



## Heartbreak Hotel: MTV's *The Real World, III*, and The Narratives of Containment

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Knowledge, after all, is not itself power, although  
it is the magnetic field of power.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick  
*The Epistemology of the Closet*

As I write this, MTV continues its daily reruns of *The Real World, III, San Francisco*, episodes, and has aired several marathons of the series, attesting to its unceasing popularity. The program has also won innumerable awards, and in March of 1995 the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) honored it as well for its positive presentation of a person with AIDS (PWA), namely, Pedro Zamora, who was a member of *The Real World* cast and became a considerable part of the show's focus. In fact, Zamora achieved a hybrid stardom of an activist/heart-throb variety not seen before in other media-frenzied cases related to HIV and AIDS.

This essay will inevitably seem to work against the grain of what appears to be unmediated (and still resounding) applause for the series (*Real World, VII*, situated in Seattle, currently airs). My aim here is neither to engage in so called "academic quibbling," with its presumed elitism, nor to judge the show against some irrelevant standard of representational practices. But as Douglas Crimp has noted, "AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualize it, represent it, and respond to it. We know AIDS only in and through these practices" (3). Thus, given the enormous stakes inherent in any representational strategies related to AIDS, I think it is important to look critically at the politics

of *The Real World, III*, a show that claims to offer a markedly different representation of a person with AIDS. Since it is my position that such a claim falls short of the mark, to say the least, and that “containment” may arguably be one of the projects of hegemonic discourse, my intent is not to “surprise” the reader with MTV’s failings. While I investigate the possibility that contrary to its queer-affirmative public posture, the discursive nexus of *TRW, III* may in fact betray a strategy whereby the gay man and/or the person with AIDS is panoptically and systematically absorbed into a regime of control, my primary concern is to examine the cultural narratives in which such a representation is embedded.

Thus, the “containment” of my title refers to those master narratives which in turn structure Zamora as narrative: first, the format of the program itself—the way it claims to occupy a different site of cultural production altogether through its “documentary” and “ethnographic” style; second, the portrait of Zamora that emerges—in what sense, if at all, is MTV’s (re)presentation of Pedro Zamora positive; and third, I want to look at the “tribute” to Zamora aired by MTV, where the concept of an innocent victim (as opposed to one who is morally liable), so endemic to mass media assessments of AIDS, is recuperated yet again. As this posthumous tribute is used to narrate a classic closure for Pedro Zamora’s “story,” we should reconsider the Silence=Death dictum of AIDS activism and note who is left speaking in “The Real World.”

## I

Each episode of *The Real World* opens with the voiceover: “This is the true story—the true story—of seven strangers picked to live in a house and have their lives changed. Find out what happens when people stop being polite and start getting real in the real world.”

Initially, the roommates for the San Francisco edition of *The Real World* consisted of three women—Cory, a white woman from San Diego; Rachel, a conservative Latina from Arizona; and Pam, the quintessentially over-achieving Asian medical student from San Francisco—and four men: Mohammed, a black rap artist from San Francisco; Judd, a white, self-proclaimed ‘liberal’ cartoonist from New York; Puck, a bike messenger from San Francisco; and Pedro Zamora, a gay activist from Miami who was HIV+ and had been clinically diagnosed with AIDS by the time the show began and died of complications arising from that condition five months after the show stopped filming.<sup>1</sup> The narrative plays out as an allegory in that cast members are expected to evoke in the viewer certain types and values. Puck and Pedro, for example, are pitted as adversaries from episode one. Puck becomes the cartoon rebel *par excellence*: compared to him Pedro is presented as thoughtful, considerate, concerned about cleanliness, almost aristocratic; contrary to Puck’s outrageous appearance, Pedro is classically beautiful by Western cultural standards. The issue here, again, is not the inherent truth or falsity of these labels but the ideological sleight-of-hand by which they are manipulated within the narrative, while the slippages inherent to such labeling are

strategically overlooked. (For example, as I discuss below, Puck and Pedro may be more alike than we think, especially as they obtain within the ideological constraints of the program.)

The core marketing strategy for the program relies on and foregrounds the constant presence of the camera, not only as the supposedly neutral witness to events that (presumably) ‘unfold’ in the household, but as the verifier of the documentary status claimed by the producers: a status, for reasons I elaborate below, that this essay challenges.<sup>2</sup> The occupants of the house are observed around-the-clock by three shifts of camera teams (a total of thirty technicians) who monitor every move from a control room. Since the participants are filmed continuously—every activity other than defecation and sex is put on film—the apparent indifference of the camera translates both as truth and intimacy; presumably, it is the constant presence of the camera that yields the titular reality of *The Real World*. During several episodes of the show, a camera would shift to show other cameras, mounted near the ceiling, eerily still, overlooking the scene. When roommates wish to air their thoughts “privately,” they do so through the format of the “confessional,” the program’s euphemism for a one-on-one with the camera, the subject looking directly into it. (While the producers may have intended some religious irony through the “confessional,” I suspect that the Foucauldian irony inherent in his concept of State power generated by citizens perpetually confessing, registered by the term as well, was perhaps both unrecognized and unintended.) In the household, surveillance is panoptically realized and perfected. The occupants are not only observed, but seemingly learn to overlook the observer: As the producers state in a *TV Guide* interview: “Apart from polite civilities, the camera crews never speak to the house residents. After a couple of weeks they’ve become such a fixture around the place they almost blend into the furniture” (31). However, while *TRW* claims the absence of a master narrative because of its *video verite* format, we should remember that 1,400 hours of videotape shot over a five-month period are then edited to eleven viewing hours. In a recent interview on the entertainment “news” program *ET*, the producers likened this massive editing to “finding the real story—the beginning, middle and end—from real life.” The comment optimistically presents the editing process as freeing an organic whole from the extraneous matter in which it is embedded, rather than one which constructs an artificial diegesis.

Given the huge disparity in the amount of footage shot and the final cut of *The Real World*, the viewing experience is surprisingly free of jerks and starts. And the producers, ever mindful of maintaining the you-are-there illusion for their viewers, do so through an unexpected investment in time, by often showing common, everyday actions in their totality: a roommate having a cup of tea or making a phone call can become the substance of a segment between two commercial breaks. In this respect, *The Real World* comes much closer to replicating the spacing and format of a soap opera. (In fact, the program was created for MTV by former *As The World Turns* producer Mary-Ellis Bunim and

documentary filmmaker Jon Murray.) As Tania Modleski has pointed out, the soap opera is “opposed to the classic (male) film narrative, which, with maximum action and minimum, always pertinent dialogue, speeds its way to the restoration of order. In soap operas, the important thing is that there always be time for a person to consider a remark’s ramifications, time for people to speak and listen lavishly” (106).<sup>3</sup> The master narrative of *TRW*, beginning with Pedro’s initial confession(al), remains his impending death. Despite its leisurely progress, the program does not dispense with or revise this particular trajectory—HIV=AIDS=Death.

To better understand the ideology of containment that I have been arguing for, and to reveal a programmatic enforcement of it, I want to discuss two related incidents which occur during the second episode of the show, where cleanliness (and the virtues thereof) emerges as the ostensible theme.

During this episode, Rachel raises the issue of dirty bathrooms to the other women, Pam and Cory. She suggests that at the next house meeting, the “girls” present a unified front and ask for a separate bathroom from the boys. At the meeting, Rachel voices her concerns and the men oppose her request. Cory and Pam do not come to Rachel’s defense as she had expected, and the idea is abandoned. We cut to a “confessional” with Rachel, and she states that while she may have had some remote fears about sharing a bathroom with someone who has AIDS (Pedro), in this case the real issue was dirty bathrooms. Additionally, she complains about feeling betrayed and abandoned by the women.

The question of cleanliness surfaces on another front during this house meeting as well—at issue is Puck’s dirtiness, whose rabelaisian habits or posture have been firmly established for the viewer through numerous incidents. This time it is Pedro leading the charge: He is disgusted after he observes Puck picking at his nose, and then scooping up some peanut butter (from the communal jar) without washing his fingers. Pedro confronts Puck with what he has seen, but Puck ignores his complaint. After citing several of Puck’s hygienic transgressions to the roommates, emphasizing the incident with the peanut butter, Pedro suggests that the roommates be allowed to vote whether Puck should take a shower before he can engage in communal activities. While the proposition itself is laughed away, Puck, not surprisingly, reacts with anger and hostility. However, in the scenes that follow, Rachel is shown cleaning Puck before the roommates go out for Valentine’s Day as a group. She scrubs down Puck’s hands while commenting about the dirt embedded in his skin. Pedro is likewise heard remarking about the grime under Puck’s nails, which is followed by Rachel also giving Puck a manicure. She talks to him as one would to a child, and coaxes him along on the process.

Though they may appear trivial, I cite these scenes because they interact in complex ways to establish the ideological nexus of the show. And if, as I have suggested, they reveal an ideology of containment, the effect is achieved, not through vulgar punitive measures, but in fact by turning punishment into play.

Thus Rachel's desertion by Pam and Cory, and the denial of her request for separate bathrooms are meant to be seen as just and communal decisions. The viewer is meant to suspect Rachel's declaration that her request was provoked by the desire for cleanliness. The suggestion that we know better implicates the viewer into the show's imaginary. However, what "we" punish Rachel for, "we" in turn practice—for these two scenes illustrate the ways in which the proverbial fears about AIDS as the foreign contaminant, and dirt as the more familiar household foe, are treated very similarly as problems of containment, of barriers breaking down that need to be restored.

While *The Real World* does not conflate the gay body with the unclean or dirty—in fact Pedro is presented as scrupulously clean—the two issues are nevertheless conflated for the audience. The structural collapse is particularly noteworthy since Pedro and Puck are pitted as adversaries, as opposite "types." And in these scenes, even while they unpack their superficial oppositions, thematically they are bound by the effort to restore barriers. In fact, Puck's rabelaisian transgressions, his mixing up of snot and germs with peanut butter (and is it just an ironic coincidence that peanut butter is not that far from shit in appearance?), the dangers his dirty wandering fingers connote—penetrating, smudging, infecting where he should not be, only serves to make Pedro's potential to infect even more covert and therefore more sinister. Pedro's beautiful, clean body only accentuates the 'dangers' of the virus he carries. In "An Epidemic of Signification," for example, Paula Triechler has pointed out the exhaustive references to the "cunning" and "secretive" nature of the HIV virus within the presumably neutral discourses of science.<sup>4</sup>

It should also be noted that both the threat and the containment occur in the domestic sphere. As I have stated, the syntactic shift from strangers or roommates to "family" occurs early in the show. It is as a family that threats are faced and resolved. And like all television families, the historically salient message seems to be that with enough familial unity and a little bit of soap and water anything can be cleansed; any problem solved. The fact that this is a family "MTV-style"—hip, interracial, with even a gay (therefore dying) member—does nothing to subvert the ideological charge of the construct, or the benign democratic ideal that the family unquestioningly connotes in the cultural imaginary. By choosing to arbitrate the perceived threat of AIDS within the domestic sphere, by structurally equating it to a ritual cleansing, MTV does not re-vision the cultural fears more progressively as it has claimed, but seems to consolidate the prevalent homophobic charges further by locating and containing them in the most psychically protected terrain of our culture—the bourgeois home—a location that is often used to stand in for the culture at large. As Simon Watney has pointed out, all AIDS discourse occurs in an arena that is "massively dependent on an ideological framework which is available at any point to draw instant analogies between the individual family unit and the nation" (48).

## II

The initial name given to the Human Immunodeficiency Virus—Gay Related Immunodeficiency or GRID—began a pattern, which continues today, wherein separate and unrelated categories of analysis are conflated and collapsed into one another. What results is a discursive web where facts and myths are so intertwined that they become inseparable. Paula Treichler has suggested that the cultural representation of AIDS and the dissemination of those representations resemble a linguistic apparatus which “in the commonsense view of language, are thought to transmit preexisting ideas and represent real-world entities and yet, in fact, do neither” (31). In the popular parlance and imagination, the crudest and most reductive narrative about AIDS inevitably reads as follows: HIV becomes synonymous with Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, the syndrome with homosexuality, and homosexuality itself with death. Mainstream productions on AIDS, beginning with teledramas such as *An Early Frost*, or *Andre’s Mother*, and more recent films such as *Philadelphia*, replicate all of the pre-existing patterns of conflation. In these narratives, the gay body is re-presented as diseased and dying, signifying a dangerous excess that must be teleologically contained. As stated before, *TRW, III* claims to break this mold, and in this section I want to assess that claim.

When we first meet him, Pedro is anything but the forlorn, emaciated figure we have been forced to associate with the quotidian visual representations of AIDS. As a matter of fact, the camera immediately privileges Pedro’s classical good looks through frequent close-ups of his face—a practice that will continue for the duration of the program. As Dennis Porter has pointed out, “[a] face in close-up is what before the age of film only a lover or a mother ever saw” (Modleski, *Vengeance*, 99).<sup>5</sup> Early on then, the viewer is indulged with a fetishistic closeness to Pedro’s face—we learn to scan it; we are encouraged to read it. After we learn of Pedro’s HIV+ status, it is clear that his beautiful face will be made to register (or show its refusal to register), Dorian Gray-like, the effects of his disease.

During the opening episode of the show, Pedro first comes out to Cory regarding his HIV status during their train ride to San Francisco to meet the other roommates. Of this encounter, Cory will later say in a “confessional,” “Oh no, not this guy. I like him.” In a scene that follows shortly after, the roommates have met each other and settled into the house. There is a restless, party-like atmosphere, and Pedro uses this opportunity to make his announcement to the rest of the group. Later, during a “confessional,” Pedro discusses his anxieties regarding this moment. He explains that he chose to use his scrapbook, which documents his AIDS activism, as a means of coming out.

This “scene-of-revelation” shows the roommates crowded around a table looking at the scrapbook. Occasionally, the camera comes in for close-ups of the pages. It is evident from the headlines, as well as Pedro’s comments, that the articles in the book praise him for his activism, and we also gather that he has been

extensively covered in the national press. The roommates, likewise, applaud his bravery; they also seem pleasantly surprised by the amount of media coverage and attention he has received. They seem pleased with the idea that, as far as AIDS activism goes, Pedro Zamora is something of a star. The lone dissenter from this adulation is Rachel. We see her standing apart from the group, a look of anxiety on her face, until finally she walks away.

Two confessionals follow: In one, Pedro says that he had taken note of Rachel's actions and felt rejected by her. The second confessional is by Rachel herself, speaking about her fears of living with a man who has AIDS. She states that she feels othered for taking a "politically incorrect" position, but she also says that "we simply do not know about AIDS."

A scene follows where Pedro, Judd, and Puck sit facing Rachel—she is the only woman present. Pedro reveals his feelings of rejection to her. Interestingly enough, since the putative purpose of this conversation is to discuss Rachel's fears about AIDS, Pedro's revelation, which initiates and frames the discussion, once again conflates his epidemiological status with ontology. As the conversation progresses, we see that no attempt is made to counter Rachel's fears with available, empirical information on AIDS:<sup>6</sup> Nobody suggests, for example, that it is impossible for her to contract AIDS by sharing a house with a PWA; nor does anyone express surprise at her ignorance. We become witness to a sentimental alliance of ignorance with innocence. But as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has noted, "[i]nsofar as ignorance is ignorance of a knowledge—a knowledge that may itself, it goes without saying, be seen as either true or false under some other regime of truth—these ignorances, far from being pieces of the originary dark, are produced by and correspond to particular knowledges and circulate as part of particular regimes of truth" (8). In this exchange ignorance becomes legitimized by being aligned with Rachel's fear of contamination, and her corresponding desire for containment as a legitimate response.

As an ironic 'liberal' counter-statement to Rachel's fear of contamination, the narrative of the show makes clear, we are to love Pedro particularly because of his illness, for the illness also renders him safe. Isaac Julien, for example, has pointed out that "the basic hidden message of safe sex in many cases is no sex . . ." (100). Pedro is not the predatory homosexual of the popular imagination, presumably because AIDS has put an end to such "pleasures" for him. I risk pointing out the obvious by saying that my use of predation as "pleasure" is ironic. But the inversions and transformations of pleasure in populist discourses on AIDS is neither so obvious nor is it simple. Once again, through a series of confluences pleasure becomes palimpsestic. Within the teleology of this mutation, gay pleasure is gay narcissism is therefore sin, which manifests itself through AIDS, which yields death. Thus pathologized, the elements which bracket the construct—pleasure and death—are in fact rendered equal. Importantly, however, the refusal of pleasure, i.e. sex, in a post-AIDS climate renders the gay subject a responsible citizen. A remarkable agent of this new responsibility is the

“gay-activist” who, via his ratification in the straight community as an example of a “good gay,” gains some access to a sanctioned representational space.

In an essay that brilliantly points out both the intricate constraints and the high price of this civic move from pleasure to politics (presuming they are in fact separate), Lee Edelman writes: “To gain the power of ‘political’ intervention, even in the midst of an epidemic, by buying into the logic of ascesis that grounds the valorization of ‘politics’ over, and in opposition to, the category of ‘pleasure,’ must prove a Faustian bargain for the gay community historically oppressed by the very operation of that logic” (110). In MTV’s version of this culturally sanctioned taming ritual, Pedro is the ultimate activist, for he teaches with wit and style, without screaming, in short, without “acting-up.” Pedro is the model of civility, and—if Edelman’s hunch is correct—obedience. He becomes what Anna Marie Smith calls the “good homosexual,” the figure constructed out of the cultural imaginary who provides cover for homophobia, at the very moment that an anti-homophobic stance is proffered: “The extremism of homophobia disappears only insofar as homophobia constructs an imaginary figure, the ‘good homosexual’ and promises to grant this figure full inclusion within the ‘normal’ social order” (64).

As I suggested earlier, MTV allows the categories “activist” and “heart-throb” free play, and what its progressive agenda amounts to is allowing an uninterrupted consumption of Pedro that resists any differentiation between the two. While I am not saying that the categories themselves are incompatible, or that an amalgamation of the two creates something innately freakish, the production has to be held accountable for a politics that presents “heart-throb” and “activist” as exactly the same. Within the dynamics of MTV’s presentation of Pedro, both are made to register equally on the commodity Richter scale. In *TRW, III*, AIDS activism is not only culturally sanctioned, it is salable. If Pedro as activist, as a PWA, is denied the sexual jouissance that Judd, as a heterosexual, for example, seems entitled to, and if his activism then amounts to a renunciation of pleasure, the material residue of any potential pleasure on Pedro’s part is nevertheless converted to kinetic scopophilic pleasure for the viewer.

In a provocative essay that examines the politics behind the invention and popularity of the wide-screen during the 1950’s, Alan Nadel writes that “[t]he format manifested visually the rhetoric of American foreign policy during the cold war. Called ‘containment,’ the policy as interpreted by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles oxymoronically entailed ‘spreading’ the American vision globally” (416). As to the economic provocations behind the wide-screen format, Nadel observes that it was a way to compete with the increased popularity of television: “[T]he wide screen signified a kind of truth inaccessible to television. Live drama, live game shows, and especially live coverage of congressional hearings underscored *television’s claim to be the privileged site of ‘real’ life, but this reality was limited to a small segment of what the eye could see*” (415, emphasis mine). Although my argument foregrounds the efficacy of television as



an instrument of containment, Nadel's observations are nevertheless applicable to this discussion, for he points out the alliance of technology and ideology, and his comments on television as the privileged site of "real" life, precisely echo MTV's successful commercial pitch. The limited scopic field of the television screen isolates the very means by which a program like *TRW* practices its containment and surveillance while laying claim to a normative gaze free from ideological taint.

During a segment that is presumably interested in presenting the alternative cures that are available to those who are HIV+, we see Pedro laid out on a table in swimming trunks, acupuncture needles being implanted in him. In this scene, the visual fragmentation of his body is extreme—we can see the precise texture of his skin, the minute lines and creases on it as the camera sweeps almost haphazardly from one part of his body to another. The segment concludes with an extended shot of the thick mat of hair below his navel blending in with the pubic region, as the acupuncturist inserts a needle there.

While startling in its overt display of Pedro, this scene is actually a textbook example of the history of medical imaging and what Bruno Latour has called the theater of proof. The conventions of this 'theater' are examined by T. Hugh Crawford in his essay "Imagining the Human Body." Summarizing Latour, Crawford writes, "even though they are not simply social constructs, objects produced by the theater of proof are far from natural. Rather evidence revealed by the *careful staging of scientific proof* lies at the intersection of many historically constituted networks of truth production" (67). What is the graphic close-up of a needle being inserted into the sensitive skin of the pubic region meant to provoke? We hover somewhere between pity and eroticism. It is as if the camera wants a verification of Pedro's illness, wants to detect some physical inscription of his contaminated blood on a body that resists such signification on its surface. Writing about the advent of early microscopy and its effect upon visual culture, Lisa Cartwright has noted how the microscopic image principally differed from the representational painting or photograph in that the accuracy of the image could not be confirmed by the human eye: "Without detail and resolution, its accuracy unable to be judged against a perceived real, the view of the invisible provided by the early single-lens microscope was a source of epistemological instability and anxiety" (84). We experience a similar anxiety as we participate in a scan of Pedro's near naked body, erotically displayed, for the AIDS narrative is now so huge and conflated that no specific body can contain or verify it. As Martha Gever has suggested, AIDS documentaries usually described as sensitive, poignant, or tragic are always overdetermined. "And the impetus of this narrative is fear—a generalized fear that is alternatively incited and allayed" (110).

As I discuss in the section that follows, these fetishistic forays become ever more invasive and bizarre in the footage that comprises the "tribute" to Pedro which was aired posthumously on MTV. During the tribute, the camera focuses

with near-necromantic abandon on the process of dying, as it records the failure of the body that nevertheless refuses to register the horrors of the process. As if offering us one more proof of his “innocence,” Pedro dies beautiful.

### III

The program that MTV aired after Pedro Zamora’s death—a video collage of segments from the show, interviews and clips with his family and the *TRW* cast not seen before, as well as extended segments from a fund-raiser<sup>7</sup>—was presented as a “A Tribute to Pedro Zamora.” With the melancholy notes of the Irish folk band *Clannad* in the background, the title sequence began with darkened, ghost-like footage from an amateur family film showing an adolescent Pedro running through suburban lawns, while a highlighted portrait of his face was imposed over this film to the right of the screen. The dates of his birth and death appeared below the title to the left, as the moving pictures were replaced by a sepia-toned still of a newspaper announcing Zamora’s death, with the image of a rust red AIDS ribbon laid over the paper. I describe this title sequence only to provide the tone of the tribute, and perhaps also to suggest the extent to which the images are manipulated. The semiotics of those images, as hyper-romanticized as they are, I suspect, are too obvious to need elaboration.

My questions regarding this posthumous tribute must begin with the title itself: Was this tribute to Pedro Zamora, also a tribute to all of us for having the humanity to have understood (tolerated?) Pedro, and once we got to “know” him, for being witness to his untimely death? For clearly MTV would have us believe that the answer to hatred lies in knowledge, in closing the gap between knower and known by bringing the object of knowledge ever closer, and placing it under greater scrutiny. In fact, this unquestioned trust in knowledge-as-panacea was ratified by President Clinton himself when he called during the fund-raiser, via satellite, to say: “Now no one in America can say they don’t know someone living with AIDS.” Once again, a hypothetical and individual capacity to understand is quickly conflated to stand in for an equally hypothetically tolerant nation.

Pam says in footage from the fund-raiser, “when we ended taping in June, it was halfway through the story of Pedro’s life and our lives.” The tribute then somehow “completes” the story. And if, as I have suggested, the “story” is merely an euphemism for witnessing Pedro’s death, then the tribute must satisfy the need for that narrative closure. In fact, the tribute amounts to a minutely detailed time-frame of Pedro’s physical and mental deterioration. While segments from the fund-raiser, which begin the tribute, make several references to Pedro as “a man living with AIDS,” once again, the narrative is emphatically structured by his impending death. The coded, perhaps even conventional, optimism of the fund-raiser with its repeated and once again romanticized references to the “joys of living,” conversely emphasizes the actual hopelessness of the situation. Pedro as living is meant to trigger our grief and sympathy, for we already know how the story will end. Punctuated by songs of pathos and grief deemed appropriate to the

footage being shown and voiceovers provided (almost exclusively) by Judd, the tribute, a meticulously constructed piece, situates the progress of the narrative temporally.

We begin with the status of Pedro's health. Several of the roommates reveal their shock and surprise at how fast his health deteriorated once filming for *The Real World* was over. Once again, Rachel declares her own ignorance of the disease, almost as a formal echo of the role she had played during the program itself. Judd claims to have noted the warning signs—Pedro, he says, was simply doing too much, and the relentless activity (activism?) took its toll. We are shown clips of Pedro at his lowest—despondent, tired, forgetful, vacantly staring out of windows. In one particularly disturbing footage filmed at St. Vincent's Hospital in New York (where Pedro remained for three weeks), we see him begin a sentence and then slowly lose his train of thought. As his words begin to slur, the camera comes in for a close-up of his face. It is shot from an angle that heightens its beauty; Pedro's face fills the screen. As he gives up trying to speak, the camera moves even closer to the eyes which finally look up at the ceiling, first frustrated—then a few slow blinks—and they go empty. Notably, in these sequences that record Pedro's continuing physical failure, the close-ups of his face are ubiquitous. As viewers, we hover over it and watch for signs of life and vitality in his eyes that simply refuse to return our stare.

During a Museum of Modern Art exhibition of "portraits" of people with AIDS in New York City, members of the group ACT UP passed out a flier which demanded, among other things, "STOP LOOKING AT US; START LISTENING TO US."<sup>8</sup> Douglas Crimp writes "against this demand—stop looking at us—the typical liberal position has held, from very early in the epidemic, that one of the central problems of AIDS, one of the things we needed to combat was bureaucratic abstraction. What was needed was to 'give AIDS a face,' to 'bring AIDS home'" (118). However, Crimp strongly criticizes this effort, particularly as it has been manifested in museum "exhibitions" which elided the difference between the targeted dominant viewer and the PWA's whose portraits they were looking at. Crimp adds, "we are confronted once again. . .with a defense mechanism, which denies the difference, the obvious sense of otherness, shown in the photographs by *insisting that what we really see is ourselves*" (119, emphasis mine). As I stated earlier, if the portrait of Pedro's beautiful face (as opposed to the decimated figures we are generally shown) makes for an easier identification, this surface difference is also the beginning and the end of MTV's revisionist agenda, for *TRW* goes to great lengths to contain Pedro's otherness-as-homosexual, a narrative move which begins early in the tribute.

In *Homographesis*, Lee Edelman points to an inherent contradiction in the Foucauldian matrix that produces the legible homosexual: "Homosexuality is constituted as a category, then, to name a condition that must be represented as determinate, as legibly identifiable, precisely insofar as it threatens to undo the determinacy of identity itself; it must be metaphorized as an essential condition,

a sexual orientation, in order to contain the disturbance it effects as a force of disorientation” (14). During the tribute, the “essential condition”—the fact of Pedro’s homosexuality—is further contextualized through his individual “history,” a narrative which is then read through the rubrics of available cultural myths. Judd begins by invoking those immigrant myths which for the Zamoras, being Cuban Americans, are already overdetermined. While we see stock footage of refugee-laden flotillas, Judd and Pedro’s voices tell us about the treacherous crossing, about family members forced to stay behind, and the safe landing in Miami. Judd interrupts this narrative of fruitful immigration through the tragic death of Pedro’s mother due to cancer. He explains that Pedro’s response was twofold—for one, to throw himself into his studies, and second, “to party.” As Judd says to a student gathering, (a speaking engagement he has taken on Pedro’s behalf) “Pedro used to go out and have unsafe, promiscuous sex. The affection that he was missing from having his mother around, just simple hugs and kisses, he was seeking through sex with strangers.” This explanation serves what Michael du Plessis has described as the “readymade fiction of heterosexism, [where] the figure of the mother’s boy serves immediately homophobic and misogynist ends by explaining a man’s homosexuality as his mother’s failure” (146). Judd’s scenario also presents Pedro’s homosexuality as *subsequent* to the death of his mother. Thus the bucolic maternal space (replete with stories of Pedro and his mother dancing into the night playing Cuban records), is sharply separated from the murkier space of Pedro expressing (and perhaps it is not unfair to conjecture—*enjoying*—) his (homo)sexuality. Creating these distinct spaces participates as well in the convention of separating the maternal from homosexuality while the former is simultaneously posited as the cause of the latter. As Eve Sedgwick points out, “the absolute ignorance continually ascribed to (or prescribed for) the mother is the ascriptive absoluteness of her power over the putatively inscrutable son. The result is that the mother has a *power* over whose uses she has, however, no cognitive *control*” (248, emphasis in original). Pedro’s sexuality is explained as phenomenon, as well as being bound by two narratives of death, thus becoming both cause and effect. Pedro’s story assumes significance only when positioned within larger cultural myths—political tyranny, successful immigration, the desolations of maternal loss—myths which contain his sexuality oxymoronically as reasoned excess. Thus homosexuality is effectively erased as anything other than an accidental aberrance, a positive Oedipal narrative gone astray.<sup>9</sup>

As I stated before, it is important to note who is left speaking at the end of the story. And if this story indeed was Pedro’s, then Judd’s summation of the narrative deserves even more attention. It is Judd who emerges as the *good heterosexual*, the one who ultimately fulfills the program’s idealistic agenda. For as Cory reveals during the tribute, “Judd is almost living his [Pedro’s] life for him.” As Pedro gets sicker, Judd takes on more of his speaking engagements. Taking on this activity, as Judd explains, “is the only way I can deal with it.” The

last remark, though casual and commonplace (perhaps even commonsensical), warrants attention because it encapsulates the method of presenting Judd to the viewer, which the program repeatedly employs: Whenever Judd is placed in a conventionally patriarchal position, whether as arbiter, or narrator, or an active agent, we are simultaneously reminded of his sensitivity. When Judd assumes agency over Pedro's life, we are asked to believe that he does so not as appropriation but as a way to assuage his own grief. Indeed, if there is any counterweight to the story of Pedro's death, it is the continual exposure of Judd's pain. During the tribute, the narrative possibilities of his sorrow are fully realized and accorded a formal status. In a particularly emotional speech during the tribute, Judd states: "What I want to do is turn the clock back, what I want to do is go back to when you were o.k.. What I want to do is reach inside you and take out what's bad, and make it o.k. again. But I can't do that." His voice cracks during the delivery, and he breaks down in tears immediately afterward and is consoled by Pam. Without resorting to unproductive cynicism, I would like to examine this incident as playing out, not only an individual crisis (which is no doubt genuine for Judd—I am not suggesting that his display of emotion is apocryphal), but a series of cultural assumptions as well. In theorizing public display of male emotions, Maurizia Boscgali has written, "[a]s a media event in particular, masculine emotions are represented through the conventions of TV melodrama. . . . Melodrama provides a hermeneutical grid through which the hyperreal can be mapped in terms of easily recognizable oppositions; it restores meaning and referentiality by encapsulating the real into a preexisting narrative code whose formal conventions are known to the subject from his role as TV viewer" (67-69).

That the grieving friend may stand in for the (presumed) grieving audience, is hardly new. But it is important to note that Rachel's grief or Cory's or Pam's or Mohammed's is not foregrounded as is Judd's, nor is their grief presented to have the same emotional impact. For Judd as the straight, white male—one that the production has presented as sensitive and likable—becomes the universal subject of Western metaphysics. It isn't just Judd grieving (and how ennobling that his grief is for the marginalized), but Western culture at large. "[T]he ultimate effect of masculine tears," Boscgali has noted, is "the shift from the particular to the universal which characterizes the discourse of Western humanism. The individual case of a man crying . . . is elevated into an essence—the inner quality of masculinity—where masculinity equals humanity once again" (71). Judd's words take the conflation of the private with the universal even further, for they imply a bodily symbiosis as well. What Judd claims he cannot do—enter Pedro's body to take out what's bad—Pedro does for him through his death. For Pedro enters Judd's body—this time safely—to enable Judd to become Pedro. If Judd can't take out of Pedro what is harmful, he nevertheless takes him in—eats him up. In Judd becoming Pedro, we are witness to the ultimate safe sex scenario. What troubles me is that through this consumption and/as consummation, Judd becomes the agent for the false reflections we have been asked to adopt as

viewers—"you are Pedro, Pedro is you." The appropriative gesture through which Judd had so casually drawn the lines of an "us" vs "them" earlier, is here complete. The straight man is left to imagine the gay man's words, and then to speak them.

As I was revising this essay, I happened to attend the gay pride festival in Los Angeles. I want to end with a personal observation from that day: The parade always includes a flotilla of dignitaries who basically represent the patriarchal state—the mayor, the district attorney, assorted state congresspeople or senators, various other officials from the police department or the sheriff's office. While it should be a source of some optimism that officials from the city of Los Angeles agree to participate in a gay pride parade, it hardly seems cause for unadulterated jubilation. But that is how the crowd always reacts—they break into thunderous applause and whelps of joy as these officials float by waving. These officials, who may or may not be queer (or even programmatically queer affirmative), are applauded simply for their presence. Queer people want to be ratified by the very law which negates them. And that is the observation which troubles me—while Judd is no doubt Pedro's friend, he becomes our law. And I am reluctant to applaud him without question.

## NOTES

1. The roster of roommates undergoes a change about halfway through the show, when Puck is voted out of the household and is replaced by an Australian woman, Jo.

2. Despite the public posture of the producers to have somehow invented this format, a material precedence for the program can be found in the PBS program, *The Louds: An American Family*, which aired during the 1970's. In my opinion the documentary format claimed by the latter is more valid in that there was no attempt to make each episode thematically consistent via editing, as MTV does with *The Real World*.

3. Modleski, Tania. *Loving with a Vengeance*. (New York and London, 1982), 106. Modleski notes that the formal properties of the soap opera closely accord with the rhythms of a woman's work at home. "Individual soap operas as well as the flow of various programs and commercials tend to make repetition, interruption and distraction pleasurable" (102). She suggests that in its refusal to approximate or copy masculine narrative trajectories, the soap opera may in fact offer a potential for feminist aesthetics. "Too often feminist criticism implies that there is only one kind of pleasure to be derived from narrative, and that it is an essentially masculine one. . . . This is a mistaken position, in my view, for it keeps us constantly in an adversary role, always on the defensive, always, as it were, complaining about the family but never leaving home" (p. 104-5).

4. "The January 1987 *Scientific American* column "Science and the Citizen" warns of the mutability—the 'protean nature of the AIDS virus'—that will make very difficult the development of a vaccine, as well as the perfect screening of blood. 'It is also possible,' the column concludes, 'that a more virulent strain could emerge' even now 'the envelope of the virus seems to be changing.' Clearly, 007 is a spy's spy, capable of any deception: evading the 'fluid patrol officers' is child's play. Indeed it is so shifting and uncertain we might even acknowledge our own historical moment more specifically by giving the AIDS virus a postmodern identity: a terrorist's terrorist, an Abu Nidal of viruses." Quoted from: Triechler, Paula. "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification" in Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (Cambridge and London, 1988), 60

5. Porter, Dennis. "Soap Time: Thoughts On a Commodity Art Form." *College English* 38 (1977), 782-88.

6. By saying "empirical information" I do not intend to privilege the scientific community, or more importantly, to suggest that the information disseminated by this community has somehow functioned outside ideology.

7. The fund-raiser taped at the United Methodist church in Hollywood was intended to pay for Pedro's medical expenses (he was not insured), and any remainder was to go into the Pedro Zamora Memorial Fund that was simultaneously established to help people with AIDS. The fund has since become operable.

8. Douglas Crimp quotes the flier in its entirety in his essay "Portraits of People With AIDS" in Grossberg, Lawrence, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler eds., *Cultural Studies* (New York, London, 1992), 118.

9. See Earl Jackson for an examination of this elision—Jackson argues that the tactic is inherent to Freudian psychoanalysis, and the Oedipal trajectory in particular. Earl Jackson. *Strategies of Deviance: Studies in Gay Male Representation*. (Bloomington, Indiana, 1995), 22.

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