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The trauma of AIDS then and now: Kushner's *Angels in America* on the stage and small screen

ABSTRACT

Although Tony Kushner's 2003 HBO miniseries adaptation of Angels in America was largely faithful to the original theatrical production, the miniseries failed to achieve the same power. What makes Kushner's play Angels so important, and what makes it stand out from most of the other early 1990s works concerning AIDS, is the idea that Angels (particularly the theatrical version) bears witness to the AIDS crisis by deploying disruptive narrative strategies, including the refusal of the typical downward spiral from diagnosis to death, the wildly varying tone even in moments of death, and various meta-fictional elements, to name a few. This article argues that the miniseries of Angels, on the other hand, even though it is a relatively close adaptation that was, in fact, written by Kushner himself, is not successful in deploying these strategies and thus does not bear witness to the collective trauma of AIDS to nearly the degree that its source material does; the tone of the miniseries is much more even and consistent and most of the meta-fictional elements have been eliminated. In part, this failure of connection can be attributed to the respective eras in which each version of Angels was produced; while in the early 1990s AIDS was still actively devastating the American gay community, by 2003, when the HBO version was released, AIDS was largely perceived as no longer an American problem

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since science had created drugs that made living with AIDS possible. The traumatic and ongoing reality of the early 1990s had become, by 2003, largely a matter for nostalgia. Thus, while many of the words, scenes and characters are shared between play and miniseries, the dynamic of battling an ongoing crisis vs remembering a trauma of the past results in very different cultural documents.

Although Tony Kushner's 2003 HBO adaptation of his own two-part play *Angels in America*, first written and produced in the theatre in the early 1990s, was largely faithful, the miniseries of *Angels* did not have the same kind of impact. If it were possible to say in 1990, nine years into the AIDS epidemic, 'that virtually every form of art or entertainment in America has been touched by AIDS', such was no longer the case in 2003; on the 25th anniversary of the first AIDS cases, American cultural and aesthetic production seems to have forgotten AIDS (Goldstein 1990: 295). Since the 'protease moment', in which Dr David Ho announced the first stunningly successful treatments using protease inhibitors at the International AIDS Conference in Vancouver in 1996, the death toll in America has been decreasing and groups like ACT UP have fallen to their own internal struggles and schisms.

Although the disease is clearly still taking a toll, particularly among women, the poor and minorities, the sense in American culture is that AIDS has become a matter for other countries, particularly African and Asian countries, and as such is much less pressing an issue in the United States. Gone are the ubiquitous red ribbons that were so prevalent in the early 1990s. The miniseries version of *Angels* is thus not amplifying an urgent message already in the culture but is, along with the 2005 release of a film version of *Rent*, one of the very few American cultural productions of the early 2000s that takes AIDS as a main subject. Claire Laurier Decoteau argues that the erasure of AIDS in the public sphere, including in mass media, 'has induced a kind of cultural forgetfulness' that helps mask how the government, the mass media, medical institutions and the pharmaceutical industry helped sustain 'blaming and stigmatizing discourses, exclusionary practices and rituals, and wide-scale economic disenfranchisement' (2008: 241). Such cultural amnesia, Decoteau asserts, serves an ideological purpose of 'absolv[ing] those responsible for the unjust treatment of people living with HIV/AIDS. The public is then able to repress its own complicity in the trauma of AIDS through distancing schemas that shift the blame' to the afflicted themselves (2008: 241). Tellingly, in her single mention of *Angels in America*, she indicts both the play and the miniseries for their complicity in popularizing and perpetuating an inaccurate portrait of people living with AIDS that was current in the 1980s but is no longer accurate and which thus helps render people with AIDS invisible (Decoteau 2008: 241). Indeed, the very distancing strategies that Decoteau notes help the public refuse to acknowledge their role have their corollary in the distancing strategies used by the miniseries in order to help make the HBO *Angels* into a expensive, special effects-laden, 'quality television' spectacle with a full complement of movie stars that eulogizes AIDS without ever antagonizing or challenging the public to recognize the continuing invisibility of people with AIDS even in the wake of the popular and critically acclaimed miniseries. The eager consumption of the miniseries by a mass audience ironically participates in the perpetuation of the misrecognition and invisibility of AIDS sufferers.

With its insistence on 'Reagan's America' and its clear setting in the mid-1980s, the miniseries of *Angels* AIDS content can seem retrospective, in a 'see how far we've come' way rather than a 'see how much work we have to do' way. Indeed, the cultural moment of the play was one of immense optimism as the Cold War had ended and the Berlin Wall had finally fallen. The miniseries of *Angels*, as a cultural artefact from the early 2000s, is a monument to an accepted trauma that is perceived to have passed while the play bore witness to the at-that-time ongoing crisis. Furthermore, in 2003, America – which was still dealing with the crisis of 9/11 and the run up to the invasion of Iraq – was in a much different political and emotional place.

What makes Kushner's *Angels* so important and what makes it stand out from most of the other early 1990s works concerning AIDS is the fact that *Angels* bears witness to the AIDS crisis by deploying several disruptive strategies identified by R. Hallas (2002) in his work on queer video. In a study of textual and cultural representations of AIDS, Hallas distinguishes between what he terms 'dominant' or 'mainstream' representations and non-dominant representations that bear witness to AIDS through a number of strategies that interrupt 'particular media conventions, genres, and dynamics' (2002: 5). He goes on to assert that texts that bear witness to AIDS must 'negotiate between the imperative to bear witness as directly as possible and the need to interfere with the discursive structures of mass mediated representations which function to silence, to objectify, or to pathologize through their ideology of realist transparency' (Hallas 2002: 5–6).

Likewise, A. Juhasz (1995), in her book on alternative television and AIDS, agrees that there is a vibrant television and video alternative to broadcast television, which in her mind includes cable networks. She argues that these alternative productions are needed to 'counter the (mis)information about AIDS' presented on broadcast television, which is standardized, regulated, profit-driven and oriented to a mass audience (Juhasz 1995: 2). The miniseries of *Angels* does not fit into either Hallas's terms, which focus on disruptive strategies that mark non-dominant AIDS video, nor does it fit into Juhasz's terms, which would rule it out as alternative AIDS television because of its need to attract a mass audience to justify its huge production budget. The miniseries of *Angels*, produced in 2003, is best understood as an adaptation that not only has similarities and differences with its source play, both in terms of responses to AIDS and in media as well, but which also responds to a much different cultural moment than did its source material.

I agree with Hallas that works that bear witness to trauma must move beyond emotional catharsis and instead strive to create new cultural space to see and hear abject subjectivities and consider the collective responsibility for dealing with trauma. However, unlike Hallas' positive examinations of some non-dominant AIDS videos, I argue that the HBO miniseries version of *Angels*, even though it is a relatively close adaptation that was, in fact, written by Kushner himself, is not successful in deploying these strategies and thus does not bear witness to the collective trauma of AIDS to nearly the degree that its source material does. In part, this is because of the timing of the two versions; while in the early 1990s AIDS was still actively devastating the American gay community, by 2003, when the HBO version was released, AIDS was largely perceived and no longer an American problem since doctors and scientists had created drugs that made living with AIDS possible. What was traumatic and ongoing when the play was first written and produced in the early 1990s had become, by 2003, largely a matter for not only nostalgia and sentiment

but also displacement; HBO executive Colin Callender noted that 'After [the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001,] and given all that's happened in Afghanistan and Iraq and the Middle East, AIDS also becomes a metaphor for those difficult, tragic things we can't control' (quoted in Edgerton 2008: 146).

In terms of an adaptation from a theatre text to a television text, Hallas' insights resonate with the difference between epic theatre's comfort with Brechtian alienation and television's desire to engage audience members' emotions. Kushner's play, clearly in the epic theatre camp, refuses to allow the audience to lose itself 'passively and completely' in the characters and emotions and instead uses a number of techniques to jolt the audience into recognizing the artificiality of the play and thus becoming a 'consciously critical observer' (Brecht 1964: 91). The miniseries, however, deletes or minimizes most of these strategies and instead often allows the audience to become absorbed in the emotion of the characters and situations. The miniseries avoided any attempt to replicate the Brechtian alienation of epic theatre through counter-cinema techniques like those theorized by Peter Wollen. Wollen's pairing of dominant cinema techniques and counter-cinema responses engage some of these same issues; for instance, whereas the miniseries follows dominant cinema conventions including narrative transitivity and straightforwardness, identification with characters, and pleasure, the play would seem more amenable to counter-cinema tendencies like narrative intransitivity (gaps, ellipses, disjunction, episodic structure), estrangement from characters and provocation (2004: 525–527).

The miniseries, however, avoided counter-cinema strategies that might have more closely replicated the disruptive strategies of the play. Thus, unlike the alternative AIDS television and video explored by Juhasz, the *Angels* miniseries, despite the massive budget and big-name stars like Al Pacino and Meryl Streep, has more in common with broadcast television programmes, whether John Erman's television movie *An Early Frost*, from 1985, or a 2005 episode of *Without a Trace* that features a missing HIV+ pregnant woman, all of which focus on familiar tropes of melodrama.

While the miniseries version retains much of the content and dialogue of the play, the miniseries can be read nonetheless much less disruptive of dominant AIDS discourses of the time than the play and that these limitations restrict its ability to bear witness to AIDS. This is largely due to changes in the miniseries that even out the tone, minimize the irony and reduce the use of humour as a way to deflate moments of high emotion and drama. Likewise, the presence of movie stars known for their award-winning performances (and, in Pacino's case, for his portrayals of over-the-top hegemonic masculinity) give the miniseries an aura of respectable 'quality television', which lessens the political and experimental qualities of the play. In addition to these changes, though, technology intrudes in the form of the camera and visual effects and this changes the narrative at least as much as the additions, deletions and changes of words and lines. This use of technology encourages what Hallas terms objective distanciation, which keeps viewers at a distance rather than encouraging active engagement with the materials, as the play did. When representing AIDS, it is imperative that distanciation is minimized in order to contest the dominant narratives surrounding AIDS at the time which encouraged viewers to see the person with AIDS as other. Dominant AIDS narratives encourage audiences to engage emotionally rather than intellectually or politically, focus on the family rather than the person with AIDS and emphasize familial reconciliation rather than political acceptance.

Even at HBO, known for stylish, innovative and edgy original programming, *Angels* stands out as 'one of the most ambitious and celebrated productions' in the history of the company, but the pomp and budget of this prestige production made a more conservative and nostalgic tone all but inevitable (Edgerton 2008: 135). In addition, the emphasis on special effects shots alongside the use of technology to digitally erase the wires in the miniseries – which Kushner specifically noted in his stage directions should show – helps eliminate the meta-fictional element that refuses audience identification and instead works towards audience engagement. Richard Edlund, most known for his Academy Award-winning work on the special effects in popular blockbusters like the original *Star Wars* films (1977, 1980, 1983) and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), was hired 'to add more than four hundred effects shots' (Edgerton 2008: 139). Despite laudatory comments from reviewers that emphasized the 'bold' and 'theatrical' tone of *Angels*, HBO's 'prime proviso' to acquire movie stars, the insistence that *Angels* be a television event, and the \$60 million production budget all mitigated against an experimental or avant-garde approach to the materials (quoted in Edgerton 2008: 138). The content of both versions of *Angels* disrupts dominant AIDS narrative conventions of the mid-1990s, although the play also actively addresses audiences and reduces distanciation, while the miniseries discourages such involvement through technological intervention.

Hallas notes that in works that successfully bear witness to AIDS, 'conventions are not rejected and erased but invoked, disrupted, and interrogated', which definitely describes both versions of *Angels*, although the play is much more forceful and effective than the miniseries in doing so (2002: 12). As T. E. Yingling notes, the task in the first decade of the AIDS crisis was to 'wrest from dominant culture the wholly negative if not annihilative representation of HIV infection and AIDS, and to construct in its stead a discourse of empowerment, meaning, and possibility' (1997: 22).

One way to accomplish this task is to disrupt the narrative conventions that dictate the disempowering views of people with AIDS. One of the most consistent tropes of dominant AIDS representations of the late 1980s through the mid-1990s was the seemingly inevitable downward spiral of diagnosis, sickening and death, which both versions of *Angels* interrupt in several ways. Both parts of the work end by invoking new beginnings rather than the final ending of death, and thus deny the convention of decline. In the mid-1990s, when the play was performed most frequently, this was a radical affirmation in the face of a disease that was still often fatal and capable of creating despair; the scientific community was still projecting huge numbers of infections and deaths. Optimism itself is disruptive of cultural expectations of AIDS narratives of the time, although, to be sure, it was a more radical gesture in the early 1990s than now. Both versions of *Angels* end with Prior doing well, out and about, and living with AIDS for over five years – a kind of narrative suspension that refuses closure.

Although both versions have content that disrupt the standard story of decline and death, the play is more forceful in its disruption of this convention. The end of Act 3 finds Prior dancing with an apparently spectral Louis who is actually elsewhere. This moment marks one of the major differences between the play and the miniseries. In the miniseries, once the spectral Louis vanishes, Prior falls. This is a choice because the stage directions indicate the opposite; the final stage directions state 'Louis vanishes. Prior dances alone. Then, suddenly, the sound of wings fills the room' (Kushner 1993, 114). This

is a significant difference between the two versions. By having Prior collapse when Louis vanishes, the film indicates that Prior is not strong enough to stand on his own. The stage directions for the play, on the other hand, note that Prior continues dancing alone, which would indicate that, despite the difficulty, he is learning to manage without Louis, which is indeed what he must do at the end of the play. The miniseries again lessens, without eliminating altogether, the most radical elements of the play: Prior's speech about becoming citizens still rings true by the end although it is not supported, as it is in the play, by a subtle development of strength through the final sections. The sense of defiance, identified by M. Aaron (2004) as one of the hallmarks of New Queer Cinema, which is present in the play, is absent from the miniseries. In many ways, the play is more in line with the sensibilities of New Queer Cinema, which Aaron notes cannot 'be removed from the context of the AIDS epidemic', than the miniseries, because of the time frame of each (2004: 6).

Prior's strength continues to the very end of the first part of the play. The final scene of *Millennium* (T. Kushner, 1993) involves Prior coming face to face with the Angel who breaks through his roof at the very end of the first part. Although Prior is in bed during this meeting and though he is clearly shaken and afraid, he is not cringing or submissive, which will become much more clear in the second part of the play, as Prior refuses to give in to the Angels' mandate to stop moving. In bed, his ceiling in ruins around him, Prior gathers himself to confront this new challenge; he tells himself to 'find the anger', reassures himself of his august lineage, and declares defiantly 'I can handle pressure, I am a gay man and I am used to pressure, to trouble, I am tough and strong and [...]' (1: 117). As the Angel breaks through the ceiling, Prior whispers his final line in the first part of the play in an awestruck voice 'God almighty [...] Very Steven Spielberg' (1: 118). These final moments demonstrate Prior's courage, strength, humour and resilience in the face of overwhelming, fantastic, frightening events. Having Prior dance on his own immediately before this scene makes sense as a way to demonstrate Prior's increasing ability to cope without Louis. In fact, even before Louis leaves, Kushner makes it clear that Prior is the strong one who comforts and shelters Louis; when Louis complains that Prior does not tell him the reality of his health, Prior replies 'you get too upset, I wind up comforting you. It's easier...' (1: 39). Prior's strength is demonstrated throughout, even as the disease obviously takes a heavy toll on him; Prior suffers and worsens, but he is still capable and courageous in the face of his hardships.

Alongside Prior's humour, strength and survival, other aspects of these final moments also can be read as interruptive strategies that disrupt generic and conventional expectations. Often, the teleological structure of dominant AIDS representations that charts the patient's deterioration mandates that sexuality has no place in the lives of AIDS patients. *Philadelphia* (Demme, 1994), for instance, was widely criticized by gay critics and audiences for showing Andrew Beckett and his lover Miguel Alvarez, played by Tom Hanks and Antonio Banderas, respectively, sharing only a dance and a rather chaste kiss. Even before the illness had progressed, the film declined to show any sexual feelings or romantic interludes between the two. Mainstream media are still reluctant to show overt homosexuality (although cable shows have pushed the envelope in particular programmes like HBO's *Queer as Folk* or Showtime's *The L Word*) and thus occlude or erase the sexuality that mainstream media nevertheless view as at the heart of the AIDS epidemic (although the reality that AIDS knows no boundaries was scientifically known early on). In order

to build empathy and identification, mainstream media seem to believe that overt homosexuality must be omitted.

In contrast, Kushner ends the play with Prior experiencing intense sexual feeling as well. Kushner ends *Millennium Approaches* with Prior being overcome by an 'intense sexual feeling' (1: 117) and then begins *Perestroika* (T. Kushner, 1994) with the continuation and elaboration of the sexual encounter between Prior and the Angel. Thus, rather than sex and sexuality dwindling and declining as the illness progresses, Prior sickens but then recovers a bit and has the most overt, passionate physical sex in the play right at the transition between Parts I and II. Not only do both versions of *Angels* foreground homosexuality – including overt depiction of homosexual sex between Louis and the man in the park – but also include queer sex between Prior and the Angel. Elsewhere in the culture, the idea of gay men engaging in sex was seen as dangerous and possibly duplicitous; *Angels* celebrates the fact that Prior can still be revitalized by sexual feeling.¹

Despite his emphasis on Prior's continuing sexuality and its energizing effects, Kushner does not shy away from describing the physical toll taken on Prior's body. He reveals his diagnosis to Louis in Scene 4 in Act 1 and he does deteriorate over the next several acts of the play. Four scenes later, Prior tells Louis that 'it's not going well' and then lists his afflictions: 'two new lesions. My leg hurts. There's protein in my urine, the doctor says, but who knows what the fuck that portends. Anyway it shouldn't be there, the protein. My butt is chapped from diarrhea and yesterday I shat blood' (1: 39). After this litany, Prior says that he finds Louis's view of justice – that for Jews 'it's not the verdict that counts, it's the act of judgment' (1: 38) – comforting because, 'while time is running out I find myself drawn to anything that's suspended, that lacks an ending' (1: 42). Prior's desire for suspension is not simply avoidance of an ending, but of the allegedly inevitable ending of early and horrible death.

In addition to denying the usual teleology of decline and death, Kushner ends Part I with Prior's ironic exclamation, 'Very Steven Spielberg' (118). Even at the moment of greatest spectacle and most overt use of effects, Kushner employs irony to deflate the Angel and the drama of the moment. Kushner employs humour throughout the play, which is in itself an interruptive strategy that helps create a different tone from most dominant AIDS representations. Humour is not simply included at intervals in order to provide relief from the heavy drama but is instead integral to the drama and suffering. Again, *Philadelphia* is an illustrative contrast. *Philadelphia* maintains a somber mood throughout, creating empathy and identification with Andrew Beckett in order to induce a catharsis at his (expected) death at the end of the film. As Beckett sickens, he shares his love of opera with his lawyer Joe Miller, played by Denzel Washington. Opera is an appropriate reference in this film, which shares its melodramatic, tragic intensity. Indeed, during this scene, while Beckett plays his favourite aria, 'La Mamma Morta' from Act III of the Italian opera *Andrea Chenier* by Umberto Giordano, for Miller, the lighting, which is otherwise very realistic and conventional, changes. The lighting changes to red and becomes very low key, which heightens the contrast between light and shadow. The life-and-death drama, indeed tragedy, which the film explores, finds a useful echo in opera as indicated through the expressive lighting and intense emotion of this scene.

In contrast, *Angels* as a play undercuts any tragic or melodramatic elements through humour and absurdity and thus refuses the tragic mode and teleological progression to death, although this is much less true of the miniseries. At the

1. For instance, there were several urban legends involving PWAs deliberately infecting others. Snopes.com, an online compendium of urban legends, lists several concerning AIDS.

2. For a more in-depth discussion of the production processes that literally erased the wires from the miniseries, see M. Goldman (2003).

end of *Millennium Approaches*, as the Angel breaks through the ceiling, the stage directions indicate 'There is a great blaze of triumphal music, heralding. The light turns an extraordinary harsh, cold, pale blue, then a rich, brilliant warm golden color, then a hot, bilious green, and then finally a spectacular royal purple. Then silence' (1: 118). As in *Philadelphia*, the lighting changes to spectacular, non-realistic filtered low-key lighting in order to indicate emotional intensity. However, unlike in *Philadelphia*, *Angels* as a play undercuts and refuses any tragic or melodramatic elements through irony and absurdity, although this is much less true of the miniseries. Prior's Steven Spielberg line is a prime example of this act of humorous deflation; Kushner calls attention to the special effects, thus undercutting the effect through a meta-fictional move. Rather than peppering the play with overtly meta-fictional elements, Kushner makes this one of the few instances of such a move; thus, through its unusualness and placement at the very end of the play, Kushner again disrupts the expectations set up by the rest of the play. By eliminating the line and thus entirely omitting this meta-fictional element, the miniseries eliminates this deflation of the special effects, which serves to again moderate the tone rather than disrupt it. While Kushner asserts that the special effects in the play are supposed to be 'bits of wonderful theatrical illusion - which means it's OK if the wires show, and maybe it's good that they do', this is clearly not the case in the miniseries, in which great pains were taken to digitally erase the wires (1: 5).² Furthermore, by allowing the moment to stand as one of awe instead of deflating the effects and tone, the miniseries downplays not only Prior's resiliency and humour in the face of the Angel but also encourages distancing in that the viewer is marvelling at the gorgeous effects.

Kushner's extensive use of humour and irony alongside tragedy and drama is an important tactic in the play that interrupts dominant strategies for representing AIDS and marks the play as bearing witness to the crisis by refusing a consistent tone and rejecting a teleological trajectory. The tone of the miniseries, however, is much more consistent than that of the play and this is another aspect in which the radical possibilities of the play are contained and minimized in the miniseries. Again, the absence of consistency in tone is a disruptive strategy that Kushner employs to interrupt normative generic plotment that determines the outcome of the story (decline and death) and the reaction elicited (cathartic closure). Kushner refuses these conventional trajectories in order to break out of the already-determined arc of AIDS narratives which, as Hallas (2002) notes, encourage distancing. One example of the miniseries evening out the tone of the play can be seen in Roy's hospital room, after he has died. Belize asks Louis to recite the Kaddish for Roy. In the course of trying to convince Louis, Belize gives one of the most profound speeches of the play, in which he discusses forgiveness and justice:

He [Roy] was a terrible person. He died a hard death. So maybe [...] A queen can forgive her vanquished foe. It isn't easy, it doesn't count if it's easy, it's the hardest thing. Forgiveness. Which is maybe where love and justice finally meet. Peace, at least. Isn't that what the Kaddish asks for?

(2: 122)

When Louis replies, 'Oh it's Hebrew who knows what it's asking?' Kushner inserts a footnote that explains 'I know, I know, it's not Hebrew, it's Aramaic, but for the sake of the joke...' (2: 122). Again, as in the examples above,

Kushner uses humour to deflate the tone of high drama and emotion. As with the example of meta-fiction discussed above, this is particularly interruptive because this is the first footnote and it appears in the last few pages of the play. Rather than sprinkle footnotes throughout, Kushner waits until the end, during one of the most intense, climatic scenes of the play, to use his first and only footnote. Although it would be easy to replicate the Author's Note, which was done in some theatrical productions with a blackout and a suspended screen, with the footnote printed on an intertitle, the HBO version omits the Author's Note altogether and the scene retains its somber tone. This is another example of the miniseries excising some of the interruptive material, even though it would have been a simple matter to replicate the moment via the long-standing televisual convention of the intertitle.

The stage and HBO versions of *Angels* differ not only in content and structure, but also in how their respective media enables some approaches to the material while shutting down other approaches, which again serves to lessen the ability of the miniseries to interrupt dominant representational strategies and thus bear witness to AIDS. The use of a camera necessitates framing as well as editing, which dramatically modifies how the material is or can be presented. Although the sense of the centrality of gay men and AIDS is preserved in the miniseries, the technology used by the miniseries undercut the impact of the play's material in several places, resulting in a much less disruptive AIDS text. Hallas argues that non-dominant, queer AIDS representations that bear witness to the epidemic do so by resisting the objectifying distanciation that is facilitated by visual media. These queer media-makers, he argues, foster an intersubjective relationality by interrupting and subverting dominant media conventions, genres and dynamics. Theatrical performance bypasses some of these difficulties through its very form; live actors sharing a space with live audience members. Unlike film, live theatre discourages objective distanciation because there is less mediation (although theatre is still media, thus still mediated) than in film; there is no camera or editing, both of which frame, shrink, cut, etc. Part of the power of *Angels* on the stage is its dramatization, in the insistent and immediate present tense of the stage, of the suffering of AIDS, without the distancing effects of camera work or editing (although of course there are theatre techniques that can produce similar effects).

In addition to the tone of the miniseries being significantly different from the play, the use of the camera, particularly in the opening credits sequences, encourages objective distanciation rather than works against it. The miniseries opens with the camera soaring over America, from the West coast eastwards, over the Golden Gate Bridge, through cities of the Midwest (St. Louis and Chicago, among others) to New York City, where the camera floats downward to the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park. The camera glides at high altitude over the entire country, soaring through cloud cover while soothing orchestral music plays. The credits appear as glowing golden letters swooping upwards through the pure white clouds. The tone of the opening is removed, certainly not the tone of a crisis; the high altitude suggests distance – literally altitude over the problems of the earth and its inhabitants – and angelic calm. The golden letters imbue the names with celestial tinges. This is certainly not the tone of the opening of the play, which begins with an invocation of grief as Louis and Prior attend Louis' grandmother's funeral, after which Prior reveals his Kaposi's sarcoma lesion, one of the most familiar signals of the early stages of AIDS in media representations of all sorts. Indeed, the necessity of opening

3. This is not a hard and fast rule; comedies often break this convention of avoiding direct address to humorous effect. For instance, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986) broke this convention repeatedly throughout the film. Also, television sitcoms sometimes will break this convention as well, including *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000–2006), which was built on the lead character's extensive commentary on the goings on via direct address to the camera. Clearly, these examples are vastly different from *Angels*, which only demonstrates the disruptive nature of Kushner's use of such a device in a narrative about the AIDS crisis.

credits that appear before any action is a televisual requirement that literally defers the opening action and solely is concerned with tone and ambience, unlike the play, which begins with Sarah Ironson's funeral at the moment the curtain goes up and which plunges the audience into mourning.

Another strategy that Kushner uses in the play that is avoided in the miniseries is direct address to the audience. Theatre has long incorporated direct address to the audience, in the forms of asides and monologues, both of which are typically shunned in fictional television programmes or filmic narratives. Unlike documentary films, which often use 'talking heads' extensively, or television news, in which the anchors and reporters speak directly to the camera, television dramas and fictional films have a long-standing convention of avoiding direct address to the camera.³ While Kushner does use direct address in the miniseries, it appears only once, at the very end. In the final scene, Prior gives the 'we will be citizens' speech in a direct address to the camera but, because of its placement at the very end, its impact is minimized as it serves as a lead out of the miniseries rather than a disruptive device throughout. Kushner, however, uses direct address much differently in both parts of the play in order to interrupt conventional generic expectations.

In addition to the Author's Note discussed above, the opening scene of Louis' grandmother's funeral also involves direct address to the audience and, through this device, the play constructs the audience as members of Louis' family. This scene in the miniseries, although it retains the content and dialogue, uses extras, who do not appear again. The Rabbi speaks to them while avoiding looking directly at the camera, as televisual convention requires. This is a significant difference in that the play literally opens by implicating the audience and constructing them as involved in the events, rather than fostering objective distanciation, as the miniseries does. The camera plays across the faces of the extras – who will not be seen again in the film – as the Rabbi calls the names of the surviving family members. In the theatre, as the Rabbi calls the numerous names of the surviving children and grandchildren, the names could refer to anyone in the audience and, indeed, it is quite likely that, somewhere in each audience, someone shares a name with the relatives named by the Rabbi: Lisa, Maria, Lesley, Angela, Eric, etc. Furthermore, the miniseries includes stock footage and archival photographs of immigrants arriving at Ellis Island, which again serves to distance the members of the audience from the events.

Prior's campy drag and pop cultural references and the 'significant parallels' found between Kushner's work and that of Tennessee Williams, the 'theater's angel of sexuality', result in a play that synthesizes European and American theatrical traditions (Fisher 2006: 66). Alongside his deployment of Brechtian epic theatre, Kushner explores the very heart of the American experience which nevertheless calls on continental philosophy. Kushner finds both a central image of the angel of history and a grounding for his exploration of historical drama in Walter Benjamin's (whose given name serves as Prior's surname) 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (Fisher 2006: 6). As David Savran notes, Benjamin's angel of history is the 'generative fiction' of Kushner's plays and results in the contradictory depiction of the 'ideas of history, progress, and paradise' (1997: 17). Such contradictory portrayals of concepts basic to American self-conception are another way that Kushner makes it impossible to reduce complexities to well-worn narratives of identity and self and thus unsettle understandings of not only the catastrophe of AIDS but the whole of history.

I do not wish to imply that television is incapable of creating complex and responsible representations of cultural trauma. Like mainstream film, which is often constrained by financial and industry demands, television is limited by its production context. Even on cable channels like HBO and Showtime, there is an economic imperative to attract as many viewers as possible, particularly in relation to large budget, star studded and special-effects-laden products like the Nichols' *Angels* (2003) miniseries. Again like film, the higher the budget, the less welcome are experimental or innovative techniques, which are crucial to creating nuanced visual representations of cultural trauma. While the miniseries was critically and commercially successful and HBO is certainly welcoming to gay material – having shown some of the earliest AIDS films and documentaries, including both *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt* (1989) and *And the Band Played On* (1993) – it was unable to successfully translate the cultural trauma depicted so successfully by the stage version of *Angels in America*.

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