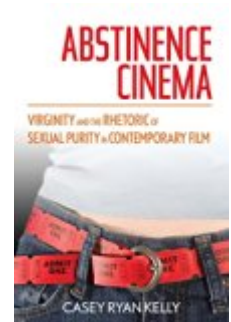


**Casey Ryan Kelly.** *Abstinence Cinema: Virginity and the Rhetoric of Sexual Purity in Contemporary Film.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016. Illustrations. 210 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8135-7511-7.



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In *Abstinence Cinema*, Casey Ryan Kelly examines a group of Hollywood films that have emerged since 2000, arguing that they mirror a national panic over teenage sexuality that has arisen in recent decades. Kelly uses the term “abstinence cinema” to characterize these films, all of which celebrate virginity until marriage (p. 5). He believes that this group of films reflects the sex-negative messages of the evangelical abstinence-only movement and that, in recent decades, Hollywood has moved away from depicting sexual liberation. The book surveys films in a variety of genres in five chapters, and each chapter explores a different message from the abstinence movement and considers how that message plays out on the big screen.

Kelly’s introduction includes a brief but helpful historical overview of the rise of the “abstinence until marriage movement” (p. 5). In the 1980s, members of the New Right made condemnation of comprehensive sex education a key element of their “family values” agenda. This agenda

was part and parcel of a backlash against the sexual revolution promulgated in particular by the feminist and gay and lesbian movements of recent decades. Though abstinence until marriage had long been a key tenet of Christianity, with the passage of the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA) in 1981, conservative Christians introduced this idea into public policy. Since the passage of the AFLA, the federal government has spent “\$1.5 billion” in “abstinence-only education” (p. 9). Kelly makes it quite clear which side of the abstinence-only versus comprehensive sex-ed debate he falls on and cites numerous studies demonstrating that abstinence-only programs are not effective. He argues persuasively that the rise of the abstinence until marriage movement has created a “welcoming environment” for films that applaud virginity and purity, as well as masculine violence against threats to these wholesome, “American” virtues (p. 13).

In the first chapter, Kelly examines the films in the *Twilight* (2008-12) franchise, exploring how

sexual purity is sold as feminist empowerment in a new twist on an old favorite, the vampire flick. This chapter, like the four that follow, includes a fairly comprehensive summary of the films that are its subject. Perhaps because the *Twilight* franchise includes five full-length films, Kelly's summary for this chapter is somewhat difficult to follow. Nonetheless, his argument here is one of the most compelling in the book. In *Twilight*, Bella, a human girl, falls in love with Edward, a "good" vampire ("good" because his diet consists entirely of animal blood instead of human blood). Chaos ensues as Edward struggles with his "thirst" for Bella's "intoxicating" blood (p. 27). The film draws parallels between giving in to the vampiric "thirst" for human blood and giving in to the desire for sex before marriage, ultimately concluding that the only safe option is waiting until marriage and implying that all male sexual desire is predatory and vampiric. Kelly argues quite convincingly that Hollywood films, such as *Twilight* and its sequels, manage to sell abstinence "as an enactment of personal empowerment" (p. 13). In essence, these films appropriate the feminist belief in "choice," presenting virginity is one of many fulfilling, empowering choices that a young woman can make. The problem, as Kelly sees it, is that the films make it clear that of all of the available options, virginity until marriage is the *right* choice and each gives the message that there is "something edgy and emboldening about virginity" (p. 14).

Kelly analyzes "man-boys and born-again virgins" in the second chapter by reviewing the 2005 film *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* and considering how abstinence discourse attributes "the collapse of family values" in recent decades to the rise of sexual liberation (p. 22). The protagonist of this film, forty-year-old Andy, is uncomfortable with casual dating and hookup culture and has thus remained a virgin. Kelly identifies two types of "man-boys," adult men who act in childish ways, in the film. "Man-boy" Andy exercises childlike behaviors, such as collecting action figures, comic books, and

video games. Audiences sympathize with him because he is sexually and socially innocent, while simultaneously being handsome, kind, and successful. Meanwhile, his three coworkers, stereotypically goofy, prankster "bros" on a quest to get Andy "laid" after he reveals his virginity, represent another, less acceptable type of "man-boy." According to Kelly, the film suggests that "man-boys" do not know how to behave in the post-sexual revolution culture in which women's empowered sexuality threatens traditional courtship, chivalry, and masculinity. The "born-again virgin" in the film is Andy's new girlfriend, Trish, the divorced mother of a teenaged daughter. Kelly explains that, in recent years, the abstinence movement has begun advocating for the concept of "secondary virginity," the idea that after having sex, an unmarried person can recommit to purity until marriage. This is a reminder to adults that "purity is a lifelong pursuit" (p. 55). Andy and Trish abstain, largely because they want to set a good example for her teenage daughter and get to know each other better. The forty-year-old virgin helps Trish rediscover moral purity and reconnect with her daughter, thus imparting to viewers the lesson that abstinence via secondary virginity can return us to family values. In the end, because Andy and Trish waited for sex until marriage, they achieve "sexual bliss," and Kelly argues that here, "great sex is the reward for marriage and monogamy, the remedy for the meaningless and hollow pleasures of sexual liberation" (pp. 74-75). The other man-boys, seeing his happiness and success, begin to think that Andy's way is the right way. Kelly's analysis of the ensemble performance of the 1960s "The Age of Aquarius," at the end of the film, allows him to circle back to the argument he made about *Twilight*, that "the very anthem of the counterculture is deployed in defense of what it once challenged ... rebranding abstinence until marriage and monogamy as the pathways to sexual liberation" (p. 73).

Kelly next examines *The Possession*, a 2012 film in which a young girl, Em, is inhabited by a

demon that makes her behave in ways she ordinarily would not, including violently attacking others. Clyde, Em's divorced and generally inattentive father, lets her buy an antique box at a yard sale. Inside is a "dybbuk, a creature in Jewish folklore that seeks to inhabit the bodies of the living" (p. 83). Because he does not closely monitor Em's rapidly growing obsession with the box, Clyde is at fault when the demon literally penetrates her body, and she becomes possessed. Kelly argues that *The Possession* demonstrates how abstinence culture breeds fear that young girls who do not have paternal protection are in crisis, and the abstinence movement advocates that the cure for this crisis is a return to traditional roles for fathers and their daughters. Once the demon is inside her, it gains control of Em's mind by filling the void in her life left by her absent father, expressing love and affection for her. The implication here is that "one misguided moment of curiosity opens up female bodies to complete exploitation by their father substitutes" (p. 87). Whereas in many of the films considered in Kelly's book there is a literal threat to a young girl's abstinence and thus, implicitly, her soul, in *The Possession* the threat is directly against the latter. Kelly argues that "the similarity between the rhetoric of demonic possession and the ritualistic imperatives of abstinence discourses demonstrate how horror films resonate with neoconservative anxieties about young women's sexuality" (p. 22). Films like *The Possession* reinforce the idea that without patriarchal protection, young women's bodies are a threat to the family. The demon makes her attack the men in her life (she rips out all of her stepfather's teeth!) in hopes of removing all of the male figures who could save her. Clyde finally saves Em by finding a rabbi to perform an exorcism on her. The film ends with the image of Clyde, Em, her sister, and her mother reunited and eating breakfast together, symbolizing a return to the traditional family values that serve as the solution to the evils that plague a teenage girl's body and soul.

Analyzing the 2008 film *Taken* in the fourth chapter, Kelly explores the myth of the "great white protector," who uses masculine violence to defend women's purity from "dark and sexually marauding" men (pp. 92, 93). Kelly briefly analyzes this trope in American culture, finding parallels in historic rationalizations for white violence against "savages" who abducted Puritan women in the colonial era and black men who allegedly raped white women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In *Taken*, Bryan, the CIA-trained father of teenaged Kim, rescues his daughter from a French-Albanian crime syndicate after she is forced into prostitution, along the way killing thirty-five people connected to her abduction. The rescue and the revenge he enacts upon her captors make up for the fact that he was absent during much of her childhood. Kelly is interested in the ways that "some Christian and conservative news outlets have treated the film as if it were an accurate representation of the global sex industry and a portrait of the negative consequences of the liberalization of sexual attitudes." One such media outlet, treating the film as an exposé of real life events, wrote that "sexual predators are the natural pedigree of sexually libertine societies." Some others saw it as a "wake-up call" (p. 94). Kelly argues that it resonated with people who believe we need to "protect our nation's daughters" by buckling down on "lackadaisical parenting of teenage girls" (p. 95). The film implies that all of Bryan's excess violence and even his use of torture are justified because he does so in the name of protecting his daughter's purity from dark-skinned predators. Kelly fears that this film was particularly damaging because it demonstrated how a mania about women's purity could be used to justify unrestrained violence against "others," a fear that seems all the more legitimate given the historical precedents he outlines and the national response to the film. Kelly's historical contextualization and his cogent analysis of the public response to this film make this chapter particularly persuasive.

Kelly's final chapter, "Sexploitation in Abstinence Satires," argues that Hollywood films are struggling to maintain a balance between the interest in "accepting and titillating portrayals of teenage libidinal energy and anxious representations of youth in sexual crisis," which the industry is attempting to resolve by "exploiting both sex and abstinence within the same text" (pp. 108-109). By examining both high- and low-budget teen abstinence satires (films that mock abstinence on some level), he concludes that even this genre is failing to truly challenge the discourse that insists on purity until marriage. These films manage to attract and excite audiences by including raunchy and explicit content, but in the end, the characters almost invariably find that sexual experimentation outside of heterosexual marriage is dissatisfying and even socially embarrassing. Because Kelly chose a variety of films in this genre to analyze instead of a single representative example, he had to include a brief plot summary for each one and as a result this chapter is a bit unwieldy. Still, his selection of abstinence satires convincingly shows that though the films in this genre poke fun at abstinence, ultimately, they reaffirm its value and conclude that teenage culture in America is too permissive.

Kelly concludes briefly with an exploration of "counternarrative" films that offer feminist or otherwise counter-hegemonic responses. He argues that though these films are few and far between, they do provide alternatives to the pro-abstinence discourse that otherwise pervades Hollywood films. One hopes that in this conclusion lie the seeds of Kelly's next book!

Kelly has written a fascinating exposé of recent "abstinence cinema." The films he examines reflect the neoconservative desire for feminine purity, hegemonic masculinity, and "traditional" heterosexual marriage. Perhaps most persuasively, he argues that such films even present the choice to remain abstinent until marriage, as a progressive, feminist ideal. *Abstinence Cinema*

does not claim to present a historical analysis, though Kelly does offer some historical context for his arguments. Rather, his focused critiques and analyses of these recently produced films present numerous points for further discussion and exploration. Students and scholars of film, gender, sexuality, and cultural studies will learn much from Kelly's well-argued text.

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