

Introduction to a special Cultural Commons section on *It's a Sin*

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In January 2021, Russell T. Davies' anticipated five-part television series *It's a Sin* was broadcast on Channel 4. Over the year, since airing, momentum around the 1980s-set AIDS drama retained the series in the mind of its viewers as one of the year's cultural touchstones. Olly Alexander, who portrays Ritchie, an established pop star with his band Years & Years, covered the Pet Shop Boys' 1987 song 'It's a Sin' to coincide with the broadcast. Alexander's cover raised money for George House Trust and several months later, in May, Alexander would join Elton John in a *Brits* performance of the same song, this time raising funds for the Elton John AIDS Foundation. The year 2021 ended with the cast's participation in a *Great British Bake-Off* Christmas special. Notably, *It's a Sin*'s success brought the history of the AIDS crisis in the United Kingdom back into public view and sustained a presence for the series through a succession of these media moments.

Popular with the coveted 18–34 demographic, *It's a Sin* was Channel 4's biggest debut drama in 3 years, and the most binged on its streaming platform All 4 (Channel 4, 2021). One pedagogical effect, a consequence of the series' popularity, was the uptake in HIV testing that reportedly tripled in the month after broadcast (Channel 4, 2021). A charity T-shirt soon followed emblazoned with the series' catchphrase 'La' raising £250,000 for

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the Terrence Higgins Trust, and as Ledin and Weil discuss in their *Cultural Commons* contribution, the same charity used *It's a Sin's* characters in their April campaign. Given *It's a Sin's* immediate status as 'important' television, we decided to organise an informal Zoom meeting on a Sunday afternoon in 2021 to discuss the series.

The meeting brought together academics, activists, human immunodeficiency virus infection/acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) educators, mothers, social and care workers, television script writers, those new to the history of AIDS, and those that survived it. For this special edition of *Cultural Commons*, we invited several of the Zoom participants to contribute, bringing together varying disciplinary and political positions. The participants brought their expertise in television studies, medical humanities, health care, HIV/AIDS-activism, queer theory, feminism, working in television and a firsthand experience of HIV/AIDS past and present.

Although conceived and filmed before 2019, *It's a Sin* coincided with another year of living during a pandemic. Its timeliness seemingly supplicated an analogy with AIDS. Not a useful analogy. If anything, the handling of the current pandemic further highlights the obscenity of the AIDS crisis, in which nothing was done for several years. The recent urgency of research, vaccination and health provision for the 'general public' around covid-19 cannot be weighed against a virus whose aetiology was once understood to be the sickness of homosexuality. Years of discriminatory government inaction in the United States and the United Kingdom, silence and disavowal on a scale unimaginable, accusations medical and biblical to a chorus of 'let them die they deserve it'; unconscionable, yes, but it happened. Nonetheless, this has not prevented speculative methods of tackling HIV (quarantining, abstinence) during the biopolitical reign of COVID-19 (Ledin and Weil, 2021). This is the wider context of *It's a Sin* in which the individual stories of Ritchie, Jill, Omar, Colin and Roscoe are located.

It's a Sin locates its story through an intimate and personal London-centric drama of youth and queer kinships; the story of a group of twentysomethings confronting the shame, homophobia, confusion and indifference of the AIDS crisis. The characters' connection to the AIDS crisis and the exacerbation of homophobia and shame it encouraged are routinely interpolated through interpersonal family dynamics, most notably mothers and sons. Many of the characters' narrative arcs find them returning home. In domesticating the AIDS crisis, the legibility of suffering and dying is contained within the private sphere, a salient point that anchors *It's a Sin* in a long list not only of televised AIDS melodramas and made-for-TV films, but also of infamous exhibitions such as Nicholas Nixon's 'Photographs of People' (MoMA, NYC) or Rosalind Solomon's 'Portraits in the Time of AIDS' (Grey Art Gallery, NYC), both of which included portraits of emaciated gay men living with AIDS, photographed in private settings and often accompanied by their mothers. Such depictions of bodies reduced to – and only read through – their illness depoliticised the crisis by centring it in the private sphere, and by presenting gay men with AIDS as victims deprived of personal history and political agency. Such an approach would lead to a protest by Act-Up outside MoMA, where activists distributed flyers that read, 'We demand the visibility of PWAs [People with AIDS] who are vibrant, angry, loving, sexy, beautiful, acting up and fighting back. Stop looking at us; start listening to us'. Similarly, AIDS melodramas, as Eve Cherniavsky (1998) argues, devolve the social and political conflicts of the crisis through personal and familial dynamics. *It's a*

Sin resolves the series on a ‘bad mother’, a theme explored by Rebecca Harrison in this special edition of *Cultural Commons*, who reminds us that Jill’s confrontation with Ritchie’s mother ends with an accusatory ‘they all died because of you’. Despite some fleeting moments referring to the nation’s ‘bad mother’ Margaret Thatcher and the passing portrayal of activism in several scenes, *It’s a Sin* is conservative in its grounding of the narrative arc of the AIDS crisis as a rupturing of the private sphere. This tactic of displacement from the broader concerns of social, political, and national accountability is characteristic of televised AIDS melodramas. These conventions were already fixed in the first television drama to address AIDS, *An Early Frost*, broadcast in the United States on NBC in November 1985. In short, *It’s a Sin*, following Cherniavsky’s (1998) argument, ‘masks the operations of political economy and institutionalized social power into the register of intergenerational strife and private affect’ (p. 376). As the late Douglas Crimp (2004) wrote in response to media depictions of people with AIDS in the 1980s in the United States:

The portrayal of these people’s personal circumstances never includes an articulation of the public dimensions of the crisis, the social conditions that made AIDS a crisis and continue to perpetuate it as a crisis. People with AIDS are kept safely within the boundaries of their private tragedies. No one utters a word about the politics of AIDS, the mostly deliberate failure of public policy at every level of government [. . .]. Even when the issue of discrimination is raised [. . .] this too is presented as a problem of individual fears, prejudices, and misunderstandings. The role of broadcast television in creating and maintaining those fears, prejudices, and misunderstandings is, needless to say, not addressed. (p. 91)

Russell T Davies has acknowledged that his original concept for *It’s a Sin* was difficult to get commissioned by the BBC and ITV. A ‘hard sell’, Davies remarks, with ITV telling the screenwriter-producer ‘we’re not quite that sort of channel yet’ (Scott and Milton, 2021). When finally picked up by Channel 4, *It’s a Sin* was truncated from its originally proposed eight episodes to five. The reception in the press and social media was hyperbolic, with claims of ground-breaking and being the ‘first’ of its kind, as if AIDS was a stranger to television. ‘Well, everyone’s talking about how *It’s a Sin* is the first time we’ve seen it through the eyes of the British’ (Opie, 2021) writes one critic. Davies even corrects these assumptions about *It’s a Sin*, noting in a self-penned account that he had already ‘created a 15 year-old HIV+ teenager for *Children’s Ward* at Granada Television’ in 1994 (Davies, 2021).

One of the earliest forms of AIDS media in the United Kingdom was television. Stuart Marshall’s landmark video-essay-cum-documentary *Bright Eyes* (1984) was one of the first examples of AIDS media activism globally, not just in the United Kingdom. Commissioned by Channel 4 for its ‘eleventh hour’ late-night slot of experimental television, *Bright Eyes* established the broadcaster’s commitment to gay and lesbian programming in an era dominated by anti-gay legislation. Channel 4 would offer some push-back and broadcast a range of gay and lesbian programming and AIDS media throughout the 1980s, including the broadcast of landmark American independent films about AIDS (*Buddies* (1985) and *Parting Glances* (1986)). Other channels followed suit. ITV broadcast the three-part *Intimate Contact* in 1987 advertised as ‘the story of a family’s

courage', and Channel 4's *Closing Numbers* was broadcast to coincide with World AIDS Day in 1993. Notably, both concern the recurring cliché of an HIV+ bisexual husband's marital infidelity. Again, AIDS becomes a drama of the private sphere of family and home. This was grist for the tabloids, too, as the *Daily Express* proclaimed: 'How to Cope When Your Man is Bisexual' with the subtitle 'secret passions can prove deadly' (Warren, 1994). A life-threatening alterity to the family vectorised by the 'epidemic's new bête noire' (Grover, 1987: 21), the bisexual male.

Despite four decades having passed since AIDS was first identified in the United States, the circumscription of HIV and AIDS to the private sphere connects *It's a Sin* to the TV AIDS melodramas of the 1980s, confirming a pattern in media representations of the crisis that continues to reproduce itself despite early critiques by activists and scholars. While Russell T. Davies' series managed to bring the history of AIDS back to the public sphere, leading to an increase in donations to AIDS charities, the manner in which it delivered that history to the public sphere was by framing it as a matter of private concerns and private lives. In doing so, the series continued to overlook the power relations – as well as the political, institutional, and collective actors – that, as Crimp noted, 'made AIDS a crisis and continue to perpetuate it as a crisis'. At a time of a newer pandemic, when public health continues to be framed as a matter of private decision-making and responsibility, we would do well to look back at the lesser told histories of HIV and AIDS to understand the social, political and health risks of privatising illness. We would do well to remember joy, solidarity and political allegiance.

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Biographical Notes

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