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Björn Sonnenberg-Schrank, "My Most Prized Possession, an American Obsession. Virginity and the Sexual Politics of the American Teen Film"

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My Most Prized Possession, an American  
Obsession.

Virginity and the Sexual Politics of the  
American Teen Film.

During the two days of the *Purity* conference, this subject was approached from many different angles: visually, sonically, genetically, poetically, philosophically, within the framework of a religious / ritualistic discourse, or one related to sexuality. It became evident how difficult and delicate purity is to determine, especially sexual and spiritual purity—the purity of the body and mind—because their boundaries are so fluid and subjective, rather than, for example, the purity of chemical substances, which is determinable, objective, and a neutral fact. Purity is almost always a “fake idea”, a construction with a clear political agenda, one that constitutes an inside-outside or pure-impure dichotomy and thereby becomes a function of (social) othering.

This paper concerns sexual purity, more precisely purity defined as virginity as it is presented to us in the so-called “teen films”. Teen films

probably need no introduction; they are a typically American genre consisting of various heterogeneous subgenres and cycles whose inception coincides approximately with the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. This huge body of film and television productions is geared to an audience of adolescents, who are usually cast as the protagonists and are portrayed in their typical settings: high school, summer camp, the family home etc.. The main trope of the teen film is the adolescent individual's search for identity and independence, narrated via the personal and social initiation associated with a coming-of-age experience which is not always, but often ignited and/or epitomized by a sexual initiation, most commonly in the form of virginity loss.

Thus, many teen films are negotiations of purity, chastity, and virginity—with quite mixed messages. Since most of these films and TV shows are clearly and openly commercially-driven and audience-oriented pieces of consumer culture aiming for the broadest possible mass appeal, as viewers, we can extract many conclusions from them about the American culture that produces and consumes them. They play a significant role in the construction, shaping and perpetuation of gender roles, normalcy, and “American-ness”, and they reveal specific attitudes and perpetuate specific agendas, which often correspond to their contemporaneous zeitgeist—or “discourse” in Foucauldian terminology. Teen films, like any narrative, have an ideological function and produce powerful and influential patterns that tell their audience how and what to be by setting up both positive and negative ideal types for morally (in)correct social behaviour and gender roles.

There are some very significant films from the 1950s and later which deal with the lives of teenagers and with which teenagers identified, and which to some extent still form a part of the folk memory of what it is to be a teenager both in the USA and outside it. (Kaveney 2006, p. 4)

Sociologist Robert Bulman suggests that 'films have the cultural power to influence how members of a society make sense of social life. ... we do learn what messages our culture chooses to convey in its entertainment' (Bulman, 2005, p. 7). Much more than merely reflecting or depicting American teenage life these films construct and invent it. In this sense, teen films are *descriptive* as well as *prescriptive*.

The focus of this paper will be the underlying (and mostly not very subtle) sexual politics and politicization of sexuality we can see in many of these

narratives, especially the obsession with (female) virginity, either in its loss or its preservation.

In his essay on *le visceux*, viscosity, which forms part of his central philosophical work *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Jean-Paul Sartre addresses qualities such as hardness, softness, wetness, sweetness, and viscosity to reflect on the relations of the subjective I and the (empirically experienceable) world. He expresses his distrust of, or even revulsion at viscosity (like stickiness or sliminess), and deems it universally repugnant. He states that ‘a [viscous] substance like pitch is an aberrant fluid’ (Sartre, 1943, p.701, my translation). Sticky, slimy, gooey, viscous objects cannot be picked up and thereby controlled—on the contrary, if we try to do so, the sticky substance clings to us and thereby even exerts control over us, as in the image of someone sticking a hand in a jar of honey and being 'dominated' by the sticky substance afterwards, because ‘the viscuous sticks itself to something like a leech’ (Sartre, 1943, p.701, my translation: ‘... il [le visqueux] s'accroche comme une sangsue’).

Viscosity is the quality that lies exactly in the liminal space between solid and liquid, dry and wet, hard and soft, yet is not only an “in between” but also “neither one, nor the other”. Hence, it must be seen as non-controllable, non-determinable. Sartre sees viscosity / stickiness as abnormal and a low state of being because of its border-endangering ambiguity, 'a trap, ... it attacks the boundary between myself and it' (Sartre in Douglas, 2009, p.47). This links viscosity to the abovementioned (adult) suspicion, distrust, and the fear of parental control loss in the context of adolescent sexuality, which I will examine more closely later.

I introduce Sartre's notion of the viscous for two reasons. First, Sigmund Freud already used the same term referring to “Klebrigkeit der Libido”,<sup>1</sup> which translates as “stickiness of the libido”, a sexual desire sticking to its object(s). So, there is a clear literal/material and symbolical/metaphorical connection between stickiness and sexuality, something present in Julia Kristeva's investigation of the abject, where she, too, discusses sticky and slimy substances associated with the mother's body, in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982).

The second reason is that “the teenager” is also situated in a transitional in-between-neither-nor space, between the formerly innocent (or pure) child and its opposing, yet developmentally inevitable counterpart, the potentially polluted adult, between dependence and independence, between undeveloped and fully developed sexuality. Barrington Moore, Jr. explains moral purity in terms of “pollution” as anti-purity and retraces a cultural-historical lineage:

Wherever the notion of moral purity occurs—in Robespierre, the Hindu caste system, or the Old Testament—it is defined in the Hegelian manner by what purity is not, namely, impurity or pollution. Thus a morally pure person is free from moral pollution. (Moore Jnr., 2000, p.3, my emphasis)

So just as Sartre expresses disgust towards the viscous as sticky in-between-and-neither-nor, because of its ambiguity (which equals impurity, or “anti-value” in his terminology) teenagers are negotiated in popular culture in ambiguous, and often problematic terms, as hard to classify and control—almost as the viscous substances in Sartre's theory and the “mid-points” of purity and pollution as explained by Moore.

In her study *Virginity Lost* (2005), Laura Carpenter has conducted interviews with American teenagers and analyzed the patterns, metaphors and narrations of the “first times” she was confronted with. Her conclusion is not that surprising, although still revealing, as the evaluations of virginity by the interviewed teenagers can be divided in three major strands as they 'likened virginity to a gift, ... as a stigma, and ... as a step in a process.' (Carpenter, 2005, p.11) A small minority even 'described premarital virginity as an act of worship' (Carpenter, 2005, p.11) .

The inseparably close connection of cinematic adolescents and negotiations of sexuality is of course due to the fact that adolescence (both on and off the screen) is strongly defined by the evolving libidinous or sexual identities. Onscreen portrayals of teen sexuality and virginity loss, however, are hardly ever negotiated as normal, and almost always exaggerated. Timothy Shary, in his historical overview of trends and tendencies in teen films, writes that ‘many youth films in the early 1980s began to feature teens engaging in sexual practices, and the majority were decidedly negative in their portrayals ... the most common plot of youth sex films throughout the early

1980s was the quest for teens to lose their virginity' (Shary, 2005, p.63). Although not completely in line with Shary's classification, since its main theme is not virginity loss and it touches on both male and female virginity, John Hughes's famous coming-of-age film *The Breakfast Club* (1985) is an example of virginity being treated as an "uncool" stigma, at least by the standards of the loudmouthed rebel (played by Judd Nelson), who ridicules the aloof and popular "princess" (Molly Ringwald). He suspects her of still being a virgin, which she finally confesses to when she cannot bear his humiliating provocation any longer. To him, her cleanliness and inexperience make her a square prude, a conformist in the film's historical context of the Reagan era and thus something undesirable for adolescents striving for autonomy and independence.

In terms of Carpenter's three definitions of virginity, I am most interested in the evaluation of virginity as a gift, which is the doctrine of the so-called "abstinence only" programmes increasingly taught in high schools since the Reagan years. Many teen celebrities (who have in many cases emerged from the "Disney Channel" context) such as Britney Spears, Justin Bieber and the Jonas Brothers have at least at some point in their career made the highly-publicized choice to endorse virginity, sometimes symbolized by wearing so-called "purity rings" (also known as chastity or abstinence rings), which are worn as a symbol of the promise made to Jesus to refrain from having sex until after marriage.

These sexual politics of teen entertainment and their mediation of chastity, purity, and virginity are arguably less the personal conviction of their respective endorsers, as time and their individual development have proved, and much more an opportunistic career move, linked to dominant societal and ideological shifts in the USA, especially the re-emerging of the Religious Right and their highly reactionary and sexist "family values". But regardless of the true motivation of such endorsements, they have an impact on their audience and impart a particular set of values, morals, and behavioural patterns.

Purity or promise rings have themselves become a recurring trope in teen programmes, for instance in the successful TV series *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* (2008-2013). Despite its high ratings with audiences, the show has been widely criticized for its quality and political stance. It is populated by stereotypical characters and clichéd scenarios that seem to have

emerged straight from New Right doctrines. Alessandra Stanley in her review for the *New York Times* states:

This kind of earnest, sound-out-all-the-syllables agitprop is almost comical, a parody of an after-school special. The occasional lapses into portentous symbolism are inadvertently hilarious. ... painful to watch. ... these teenage morality plays have been made many times before, much better. ... ABC Family underestimates its viewers' sophistication. Even for a didactic work made in collaboration with the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, "Secret Life" is surprisingly unimaginative. ... ABC Family means well but could not have done worse. "Secret Life" doesn't take the fun out of teenage pregnancy, it takes the fun out of television. (Stanley, 2008)

A telling example is a scene from the first episode. It introduces the viewer to "the cheerleader" (blond, Christian, active in the church community, naïve, from stable family background) and her boyfriend, "the football player" (Christian, but even though he is the pastor's son, his integrity is more doubtful, since it's implied his libido will outweigh his belief and fidelity at the first opportunity). In this scene, he notices a new ring on her finger:

**Him:** What's that ring? I never noticed you had a ring like that.

**Her:** It's a promise ring. My parents gave it to me when I promised them that I wouldn't have sex until I get married.

**Him:** I know what a promise ring is, I just didn't know you had one. (*sighs*)

**Her:** Last night, my parents and I had a long talk about you and me.

**Him:** But I thought your parents were happy we're dating? I thought they trust me. I'm a Christian! I'm just as committed to abstinence as you are. Besides, sexual purity in or out of marriage isn't a one-time vow, Grace. It's a daily recommitment to God and his plan for us.

**Her:** I know that and my parents know that. And they're happy we're dating and I'm happy we're dating, because you *are* a Christian and we do share a commitment to our faith. That's why I have no problem making a promise to them.

**Him:** (*pauses*) When do you think we'll get married? If we do get married—and some day I do hope to marry you, in case I never said that. I, I do hope to marry you. You know, someday.

**Her:** Well, I'm fifteen, you're sixteen. I think it's gonna be a while. I've got high school and college and I hope medical school (*crosses fingers*).

**Him:** (*pauses*) How long is medical school exactly?

**Her:** (*smiles friendly*) What difference does it make? True love waits!

(*The Secret Life of the American Teenager S1:E1, 2008, my transcript of the dialogue*)

Her final line ends on a phrase with which the character (and by extension the show) pledges allegiance to the Religious Right, since "True Love Waits" is also the name of a well-known pro-abstinence programme: 'True Love Waits (TLW) is an international Christian group that promotes sexual abstinence outside of marriage for teenagers and college students. TLW was created in April, 1993 by the Southern Baptists, and is sponsored by LifeWay Christian Resources. It is based on conservative Christian views of human sexuality that require one to be faithful to one's husband or wife, even before marriage' (Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/True\\_Love\\_Waits](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/True_Love_Waits), accessed September 27 2013). We can see here in this brief exchange how New Right agendas and teen sexuality are seen as portrayed hand-in-hand, espousing the same course of abstinence and reaffirming the "sacredness" of virginity.

In her introduction to *Virginity Revisited*, Bonnie MacLachlan states:

As a doctrine, virginity has been a cultural artefact. For much of human history, it has been held in high esteem for young women approaching marriage: virginity has been an essential quality for determining their market value. Once virginity was lost, a nubile woman's worth was greatly diminished. All this has changed recently, of course, but the sexual permissiveness that many North American youth have enjoyed in the last three or four decades is now being challenged by other young people who are reclaiming the value of sexual renunciation. "Athletes for Abstinence", "True Love Waits", and new age monasticism are attracting growing numbers of adherents. (MacLachlan, 2007, p.3)

Virginity is of course neither a specifically American obsession, nor a specifically recent one.

But the fact that current mainstream media and political-societal debates so openly address, exploit, and deal with the issue, and have done so for some time, is a character which seems to be particularly American. Considering the sexual revolution since the 1960s, improved birth control, the women's liberation movement and the several waves of feminism, one would think that such conservative perspectives on virginity equalling purity and the ideological elevation of abstinence, have long been outdated as ballast from the Victorian



Age. But on the contrary, the issue remains fiercely debated, and the interference of political and societal movements in such private matters has not faded. The preservation of virginity can be seen as directly linked to another New Right concern surrounding the nuclear family and the well-worn phrase of “family values”, a term used to subsume conservative morality in traditional political, social, and religious beliefs (commonly associated with Republican politics). Laura Carpenter traces the evolution of some of these concerns from the more socially liberal 1960s:

A convergence of social forces at that time (the late 1960s and early 1970s)—the youth counterculture, women's and gay rights movements, proliferation of effective birth control methods, and climbing divorce rates, to name but a few—had helped make sex before marriage widely acceptable for men and women, albeit without wholly eradicating the erstwhile consensus that people, especially women, should remain virgins until they married. By the mid-1980s, another series of developments had begun to work a dramatic transformation on sexual life in the United States. Starting in the mid-1970s, conservative Christians mounted a moral crusade intended to restore pre-1960s sexual norms, especially among adolescents. They won a key victory with the 1981 passage of the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA), which mandated the inclusion of pro-abstinence instruction in federally funded sex education programs and bankrolled curriculum-development efforts. (Carpenter, 2005, p.3)

This rise in power of the “family values” discourse—especially during the Reagan years in the 1980s as a radically conservative reaction to the more liberal and permissive 1970s, and in a comparable political-societal dynamic again under George W. Bush in the 2000s, following the more liberal Bill Clinton 1990s—has obviously had its effect on mainstream culture, with the “nuclear family” being characterized by supporting traditional ideas of the role of women as childbearers or mothers, “traditional marriage”, abstinence education, and opposition to premarital sex, same sex marriage, feminism, or the legalization of abortion. This short-list already indicates that this debate exceeds sexuality to encompass power, control, dominance and the upkeep and stabilization of a patriarchal, heteronormative matrix in which the regulation of female sexuality and virginity is part of a bigger operation to regulate female autonomy and independence, ‘a power struggle for control of the woman's body... symbolic of something much bigger...’ (Doan and Williams, 2008, p.4).

A further scene from the same *The Secret Life...* episode illustrates the male-dominated hierarchy of the nuclear family both in its form and content (see the

Appendix, fig. 1-4). The younger of the family's two daughters has been reprimanded at school for wearing a "sexy" midriff-exposing outfit, which is now the topic of the dinner table conversation:

**Father:** Forget the school dress code, we have our own dress code. You didn't just break the school's rules, you broke *our* rules, the rules of good taste. What are you trying to prove? That you're not thirteen? You're thirteen! That you're sexy? You're not sexy! Do you even know what "sexy" means? It means that you're ready to have to have sex. And YOU – ARE – NOT ready to have sex. Neither of my daughters are ready to have sex and you two will not be ready to have sex for a long time – no, hoho – a long, long time! (*winks at his wife*) Maybe after you've been married a couple of years – wanna make sure it works out first, heh heh heh. (*To his wife*) Am I right?

**Mother** (*smiling forcedly*): He's right. Although I doubt you'll get your father's permission even after you're married.

(*The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, S1:E1, 2008, my transcript of the dialogue)

Besides the reactionary stand conveyed in the dialogue, the scene is also enlightening in its symbolism and structure. The patriarch is still wearing his tie for no other reason than to emphasize to the audience his identity as “breadwinner dad”, whereas “homemaker mom” (played by Molly Ringwald, a very interesting casting choice, given her history as one of the best-known stars of 1980s teen films) is never seen outside of the family home—most of the time she bustles about the kitchen, microwaving plates of food. The portrayal of these characters, through stock uniforms such as tie, or stock locations such as the kitchen, is reflective of this series’ stereotypical approach to the characterisation of gender, race and status. The patriarch wants to govern his daughters' sexuality and needs his subordinate wife only to reaffirm his status half-jokingly, more-than-half-serious. This is comparable to the promise ring scene: the girl made her promise to her parents, who gave the ring to her—further stressing the flow of power as coming clearly from the parents (in reality the patriarch) to the children, with God/Jesus as overarching superstructures ratifying the patriarch’s position.

This is not simply TV fiction, but based on real practices. In the March 2007 issue of *O – The Oprah Magazine*, Amanda Robb published her article "The Innocence Project", her account of an organized ritual: since 1998,

fathers and daughters can attend so-called "purity balls" together. In a quasi-wedding ceremony they read out vows to each other and share a dance.

Mr. Forte slips the band onto his daughter's ring finger. With a tender smile, he hands her another box. In it Elise finds a man's ring. Her creamy brow furrows in confusion. Mr. Forte explains that just as Elise now wears a ring representing her promise to be pure until marriage, he will wear one, too, as a sign of his dedication to the same goal. "It is in the form of a shield," Mr. Forte reads, "symbolizing my commitment to protect and shield you from the enemy. Inside the shield is a heart, which is your heart, which I am covering. Across the heart are a key and a sword—the key is the key to your heart, which I will safeguard until your wedding day, and the sword is the protection I pledge to you... On your wedding day, I will give this ring to your husband. I love you, my jewel, my princess. Daddy. (Robb, 2007, p. 1)

As stated before, media rarely treat evolving teenage sexuality as the common rite of passage it actually is but rather as transgression, dangerous and followed by punishment, and tend to exploit and scandalize it in any way possible. Teen pregnancy for instance is often portrayed as biological punishment for the transgression of virginity loss. This is not only a staple for the fear-mongering agendas that underlie so-called "moral panics", it has been a recurring trope of teen and family narratives from *The Cosby Show* (1984-92) to *Degrassi Junior High* (1987-89) to *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990-2000) to *Skins* (the UK series was broadcasted from 2007 to 2013, the US version in 2011 only), or pretty much *any* teen-oriented series (which includes not only shows explicitly addressing teens, but also shows that include adolescents as part of a larger group, such as a family). Especially in recent years teen pregnancy has become a pet subject of so-called reality TV shows like MTV's *Teen Mom* (2009-2012), *16 and Pregnant* (since 2009) or in films such as *Juno* (dir. Jason Reitman, 2007).

Almost all of these examples function as cautionary tales, as if to say: "This is what happens when you have sex!". In the "slasher film" (a horror film subgenre including examples such as John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) or *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (1980) by Sean S. Cunningham) this is exaggerated to a cartoonish level when the promiscuous, sexualized teenage protagonists get killed off in a cause-and-effect chain in which sexual transgression literally leads to death by psychotic serial killer.

It is striking how negatively evaluative these diverse programmes are in their depiction of female adolescents as victims. This is evidently also the

premise of *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* whose main plot follows Amy, a nice and talented 15-year-old suburban white middle class high school girl and almost-ideal model student with dreams of higher education, who instantaneously gets pregnant after her first sexual encounter during band camp (the sexual activity of high school band members is a strange trope of teen films it itself, for example in the *American Pie* movies). She becomes ostracized, her friends' parents don't want them to be socializing with her any longer, and of course her formerly bright academic career is passé since now her only option is the stigmatizing “bitch school”, a special educational programme for girls in such special and tragic circumstances.

Such a portrayal (and its underlying agenda) is in stark contrast to most negotiations of male virginity. For instance, the whole *American Pie* film series, with its many sequels and spinoffs, is built on the single idea that:

Men themselves have clearly found some aspects of sexual activity—not least, its absence—problematic and have seen virginity loss as a significant, positive life transition. Popular tales of young men's quests to lose their virginity, preferably before it becomes an intolerable embarrassment, are legion. (Carpenter, 2005, p.6)

Male virginity and its loss is treated in just as an exaggerated manner as the loss of female virginity, but much more commonly portrayed in satire and comedy, as more humorous, half awkward, half competitive-aggressive. The loss of female virginity is, in contrast, addressed in serious, grave terms, as dangerous and/or problematic, as something that inevitably bears consequences that are not necessarily 'a significant, positive life transition', as Carpenter puts it in the above quote. The definition of purity as virginity is clearly gendered and treats adolescent female sexuality as problematic. Doan and Williams set this out in their work *The Politics of Virginity: Abstinence in Sex Education* as follows:

Adolescent sexuality may be defined as "in crisis" when the wider culture threatens to sully young women's innocence. Here, adolescent women may be constructed like children, as relatively pure youngsters in need of protection. When teen women are constructed as childlike, the impetus is to protect them from sexual activity, but it is also their lack of knowledge that must be protected. .... This construction of purity and naïvité historically has been reserved for the middle and upper-middle classes, particularly for whites. Abstinence-only is a policy that ultimately aims to curb female autonomy and individual sexuality by

building on the social construction of teenagers as a class of people in need of protection or control and on traditional concepts of gender differences that cast female sexuality as a problem to be addressed . . . Evidence of female autonomy, in particular sexual autonomy, has been met with opposition in the form of legal punishment, societal wrath, and repressive sexual ideology. (Doan and Williams, 2008, pp.66-69)

This is not only a reminder of a general male-dominated heteronormative hegemony in (American) society and culture, but also reminds us of the functions of power that define the images perpetuated by American cinematic media. As Shary also recognises: 'sexual pleasure for girls in teen films remains far more problematic than it is for boys, most likely because the majority of teen films are made under the patriarchal standards of Hollywood' (Shary, 2005, p.107).

When discussing teen media's negotiation of sexuality in terms of purity=virginity, an almost self-evident example from present-day teen culture (or young adult fiction) is the *Twilight* saga, because it combines many aspects mentioned in this chapter. Even the liminal spaces / concepts of adolescence and viscosity are reflected in the title's own in-between state combining dark and light. Due to its worldwide success and its status as (pop)cultural phenomenon, the books and their movie adaptations have gained a high level of familiarity; even those who have never read the novels or seen the films have at least a vague idea about Mormon author Stephenie Meyer's epic about the romance between teenage girl Isabella and Edward Cullen, the century-old vampire immortalized in the vessel of a beautiful young man's body. Carrie Anne Platt has published a brilliant and insightful analysis of *Twilight's* sexual politics and the underlying messages thereof: Bella and Edward's sexual dynamic is a repeatedly enacted script in which Edward must prevent Bella from acting on her own sexual desires. Even though she longs for him, even offers herself on various occasions, it is *him* who decides when the time has come to finally engage in intercourse—which *naturally* is after having married, and *naturally* leads to instantaneous pregnancy and subsequent death and rebirth (because the human-vampire hybrid foetus kills Bella from the inside and only converting her into a vampire can save her life). As Platt observes:

The idealization of this (over)protection by Meyer perpetuates the idea that young women are objects to be possessed, cherished, and defended from every danger by the men in their lives... and it lies upon and reinforces regressive ideologies of romantic relationships, gender difference, and, perhaps most significantly, sexual desire. ... The premise of the series—a passionate yet chaste romantic relationship between an immortal vampire and a human woman—is unabashedly pro-abstinence and positions itself among conservative social values like the policing of female desire, the protection of female virtue from ruin, the importance of marriage, and the sanctity of life as key plot devices, creating a world in which vulnerable women need to be protected at all times, both from external forces and from their own desires. (Platt in Click, Aubrey and Behm-Morawitz, 2010, pp.72-73)

Platt quotes Iliana Nash in this context and reminds us how ‘the figure of the teenage girl has come to symbolize both childhood and womanhood, allowing young female protagonists to be simultaneously infantilized and sexualized, reflecting a gender ideology that likens women to children while also viewing them as sexual objects’ (Platt in Click, Aubrey and Behm-Morawitz, 2010, p.74). The *Twilight Saga* in this sense illustrates how teen films are vehicles that at the same time have a political agenda *and* cater to the desire and voyeurism of their audience.

According to Platt, *Twilight* presents a further example of the gendered connections made between sexual desire and violence/death, with Meyer presenting abstinence as literally a matter of life and death (see Platt p.80). Platt views *Twilight* as echoing wider misogynistic discourses and gender imbalances in the treatment of virginity, for example ‘the worry about the life-altering consequences of sex for teenage girls which we see far more often than those about teenage boys seeing the loss of female innocence as a greater social tragedy’ (referring to Tolman). And whereas unplanned pregnancies are viewed as something that ruins young girls' lives, their male partners emerge from the experience relatively unscathed’ (Platt in Click, Aubrey and Behm-Morawitz, 2010, p.80).

Given the enormous commercial success and cultural impact of *Twilight*, these artefacts can to some degree be seen as ideologically / politically successful. They, too, are as I have put it earlier, *descriptive* and *prescriptive*, as they respond to existing concerns, views, discourse, as well as contribute to, or even constitute them. The strong focus on virginity as well as the gender imbalance in its portrayal affirm the status quo of patriarchal dominance and

heteronormativity by producing powerful and influential gender roles, behaviour patterns, and sexual scripts.

Furthermore, the prevalence of sexual desire—and the constant policing of this desire—reflect recurring cultural contradictions surrounding sex in American culture. This tension is particularly acute for the adolescent target audience growing up in an era of abstinence-only sex education, a neoconservative return to 1950s sexual morals and gender roles, and public declarations of sexual purity and abstinence, juxtaposed against an increasingly sexualized media culture. To Platt, ‘It’s no wonder, then, that teenagers are both anxious and curious about sex’ (Platt in Click, Aubrey and Behm-Morawitz, 2010, p.84).

This ambivalent tension of abundant discourse and simultaneous prohibition necessitates a brief digression to Michel Foucault’s seminal *History of Sexuality* (1978), in which he expanded his analysis of power and his notion of discourse to ‘define the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexuality’ (Foucault, 1978, p.11). He argues that we continue to be dominated by a Victorian regime, a ‘modern Puritanism [which] imposed its triple edict of taboo, nonexistence, and silence’ (Foucault, 1978, p.5). This means (sexual) discourse is characterized by repressing, concealing, and censoring all discussion of sexual matters, by an actively pursued attempt to bar sexuality from visibility and the public. But in order to suppress a discussion of specific matters, one has to mention exactly those matters, and all public discussions of sexuality, including those designed to repress and censor sexuality and sexual behaviour automatically add to the total amount of sexual discourse in society, be they public statements of the censors’ positions or the opposing progressive stances they inspired.

Consequently, the stronger and more vigorous the attempt to conceal or repress sexual matters, the more it simultaneously puts them in the spotlight and eventually ‘incites’ and increases sexual discourse and the preoccupation with sexual topics (Foucault, 1978, p. 33 ff).

But the ways in which teenage sexuality is negotiated also reflect the cultural discomfort and distrust towards non-classifiable in-between-and-neither-nor stages of being that I illustrated by Jean Paul Sartre’s notion of viscosity and the transitional stage of adolescence. This discomfort relocates the construction of virginity as a more classifiable, clear, and pure state, where

the control over a woman's body, and her virginity, is strongly regulated by a strict set of rules. There are, of course, other examples of films and TV shows which are quite aware of such sexual politics, and openly question, or even disrupt them (for example Joss Whedon's series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, 1997-2003), but this goes beyond the scope of this paper and merits its own investigation.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> In *Analysis Terminable and Interminable* (1937) Freud writes: 'A further step in our analytical experience leads us to oppositions of different sorts whom we can no longer localize and who seem to depend on fundamental relations within the psychic apparatus. I can only list few samples of this category, the whole area is still confusingly strange and has not been sufficiently investigated. For instance, you encounter characters, whom you want to attest a particular stickiness of the libido.' ("Die endliche und die unendliche Analyse" [1937; in Sigmund Freud: *Gesammelte Werke* 16, 57-99], my translation).



Figures



Fig. 1-4: Dad laying down the rules. Stills from *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, season 1, episode 1 ("Falling in Love"), directed by Ron Underwood, written by Brenda Hempton, ABC Family, 2008.

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