

***Virgin Territory: Representing Sexual Inexperience in Film*, edited by Tamar Jeffers McDonald. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010. 978-0-8143-3318-1**

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The scholarship on virginity is surprisingly sparse for a subject so ubiquitous in cultural narratives and so rich in interpretative possibilities. Apart from two general histories of the topic by Hanne Blank (2007) and Anke Bernau (2007), and an emerging interest as it pertains to girlhood studies, much of the focus on virginity has occurred within literary scholarship, with Kathleen Coyne Kelly (2000, 1999) and Sarah Salih (2001, 2003) leading the way in medieval studies, and an earlier collection on virginity in the Victorian era edited by Lloyd Davis (1993). Few published works exist focusing on virginity in popular romance studies, although Jonathan Allan is forging a new path in this respect, and several PhD dissertations on the topic are underway. The investigation of virginity in film, however, is literally “virgin territory” so this volume of essays edited by Tamar Jeffers McDonald is an exciting and welcome addition to the extant scholarship.

Virgin Territory considers how virginity has been produced in and used to market films: an intriguing endeavor since, as Jeffers McDonald points out, filmmakers have to grapple with how “virginity—a lack of experience, a zero, can be made visible to audiences” (2). The book aims “to destabilize assumptions about virginity by questioning how it can be performed, externalized, and rendered not only visible but spectacular, across a range of periods, genres, and performances” (2). It begins with an excellent introduction by Jeffers McDonald providing a concise overview of the scholarship on virginity, before a strong first chapter by renowned film scholar Gaylyn Studlar which examines the screen presence of the young Elizabeth Taylor in three films of 1944: *Jane Eyre*, *The White Cliffs of Dover*, and *National Velvet*. Studlar is highly skilled in locating her readings of film within broader social and historical practices. Here, she argues that the representation of young girls in early Hollywood films draws from Victorian aesthetic conventions portraying little girls in rural or domestic settings. An analysis of Taylor’s screen image as a pure and beautiful innocent wielding mysterious sexual power is juxtaposed against a reading of the British artist John Everett Millais’s portrait of *Cherry Ripe* (1879), a “quintessential English girl” of

“timeless purity” (21) whose disturbing sexual power was ameliorated by the sentimentalized idyllic rural setting connoting and confirming childhood innocence. Studlar looks at how the Elizabeth Taylor of 1944 challenged “the stereotype of the ‘pure’ child” (31) best epitomized in Hollywood films by Shirley Temple. Because of Taylor’s extraordinary “womanly” beauty as a child, Studlar observes, “Sexual power accrues to her by virtue of her erotized innocence and the desire of others directed toward her, including the desire of the film viewer. This calls into question the cultural fantasy of being able to separate desire for the pure child (taboo) from that for the impure woman (acceptable)” (32). Yet Taylor symbolized more than a potently sexualized and mysterious virginity; to American audiences she also represented a nostalgic and mythicized view of Englishness which, in the midst of the Second World War, they were fighting to defend.

That the virginal girl’s body should represent the body politic of the nation at war is also an idea explored by Ilana Nash in her chapter looking at teenage girls in Hollywood films produced during the Second World War—*Janie* (1944) and *Kiss and Tell* (1945)—and the Cold War—*One, Two, Three* (1961) and *Take Her, She’s Mine* (1963). In a parallel reading of these films, Nash contends that during these periods when the borders of the nation were under threat, the virginal and unruly body of the teenager represented the potential rupturing of social relations and the American way of life that Americans were fighting for. In these films, however, patriotism won out as the teenage virgin subordinated her own desires to patriarchal authority and was shown to possess the wholesome values that made her a fitting emblem of the nation.

The focus on American teenage virgins continues in Timothy Shary’s chapter: an overview of films depicting teenage sexuality and the loss of virginity from the 1950s to the present day. Shary points out that until the 1950s, teenage problems were depicted in terms of juvenile delinquency rather than sexual activity. From the mid-1950s onwards, however, filmmakers began to gesture to teenage sexual desires and loss of virginity—usually to each other. The early 1980s saw the rise and heyday of a new genre, the youth sex quest film, featuring “depictions and discussions of teenage premarital sexual intercourse and on-screen youth going to great lengths to alleviate their carnal longings” (57). This genre petered out with the onset of AIDS but was revived in the 1990s. Throughout this period, however, the emphasis was on teenage confusion over sexuality, and the consequences—both emotional and physical—of virginity loss and sexual activity. “Thus far, teenage sex in American cinema tends to be either frivolously unenlightened or, more often, torturously somber” (67)—an assessment which is borne out by Rebecca Sullivan’s chapter exploring the “Marjorie Morningstar” phenomenon, based on the Herman Wouk novel of 1955, which suggests the concerns about sexuality and domesticity that would come to characterize the 1960s.

The conservative ending of *Marjorie Morningstar* is shared by Otto Preminger’s version of Françoise Sagan’s bestselling French novel, *Bonjour Tristesse* (1954). Alisia G. Chase contends that where Sagan’s prize-winning novel shocked more conservative readers because it presented an insouciant and unrepentant young girl who not only lost her virginity but became thoroughly degenerate to the point where she plotted her stepmother’s murder in order to preserve her and her father’s libertine lifestyle, Preminger’s film of 1958 distorted the original plot into a much more censorious ending by “punishing” the young heroine and condemning her to a jaded and meaningless life in Paris. Chase suggests the director pursued a double strategy of appeasing the moral consciences

of American mothers by casting the elegant and sympathetic Deborah Kerr as the stepmother, and by offering “a chic ex-Iowan, Jean Seberg, wearing the latest in Left Bank style, gambling and making love along the French Riviera, and bebopping at smoky Parisian basement boîtes—all anti-virginal mise-en-scènes rife with thrilling implications to young American women in the 1950s” as “visual consolations for his morally conventional ending” (85-86). One of many fine moments in this essay occurs with Chase’s analysis of costume to show how Jean Seberg’s clothes are used to show visually her moral “descent into postvirginal debauchery” (94).

This chapter is followed by Tamar Jeffers McDonald’s analysis of the Doris Day-as-perpetual-virgin phenomenon, which the author traces back to Day’s films *Pillow Talk* (1959) and *Lover Come Back* (1961). I was particularly fascinated by this phenomenon because even as I write, the Sydney Opera House is advertising a concert in April 2012 called “Doris Day—So Much More Than the Girl Next Door.” In Australia, Day is well-known as a gay icon and for her feisty, tomboyish roles in early to mid-1950s musicals which were constantly re-run on Australian television during the 1980s and 1990s. Her later films, however, are not so well known here, and her reputation in the U.S. as a perpetual filmic virgin was a surprise to me. Jeffers McDonald presents a polished and intricate analysis of the plots of *Pillow Talk* and *Lover Come Back*, as well as of Day’s singing performances, making a convincing case that where *Pillow Talk* portrays Day as an independent, glamorous career woman who is not necessarily a virgin—even if the audience assumed her to be one—and who is aware of her sexual desires, *Lover Come Back* is far more conservative in shoehorning Day back into a subordinate, less competent role than her male costar.

Peter Falconer’s chapter on the “Horror Movie Virgin” explores how the conventions of the virginal Final Girl heroine are utilized, mocked, and subverted in teenage horror movies. Falconer sees disturbing parallels between the virginal body of the Final Girl and the monstrous body of the psycho killer. Both possess bodies which are marked and isolated from the mass of sexualized flesh surrounding them, bodies which open themselves willingly or which are violently torn asunder. The bounded, impermeable bodies of the Final Girl and the killer are set apart from sexual inexperience, and they are both hard to kill because “their bodies are already figured as closed. They are resistant to all forms of penetration,” (133) which accounts for the thrill of the climactic battle between them.

The violation of virginal bodies is also explored in Nina Martin’s superb chapter on Roman Polanski’s *Repulsion* (1965). Martin’s reading of *Repulsion* sets it in the context of London of the Swinging Sixties, when older codes of gender relations are giving way to new expectations of the sexual availability of women. For the virginal protagonist Carole, who is painfully shy and glances longingly at the sequestered lifestyle of nuns, the sexual attention of men is terrifying, symbolizing a metaphorical and, later, physical invasion and rupturing of her private space and mind even as she tries to keep her body intact. Where Chase showed how virginity could be signified on film through costume, and Jeffers McDonald through song, Martin skillfully shows how Carole’s increasing paranoia and fear of violation and virginity loss are visually realized through the increasingly distorted mise-en-scènes, with the “gaping fissures and broken doors in her apartment signify[ing] the unraveling of young Carole’s mind” (140).

From the overly melodramatic to the bathetic, the volume then moves on to Greg Tuck's exposition of orgasmic teenage virgins who masturbate. This chapter ponders the liminal status of virgins—especially male virgins—who have not yet had sex with females, but who nonetheless experience sexual pleasure through masturbation. In the end, Tuck concludes that American films portray male masturbation as infantile, presexual activity whereas for adult men, it is regarded as sinister and deviant activity because male sexuality is continually viewed through, and perpetuates, a “heteronormative ideology understood not simply as a gendered system of domination but as an ideology of reproduction” (160). The arrangement of chapters in this edited volume is a little unfortunate in some ways, for Shary's work on teenage sex quest films would have provided an excellent overview and comparative context for this chapter, and Tuck's work would have been usefully paired with the final chapter that ends this volume, Celestino Deleyto's analysis of *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005). Deleyto locates this film within the generic hybridization of the gross-out film and romantic comedies that had begun with *There's Something About Mary* (1998). *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* is different from other films featuring male virgins or masturbation, Deleyto contends, because while it follows the convention of showing an adult male virgin who needs to grow up mentally, emotionally, and sexually, the film suggests that Andy's masculinity is in many ways admirable: “the mildness of his attitude to other people, his relaxed politeness, his sense of humor, and especially his respect for women are all related to his virginity and openly celebrated by the film. . . his is not a way of living and being that the romantic comedy would like to dispense with altogether” (259). The fact that he has not been socialized into dominant modes of aggressive masculine heterosexuality makes him a fitting romantic partner and bodes well for the couple's future happiness.

The weakest essays in this edited collection are Shelley Cobb's piece on *Elizabeth I* (1998), and Andrea Sabbadini's psychoanalytic interpretation of virginity in Krzysztof Kieślowski's *A Short Film about Love* [*Krotki Film O Milosci*] (1988) and Bernardo Bertolucci's *Stealing Beauty* (1996). Cobb has an enthralling subject: the fictitious narrative of a young, sexually active princess who transforms herself into a de-gendered Virgin Queen in order to assume power and the throne of England. The contemporary debate over the historical inaccuracies in the film are handled well by Cobb, who notes that all critics writing along these lines converge on the issue of Elizabeth's virginity or lack of it. However, it is when comparisons begin to be made between Elizabeth and Princess Diana and Margaret Thatcher that the analysis falters. In large part, this is because Cobb is recounting a contemporary debate in Britain that accompanied the film. However, the original analogies cited are confused and not clearly articulated, and this problem subsequently spills over into Cobb's analysis as well—an analysis which is far too heavily reliant on large slabs of quotes from the original commentaries, and insufficient elaboration of the incoherent points the authors were trying to make. For instance, there is insufficient explanation of the correlation between the virgin, virgin mother, virgin queen, and Princess Diana's fondness for the pieta image (210-215). Instead, the essay relies heavily on a long block quote from Joan Bridgman's article “Diana's Country” and Pamela Church Gibson's “From Dancing Queen to Plaster Virgin: *Elizabeth* and the End of English Heritage”—both of which do not and cannot sustain the burden of explanation. References are also made to the fact that when Elizabeth transforms herself into Virgin Queen at the end of the film, she is “no longer a living, mortal woman but a stiff, statuesque demigoddess, no longer appearing human,” and this is somehow connected to Margaret

Thatcher as another woman who wielded female power and was, presumably, regarded as inhuman. This might well be true, but it is well-known that Thatcher's sexuality was far more complex than this; she possessed considerable sex appeal particularly for conservative men, for whom the Iron Lady conjured up public school stereotypes of the stern, spanking British nanny who derided the British nanny state. The powerful virgin—the virago—who has escaped the control of men, who controls men, is something that needs far more consideration that has hitherto been given to the subject in all realms of virginity studies. In the end, while the essay indexes important scholarship about and during the Cool Britannia years (a reference is also made to Elizabeth and the Girl Power of Spice Girls) it does not venture very far beyond this. It is a lost opportunity, because Cobb certainly raises some intriguing ideas that could be fleshed out.

Sabbadini's chapter uses Kieślowski's *A Short Film about Love* and Bertolucci's *Stealing Beauty* as examples to explain psychoanalytic theories of virginity, and he does this very well. However, because of an almost complete lack of knowledge of, and engagement with, extant scholarship about virginity, the conclusions reached about virginity in these films seem somewhat banal:

Virginity [. . .] occupies an emotionally ambiguous place in the moral landscape of our relationship to our own and other people's bodies. It can be invested with either positive connotations [. . .] or negative [. . .] or both. Therefore virginity, alongside adolescence itself with which it is often associated [. . .] can symbolically represent a number of other ambivalently invested aspects of our lives, such as the need to grow up and the wish to remain dependent on our families. (235-236)

Moreover, whether this was intentional or not, the placing of Sabbadini's chapter next to Carol Siegel's masterly exposition of the historical and cultural contingencies of psychoanalytic theories, and of feminist and Foucauldian critiques of dominant Freudian paradigms of sexuality, undermines the ability of a psychoanalytic interpretation of films to tell us anything "true" about human sexuality. It may present an interesting reading of virginity, but it is ultimately not much more than simply just another story about sexuality.

Virgin Territory is rich with original and insightful analyses of films, and two of the strongest chapters are the feminist-inspired readings of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) and *Little Darlings* (1980) by Lisa M. Dresner, and Carol Siegel's discussion of Catherine Breillat's *À ma soeur!* (2001) and Catherine Hardwicke's *Thirteen* (2003). Dresner argues that although *Fast Times* and *Little Darlings* did not set out to articulate a feminist agenda, this is essentially what both films achieve with their adolescent female sex quest plots in which "girls' sexual decision making is represented as intelligent, responsible, and important, and the films make their points about not rushing into sex in a way that respects and empowers teenage girls instead of romanticizing or infantilizing them" (174). Both films feature protagonists who are anxious to lose their virginity, but their sexual experiences are not particularly enjoyable or fulfilling. Both feature protagonists who must make decisions about their subsequent sexual activity and its possible consequences. In *Fast Times*, Stacy's pregnancy and decision to have an abortion is treated sympathetically and without condescension, while her brother is shown to be supportive of his teenage sister's decision not to have a child because she knows she is not

capable of looking after one. Meanwhile, having won the quest to lose her virginity, Angel in *Little Darlings* decides to stop having sex and instead gains “access to female solidarity and close female friendships” (192). Dresner contends that “In their portrayal of empowered, reasoning, sexually curious girls who decide to lose their virginity and who then decide to stop having sex, these two films show a respect for their characters and their audiences that is sadly lacking in many films and television programs of the later 1980s, 1990s, and beyond.”

In focusing on girls who want to experience sex and be desired by men, but who do not necessarily experience sexual pleasure or know when they have had an orgasm, Dresner implicitly raises a significant question that Siegel then articulates in her chapter on *À ma soeur!* and *Thirteen*: “what constitutes heterosexual pleasure for teen girls[?] Does teenage female sexuality consist primarily of the desire to be desired, or of the desire to successfully compete for male attention? Is it about the girl’s physical sensations or direct experience, or it is mainly psychological? Does it retain any connection to orgasm?” (245). These are questions that resonate particularly with popular romance studies, with its increasing attention to the psychological, emotional and sexual pleasures of reading, of readers’ ability to experience and inhabit simultaneously female and male protagonists’ points of view, of the myriad manifestations of sexualities, desires, and much more.

Siegel’s chapter analyzes two films centered on teenage girls’ sexual desires, first sexual experiences, and their relationship with their mothers and society: Catherine Breillat’s *À ma soeur!* (2001) and Catherine Hardwicke’s *Thirteen* (2003). What makes this analysis so original and insightful is that Siegel shows how the concerns of each film grow from and feed into dominant discourses of feminism in France and in the United States. Siegel argues the plot of *Thirteen* and the film’s treatment of virginity is very much influenced by three historical developments in America over the last quarter century: “the development and ultimate mainstreaming of a feminist backlash against the orthodox Freudian view of healthy female sexuality and against the sexual availability of women to men demanded by many proponents of the sexual revolution”; the “the hysteria over the AIDS pandemic” which has equated ignorance and abstinence of sexual activity as safety; and “the rise of the religious right as a formidable political power,” central to which has been the cult of virginity (242). These perspectives can be seen in the way excessive teenage sexual activity in *Thirteen* is regarded as damaging to teenage girls and is blamed on bad parenting and peer pressure from the “wrong” types of friends. Delinquency and dysfunction—whether personal or familial—revolve almost solely around whether the teenage girl Tracy in *Thirteen* is having sex. “Although Tracy does some very dangerous drugs with Evie,” Siegel points out, “ones generally depicted in film as being instantly additive, the implication is that because she comes through her association with Evie with her virginity intact, she comes through all right. Nothing else seems to matter” (245). Not only does this ideology align with the values of the religious right; Siegel also traces it back to a particular type of American feminism which holds that “virginity’s loss for girls has come to signify the subordination of female truth to male fantasy, the girl’s loss of access to the universal(ized) realities of the female body to masculine discourses of pleasure. Within these circles virginity has come to represent women’s truth” (243).

In France, by contrast, feminism has reacted against Freudian theories of healthy female sexuality by critiquing Freudian discourse as a linguistic construct that institutes a truth regime positing sex as the core of identity—an essence rejected by poststructuralist

theorists such as Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari. French feminist theory, influenced by Lacanian discussions of *jouissance*, has argued for the possibilities of myriad sexual pleasures which arise from the female body itself. In France, Siegel contends, “sexual pleasure was assumed to exist meaningfully outside relationships between lovers, the two vaginal lips touch each other, for instance. And meanings were made through the interplay of cultural discourses not through an individual’s consciously adopted gender politics” as in America (239). These ideas are given voice in *À ma soeur!* where the middle-class home is not a safe haven from sexual politics and the center of maternal love, but the site where female bodies are disciplined into heterosexual discourses of beauty, romance, and being sexually desirable to men. The director Catherine Breillat subverts this patriarchal, heteronormative ideology by suggesting that there are other autoerotic possibilities of pleasure as the teenage protagonist Anaïs revels in the fleshiness of her body and its sensations as it moves in and through the world. Anaïs rejects an initiation into sexuality that necessitates her attention to men’s pleasure and evaluation of her sex appeal. She wants her virginity loss to be completely impersonal so that she can focus on her own sensations and experience. Breillat takes this idea to extreme ends when Anaïs loses her virginity as a result of a psychotic killer murdering her mother and sister before raping her. Breillat’s decision to depict this horrific event as a satisfying initiation into sex for Anaïs seems to arise more from a desire to shock than a scrupulous adherence to French feminist ideas; we can envisage many ways in which Anaïs could have lost her virginity in a manner that enabled her to focus entirely on her own body’s various pleasures rather than in a savage rape which, despite Anaïs’s indifference and even pleasure, seems to confirm radical American feminists’ argument about rape as an extreme patriarchal tool by which men keep women in subjection (Brownmiller 49 and 15; MacKinnon 182). Nevertheless, Siegel’s analysis enables us to make sense of Breillat’s film and to see it as a meditation on French feminist concerns about sexuality, the body, pleasures, and the self, allowing “for the possibility that teen girls can choose how they will experience their virginity’s loss and can embrace and take pleasure even in acts that our current culture and society consign to the very fringes of criminality and unnatural evil” (252). She demonstrates most skillfully the differences between French and American feminisms at the turn of the century, and how these are played out on the bodies of teenage virgin girls.

In the introduction, Jeffers McDonald emphasized that *Virgin Territory* is not meant to be the final or even definitive word on virginity in film but, rather, the edited volume is intended to “inaugurate exploration of this fascinating topic.” This is certainly what the book achieves through its various overviews of male and female virginity sex quest films, historical discussions of what virginity meant over the course of the twentieth century, how it can be represented visually and aurally, and what theoretical tools may be used to analyse this complex subject.

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