and every age, and is epitomized in every grotesque and absurd narrative in every media I have discussed in this study. But together with the expression of crisis, there are clear instances of catharsis also expressed throughout time, in the solace of being a part of a community of freaks, in the outwitting of death through community survival, with individuals embracing their inner freak, evading representation, becoming inanimate, becoming animal, becoming something other than an individual human subject, taking on the guise of the esperpentic radical agent, who wields the philosophical tool of enlightenment, a lens of perspective: an absurdist-ethical paradigm—even if the radical cashes in pleasure for a chance at an earlier death.

The end of the individual or the death of the subject is also a postmodern notion, as posited by Fredric Jameson. In place of the singular subject emerges a schizophrenic and collective representation of identity, which must not necessarily have a negative connotation, but in truth may exhibit the exact opposite. Jameson contends that

[Schizophrenic] disjunction [...] as a cultural style, ceases to entertain a necessary relationship to the morbid content we associate with terms like schizophrenia and becomes available for more joyous intensities, for precisely that euphoria which we saw displacing the older affects of anxiety and alienation. (29)

Jameson explains that that which was considered grotesque or freakish have later become the most fresh and innovative ideas. Anxiety and alienation are replaced by the affect of humor and the creative possibilities of the grotesque:

Not only are Picasso and Joyce no longer ugly; they now strike us, on the whole, as rather ‘realistic,’ and this is the result of a canonization and academic institutionalization of the modern movement generally that can be traced to the late
1950s. This is surely one of the most plausible explanations for the emergence of postmodernism itself (4).

In this paradigm, the role of revolt in the postmodern is that which pushes the boundaries of acceptability to the limit because “the most extreme moments of high modernism […] no longer scandalize anyone and are not only received with the greatest complacency but have themselves become institutionalized and are at one with the official or public culture of Western society” (4).

This explains why one would turn to posters of Hitler to represent HIV in order to draw people’s attention, why absurd AIDS films bank on the comical and grotesque to make an impact, and why some people might seek high-risk behaviors to glean a viable sense of living. Revolt is perhaps the only means, in the postmodern, of making people feel and intuit that which is life, which remains otherwise imperceptible, invisible, or absent. An absurdist-ethics prescribes that one must risk death, in order to live. Better yet, perhaps, one must muster the strength to die in order to live, ethically.


Garofoli, Joe. “‘Welcome to the Fight’: Reaction Pours in to Obama’s Support for Same Sex Marriage.” *San Francisco Chronicle.* 9 May 2012. n pag. Web. 6 June 2012.


