

COMEDY AS CURE FOR TRAGEDY: ACT UP AND THE RHETORIC OF AIDS

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ON Sunday, December 10, 1989, parishioners at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City were joined by more than 4,500 AIDS and reproduction rights activists staging a "STOP THE CHURCH" protest.¹ Demonstrators decried the Catholic Church's involvement in U.S. politics and pilloried Cardinal John O'Connor for his comments that homosexuality and abortion were immoral. The demonstration was a carnival-like performance of guerrilla theater, irreverent parody, and angry chants. Protesters held mock tombstones while hundreds of others lay down in the street, enacting one of ACT UP's (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) trademark "die-ins."² The bodies were outlined in paint and chalk to emphasize the deadly effects of social indifference to AIDS. A handful of male protesters dressed as clowns, Catholic bishops, and nuns cavorted in the street. A male "Virgin Mary" carried a baby doll and a sign, "This Mary believes in safe sex education."³ A mock condom the size of a giant torpedo was labeled "CARDINAL O'CONDOM." Throughout the crowd, signs declared: "Curb Your Dogma," "Papal Bull," and "Danger: Narrow Minded Church Ahead." Churchgoers expressed disgust at the protest's carnival atmosphere: "Look at that . . . They're making a party out of this, like they're having fun. How can anybody take them seriously?" (Perez-Rivas & Yuh, 1989, p. 3). Most offensive to those attending services were the professional posters that humorously juxtaposed a photo of Cardinal O'Connor with an enlarged photo of an unrolled condom. The similarity between the shape of the condom and the miter on the Cardinal's head suggested an obscene comparison that the accompanying text utilized: "KNOW YOUR SCUMBAGS" (Crimp, 1990, p. 135).

Protesters staged another die-in inside the Cathedral during the service. They lay down in the aisles, blew whistles, and threw hundreds of condoms into the air like human fountains. One activist yelled "Bigot" and "Stop the Murder" over Cardinal O'Connor's sermon, and other protesters soon joined in. Parishioners responded by praying the rosary aloud to drown them out.⁴

This dramatic protest was a well-orchestrated performance typical of ACT UP actions (Ariss, 1993; Sadownick, 1990; Solomon, 1989). The demonstration was planned openly and advertised in advance, giving church and civic officials time to prepare. Cardinal O'Connor handed out copies of his sermon at the beginning of the service; political leaders such as former Mayor Ed Koch and then Mayor David Dinkins attended the service to show their support for the Church and for religious freedom; parishioners responded with outrage when ACT UP members disrupted the service; and the police were there in force with more than 400 officers outside the Cathedral and many plain clothes officers attending services inside.⁵

Media coverage of the protest was hostile. A *New York Times* editorial typified published responses:

The demonstrators who stormed St. Patrick's Cathedral Sunday . . . brought discredit on themselves for demonstrating in a way that obstructs consideration of their arguments. . . . To

deny clergy and laity alike the peaceful practice of religion grossly violates a decent regard for the rights of others, let alone the law. Far from inspiring sympathy, such a violation mainly offers another reason to reject both the offensive protesters and their ideas. ("Storming," 1989, p. A24)

The group's "in your face" brand of direct action protest earned it widespread condemnation. President George Bush called the group "'outrageous'" and "'counterproductive'" (Kramer, 1991, p. 62); Mayor Koch referred to them as "'fascists'" (Taylor, 1990, p. 67); Dr. Stephen Joseph, former New York health commissioner, called them "distasteful and disruptive" (Taylor, 1990, p. 68); a writer for *Commonweal* reported that he had heard the group's efforts referred to as "'blasphemous'" and "'satanic'" (Dawson, 1990, p. 477); and even Andrew Sullivan, the gay editor of *The New Republic*, called their methods "fanaticism" (1990, p. 24).

These and other critics overlook the complexity of the group's rhetorical situation and the richness of its persuasive efforts. They fail to recognize that ACT UP members struggled with doubts about the propriety of their tactics and that the life and death immediacy of AIDS was a rhetorical exigence that strongly influenced their choice of strategies. As one activist wrote:

Do we play by the rules, court public sympathy, and push steadily but politely for recognition? Or do we make ourselves so unpleasant that yielding to our demands finally becomes easier than ignoring us? I myself favor the noisier alternatives. I believe the AIDS epidemic has taught us that nobody will listen unless we scream. (Cunningham, 1992, p. 63)

ACT UP deserves scholarly attention because its rhetoric is a complex, sophisticated response to some of modern society's most daunting persuasive obstacles.⁶ This study highlights the group's use of what Kenneth Burke calls the comic frame to respond to the tragic frame of AIDS discourse in America. Although elements of ACT UP's rhetoric can be seen as fitting into other poetic frames, such as satire, grotesque, and, occasionally, tragedy, most of ACT UP rhetoric draws upon the comic frame's emphasis on humans' capacity for laughter, reason, and action rather than scapegoating and paralysis.

ACT UP strategically uses the comic frame to *change perceptions* of gays as scapegoats. Treating the comic frame as a method to create perspective by incongruity, ACT UP repositions themselves as members of the community. ACT UP's rhetorical strategies debunk the tragic frame that would position gay men as victims of immoral acts or as sacrifices that symbolically purify society. The group reframes the AIDS crisis in comic, realistic, humane, and pragmatic terms. ACT UP's experience with the comic frame also suggests that there may be *recurring conditions* or rhetorical exigencies that comedic strategies can mitigate. This study demonstrates the utility of Burke's frames for comprehending and interpreting the rhetorical responses by other angry, oppressed, and despised groups who have been scapegoated by society.

In what follows, we discuss the theoretical foundations for the study, analyze the rhetorical situation using Burke's frames, and critique ACT UP's rhetoric. We argue that the group's emphasis on humorous, humane, and rational responses to a deeply tragic rhetorical situation is an appropriate and sensible use of the comic frame.

BURKE AND THE COMIC FRAME

ACT UP's actions had clear precedents in effigy burning, building takeovers, sit-ins, and guerrilla theater of the 1960s and 1970s social movements. Rhetorical critics who

studied this earlier protest rhetoric developed theoretical perspectives that shed light on ACT UP's strategies.⁷ Scholars have begun to analyze gay communication (Chesebro, 1981; Darsey, 1991; Gilder, 1989; Ringer, 1994), but few rhetorical critics have used Burke's comic frame as an analytic tool (Carlson, 1986; Carlson, 1988; Bostdorff, 1987; O'Leary, 1993; Powell, 1995).

A. Cheree Carlson urges critics to learn more about the capabilities and "limitations of the comic frame in promoting peaceful social change" (1988, p. 310). This study meets her call by analyzing the rhetoric of a despised social group that urged nonviolent solutions under particularly fearful and odious conditions. ACT UP is a good test of the uses and limitations of the comic frame because gay men were in an untenable situation as the prime victims of an incurable disease. They used comic rhetoric and acted like court jesters to remind audiences of shared social values such as liberty, justice, political accountability, and having compassion for the sick and dying. Even though most gay and straight people do not agree about the morality or immorality of homosexuality, the two groups share many common values.⁸ By behaving indecorously and challenging heterosexual citizens to live up to American principles, ACT UP encouraged audiences to see gay men as community members rather than sacrificial scapegoats.

In *Attitudes Toward History*, Burke says that "in the face of anguish, injustice, disease, and death," humans make attitudinal choices that commit them to particular actions, including ways of speaking (1959, p. 3). Our words and actions when responding to a crisis help us to interpret reality. "They prepare us *for* some functions and *against* others, *for* or *against* the persons representing these functions" (p. 4). Burke argues that humans organize their discourse and actions in accordance with the major poetic forms of epic, tragedy, comedy, elegy, satire, burlesque, and the grotesque. Thus, one need not choose tragedy as a frame of reference even when confronting life and death issues. In contrast to the impulse toward tragedy in Western society, Burke argues that it is "imperative" that we embrace comedy because only it can protect us from "the most idiotic tragedy conceivable: the willful ultimate poisoning of this lovely planet, in conformity with a mistaken heroics of war" (1959, p. xv). In a note in *Language as Symbolic Action*, Burke states his "conviction that mankind's only hope is a cult of comedy. (The cult of tragedy is too eager to help out with the holocaust)" (1966, p. 20). The elevation of comedy as our saving grace is in stark contrast to ACT UP's critics who treat the group and its comedic rhetoric as a threat to society. This contrast suggests that ACT UP and its critics operate from fundamentally different conceptual frameworks.

People sometimes erroneously think that tragedy differs from comedy in its subject matter—that tragedy treats serious subjects and comedy deals with humorous ones. In fact, both models deal with serious subjects, but their depiction of the human role in affecting social outcomes is decidedly different. Thus, one may speak or act in the comic frame and yet not be funny per se. Hugh Duncan (1962) writes that "the burst of glory in comedy . . . is our sudden reassurance that while some aspect of authority is threatened, the *principles* of authority are not" (p. 387) and that "comedy exposes transgressions of rights, but does not question the rights themselves" (p. 411).

Burke refers to the main character in tragic discourse as a *victim* because the person cannot avoid suffering his or her fate. The tragic victim's discourse is fruitless because he or she appeals to a supernatural force such as God, fate, or destiny, a force that is, in essence, beyond persuasion. The tragic frame requires a sacrificial scapegoat who suffers, dies, or is banished by society in a symbolic attempt to rid itself of chaos, disease, and impurity.

In contrast to the tragic frame, the comic frame never requires the death or banishment of a scapegoat. It attempts to shame or humiliate the target into changing his or her actions. The comic frame offers hope to society because the efficacy of human agency, reason, and community are affirmed. Hugh Duncan writes:

We submit to the discipline of comedy because we believe it is necessary to social solidarity and group survival. Communication is kept open and free through laughter because laughter *clarifies* where tragedy *mystifies*. Tragic art and religious ritual lead to victimage and mystification. . . . The comic actor must keep alive belief in reason. His dilemma is how to explain why men so capable of reason and joy are yet so irrational and sad. He resolves this by showing that men sin because they abandon reason. (1962, pp. 388–389)

For Burke, rhetoric in the comic frame is both humane and rational because the rhetor who speaks from the comic frame assumes that humans eventually will recognize their shared social identifications and will respond in a moral manner. Such a rhetor has greater faith in the bonds of human connection and reconciliation than in the victimage and mystification that tragedy requires.

AIDS IN THE TRAGIC FRAME

During the years prior to ACT UP's formation in 1987, many Americans responded to the AIDS crisis with fear and denial. In such dire circumstances, Burke (1959) argues, individuals construct ways to account for the crises they face based upon beliefs about the universe or history. In the mid 1980s, speakers and writers working from the tragic frame stressed that gay men were guilty of personal and sexual sins, that they were socially and medically impure, and that they alone were responsible for the American AIDS dilemma.

Early in the AIDS crisis, Americans ignored evidence that in other countries AIDS was transmitted primarily through heterosexual intercourse and, instead, focused on gay men's culpability for the spread of the HIV virus in this country. Many writers explicitly blamed gay men for AIDS. Others focused on AIDS as a predictable consequence of gay male promiscuity. Media stories consistently distinguished between gay men who had AIDS and "innocent" AIDS victims such as children, hemophiliacs, recipients of blood transfusions, or women who were infected by bisexual husbands.

Leaders of many social institutions used the AIDS crisis as an opportunity to scapegoat gay men and criticize homosexuality. Patrick Buchanan pitied the " 'poor homosexuals' " who had " 'declared war upon Nature, and now Nature is exacting an awful retribution' " (Brandt, 1988, p. 155). Scapegoating gay men during the early AIDS years was common among conservative religious communities—a practice, according to a report by People for the American Way, that continues to this day in the form of hundreds of local and state anti-gay ordinances (People for the American Way, 1993). So thoroughly had the tragic frame taken hold in U.S. AIDS discourse that the rock music star Axl Rose of the group Guns 'n' Roses developed lyrics about " 'faggots' " who think they are free to act as provocateurs and transmit a " 'fucking disease' " (Goldstein, 1991, p. 24). Rap artists such as Public Enemy sang about gay men as AIDS carriers, promising that any gay man who dared to act on an attraction to a member of the musical group would get bashed (Goldstein, 1991).

Gay men's ostensible guilt for bringing AIDS to the United States was also expressed through a unique language of identification: "gay cancer," "GRID: Gay-related immunodeficiency," "WOGS (the Wrath of God Syndrome)," (Treichler, 1988, p. 198) or GAY:

Got AIDS Yet? Such ridiculing language targeted only gay men and no other population affected by AIDS during the early years of the crisis.

Some government-funded researchers focused on ways to “fix” gay men or separate them from the rest of society. Early AIDS social researchers failed to explore many actions or behaviors that led to HIV infection, focusing instead on what was wrong with gay men that caused them to act in ways that led to infection (Watney, 1994). In doing so, researchers essentialized and naturalized the medical crisis. Public policy initiatives attempted to identify and control gay men through testing, tattooing, and quarantine.⁹ Several states introduced, but did not pass, legislation for AIDS quarantine camps. In November 1983, a Texas legislative committee recommended that all homosexuals be locked up until they had been cured of all their medical problems—or died (Murphy, 1989). Few persons called for locking up hemophiliacs or IV drug users, other populations that were deeply affected by AIDS.

Some Americans expressed their belief that gay men were the cause of the AIDS crisis by resorting to physical assault. The United States witnessed a dramatically increased incidence of hate crimes and gay bashings due to AIDS by the late 1980s (Berrill, 1992); perpetrators sometimes referred to “AIDS carriers” as they beat their victims, or they argued in court that their fear of contracting AIDS was a justifiable rationale for assault and murder. All of these actions, from calls for quarantine to pulpit denunciations, reflect an understanding of the AIDS crisis that is based in the tragic frame. Gay men were consistently depicted either as the tragic victim or tragic villain. Regardless of their tragic role, gay men’s sin, sexual deviancy, and hubris made their quarantine, sickness, and death from AIDS acceptable. Gay men had to be symbolically scapegoated in order to reify social hierarchies and to maintain social order.

We can begin to understand these tragic framings of the crisis by recognizing that AIDS brought conflicts between sexuality, disease, and equality to the forefront of U.S. politics. The deadliness of the syndrome forced Americans to make uninformed decisions based on a hierarchy of personal values; many people sought comfort in the principles of morality, heterosexual hegemony, purity, and religion. By identifying gay men as the cause of AIDS and targeting their demise as the solution to the crisis, social commentary unfolded a drama that was steeped in the tragic frame and that justified indifference and hostility toward gay men dying of AIDS. Many of the scapegoated victims in the American AIDS drama did not accept their fate passively; instead, they protested using strategies that shifted the tragic discourse to a comic frame.

ACTING UP IN THE COMIC FRAME

When individuals or groups act in the comic frame, they commit themselves to an approach that runs counter to the prevailing tragic impulse in Western society. Rather than reducing social tensions through mystification, scapegoating, or banishment, rhetoric in the comic frame humorously points out failings in the status quo and urges society to correct them through thoughtful action rather than tragic victimage. Jim Serafini, a member of ACT UP admitted that the group’s intent was to change society by using nontraditional, humorous methods:

Faced with the prospect of one’s mortality, a lot of us have gained an ironic sense of humor. We’ve lived in a death-drenched community for ten years, and to keep our sanity we’ve had to joke—as well as raise hell. So what if people think we are going over the top? We can see the profound absurdity of our situation and laugh at it. (Taylor, 1990, p. 73)

The group used outrageousness and exaggeration to prod a reluctant society into recognizing shared values and taking humane action to deal with AIDS. ACT UP tried to change perceptions of gays and people with AIDS by making irreverent, indecorous jokes about a deeply tragic situation. They were engaged in what Burke (1984) has called "perspective by incongruity." The phrase has been operationally defined by Bostdorff as "altering an orientation or expectation by viewing an incongruity, which is inconsistent or not in agreement. Such an incongruity occurs by misnaming those things which are the focus of the orientation; one calls them '*the very thing in all the world they are not*'" (emphasis in original) (1987, p. 44). Most humor operates on the principle of perspective by incongruity, and ACT UP used this technique to great effect. They drew attention to the AIDS crisis and motivated change by relying on visually-oriented, non-discursive direct action.¹⁰ We categorize their rhetorical efforts under three broadly related comedic strategies: "campy" theatrical performances, ironic or playful uses of language, and exaggeration/concealment of their gay and/or HIV+ identity.

Campy Theatrical Performances

The group's reliance on humorous performances clearly suggests use of the comic frame. These signature events were not merely rhetorical dramas performed publicly, they were also "camp" performances. The word "camp" has long been used to identify a kind of sensibility in which playful kitsch and exaggeration help gay people contend with the difficulties of living in a homophobic society. In the book *Campgrounds: Style and Homosexuality*, Jack Babuscio describes use of camp as a strategic way to deal with righteous anger:

Camp can thus be a means of undercutting rage by its derision of concentrated bitterness. Its vision of the world is comic. Laughter, rather than tears, is its chosen means of dealing with the painfully incongruous situation of gays in society. . . . Camp, through its introduction of style, aestheticism, humor, and theatricality, allows us to witness 'serious' issues with temporary detachment, so that only later, after the event, are we struck by the emotional and moral implications of what we have almost passively absorbed. (1994, p. 28)

Whenever the group publicly "camped it up" by making fun of themselves and others, they were trying to alter attitudes through perspective by incongruity.

There is no shortage of illustrations of what ACT UP founder Larry Kramer called "theater with a purpose" (Winkour, 1994, p. 32). ACT UP members organized a mock presidential inauguration in the streets of San Francisco to draw attention to President Bush's seeming lack of concern about AIDS. They enacted mock trials where Presidents Reagan and Bush were called to account for their inaction and were found guilty of murder. During the 1987 New York City gay pride parade, ACT UP sponsored a dreary looking float that was trimmed in barbed wire and surrounded by camp guards who wore camouflaged military garb, gas masks, and large yellow rubber gloves. The float, driven by a man in a Ronald Reagan mask, was labeled a "quarantine camp."¹¹ Each of these theatrical performances misnamed events. George Bush was not inaugurated in San Francisco, was not a murderer, and Ronald Reagan was not driving a moveable quarantine camp. But the incongruity of these actions gave ACT UP opportunities to raise serious issues in the context of joyful, even carnival-like social events.

Not all of ACT UP's campy theatrics were so obviously serious. Some performances imposed a comic, even ridiculous tone on a serious event. Lying in the aisles inside St. Patrick's Cathedral and tossing hundreds of condoms into the air illustrates this tendency.

Similarly, ACT UP Los Angeles sponsored a male fashion show on the steps of a local hospital to dramatize the dearth of beds and medical resources available to AIDS patients. The models demonstrated how to wear AIDS evening wear, fashionable hospital gowns, and an outfit that was, literally, a bed that wearers "could take with them"—highlighting the problem of homelessness that many AIDS patients experienced (Horsfield, 1989). Other campy events included theater such as "AIDS—The Musical," which was advertised with the slogan, "You've had the disease, you've been to the demonstration, now see the musical" (Roman, 1994, p. 220).

Guerrilla theater and campy performances allowed ACT UP activists to dramatize their concerns while acting out their anger and despair in a comic, informative, and potentially persuasive manner. Admittedly, audience responses to these demonstrations were mixed. Heterosexuals often were put off by the satiric and critical character of the performances, while gay audience members often recognized and identified with both the serious and the comic elements. Although some of these performances were targeted primarily to a gay audience, all were performed publicly to raise awareness and change attitudes.

Ironic, Playful Uses of Language

Like the campy theatrics, the playful language used by ACT UP was deeply ironic and double-voiced; activists said one thing, but often meant another. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1988), has labeled similar rhetorical moves by African Americans as "signifyin(g)." He argues that African-Americans' capacity to speak in a double-voiced manner grew out of the history of U.S. slavery when slaves had to develop a "language within a language" in order to have private conversations that could not be understood by slave masters. Although signifyin(g) is not addressed to public audiences and ACT UP rhetoric is, the history of discrimination against American gays and lesbians has created a similar capacity for creative, double-voiced discourse (Grahn, 1984; Hayes, 1981; Painter, 1981).

Much of ACT UP's playful use of language was ribald, obscene, or filled with sexual innuendo; yet this rhetorical strategy was undertaken to change perspectives by incongruity, not just to offend an audience or "let off steam" in an ego-gratifying way. Activists played the clown to prod the audience into consciousness and to raise awareness that gay men were citizens who deserved compassion and medical attention.

ACT UP's use of slogans and language illustrate the group's sense of humor and rhetorical sophistication. For example, ACT UP San Francisco had a graffiti group that called itself TANTRUM—Take Action Now to Really Upset the Masses (Gamson, 1989, p. 362). One popular ACT UP chant at demonstrations was humorously self-deprecatory: "'We're here . . . We're queer, and we're not going shopping'" (Gamson, 1989, p. 362). In 1987 when the Third International Conference on AIDS took place in Washington, D.C., activists were arrested after protesting President Reagan's inaction in dealing with the AIDS crisis. Washington police exposed their fear and ignorance by wearing bright yellow rubber gloves when they arrested 64 ACT UP protesters. The remaining activists, many "looking unusually respectable in conservative business clothes" played off the stereotypes of gay men as vain and overly concerned with fashion when they started the campy chant: "YOUR GLOVES DON'T MATCH YOUR SHOES! YOU'LL SEE IT ON THE NEWS" (Crimp, 1990, p. 33).

Many of ACT UP's slogans were made into professional flyers and posters by Gran Fury, the New York group's graphic design team. The most well-known ACT UP slogan,

"Silence = Death," was combined with a graphic image of a pink triangle, which represented the color and shape of the arm patches forced upon homosexuals in Nazi concentration camps. Thus, the phrase symbolically evoked World War II persecution in Germany at the same time that it reminded the audience of the dangers of living in the closet and the high death rates of gay men with AIDS. Other graphics included a poster which showed a smirking Ronald Reagan next to a bull's eye with the phrase "He Kills Me" printed underneath (Crimp, 1990, p. 46). The poster inverted the affable public image of Reagan and combined it with a colloquialism to advertise the charge that Reagan's indifference to AIDS was killing people. This is a good example of ironic humor combined with a politics of deadly seriousness.

Other graphics used language in equally clever and insightful ways to change perspectives about who could get AIDS and who was making enormous financial profits from it. ACT UP printed flyers with photos of large denomination bills set next to similarly shaped green boxes. The captions in the boxes said "White Heterosexual Men Can't Get AIDS . . . DON'T BANK ON IT" or "FUCK YOUR PROFITEERING. People are dying while you play business" (Crimp, 1990, pp. 48-49). A subway advertising poster read: "AIDS[.] IT'S BIG BUSINESS! (BUT WHO'S MAKING A KILLING?)" (Crimp, 1990, p. 116).

Some of the posters used perspective by incongruity to attack the inaction of local politicians. New York City Mayor Ed Koch was criticized when ACT UP humorously turned his own self-congratulatory, reelection campaign slogan ("How'm I Doin'?") against him. A photograph of his face was juxtaposed with the message: "10,000 New York City AIDS Deaths[-]How'm I Doin'?" (Crimp, 1990, p. 90). The mayor also was lampooned in a poster that superimposed his photograph on a black and white photo of a cemetery. The caption read: "WHAT DOES KOCH PLAN TO DO ABOUT AIDS? INVEST IN MARBLE AND GRANITE" (Crimp, 1990, p. 87). These posters, designed to educate New Yorkers and tourists, were placed illegally in subway cars' advertising slots and called attention to New York's woefully inadequate response to the AIDS crisis.

Other graphics combined sarcastic humor with patriotic icons to remind Americans that they were not living up to shared, national values. ACT UP utilized the imagery of the American flag, substituting the red stripes with a red-lettered message: "Our government continues to ignore the lives, deaths and suffering of people with HIV infection because they are gay, black, hispanic or poor. By July 4, 1989 over 55 thousand will be dead. Take direct action now. Fight back. Fight AIDS." (Crimp, 1990, p. 108) Another flyer used the Pledge of Allegiance to claim that liberty and justice for all was an "offer not available to anyone with AIDS" (Crimp, 1990, p. 67). ACT UP used these icons to create identification with the audience and reposition people with AIDS as members of the American community. They illustrate how the comic frame can be used to make messages that prick the consciences of an audience but that are not explicitly funny. Finally, one visually startling graphic reminded Americans that women also get AIDS. On a close-up photograph of an erect penis was emblazoned the message: "SEXISM REARS ITS UNPROTECTED HEAD[-]AIDS KILLS WOMEN." ACT UP used slang terms for masturbation when it punned in a second caption "Men: Use Condoms or Beat It" (Crimp, 1990, p. 63).

All of these AIDS graphics created rhetorical messages out of eye-catching visuals and humorous, indecorous, and playful use of language. Although each message concerned topics of sex, death, disease, and political accountability, they also rewarded the viewer

for understanding the joke or pun. But as Douglas Crimp asserts, "ACT UP's humor is no joke. It has given us the courage to maintain our exuberant sense of life while every day coping with disease and death" (1990, p. 20).

Concealment/Exaggeration of Gay and HIV+ Identities

The final comedic strategy was ACT UP's penchant for alternatively concealing or exaggerating their gay identity or their HIV positive status. ACT UP members masked their gay identities to create social disruptions and remind audiences that one cannot always tell who is gay. Conversely, ACT UP members strategically exaggerated their gay identity or positive HIV status to remind audiences that homosexuals and medically ill people were the comic victims/scapegoats as society struggled to deal with the AIDS crisis. By alternating their identity-related strategies, ACT UP skewered and drew upon stereotypes about gay men and lesbians in a manner that was both disquieting and comedic. When they announced their HIV positive status, members of ACT UP stripped away the veil of secretive, shame-based silence about AIDS and refused to become good victims who died quietly and passively.¹²

ACT UP members submerged or concealed their gay identity as a part of their performances and to better infiltrate their targets. The first large ACT UP protest took place at the New York Stock Exchange. Posturing as businessmen, members gained entrance to the Exchange, unfurled a huge banner urging brokers to sell stock in Burroughs-Wellcome Corporation (the makers of AZT, the only anti-AIDS drug on the market at that time),¹³ used bull horns to drown out the opening bell, and disrupted activities. Similarly, members posed as government bureaucrats and security guards in order to enter the national offices of the Food and Drug Administration. Once there, protesters locked themselves into officials' offices, welded the doors shut, and held sit-ins.

ACT UP members also infiltrated political and media organizations. Female activists in New York surreptitiously gained admittance to a Republican women's cocktail party in 1988 and unfurled several AIDS-related ACT UP banners, including one that read "Lesbians for Bush." The Republican women responded to this double entendre with a rousing rendition of "God Bless America" (Gamson, 1989). In another instance during the Persian Gulf War, members of ACT UP New York successfully portrayed themselves as businessmen and security guards in order to infiltrate the New York offices of each of the major network television stations. They interrupted the *CBS Nightly News* for four seconds. Their shouted message "Fight AIDS, Not Arabs" was broadcast nationally before activists were forcibly removed and arrested (Bull, 1991).

The concealment of their gay identities was a particularly effective and comic strategy because it debunked traditional beliefs that gay and lesbian Americans look and act differently than "normal" Americans. In addition, it directly challenged the argument that if only homosexuals would stay in the closet and not flaunt their sexual deviancy by dressing up as drag queens, bull dykes, and s/m leathermen, then U.S. society would tolerate them. It also vividly enacted the gay rights slogan, "We Are Everywhere." Having lived (or been forced to live) their lives in the closet, ACT UP members feel an ironic pleasure in using their ability to pass/perform as heterosexuals as a means of forcing Americans to confront the reality of AIDS. The strategy of masking or submerging their gay identity is a reminder that millions of gay Americans do not have to *act* as if they are business men and women, security guards, Republicans, Christians, or television executives because they *are*. Finally, by following social dictates to look heterosexual,

even though most are gay, ACT UP members dramatically enacted their own argument that AIDS is not a gay disease, but a disease that anyone can get, including those who look respectable and who, for whatever reasons, hide their sexual orientation.

ACT UP members also exaggerated or flaunted their gay identity and their HIV positive status. They used highly visible, often comedic ways of announcing their identities such as holding placards, wearing ACT UP t-shirts, buttons, or the urban gay uniform of jeans and black leather jackets, campy drag attire, or sado/masochistic paraphernalia. In the case of drag or s/m outfits, protesters drew upon stereotypical images of gays and lesbians to announce their identification.

ACT UP's rhetorical performances also announced to the public that many of the protesters were gay. The best example of this was the "kiss-in"—an activity where large groups of ACT UP members descended on a shopping mall or a government building and same-sex couples passionately kissed one another. This strategy confronted powerful social norms that all evidence of homosexuality must be kept hidden and that homosexuals do not have the same privileges as heterosexuals to express publicly their love for one another.

Just as ACT UP took pains to announce their members' gay orientations, the group also highlighted their members' HIV positive status. For example, Americans' fears of tainted blood was exaggerated by the group. Rather than hiding the symbolic associations between AIDS and an impure blood supply, ACT UP members used blood (red paint) as a rhetorical device. They left "bloody" hand prints all over t-shirts, public buildings, posters, sidewalks, and streets during an action. In their demonstrations, they often wore canary-yellow rubber gloves that would drip with red paint. In these ways, the group shifted the association of blood away from issues of impurity to evidence of criminal neglect and murder, as in their slogan, "The Government Has Blood on its Hands."

CONCLUSION

What appeared to many of ACT UP's critics to be senseless, ineffective antics by a group of social outcasts was, in fact, a call to change society's perceptions about people with AIDS. The majority of ACT UP's rhetorical strategies, such as camping it up, playing with language, and concealing or exaggerating their gay identities and HIV positive status, were designed to deal with overwhelming rhetorical obstacles created by the tragic frame, such as fear, hatred, anti-gay discrimination, religious sanction, gay bashings, and calls for quarantine. By inverting social practices and behaving in an irreverent manner, ACT UP's strategies were meant to shock, educate, and change perspectives by incongruity, at least for some portion of the group's multiple audiences.

ACT UP used the comic frame to point out the irrationality of a society that preferred to scapegoat one of its segments and at the same time to ignore the risk the HIV virus posed to the rest of society. The activists made fun of common conventions and social practices including those specific to the gay community. They used humor in many forms to encourage dialogue about the AIDS crisis and to motivate action so as to save lives. ACT UP strove to create recognition that only concerted, cooperative action could save lives and forestall a worsening epidemic.

Although they took every opportunity to shatter society's indifference about AIDS by disrupting business as usual, ACT UP's political efforts ultimately were directed toward social reconciliation rather than social rupture. None of their actions or messages

encouraged gay or HIV positive people to throw infected blood on others or to bash, lock up, or kill their adversaries, although their opponents regularly threatened them. Even as ACT UP tried to alter attitudes with their protests, members risked social ostracism, personal injury, and death. During the protest at the New York Stock Exchange, for example, "many of the suits and ties [traders] ran over to the balcony and started screaming: 'DIE, FAGGOTS!' 'MACE THEM!' " (Handelman, 1990, p. 82).

Tragic rhetoric about AIDS ultimately does not purge evil, chaos, or the HIV virus from society. Whether gay men were depicted as tragic victims who had to die because of their own folly or tragic villains who had to die in order to symbolically purify society, the HIV virus has continued to ravage millions of Americans and others across the world. In contrast to the tragic frame that justifies the death or banishment of victims, ACT UP members used the comic frame and their positions as comic clowns to shame and ridicule their adversaries. ACT UP did not physically assault Koch, Reagan, or Bush, but debunked their inactions which were part and parcel of the tragic frame. Only by criticizing these political leaders' indifference could ACT UP enact the argument that gay men and people with AIDS were valuable members of the community.

By operating from the premise that their opponents were educable and could be persuaded to abandon their fear, indifference and scapegoating, ACT UP demonstrated its commitment to humane, rational modes of solving problems. As Duncan (1962) notes, "comedy is the guardian of reason in society because it makes possible confrontation of social disrelationships" (p. 393). ACT UP treated its adversaries as horribly misguided rather than as deserving of symbolic or literal death. As Burke reminds us, "Call a man a villain, and you have the choice of either attacking or cringing. Call him mistaken, and you invite yourself to attempt setting him right" (1959, p. 4). For ACT UP, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, Ed Koch, Cardinal O'Connor, and many other Americans were deeply, tragically mistaken. ACT UP used comedic antics to set them right.

Most exigencies do not call for the strategic use of puns, camp, satire, sexual innuendo, obscenity, ridicule, and comedy. ACT UP's use of these rhetorical methods served to shock at least some Americans out of their denial about AIDS and to begin taking steps to deal with the medical catastrophe. An important scholarly implication of this study is that there may be *recurring social conditions* for which rhetoric in the comic frame is the only sensible response. Although there may be more, Burke (1959) suggests several of those conditions: When society deals with "anguish, injustice, disease, and death" (p. 3). Recalling the exigencies that led to ACT UP's rhetoric and utilizing the comic frame as an analytic tool should help us to better understand and interpret the motives and actions of similarly angry, alienated, and dispossessed groups.

NOTES

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¹The St. Patrick's protest was sponsored by a rare coalition of AIDS and abortion activists. During its history, ACT UP joined with different organizations, notably civil rights, prostitution, and prisoner rights groups, in order to publicize the special impact of AIDS on marginalized people.

²ACT UP was formed by author/activist Larry Kramer on March 8, 1987. The group's mission was to put direct political pressure on the government and pharmaceutical companies to "get drugs into bodies" of AIDS patients and to oppose the apathy and ignorance of the public, doctors, politicians, and researchers towards the AIDS epidemic. Between 1988 and 1991, more than 60 ACT UP chapters formed in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia.

Today, many ACT UP chapters have disbanded; a few still exist, but they are populated by few members who engage in occasional actions. AIDS has ravaged ACT UP's membership, and many activists have died.

³Some of ACT UP's jokes and puns can only be understood fully by other gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, or heterosexuals familiar with the gay subculture. In this example, one must know that many gay men refer to each other with the generic term "Mary." "This Mary believes in safe sex education" should be read as a doubled-voiced play on words rather than mere mimicry of a Christian icon.

⁴During Communion, a protester named Keane "scrunched" a consecrated Communion wafer in his hand, dropped it to the floor, and mumbled, 'Opposing safe-sex education is murder.' Another man, John Wessel, a former Jesuit seminarian, broke the Host and threw it over the heads of the parishioners" (Taylor, 1990, p. 73). The men who desecrated the Host acted on their own and without approval by ACT UP. Mr. Keane and 42 protesters were arrested for disrupting a religious service, disorderly conduct, and resisting arrest. An additional 68 persons, who had not entered the church, were arrested for civil disobedience. Different news stories of the protest exaggerated the number of protesters who desecrated communion wafers, as well as inaccurately reported what occurred. No protester spit out or stepped on the Eucharist. A videotape of the protest inside the Cathedral (which later became part of a television program entitled "Stop the Church" and was broadcast on large PBS stations) indicates that only two individuals desecrated the Eucharist. For a discussion of the controversy over the PBS program from the Catholic Church's point of view, see Coleman, (1991).

⁵Although hundreds of protesters who tried to enter the service were turned away by police, those activists who successfully "infiltrated" the service did so because police could not distinguish them from parishioners. Making themselves seem indistinguishable from other Americans was a common ACT UP strategy that we discuss later in this paper. It has a particularly ironic significance, though, because the practice of infiltration also was used *against* ACT UP by government agencies; the Philadelphia State Police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation planted undercover officers at ACT UP meetings and kept files on the group. Government officials unjustifiably feared that members of ACT UP would throw blood contaminated with the AIDS virus during demonstrations and would engage in terrorism (Bull, 1991; Dunlap, 1995; Osborne, 1993).

⁶ACT UP groups were remarkably successful in attracting media attention and in having some of their demands met. In addition to embarrassing political leaders for their inaction and indifference, they were able to change government protocols on drug testing, reduce the time it took to get an AIDS drug through the FDA from 12 years to less than two, force the government to release information on drug dosages, testify during hearings about the release of new treatments, force pharmaceutical companies to reduce prices on AIDS drugs, facilitate AIDS research funding, run housing programs for homeless AIDS patients, and distribute educational materials, condoms, and clean needles (Gamson, 1989; Handelman, 1990; Taylor, 1990).

⁷Robert Scott and Donald Smith's (1969) schema for totalistic and non-totalistic confrontational rhetorical acts help to account for ACT UP's extremist tactics. Theodore Windt, Jr.'s (1972) comparison of the Yippies with the ancient Greek Cynics is useful since his analysis of those extremely comic, moralistic, and critical protestors is, in some ways, comparable to ACT UP's rhetorical efforts. Richard B. Gregg's (1971) recognition of the ego-gratification components of 1960s protest rhetoric provides a trenchant, yet unsatisfactory explanation for ACT UP's persuasive efforts. Many ACT UP members protested for deeply personal, self-gratifying reasons, and in ways that suggested they were speaking to themselves. Nevertheless, ACT UP's actions attempted to persuade others and bring about immediate social and political change because of the life and death urgency that AIDS posed for members.

⁸There are extensive similarities in value hierarchies between gay and straight Americans. In contrast to common mass media depictions of homosexuals as social and sexual libertines, many gay men and lesbians attend churches and synagogues, serve in the military, "marry" their committed partners, raise children, build their neighborhoods, and make significant contributions to society. Andrew Sullivan (1995) and Bruce Bawer (1993) argue that although homosexuals are a diverse population, their values are mainstream.

⁹Although no quarantine facilities have been established in the United States, Cuba created a strict policy of enforced segregation for HIV positive people. According to Golden (1995), "the measure of control it [quarantine] has gained over the outbreak is the envy of many other nations in Latin America and the Caribbean" (p. A1).

¹⁰ACT UP appealed to different, overlapping audiences. The most important audience was the mass media. Members dispersed media kits, trained themselves to speak in sound bites, and rehearsed their acts of civil disobedience; they attracted reporters with creative actions, visually enticing photo opportunities, and stirring words (Bull, 1991; Sadownick, 1990; Solomon, 1989). A second audience was other gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and heterosexuals who were concerned about AIDS. These groups were targeted because ACT UP needed a large constituency to support its causes and effect social change (Crimp, 1990). Government and corporate agents of power comprised a third target audience. ACT UP used direct action and citizen politics to move these groups to action, especially when traditional routes of influence, such as lobbying or negotiating, did not work. A fourth audience included Americans who were confronted whenever ACT UP sponsored a public action, such as passers-by who could not drive home when ACT UP stopped traffic.

¹¹This float illustrates how ACT UP events can often be read with many layers of meaning. The float obviously can be categorized as "camp"—an illustration of the gay political and aesthetic sensibility, but the float actually depicts a quarantine *camp*. ACT UP members on the float wore t-shirts with the signature pink triangle which represents the color of the arm patches worn by Jewish gays and lesbians in World War II German concentration *camp*s.

¹²Another way to explain this phenomenon is provided by Josh Gamson (1989). He argues that ACT UP put itself in a difficult situation both by affirming and denying that most of its members were gay or lesbian. In order to remind audiences that anyone can get AIDS, the group stressed the heterogeneity of their membership, yet they enhanced the persuasiveness of their message by highlighting societal discrimination against gays and alternatively described themselves as a gay organization.

¹³Burroughs-Wellcome pharmaceutical company was the target of a number of ACT UP actions due to the company's exorbitant pricing of AZT, the only AIDS drug on the market for many years. ACT UP accused the company of obscenely profiting from the medical crisis by charging more than \$10,000 for a year's prescription. Members of ACT UP met privately with the company and tried to "negotiate a price cut; in April, they'd invaded the company's North Carolina offices, barricading themselves and doing some impromptu redecorating with drills and chain saws (they paid for the damage immediately afterward). . . . Representatives of ACT UP and fifteen other AIDS groups again met with Burroughs—this time at a safe distance from its offices—to no avail. ACT UP responded by calling for a nationwide boycott of Burroughs products, which include the cold remedies Actifed and Sudafed, and by sticking AIDS PROFITEER labels on the company's products on store shelves" (Handelman, 1990, pp. 80, 82). ACT UP's New York Stock Exchange protest was the action that finally put enough pressure on the company. One week after ACT UP's protest, Burroughs-Wellcome stock dropped in value by 20% (Calendo, 1992). Just weeks later, the company reduced the cost of AZT to \$6,400 a year and claimed that they had "been planning to do so all along" (Handelman, 1990, p. 82).

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