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Trailers

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A VIRUS KNOWS NO MORALS

The look is grainy, ugly, and depressingly familiar. Clinical white light; skin that looks like skin, creases and blemishes and all; no shading, no warmth, no humanity. It's that old glaring, 40-watt-bulb realism, Rainer Werner Fassbinder-style. Remember how people in the '70s used to convince themselves they were having a good time at movies like this? The photography isn't merely unpleasant, it's an assault, and so is the dialogue — lines like "How can homosexuals — if you'll pardon the expression — fuck the face of death?" How can they indeed? That's the question that haunts *A Virus Knows No Morals*, a rude, cruddy, genuinely unsettling film from West Germany that is perhaps the first movie to confront AIDS — if you'll pardon the expression — head-on. The independent filmmaker Rosa von Praunheim has no use for easy melodrama or TV-movie platitudes. The courageous impulse behind his film is to explore what AIDS has meant in the gay community, in all its you-may-die-tomorrow horror. And the key to that horror (at least as the film sees it) is that a number of homosexuals are refusing to turn themselves into good little monogamous safe-sex clones. Having grown up in the cruising culture, they're continuing to screw around (without condoms), because screwing around is the one path to spiritual freedom they've ever known. They're fucking themselves to death and doing it with open eyes.

This is a grisly, subversive notion, and Praunheim means it to be. He himself plays the hero, a gay-sauna proprietor who's dying of the disease. His sorrowful, scary performance doesn't give viewers the easy out they got at *Parting Glances*, the likable gay comedy of manners in which an AIDS victim met his fate with starchy wit. If that character's patron saint was Katharine Hepburn, Praunheim's must be Joan Crawford — he doesn't smile through tears, he grimaces, with teeth bared.

As uncompromising as it is, *A Virus Knows No Morals* isn't finally a very good movie. Characters blurt out their feelings and then disappear into the fluorescent-lit woodwork. There are amateurishly staged musical numbers featuring a quintet of drag queens in various guises, and the film's women characters seem little more than hysterical projections of gay paranoia: there are satirical-erotic interludes with an insatiably horny vamp

who wants to forge a bizarre "new sexuality" between straight women and gay men, and also scenes with a monstrous female physician who thinks all homosexuals deserve to die. These scenes succeed at letting viewers giggle away their tension, but one can't help feeling that Praunheim is pulling his punches. (If homosexual filmmakers on the cutting edge could ever ditch their campy/arty/Brechtian distance, that might *truly* be liberating.) Still, for every easy laugh, this film produces several shudders. Praunheim has made an AIDS movie that dares to be more than a cautionary tale, a film that acknowledges how badly people want to fool around even as it urges them not to. His mixed message should prove chilling to everyone — gay or straight — in the audience. *At Copley Place.*

— Owen Gleiberman