

Silverlake Life: The View from Here
Peter Friedman (with Mark Massi and Tom Joslin)
99 minutes, film, video, 1993
Zeitgeist Films

Description

This 99-minute documentary chronicles the decline and death of a gay couple from AIDS. The film begins with an interview with Mark Massi poignantly recalling his lover, Tom Joslin. “The thing I remember most about Tom is what he feels like,” says Mark. “I was so used just being able to run into the other room and kiss him on the forehead and I can’t do that anymore.”

Against a mournful soundtrack of new age music, symbols of demise leftover medications, the setting sun, a television screen with the words “The End” printed beneath Tom’s video visage, linger in deliberate succession. The screen cuts to static, then to footage of ashes in an urn.

Returning to the interview, Mark recalls, “It was very scary to look at him after he died. It’s very strange to see a dead person staring. I tried just like in the movies to close the eyelid, but it doesn’t close. It pops back open! As I said to Tom, I apologized that life wasn’t like in the movies.”

Filmmaker Peter Friedman’s voice is heard next over images of boxes of films and videotapes stowed away in a storeroom. Friedman introduces himself as a former student of Tom’s from the mid-’70’s, and describes the events that led to the making of the film. “Tom asked me to finish it,” says the unseen Friedman, as his hands leaf through the script to the crew list page which reads: Peter Friedman, Editor, Videographer and (in case of health disaster) filmmaker. Friedman’s hand pops a cassette into the videotape deck, and the screen again turns briefly to static before Tom’s image returns. Holding the camera at waist level toward his own face, Tom says, “This is the first footage from the beginning of the first tape from Silverlake Life. I thought I’d show this to Mark.” The message is going to be clear. A heart-shaped graphic pops onto the screen surrounding Tom’s face, with the words “I love you” printed beneath. This image cuts to the film’s title page, Silverlake Life: The View from Here scrawled across the shadow of an emaciated head turning from front view to profile and back.

The shadow of the head cuts to an x-ray of the same, then to Tom on a hospital table undergoing a CAT scan. With camera in hand, Tom next films a trip into the local Thrifty Drug Store, where he has difficulty pulling a plastic trash can from the bottom of its large stack. Returning to his car in the parking lot, Tom has placed the camera on the dashboard and speaks to it: The simplest five-minute task, you have to go back to the car and lie down and rest. What a way to live, what a way to die. Next, Mark is seen lying on a table receiving treatment by a spiritual healer who chants, trembles and waves her hands across his body.

The following sequence begins in Tom’s home, where assistants are setting up video equipment to interview Tom and Mark about their relationship and illness. Tom identifies Mark as his lover of 22 years. He then relates how, after testing positive for the HIV virus six years earlier, he started looking for the disease’s telltale Kaposi’s Sarcoma spots on his body; now, streptococcus meningitis infects his brain. Next, Mark describes what it is like to tell people that he is ill, and how they begin treating him like he has the disease. From these clinical descriptions and the couple’s outward coping mechanisms, the mood changes to an intimate moment of Tom and Mark reclining on their couch at home, playfully watching themselves on the video monitor. Yet, even here, they cannot escape the disease’s advance, as Tom discovers a new Kaposi’s Sarcoma lesion on Mark’s eyelid.

Christmas time is announced by Tom's voice-over as the camera captures the retreating ground from his plane's window. The couple is flying to New Hampshire to spend the holiday with Tom's family, an event he approaches with anxiety. I was already sick, I was worried about the cold, he says over aerial views, and they were also worried that I had started to make this tape again, because literally fifteen years ago I had made a movie about being gay and growing up gay and it was asking a lot of them at the time. The movie Tom references is his earlier film *Blackstar: Autobiography of a Close Friend*, an aggressive exercise in documenting his coming out process and announcing his relationship with Mark. Against the same mournful soundtrack in *Silverlake's* opening sequence, a scene of Tom applying make-up to his facial lesions in the plane's bathroom mirror undulates to the black-and-white title shot of *Blackstar*, where a young, long-haired, mustachioed Tom is filming himself in a full-length mirror.

The militant voice of the following seven-and-a-half minute *Blackstar* sequence provides a patent contrast to the meditative and intimate tone of *Silverlake Life*. It begins with black-and-white footage of Tom standing in the woods, holding a microphone, relating his reasons for making the film. In tones typical of raw '70's gay activism, he describes his methods of concealing his homosexuality: You learn to lie pretty well, he says to the camera, and I'm tired of lying so I make this film. Next, Mark addresses the camera to Tom's off-screen urging, introducing himself as Mark Massi your lover. Over grainy footage and black-and-white stills of the two men, Mark describes how the two men fell in love. Another in-the-mirror shot of cameraman Tom pulls back to reveal his mother in her living room describing in detail her memory of his telling her he is a homosexual. Tom's father is filmed standing outside, ranting that Tom's homosexuality is awful and that it embarrasses him. Over an image of Mark above with the words What about Mark? Tom voices that question to his mother, and she replies, I don't know how frank I should be about this, Tom, while his father responds Your 'married life,' shall we say it doesn't seem quite normal to us to the normal people. I think he resents a great deal about me, says Tom's mother, while in his separate interview Mark counters ,On the surface she's nice and kind, but she feels sort of sorry for us. The contentious relationships between these three key figures in Tom's life are underscored by the contrast between the color footage used to film Tom's well-meaning but bewildered mother in her warm living room with the black-and-white stock used for the segments of Tom's more outraged father in the cold, snowy outdoors. In the film, Mark appears in both color and black-and-white footage. The *Blackstar* portion of *Silverlake* then ends with Mark sitting atop a roof, reading aloud about the necessity of blatancy in bringing about the gay revolution. Returning to present day, and images from the plane's window, Tom's voice-over describes his family's consternation when *Blackstar* aired on PBS.

Tom and Mark are greeted at the airport by Tom's family members; his parents are reintroduced next at their kitchen table. A brief clip from *Blackstar* of Tom's brother, Whitey, cuts to present-day with Whitey and his wife, Susan, sitting on the family couch. Off-screen, Tom asks the couple to describe their reaction to his announcement that he had been diagnosed with AIDS. Susan recounts the moment in detail, describing how it occurred at the same time Tom's father was coping with his own dying brother. Your mom and dad are dealing with it on it doesn't exist, she says.

Scenes of the family opening gifts on Christmas morning are presented against the soundtrack of a sprightly *Jingle Bells* rendition. The joyous setting cuts abruptly to a traveling view of a snow-covered roadside while an ambulance siren wails in the background. Well, here we are, back in the hospital, says Tom to the camera, lying in an emergency room on New Year's Day. Tom is examined by a doctor, and as the doctor describes suggested medications to him, the scene cuts back to the snow-covered roadway before dissolving to a nighttime view of Los Angeles from

a descending plane's window. By the time we were finished with Christmas this year, Tom says in voice-over, I was sick, exhausted, unhappy with my family, and never so happy to come back to the lights of Hollywood. Scenes of the Silverlake neighborhood cut to close-ups of vibrant flowers.

Mark's visit to Dr. Matt, an herb doctor, reveals the spreading KS lesions on his back, and the camera records Dr. Matt's selection and pulverizing of different herbs into a fine powder. Back in the parked car, Tom addresses the camera in his first obvious moment of frustration. He is hungry and wants to go home, but Mark has errands he wants to run. I hate being a nice guy, Tom sputters through clenched teeth. Back at home, Tom explains his frustration and the couple's subsequent reconciliation over footage of Mark filling capsules with the herb powder. I love you, Mark says to Tom's camera, I can't stand seeing you sick it drives me crazy I can't do anything about it. The couple next exchanges tender kisses.

Tom awakens during the night and, holding a flashlight on his face, records his anxiety about attending an upcoming auto show. Instead, he and Mark go to a music store, and Mark is next seen dancing alone in their home to the recently purchased C.D. In a visit to the doctor, Mark receives treatment for his KS lesions. I'm ready for my close-up, Mr. DeMille, he jokes, as the nurse takes new Polaroids of his lesions.

In a visit to a therapist's office, the couple reveals their different approaches to their illness. Tom is a Doomsday AIDS -er trying to make the most of what he has, while Mark tries to lower the threat. Back in their bedroom, Tom documents and explains all of his video equipment which, amidst his varying medications, is carefully arranged around the room With the idea that I'd be sick in bed all the time.

Infirmity contrasts with stamina in the following sequence of a foot race through the streets of Los Angeles. Tom's interview with one of the race's participants cuts to intertitles: Q: Do you think you'll make it all the way? A: With all the wonderful people and entertainment, I'll make it all the way. Back at home, Tom appears weary, describing how he has been sick and depressed for two weeks. I've lost the steam of life, the thing that powers you, he says, I feel so empty and I feel so pointless. You get what you get.

Cheerful new age music begins as Tom films Mark gathering bags for a trip out of town. Scenes of their neighborhood from the car window dissolve to a desert cactus garden, where Tom is recorded walking along a path proudly announcing their efforts to continue moving without stopping to rest. He smiles sweetly and says to Mark's camera, And I do love you Mark, so much! The frail couple is next seen swimming and frolicking in their motel pool and hot tub, where Mark explains to the camera that the woman who had invited them out had asked them to keep their shirts so not to freak out any of the other guests. Gentle zither and flute music accompanies their relaxing massages.

Returning to images of Silverlake store front with the words God Help Us painted over it, palm trees, a pet cat Tom asks in voice-over, What is this that passes before my eyes every day? I'm not much of a participant in life anymore. I'm a distant viewer. The neighborhood montage fades to black, then back up to Tom lying in bed, covered with blankets. He tells the Mark, who is holding the camera, about his doctor's suggestion that he begin looking for a hospice, an implication that his life expectancy at that point is two months. He is not doing much these days, just sleeping, rolling over, sleeping some more, taking medications, while friends are beginning to schedule visits to come to say 'hi' before we die.

Good morning, Tom, Mark says to his bed-ridden lover, who is surrounded by video equipment, empty dishes and a urine bottle. Mark announces that it is June 1st and that the couple has made it another month. Tom has trouble comprehending the date, adding, “my mind has been getting vague lately.” Next, the couple relaxes on their deck, which looks out from the hillside over the Silverlake neighborhood: our European cruise, they joke, which Tom thoughtfully admits through labored speech, is shorter than we expected. Serene piano music accompanies a close-up of a hummingbird darting at a feeder before it flies away, leaving the feeder swaying alone in the breeze.

Tom and Mark’s photographer friend, Judy, pays a visit, placing a photo she had taken of the couple a year-and-a-half earlier on the pillow next to Tom. Mark recites the names of other friends and family members among them, Tom’s mother and brother who are planning to visit. It is June 19th, and Mark is preparing a breakfast of soup, cheesecake and mashed egg, before feeding it to Tom. Mark shows the camera a painstakingly scrawled note on yellow lined paper from Tom to his mother: I love you. Tom. Another scene of a lethargic Tom in bed, his face covered in stubble, underscores his helplessness as Mark describes cleaning Tom’s fingernails. An interview with two friends who are visiting reveals that Tom has really gone down hill in the past three weeks.

With his mother and Mark at his bedside, Tom is slowly fed baby food; the scene then shifts to the living room, where family and friends keep vigil. Mark describes in frustration his need to update Tom’s Medical benefits records, leafing through pages and pages of forms that request information he has already given to medical. The family tells Tom they are going to visit Huntington Gardens, and the trip is presented in a montage of cacti and other desert plants with a lively accompaniment of Bach’s Two-Part Invention in F Major.

Today is June 25th, and it’s really, really hot, says Mark as he films the now-skeletal Tom lying in bed. Mark sobs as he explains his reasons for not having filmed for a few days: he was ashamed that he had given Tom some food that had caused him to be sick all night. I was afraid to turn on the camera, ‘cuz everybody would see that he was weaker again. Next, Mark shows a close-up of the KS lesion which covers Tom’s right eye. Tell the camera how you feel, Mark prods, and Tom whispers, I don’t feel chipper. The camera stays in a close-up on Tom for another twenty-five seconds as he feebly mumbles, over and over, I feel pretty bad.

Oh! This is the first of July, and Tommy’s just died! Mark wails. With the camera trembling but amazingly focused in a close-up on Tom’s open-eyed corpse, Mark sobs through a heartrending rendition of You Are My Sunshine. All of your friends will finish the tape for you! Mark weeps at the end, We promise! We promise! The poignancy of this full minute of the film shifts abruptly to the practical business of death’s aftermath, as Mark and other family members help prepare Tom’s death certificate in the next room. Mark is listed as Next of Kin. Quietly, the corpse is unceremoniously wrapped in a body bagged, which is zipped up, wheeled outside on a stretcher, and pushed into the back of a station wagon. Mark continues to film while the car’s gate is shut, his reflection visible in the back window as he pans the body bag inside.

A montage of vibrant flowers accompanied by bird song introduces the next sequence of Mark at home describing the book he has been reading, How to Survive the Loss of a Love. The pain he has felt in the few days since Tom died is now replaced by anger. In an almost comical scene, Mark unwraps a package which is sitting on the floor, and pulls out a metal box. He opens the metal box, and as he draws out a plastic bag from inside, debris begins to spill out onto the floor. You’re all over the place, Tom! he jokes, as he transfers his lover’s ashes to a large urn before

sweeping up the wayward remains.

Over a shot of Tom's ashes in the urn (also seen in the beginning of the film) and Tom's glasses lying unused on a table, the voice of a clergyman at the funeral service resounds: Jesus loves people with AIDS. Jesus loves any sick person. Friends deliver touching eulogies for Tom, and Whitey reminds the congregation, Ace left us a legacy Silverlake Life: The View from Here.

A view from an ascending plane's window accompanies Peter Friedman's voice-over which explains how he had been in France during Tom's death, but returned to Los Angeles five months later to film and ending for Silverlake Life. In another sequence from his interview with Friedman which appeared in the beginning of the film, Mark discusses Mr. and Mrs. Joslin's earlier hesitation at visiting their dying son; yet, experiencing Tom's death together brought Mark and Tom's mother closer together than ever before. Of the irony in the situation, Mark comments, Tom had to die for her to see how much I really did love him. For the first time in the film, Mark talks of his own father. Over black-and-white stills of his dad and a copy of Tom's death certificate reading Never Married, Mark reads the surreal letter from his dad the only one he's ever received, which at last acknowledges the scope of his relationship with Tom.

Life now? Mark reflects, life now is very confusing I have my own AIDS I'm really, really beat. In a visit to the doctor, Mark's upraised shirt reveals a host of dark Kaposi's Sarcoma lesions which spread across his pale, emaciated back. He discusses his difficulty taking his medications. A moving montage follows: the empty chair where Tom had last enjoyed his European cruise; the abandoned hummingbird feeder; Mark sleeping on the couch holding a stuffed teddy bear. Returning to the interview, Mark matter-of-factly describes how Tom has come to visit him three or four times since his death. If it's your time to go don't hang around here for me, Mark recalls telling Tom. "You idiot," he snaps, quoting Tom's reply, "I have nothing else to do now!"

Silverlake Life ends with a lighthearted clip from Blackstar. A youthful Tom and Mark dance playfully together to the soundtrack of "I Met Him On A Sunday," a song which plays out a relationship over the course of a week, and reflects their own 22 years together to the final lyrics, Bye, bye, baby.

Style/Structure

Silverlake Life expertly combines simplicity and sophistication. The homemade quality of this video diary derives from both the look of the camcorder videotape and the hand-held style in which most of the video footage is shot (other footage is shot on 16mm film). The camera's function in creating a chronicle of Tom's death is made clear at the outset of the film, and its machinery is repeatedly referred to and seen, in sequences where its image is captured in a mirror, in two-camera sequences where the secondary camera becomes part of the mise-en-scene captured by the primary camera, and in the bedroom sequence where its accouterments are featured and explained. As such, it becomes the third, omnipresent character of the story, assuming the role of a constant companion and confidant for both Tom and Mark.

The diary approach, in its very simplicity, makes complex claims for the two men and their relationship. The ordinariness, the dailiness of the recording technique implicitly grants to the men the status of ordinary humanity, rather than the dramatic performance of gay liberation they execute in their younger days. The camera allows them to speak to each other and to reflect to themselves through the entry that they make.

The compositional sophistication of Silverlake Life lies in its expert editing and narrative

design the journey into death of a couple who take sustenance from their great love as they go. Moments of intimacy, disagreement and collaboration inherent in any long-term relationship are juxtaposed as routine life against the extraordinary circumstances of their disease. Thus, the film reveals the gay couple as one that shares in the broadest universal processes love and death at the same time that they face the unique and particular situations of dealing with AIDS-related health issues, interacting with estranged family members, and coping with the stigma of a poorly understood disease.

The demarcation of time is an important characteristic of the film. A dwindling life once measured by seasons and holidays begins to be quantified by days as Tom enters his final month of life to Mark's declaration, Its June 1st we made it another month. Subsequent specific dates June 19th, June 25th become the milestones by which Tom's life is celebrated. Images presented in the sparingly used B-roll are also used to contrast time, with the vibrant flowers, a hummingbird, and neighborhood scenes depicting life against the death imagery of the setting sun, Tom's ashes, and a static-filled television screen. Finally, the inclusion of Joslin's Blackstar footage provides an important yesteryear counterpoint to the couple's present-day circumstances. The issue of coming out as a homosexual is replaced by coming out as a homosexual with AIDS, as the animated figures of the late-'70's Tom and Mark stand in obvious contrast to their weariness in the early '90's.

Background on Director/Film

Tom Joslin was a filmmaker and instructor at the University of Southern California when he discovered he had AIDS. Two years earlier, when his lover, Mark Massi, was diagnosed with the disease, the couple conceived the idea of Silverlake Life: The View from Here, a video diary which would focus on both Mark's struggle with AIDS and the wider effects of the disease on the gay population of the Silverlake neighborhood in Los Angeles. As Tom's health began to decline more rapidly than Mark's, however, the subject of the documentary shifted to feature Tom's futile battle against the illness that would, within the course of the film, ultimately claim his life.

Upon Mark's death in 1991, over 40 hours of footage which he and Tom had shot were willed to Peter Friedman, Tom's former student during the 1970s at Hampshire College in Massachusetts (Ken Burns was a later student of Joslin's). Friedman, who had been instructed by Joslin on the filmmaker's vision of Silverlake Life, spent the next 15 months editing the tapes. Throughout the process, he saw the film as a labor of love for his old teacher and friend, and as a continuation of Joslin's political struggle. In a 1993 New York Times interview, Friedman said, People who watch Silverlake Life say they feel they're seeing something they shouldn't see. But that's the point of it... There is a desire to keep gay people out of sight. There is a desire to keep unpleasant things like death and illness out of sight ... homosexuality, AIDS (and) death...are all things the public tries to keep out of sight. Just the fact of presenting (them) openly and intimately is a political act.

Funding for Silverlake Life: The View from Here was provided by Britain's Channel 4 and the New York State Council on the Arts which, in addition to other films, provided funding for Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community (1985).

Prior to Silverlake Life, Friedman completed another AIDS-themed film, Fighting in Southwest Louisiana, about a rural gay couple coping with their disease within a dispassionate community.

Production Context

At the time Tom Joslin and Mark Massi were diagnosed with AIDS in the mid-1980s, gay

political activism spearheaded by such organizations as the Human Rights Campaign Fund and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force had evolved to include heightened awareness of the epidemic and demands for funding for AIDS-related research. In October, 1987, the gay community's March on Washington drew together an estimated half a million people under the banner of equal rights and AIDS responsiveness; the following year, Congress passed its most substantial AIDS package of \$800 million to support research activities. By then, over 100,000 Americans had been diagnosed with the disease.

Filmmakers responded to the disease's effects on the gay community. The 1985 made-for-television movie, *An Early Frost*, was one of the first attempts to bring a narrative about AIDS to a mass audience. The late 1980's witnessed a wave of documentaries on the subject, including *Dying for Love* (1987), *Absolutely Positive* (1989), and the 1989 documentary feature Oscar-winner, *Common Threads: Stories From The (AIDS) Quilt*. Feature films of note in the same period included *Longtime Companion* (1990) and *Philadelphia*, which premiered the same year as *Silverlake Life* and garnered Oscars for Best Film and Best Actor (Tom Hanks). Reflecting on the timeliness of *Silverlake Life* for gay Americans, Friedman reflected in a 1993 USA Today interview, We have at least a sympathetic ear in the White House at a time when the public exposure and debate of our lives, the way (gays and lesbians are) treated has reached a high point.

The problem of mourning well, and dying well, which was faced by the men in this film was widely seen as an important issue to confront and learn about. The film also appeared at a time when death and mourning had become topics of widespread therapeutic discussion. Like many other aspects of life, the burdens of grieving and dying had become personal responsibilities rather than processes largely controlled and executed by the immediate community. Once these universal phenomena had become individual projects, one could even aspire to high-quality, high-performance experiences of them. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' immensely popular book *On Death and Dying* had appeared in 1969, with a vast therapeutic literature developing in the decades following. In 1987, in fact, Kubler-Ross herself published *AIDS: The Ultimate Challenge*.

Reception/Distribution

The film debuted at the 1993 Sundance Film Festival, where it won a Grand Jury Award and was recognized critically as a hallmark of personal documentary filmmaking. In June of the same year, it launched PBS's P.O.V. ("Point Of View") documentary series. Like most diaries, wrote Phil Kloer in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, *Silverlake Life* (is) far more personal than most art or television usually is. But (it was) conceived with the viewing public in mind, and as difficult as (it is) to watch, little on TV this year is more deserving of your time. Critics praised the film for its use of the diary form in chronicling that most personal event of one's life death and further recognized its unselfconscious representation of a committed gay relationship. *Silverlake Life* isn't merely about gay life or even death in the age of an epidemic. It's a moving document about commitment, love and mortality that no viewer will soon forget (Tom Feran, *The Plain Dealer*, June 15, 1993).

Audience reaction was overwhelmingly positive, with many viewers making connections to their own experiences with dying relatives and loved ones. Still, Friedman admitted the only real reticence I had in making this film is that people who are sick have this need for hope, and *Silverlake Life* might be seen by them as some kind of loud announcement of hopelessness (*San Francisco Chronicle*, April 25, 1993).

Following its broadcast on P.O.V., *Silverlake Life* went on to win several awards, including a

distinguished achievement award from the Independent Documentary Association (1993), and a George Foster Peabody Award for distinguished public service (1994). Though Friedman did not design the film as a political statement, it was used to promote gay issues awareness and to secure contributions to AIDS groups. Screenings of the film in New York during late Spring, 1993 were coordinated to raise funds for Fear of Disclosure and Seeing Through AIDS, organizations committed to AIDS education. When it was released on video in 1994, portions of its proceeds went to the Canadian AIDS Society and the Video Industry AIDS Committee, groups that provide home care for AIDS patients. "The fact is, people want a forum," Friedman told the San Francisco Chronicle, "They want their experiences validated in some way."

Discussion

Describe the multiple roles of Tom and Mark as subjects, objects, and makers of the film. Do they appear as actors in or agents of the film? How is the presentation of their intimate life made suitable as pan-demographic public material? Compare and contrast the filmic styles and themes of *Blackstar* (Joslin's earlier film) and *Silverlake Life*. How does Peter Friedman use symbolism to describe life and death?

Further Reading

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Contributors: Bob Connelly, Pat Aufderheide