

Kelly, Casey Ryan. *Abstinence Cinema: Virginity and the Rhetoric of Sexual Purity in Contemporary Film*. Rutgers UP, 2016. Pp. 196. US \$37.95 (paperback). ISBN: 978-0-8135-7510-0.

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Casey Ryan Kelly's 2016 monograph *Abstinence Cinema: Virginity and the Rhetoric of Sexual Purity in Contemporary Film* argues that "[P]opular cinema contributes to the ideological salience of a growing neoconservative movement that seeks to reestablish abstinence until marriage as a social and political imperative" (5). He calls this movement "abstinence culture." Kelly is particularly interested in how abstinence culture manifests in films from around the turn of the millennium and the shift from the Clinton to Bush administrations. The chapters explore films from five genres: melodrama and the *Twilight* franchise (2008-2012), romantic comedies and *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005), horror films and *The Possession* (2012), action films and *Taken* (2008), and finally, a broad exploration of abstinence satire sexploitation films. He argues that the films he addresses "are evidence of both how cultural articulations of virginity are heavily invested in maintaining both feminine purity and hegemonic masculinity" (6). *Abstinence Cinema* offers important perspectives challenging popular conservative talking-points about the social progressivism of Hollywood and its portrayals of relationships, sex, and sexuality. However, there are several moments where the scholarship on the page does not live up to the potential of this premise.

The introduction points to two films, *American Pie* (1999) and *Thirteen* (2003), as being emblematic of the kind of perspective shift he asserts exists in Hollywood. While the first, released during the Clinton administration, tells the story of high schoolers seeking virginity loss, the second, released during the Bush administration, addresses parental concerns about teenagers engaging in risky behaviors, including sexual exploration. He argues, "In the short time between *American Pie* and *Thirteen*, the tale of virginity loss depicted in popular entertainment was augmented by the material and rhetorical reorientation of social policy toward abstinence until marriage" (5).

The first chapter, "Melodrama and Postfeminist Abstinence: The *Twilight* Saga (2008-2012)," explores the ways the *Twilight* franchise co-opted and adapted the vampire figure. Kelly argues that "the wholesome update to the vampire reflects the growing influence of

conservative voices that have adjusted their strategy for recruiting youth to present chastity as sexy, ritual courtship as hip, and chivalry and purity as romantic” (24). He asserts that the *Twilight* vampires’ espoused morality has far more in common with their Victorian predecessors than post-sexual-revolution examples, such as *The Lost Boys* (1987) or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). In addition to embracing postfeminist perspectives on girlhood, Kelly argues that the saga’s insistence on sexual purity reflects the growing influence of neoconservative religious discourse of the time.

The second chapter, “Man-boys and Born-Again Virgins: *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005),” addresses romantic comedy character types, in particular, the “man-boy” in the film *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. Kelly argues that the male character types in the film, virgin Andy (Steve Carell) and his sex-obsessed friends, are representations of the man-boy—the man who never really grew up—as they both reflect a sort of unfulfilled masculinity. He asserts that the film ultimately presents abstinence until marriage as the only way to successfully move from man-boy to man, as Andy is the only character to end the film with a marriage—the traditional successful end of a romantic comedy. Kelly also argues that within the world of the film, sexually liberated women are at fault for both kinds of “man-boy”: “the film illustrates that all of these men—whether oversexed or chaste—have dysfunctional relationships with women that stem from the putatively perplexing nature of pleasure and women’s sexuality” (63).

The third chapter, “Monstrous Girls and Absentee Fathers: *The Possession* (2012),” argues that “[f]or abstinence advocates, sexual purity is as much about restoring the proper role of fathers in the family and society as it is about protecting young girls’ chastity” (76). Kelly reads possession films in general and *The Possession* in particular as “illustrat[ing] the evangelical Protestant moorings of our popular culture’s representation of the ‘monstrous feminine’” (91) and aligning closely with purity culture.

Probably the strongest chapter of the book is the fourth, “Abstinence, the Global Sex Industry, and Racial Violence: *Taken* (2008).” Kelly situates *Taken* within a history of American racial captivity narratives and makes some very interesting observations about the reality of the global sex industry as opposed to the ways that it often appears on film. He asserts that films like *Taken* replicate traditional ideas and perspectives about race, gender, and sexuality. Interestingly, I think this is also the chapter that most begs for an update, not because the chapter is outdated, but because of how American politics has amplified this conversation in the years since this book was released.

The fifth chapter, “Sexploitation in Abstinence Satires,” looks at several “raunchy teen comedies and their low-budget knock-offs,” (109) such as *American Virgin* (2000), *American Virgin* (2009), *I Am Virgin* (2010), and *18-Year-Old Virgin* (2012). Kelly argues, “[W]hile these films mock abstinence, they ultimately affirm the conservative proposition that American culture is too sexually permissive” (110).

The conclusion, “Counternarratives,” returns to the discussion of the influence of neoconservative culture on American politics and Hollywood. Kelly also looks forward to several films he sees as being different from the kinds of films he discusses in the body of *Abstinence Cinema*. Each section is broken down with a theme and a film title he believes accomplishes that theme, “Reform: *The Virginity Hit* (2010),” “Resistance: *Teeth* (2007),” “Redefinition: *The To-Do List* (2013),” “Refutation: *How to Lose Your Virginity* (2013),” and “Moving On: *Whip It* (2009).”

Overall, Kelly's close readings of films are well done, however, the connections between the close readings and the cultural moments to which he attributes the films sometimes leave something to be desired. For example, the very first example comparing *American Pie* and *Thirteen* argues that the most important difference between the films is the political party of the American president of the time, rather than the age of the relevant teenagers, other contexts for said virginity loss, or the genres of the films. He makes these kinds of arguments regularly throughout *Abstinence Cinema*, presenting simple black-and-white answers when there may be more nuance to the argument.

Additionally, the context of "purity culture" is culturally significant to Kelly's arguments throughout *Abstinence Cinema*, and this term was in use in 2016 when it was published (as is evidenced by its use in the titles of some of Kelly's sources). Kelly's decision to primarily use the term "abstinence culture" rather than "purity culture" to describe the phenomenon so instrumental to his argument is confusing. He uses the term "purity culture" only five times (outside of citations) whereas he uses "abstinence culture" fifty-eight times (with no examples of the term appearing in endnotes or citations). Conversations around purity culture have continued since 2016, and Kelly's use of "abstinence culture" throughout the book leaves it feeling like a book out of touch with the direction of the movement rather than one that could have been at the forefront.

Further, interestingly, or perhaps confusingly, Kelly reads *Twilight* from a perspective of evangelical Christian "purity culture," though he does not call it that, but does not ever address Stephanie Meyer's background with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints—a denomination known for its strict adherence to purity culture—or address how this may have influenced Meyer's storytelling decisions. Similarly, in the conclusion, he addresses the ways purity culture influenced Elizabeth Smart when she was held captive in 2002 and 2003 without ever mentioning her connection to the LDS church. This information may have helped strengthen his arguments about the influence of the neoconservative movement on the politics of the early twenty-first century; its absence instead seems like a conspicuous hole in his argument.

Perhaps most concerning, particularly to a publication like *JPRS*, are misreadings of scholarship about romantic comedies. Kelly defines "'neotraditional' romantic comedies" as "an ironic and self-consciously styled satirization of the 'chick flick' designed to reach male audiences" (56) citing Tamar Jeffers McDonald and Claire Mortimer. Beyond the fact that Mortimer uses the term "resurgence" rather than "neotraditional" to describe romantic comedies of this period, Jeffers McDonald uses the term to broadly describe romantic comedies from the late-1980s through the early-2000s, not only those "designed to reach male audiences." Kelly is fairly dismissive of the genre as a whole in a way that is not surprising, but is disappointing. These misreadings also make me wonder about Kelly's readings of scholars in other chapters in which I am less familiar with the existing scholarship.

Finally, while Kelly makes some interesting arguments throughout *Abstinence Cinema* about fears about sex and gender in the wake of the second- and third-wave feminism, how those fears impact gender relations, and the ways in which those in power are invested in ensuring that women do not make further advancements, those arguments are ultimately dropped before they can come around to connecting to the rest of the arguments in the book.

Abstinence Cinema is responding to the social influences that led to conservative American political victories in its publication year. The book's largely positive reviews in the

years immediately following its release reflect a growing awareness of the conservative political influences that subtly impact the work coming from Hollywood. The conservative movement's cultural influence has only become more pervasive and vocal in the years since *Abstinence Cinema's* publication. The growing political power of Christian Nationalism means that texts like *Abstinence Cinema* are all the more important as they pull back the curtain to reveal the influences at work. While film and media scholars are likely already aware of Hollywood's social influence and influences, the insights *Abstinence Cinema* offers may be revealing for scholars with other specialization areas. Not enough books are doing this work, and thus, we continue to need *Abstinence Cinema*, despite its flaws.