***United in Anger: A History of ACT UP* (2012)**

**Film background/summary:** *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP* is a documentary directed by Jim Hubbard and produced by Hubbard and Sarah Schulman. The film chronicles the efforts of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), a grassroots activist network that used a variety of tactics to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS and challenge discriminatory and harmful practices by the federal government, the Catholic church, the media, etc. The documentary primarily addresses ACT UP's New York chapter's work from 1987-1996. The film relies on archival footage from ACT UP's direct actions, as well as from interviews that Hubbard and Schulman filmed and archived on their website, the [The ACT UP Oral History Project](http://www.actuporalhistory.org/). All told, Schulman and Hubbard conducted 187 interviews with ACT UP members for this oral history project in order to preserve the legacy of this activist movement. Schulman and Hubbard also created a [website](https://www.unitedinanger.com/) for the film, which has many helpful resources for additional reading.

**Content warning:** *United in Anger* contains extensive discussion of death, disease, and grief, and several images of dead bodies.

**Running time:** 55 min

**Notes:**

* This set of lesson plans focuses on the history of ACT UP and the intersection between film and activism. It does not include extensive discussion of what HIV/AIDS is, or about HIV transmission, testing, treatment, or prevention. However, students may have questions about all of these things. If you have time, you may want to build in an additional day to build knowledge about this topic. [The Body](https://www.thebody.com/health/hiv-aids) has useful resources on these topics. [I Wanna Know](http://www.iwannaknow.org/teens/sti/hiv_aids.html) also has valuable resources directed at youth audiences.
* Another film that covers some of the same ground as this film and makes use of the ACT UP Oral History Project and archival footage of ACT UP's direct actions is David France's 2012 film, *How to Survive a Plague.* This film is more well-known, but I thought it would be best to include a different perspective, since France also directed *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson. United in Anger* and *How to Survive a Plague* are fascinating to compare; while they make use of much of the same footage, France's documentary is more narrowly focused on actions targeting pharmaceutical developments and more prominently features the perspectives of white gay men; Hubbard's film represents a broader set of concerns that ACT UP raised and features interviews with more women and people of color. If you have time, you could extend this week's work by asking students to watch at least part of \*How to Survive a Plague\* (available on Netflix) and compare the different narratives and perspectives that these films present. If you choose to extend the unit in this way, you may want to also bring in Jih-Fei Cheng's article, "How to Survive: AIDS and Its Afterlives in Popular Media," which critiques France's film.
* You might consider the extent to which you want to help students understand the HIV/AIDS pandemic by comparing it to the covid-19 pandemic. On the one hand, this might be a valuable way to help students understand the complex, emotional experience of living through HIV/AIDS, and explore the similarities and differences between these two pandemics. On the other hand, if your students are grappling with trauma, these questions could be extremely difficult to discuss. You may even want to consider swapping out this entire film for another documentary, if you think this topic could be triggering for students. Some alternative choices are listed in the unit response assignment.
* I included a brief excerpt from the Afterword of Roger Hallas’ book for students to read prior to Day 1’s class. This could be cut, if you’d like to cut down the reading material this week. It is disconnected from this week’s close-reading scene, so that could easily be done without the reading.

**Materials for this week:**

* Lesson plans
* Screening quiz
* Secondary texts:
  + Day 1 (Optional): Hallas, Roger. *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image*. Durham, Duke UP, 2009. (Excerpt provided from "Afterword," pp. 241-247.
  + Day 2: Hallas, Roger. *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image.* Durham, Duke UP, 2009. (Excerpt provided from Chapter 2: "The Embodied Immediacy of Direct Action: Space and Movement in AIDS Video Activism")
  + Day 3: Juhasz, Alexandra. "Video Remains: Nostalgia, Technology, and Queer Archive Activism." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* Vol. 12, no. 2, 2006, pp. 319-328.

**Lesson 1 – Close Reading *United in Anger***

1. (7 min) Screening quiz.
2. (15 min) Student-led scene analysis on *United in Anger.*
3. (6 min) Start teacher-led scene analysis with screening clip. (St. Patrick’s Cathedral action, 35:15-41:52)

1. (6 min) Discussion prep.
2. What were the most important points in Hallas’ article? What evidence supported those points?

* *AIDS activists shared video resources that could be used and reused for a variety of purposes, and this was in important tool of activism: “AIDS video activists demonstrated a strong commitment to sharing resources and footage that could be reused and refunctioned in different tapes” (242); “It is the archival function of the new media ecology that has proven most valuable to queer AIDS media themselves. Video streamed virtual archives permit continued access to works without official distribution” (242)*
* *Formal experimentation of AIDS activists helped bear witness in a variety of ways and centered the perspectives of those who were marginalized: “Queer AIDS media developed a versatile array of formal techniques to reframe the discursive space of testimony in the service of securing effective acts of bearing witness. Their wide-ranging experimentation with the fundamental formal elements of moving-image media—cinematography/videography, editing, mise-en-scene, and sound—demonstrate the absence of a singular formal model for the queer moving image to bear witness to the AIDS crisis” (243).*
* *Current filmmakers who engage with AIDS media must generate new ways of engaging with AIDS visual media, and Hallas points to Hubbard and Schulman’s ACT UP Oral History Project Database as an example: “One of the principal challenges for queer media makers in the third decade of the pandemic has become how to reframe the archive of AIDS cultural activism in ways that generate new acts of bearing witness to the present moment of AIDS and the ongoing historical trauma and crisis it constitutes” (243).*
* *Hallas explains Schulman’s interest in creating an ACT UP Oral History archive, which stems from her hearing a problematic narrative of AIDS that erased the efforts of activists: “This narrative of moral education, which allows straight America to overcome its fear of people with AIDS, completely disavows the collective mobilization against AIDS by lesbians and gay men. To prevent such forgetting in the cultural memory of AIDS, Schulman worked with Hubbard to create an oral history of ACT UP” (243)*
* *Although the framing Schulman uses is a conventional “talking-heads” format, her digital archive carries the radical political vision of ACT UP: “”Whereas earlier queer AIDS media used formal experimentation to reframe the discursive space of the speech act itself, particularly the talking head, the ACT UP Oral History Project’s web site reframes the conventional screen interface….with their medium-long shot, head and shoulders framing, the actual talking heads are not themselves formally radical. Rather, it is the organization of the archive’s interface that embodies the radical ethos of ACT UP. Just like the group itself, this interface refuses to frame its participants in terms of hierarchy, role designation, or authorized expertise. Like the group’s meetings, it brings together ‘a diverse, non-partisan group of individuals” (244).*
* *Hallas explains Hubbard and Schulman’s relationship to ACT UP and process of interviewing: “Both being long-term members of ACT UP, Hubbard and Schulman are clearly insiders to the testimonial community they are interviewing…After every interview has been catalogued and transcribed, they meet to discuss the issues it has raised…This process of ongoing feedback and assessment allows Schulman to incorporate new questions into the subsequent interview as she and Hubbard discover previously unacknowledged issues in the group’s history…[which ensures] a commitment to exploring the complexity of the group’s political, social and psychological dynamics” (247).*

1. What does the scene we just watched help you understand about ACT UP?

* *This clip shows ACT UP’s collective nature and culture of disagreement. In the meeting before the action, and in the clip of Schulman from the day of the action and Wolfe years later, it is clear that ACT UP members did not agree in advance or afterwards about the strategies they should employ. While some members yelled from the pews, not everyone agreed with this action.*
* *The clip of Robert Hilferty, from meetings in advance of the action, shows the detail-oriented and organized approach to this action; ACT UP members pored over cathedral blueprints to plan their die-in. Hilferty also shows the fake program that contains their fact sheet; this is one of many examples of how ACT UP used graphic design to help spread their message.*
* *The clip of Ray Navarro (as part of the DIVA TV collective) showcases the irreverent style of some elements of ACT UP. While the challenges faced by Navarro and many other activists were matters of life and death, they injected their work with humor, camp, and irony.*

1. (15 min) Whole-class discussion.
2. What were the most important points in Hallas’ article? What evidence supported those points?
3. **Additional questions, if needed:** Review p. 242. What does Hallas say about “sharing resources?” How is this different from how the film industry typically works?
4. Review Hallas’ comment on p. 243 about “formal experimentation.” What is his claim here?
5. Review p. 243-244. How does Hallas describe Schulman and Hubbard’s Oral History Project? According to Hallas, how does the design of their website align to the spirit of ACT UP?
6. Review p. 247. How does Schulman and Hubbard’s interview process help them get a more complete and accurate picture of ACT UP?
7. What does the scene we just watched help you understand about ACT UP?
8. Consider the clips of ACT UP members disagreeing about how to approach this action in their meetings, and disagreeing about its impact. What does this help you understand about their decision-making structure?
9. Consider the blueprints and fake program shown in the section where Robert Hilferty speaks in a meeting. What does this show you about ACT UP?
10. Consider the clip of Ray Navarro, speaking in what Roger Hallas calls, “Jesus Christ drag.” What does this clip show you about the tone and spirit of ACT UP? What, if anything, surprises you about Navarro’s approach?
11. **If you have time and can project on screen**: Show students the [website](http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/index.html) Hubbard and Schulman created. How does the design support ACT UP’s project, as Hallas explains?
12. **Extension question**: In this clip, ACT UP members disagreed—before and after the church action—about strategy during the cathedral action. What do you think of the action? Do you think this was disrespectful and alienating, or attention-grabbing and effective?

*Answers may vary.*

1. **Extension question**: This is the only point in the film where Sarah Schulman, who is a producer of the film and curator of the ACT UP Oral History archive, actually appears? What’s the effect of including her at this moment? How does it help you understand her position as a filmmaker and an ACT UP participant? How might the film be different if she appeared as a voiceover track throughout the film, or appeared more consistently in interviews? How might it be different if she didn’t appear at all?

*As Hallas illustrates, Hubbard and Schulman were long-time ACT UP members, and this clip of Schulman from 1989 helps demonstrate that. Additionally, by including her in a moment in which she disagrees with other members, it highlights her and Hubbard’s resistance to presenting a single, controlling narrative about some of ACT UP’s most prominent conflicts. Although she is included here and shown as a participant, the film does not position her as a leader or as more important than the other members she chooses to document.*

**Lesson 2: Examining *United in Anger* alongside Chapter 2 of *Reframing Bodies***

1. (5 min) Personal reflection. Choose one question to respond to:
2. What did you learn about AIDS and activism in the 1980s and 1990s that you didn’t know beforehand?
3. What questions do you have about this movement or this time period?
4. What effect did this film have on you?
5. (7 min) Discuss.
6. (7 min) Screen today’s clip (17:22-21:17)

1. (15 min) Study groups.
2. What are the most important ideas in Hallas’ chapter?
3. How does the footage we just watched from the St. Patrick’s Cathedral demonstration support Hallas’ claims? What formal choices—made by the filmmakers who filmed the planning and demonstration, as well as by the filmmakers who created *United in Anger—*are connected to these claims?
4. (20 min) Whole class discussion.
5. What are the most important ideas in Hallas’ chapter?
6. How does the footage we just watched support Hallas’ claims? What formal choices—made by the filmmakers who filmed the planning and demonstration, as well as by the filmmakers who created *United in Anger—*are connected to these claims?
7. **Extension question:** This was one of ACT UP New York’s most controversial demonstrations. What is your opinion of the strategies the activists used?

**Lesson 3: Examining *United in Anger* Alongside “Video Remains”**

1. (5 min) Compare/contrast. Choose one question to respond to.
2. What connections can you identify between *United in Anger* and *Disclosure* or *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson?* In what ways do the formal elements or themes of these films differ? In what ways are they similar?
3. What similarities or differences do you notice between the HIV/AIDS pandemic, especially during the 1980s, and the covid-19 pandemic?
4. (7 min) Discuss.
5. (9 min) Screen today’s clip (Affinity groups: 21:30-30:23)
6. (15 min) Study groups.
   1. What is Juhasz’s claim in “Video Remains?” What evidence is most significant for her claim?

* *Video of Jim: Juhasz explains that a 1992 clip she has of her friend, Jim Lamb, who died of AIDS “cannot adequately represent” him fully, but it still carries some of him. She realized that she could “use this remnant to revisit Jim’s life and death, as well as that of AIDS activism and AIDS video activism” (319).*
* *Queer archive activism: She speaks of the video she made that uses footage of Jim and other recent footage, which she produced into a film called* Video Remains. *She argues that this film suggest the possibilities of “queer archive activism,” which offers the potential to “not merely get stuck in remembering AIDS images but rather to relodge those frozen memories in contemporary contexts so that they, and perhaps we, can be reanimated” (320).*
* *Combining nostalgia and video makes the personal loss collective and the loss potentially productive of new resources: Juhasz argues that nostalgia and video have some things in common. They are both “attempts to hold onto time, given its inevitable loss” (321). She also argues that “while nostalgia is typically understood as an emotion that is paltry and passive…when mixed with video, it has the potential to be substantial and productive” (321). Juhasz argues that when combining nostalgia and video, a filmmaker is able to present “a refiguring of time and feeling in response to personal losses in that doing so becomes collective and also potentially productive of new feelings and knowledge that might lead to action” (322).*
* *Duration trouble: Juhasz says that nostalgia is a kind of “duration trouble in that one defiantly wants something to endure that cannot and has not” (322).*
* *Nostalgia as collective mourning: Juhasz quotes Boym, who argues that “nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory” (322). Juhasz explains that in her own case, she feels nostalgia “not simply for a lost person, Jim Lamb, but more so for a lost, shared collective time and place: AIDS activism, New York City, late 1980s” (322).*
* *She argues that video is a solution to nostalgia: “Just as nostalgia is a duration trouble, video is a duration solution, in that it allows things to last. Unlike memory or fantasy, which are personal and subjective, video is collective and objective in that it is unchanging while also being a mutually verifiable record of things that once were, are no longer, but remain present through the form of its mechanical reproduction…Video lasts even if we have stopped talking about what it records. When we are ready to talk about it again, it is still there even as we change and AIDS changes. Video stays the same; it shows what was” (323). Juhasz quotes Sarah Schulman, who gives some insight into her interest in oral history collection: “When I am dead and gone, and the people that I interviewed are dead and gone, these tapes will still exist, so that someone later can use them to understand what happened” (323)*
* *Uses of queer archive activism: “Video as a duration solution stemming from nostalgia creates the possibility of collective action rather than individual stasis…Through making a video in 2004 about AIDS in 1992, I left my solitary, backward-looking circumstances and made them public and forward-looking through interviewing, screening and discussion. I made my mourning productive, collective, and interactive through video production, montage and reception” (326).*
* *Value of nostalgic video to the future social justice actions: “Video archives, production, editing and viewing can be necessary components of social justice movements that while rooted in nostalgia strive to ensure that remembered abuses will not happen in the present or future” (326).*
* *Expanded definition of “queer archive activism:” “A practice that adds love and hope to time and technology. Because we once loved, and recorded it, we have proof that we did and that others will. Because we lost but lived, we wihs to spare others this pain while we take pleasure in sharing its memory. We can use archival media to remember, feel anew, analyze and educate, ungluing the past from its melancholic grip and instead living it as a gift with others in the here and now” (326).*
* *Significance of affect/feeling in AIDS activism: “The tape enacts a queer practice by commingling history and politics with feelings, feelings of desire, love, hope or despair for both my videotape evidence and my anticipated audience” (326).*
* *Optimism through video production: “By making [our memories] public, I think we can make our mourning visible, and use this to produce something better for the future. The question certainly remains whether our grief is of use for other generations, and more important, whether another’s grief can inspire one’s own action” (327).*
* *Importance of action and community to continue the spirit of ACT UP in the 1980s: Juhasz closes her piece by pointing out that “We cannot make of this queer practice a sustained AIDS politics or art unless we also remake community. For it is unclear whether a politics can be sustained by nostalgia or even videotape. Alongside these feelings and machines, politics must have real people, in numbers, in the world, acting (up) together” (328).* 
  1. How does the clip we just watched relate to that claim? What formal choices did Hubbard make that are relevant to Juhasz’s claim?
* *Title cards with names and death years: This clip, although focused on the topic of affinity groups in ACT UP, is also a record of loss, since so many of the individuals in this clip have died, including Robert Garcia (1962-1993), Alydyn McKean (1948-1994), Danny Sotomayor (1958-1992), Jon Greenberg (1956-1993), and Luiz Salazar (1965-1992). Not everyone who speaks on a microphone is identified with a title card, so this is something Hubbard used to honor those who have died. This clip not only names these individuals and notes their untimely deaths, but showcases their personalities. The audience can particularly see Robert Garcia’s wry humor or Jon Greenberg’s charisma and connection with the audience. In this way, these clips turn “personal losses” into “collective” (322) losses, as the audience also feels the loss of these people, who were clearly powerful activists and interesting individuals.*
* *Queer archive activism: In addition, this clip is not merely a clip about mourning; it is also an instructional video about effective activism. The clip introduces affinity groups, shares some examples of the “affinities” that people rally around, shows groups practicing linking arms in ACT UP meetings, and shows their successful demonstration at the City Hall action. It speaks to the “collective time and place” (322) that Juhasz mourns, celebrates the legacy of these activists for the efforts the work they did, and provides a template for future activists about a strategy for direct action. Therefore, this clip can be used to “remember, feel anew, analyze, and educate, ungluing the past from its melancholic grip, and instread living it as a gift with others in the here and now” (326).*

1. (20 min) Whole class discussion.
   1. What is Juhasz’s claim in “Video Remains?” What evidence is most significant for her claim?
      1. Review p. 321-322. What does Juhasz say that nostalgia and video have in common? What happens when we combine them?
      2. Review p. 322. What does Juhasz mean by “duration trouble?”
      3. Review p. 320 and 326. What is “queer archive activism,” as Juhasz defines it?
      4. Review p. 327-328. How does Juhasz close her piece. What questions does she leave the reader with? What final claim does she make?
   2. How does the clip we just watched relate to that claim? What formal choices did Hubbard make that are relevant to Juhasz’s claim?
      1. What is the role of the title cards that include some activists’ names and years of life? What’s the effect of including those title cards? How does that relate to Juhasz’s article?
      2. Consider the clip’s illustration of the structure and function of affinity groups. How is this part of the film an example of “queer archive activism?”
   3. **Extension question:** Do you agree with Juhasz’ claim that “video stays the same…it shows what was” (323)? In what ways might video *not* stay the same?

*Answers may vary. Students may point out that both analog and digital formats may break down over time. (Many examples of this: a )VHS tapes degrade; b) DVD and VHS players become harder to find; c) I can’t play any clips from the ACT UP Oral History Archive on my computer because my computer is a Mac, and Quicktime is no longer supported by Macs.) Students may also point out that video doesn’t stay the same if you don’t have context for it; knowing who the people are in a video changes your impression of it, and as that context falls away, the video may lose meaning. They may also note that post-production editing changes how a video is understood or received.*

* 1. **Extension question:** Juhasz writes: “The question certainly remains whether our grief is of use for other generations, and more important, whether another’s grief can inspire one’s own action” (327). When considering her article, and the scenes we’ve examined in class this week, do you think the nostalgia, mourning, and memories of ACT UP activists can be productive for future generations? Why or why not?

*Answers may vary.*