

Media Review

NXIVM and #MeToo

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The Vow. Directed by Karim Amer and Jehane Noujaim. HBO, 2020. Season 1, nine episodes.

Seduced: Inside the NXIVM Cult. Written by Cecilia Peck and Inbal B. Lessner. Directed by Cecilia Peck. Starz, 2020. Four episodes.

Will a mother regain her daughter? Will Keith Raniere be toppled off his pedestal to face justice? How did a benign self-help group become an abusive cult? How could adult women submit to ordeals of pain, humiliation, and self-denial, believing this would lead to feminine empowerment? These are the questions that inform the plotlines of *The Vow* and *Seduced: Inside the NXIVM Cult* documentary series, which both aired in 2020.

The nine episodes of *The Vow*, airing on HBO in 2020, explores the controversial history of NXIVM, “billed as a self-help and multi-level marketing company that offered professional development seminars,” based in Albany, New York.¹ NXIVM shares many therapeutic and spiritual techniques found in other new religious movements whose roots may be traced to the 1970s Human Potential Movement. The filmmakers track the rise of a small anticult resistance movement of NXIVM ex-members, all former high-ranking instructors, who

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collaborated to expose the secret abuses and past crimes of NXIVM's charismatic leader Keith Raniere (b. 1960) and bring him to justice. Three protagonists drive the plot—Sarah Edmondson (b. 1977), Mark Vicente (b. 1965), and his wife Bonnie Piesse (b. 1983). These three spiritual seekers, who devoted their energies to Keith Raniere (pronounced Ran-*eer-ee*) for more than a decade, internalized and propagated his techniques and teachings. We follow their gradual disillusionment on becoming aware of the corruption at NXIVM's core and their efforts to reach out to current members and apostates to share information. In later episodes, a fourth protagonist joins their ranks—Catherine Oxenberg (b. 1961) of the 1980s TV series *Dynasty*. Her passionate struggle to extricate her daughter, India Oxenberg (b. 1991), from Raniere's control becomes a new subplot, which is developed further in *Seduced*.

The Vow tracks the quartet's frustrating efforts to alert police, the FBI, and journalists. A breakthrough comes in 2017, when an exposé appears in the *New York Times*.² The article describes NXIVM's secret sorority of sex slaves, known as DOS (*Dominus Obsequious Sororium*, translated by one member as “Master over Slave Women”). Initiates were assured it was a women-only empowerment group run by “bad ass” women, but in reality DOS was Raniere's brainchild. DOS records go back to 2015. In its original pyramid structure, DOS was composed of seven “first line” slaves under “Grandmaster” Vanguard (aka Raniere). Each slave was pressured to become a “Master” by finding and grooming six new slaves. In text messages, Raniere referred to the slaves as his “fuck toys” whose important function was “revving my body sexual to produce more energy. . . .”³ Sarah Edmondson is interviewed in the *New York Times* article about her harrowing experience in the DOS branding ceremony, in which the initials KR were burned into her flesh below the bikini line with a cauterizing pen. A photograph of Edmondson's pink knotted flesh validates her story. The *Times*' account prompted a flurry of other news reports and galvanized the FBI to investigate the apostates' claims.

Unexpectedly, *The Vow* dwells on more than just the shock and awe of Raniere's draconian methods of control over his secret sex slaves through branding, blackmail, and rigorous fasting programs, not to mention his punishments for traitors, which ranged from incarceration to crippling lawsuits. Paradoxically, these harsh techniques were supposedly designed to empower women. But *The Vow* also investigates the positive experiences of members in their early years of participation in NXIVM. It spotlights the moments of therapeutic epiphany and personal growth in the Executive Success Program. It portrays the warm friendships, ecstatic social gatherings, and joyous play in lakes and on volleyball courts. Attractive and articulate NXIVM-ites tell us how Raniere's philosophy and methods satisfied their deepest longings for self-awareness and spiritual enlightenment. The filmmakers' message

seems to be that NXIVM, once a delightful community of participants with idealistic goals, with some living near Ranieri and others living in other locations, was corrupted by the evil worm at its core—Keith Ranieri.

The Vow belongs to a new wave of documentary films about new religions, such as *The Source Family* (2012); *Holy Hell* (2016); *Enlighten Us: The Rise and Fall of James Arthur Ray* (2016); *Wild Wild Country* (2018, six episodes); *Bikram: Yogi, Guru, Predator* (2019), in addition to the dramatized six-part *Waco* miniseries (2018). Like the old wave films on “cults,” the new films tend to focus on abusive cult leaders. But the new wave of filmmakers exhibit a more sophisticated, empathetic approach to exploring new religions and the perennial enigma of a leader’s charisma. They sidestep the anticult narratives found in the earlier documentaries and docudramas that over-simplify complex social dynamics and trivialize seekers’ spiritual quests. Brainwashing theory is referred to in passing, but it no longer provides the sole hermeneutical framework or explanation for people’s dubious choices as it did, for example, in the drama *Ticket to Heaven* (1981), the documentary *The Love Prophet and the Children of God* (1998), and the dramatized story of Roch “Moïse” Thériault and his apocalyptic group in *Savage Messiah* (2002).

Husband and wife directors Karim Amer and Jehane Noujaim, in a spirit of open-minded, almost naïve fascination, set out to explore NXIVM participants’ diverse range of experiences and opinions, showing a respectful appreciation for Vanguard’s loyal adepts and disillusioned apostates alike. They document the early history of the group, its appeal to spiritual seekers, and the growing awareness of Ranieri’s dark side. Their refusal to rely on pop psychology and anticult stereotypes to achieve a neat conclusion leaves room for a variety of responses from viewers, as may be seen in the passionate online debates following reviews of *The Vow* series.

This depiction of a new religion shows unusual depth and scope. The main person responsible for this is Mark Vicente. One of the directors of the New Age classic, *What the Bleep Do We Know!?* (2004), which explores the Human Potential Movement, Vicente was invited by Ranieri, his friend and spiritual teacher, to film the Executive Success Program (ESP) classes and lectures of NXIVM’s fast-growing self-help community. The idea was to honor Vanguard, the great philosopher, and his movement. After defecting from NXIVM in 2017, Vicente donated more than a decade’s worth of archival footage to *The Vow* project. This enables us to time travel inside this group. As we follow the directors’ interviews with Ranieri’s angry victims and ex-lovers, who complain of suffering legal harassment, financial fraud, and sexual abuse, we are shown flashbacks to their younger days as enthusiastic ESP instructors who hug their graduating students, and join Ranieri’s midnight volleyball sessions

where he imparts occasional gems of esoteric wisdom while sitting on the sideline during breaks.

What makes *The Vow* intriguing is the way that life imitates art. The characters and the action are so compelling that viewers might feel they are watching a fiction film. After all, three of the real-life protagonists (Edmondson, Piesse, and Catherine Oxenberg) just happen to be professional actors who express their feelings with a disciplined passion. Footage recorded in NXIVM meetings years ago appear theatrical and artful, probably because NXIVM-ites were self-consciously making history before the camera. Recent conversations between the protagonists—probably staged to fill in the plot—come across as entertaining scenes in a theater production.

Life began to imitate art due to the timing of the series. By the time *The Vow* came out on HBO in late summer 2020, media accounts of the NXIVM scandal had erupted. Keith Raniere was arrested in 2018 in a police raid on his hiding place in Mexico. Five women in his inner circle were also arrested, including Clare Bronfman (b. 1979), a Seagram liquor heiress, and Allison Mack (b. 1982) of the television series *Smallville*. Each woman pleaded guilty to charges before Raniere's trial in 2019. In June 2019 Raniere was convicted by a federal jury of "racketeering, racketeering conspiracy, sex trafficking, attempted sex trafficking, sex trafficking conspiracy, forced labor conspiracy, and wire fraud conspiracy."⁴ Claire Bronfman was sentenced to seven years in prison on 30 September 2020 (just before Episode 7 started), and the four remaining co-conspirators currently await sentencing.⁵ The ninth and last episode of *The Vow* aired on 18 October 2020. Less than two weeks later, Raniere was sentenced by Judge Nicholas G. Garaufis to 120 years in prison. At the sentencing hearing, a victim referred to as "Camila" alleged that she was "sexually exploited by Raniere when she was 15 years old," but the *New York Times* reports that Camila had decided not to press charges upon advice of her attorney.⁶

A competing docuseries on NXIVM came out in the fall of 2020 on the Starz network. *Seduced: Inside the NXIVM Cult*, a series with four episodes, covers a later phase of this new religion's history. It highlights Catherine Oxenberg's triumph in bringing down Vanguard in a last-ditch attempt to rescue her daughter India. It explores India's perilous journey inside NXIVM and her initiation into, and escape from, DOS. Actor Gregory Peck's daughter, Cecilia Peck, director and co-producer of *Seduced*, displays a feminist's compassionate approach to interviewing Raniere's victims. Members of an all-women sound recording team were trained on how to put mics on survivors of sexual assault, and Peck made sure a counselor was available whenever India or another DOS initiate described a triggering experience.⁷

Compared to *The Vow*, *Seduced* is a more primitive work of art, definitely old wave and anticult; but it fills in *The Vow*'s plotline, presenting

the personal, political, and legal battles that led to Keith Raniere's downfall. It offers the viewer a deeper, more insightful account of the inner workings of DOS, exposing the hierarchical structure and secret practices that enabled abuse. India Oxenberg is the beautiful star of the show, as well as one of the executive producers, and we see Keith Raniere and Allison Mack through her eyes as narcissistic, manipulative monsters who almost succeeded in implicating Oxenberg in activities later identified as federal crimes.

Another useful source interviewed in both *The Vow* and *Seduced* is Frank Parlato, a former employee of NXIVM. Parlato writes a blog devoted to scandal and scuttlebutt about the group.⁸ The former publicist does not disguise his implacable hatred for Raniere in his essays, which explore topics like Vanguard's smelly personal hygiene, his mediocre college grades, his erectile dysfunction and his Viagra orders using a deceased girlfriend's credit card. Parlato speculates on what Raniere will get for supper after he hears the judge sentence him to 120 years (baloney sandwich and an apple); and the dimensions of his cramped prison cell dominated by a toilet. He gleefully explores the likelihood of Raniere's solitary confinement, along with the Unabomber, in the supermax federal prison near Florence, Colorado. Parlato's ongoing support for Raniere's victims has resulted in intimate confidences, so his blog is a rich source of data on Vanguard's relationships with women.

Scholars familiar with the language, techniques, and philosophical ideas of the Human Potential Movement, and what sociologist Roy Wallis called "world affirming" new religious movements,⁹ will recognize elements appropriated from Erhard Seminars Training (est) and from Scientology. Researchers will also find that the filmmakers, journalists, and lawyers in both series exhibit a frustrating lack of scholarly interest in Raniere's charismatic claims. NXIVM's leader told a journalist for the *New York Times Magazine* that he walked fourteen to twenty miles per day as "he thought about how to solve humanity's problems."¹⁰ Tantalizing bits of information surfaced in the victims' statements at his sentencing that referred to Vanguard's putative psychic abilities and mystical powers. Studies of est and other self-help groups that focus on how to attain personal health, power, and material success have pointed to a hidden core of gnostic teaching that seeks to liberate the god-like Self.¹¹ NXIVM might provide an interesting case study of this pattern.

Sociologists and historians who have studied the radical sexual experiments launched by nineteenth- and twentieth-century charismatic leaders might consider classifying Raniere as a sex mystic, along with Thomas Lake Harris, Paschal Beverly Randolph, Aleister Crowley, and Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. In testimony during Raniere's trial a witness reported that Raniere told her, "Some women see blue lights" when they ingest his semen.¹² This ancient gnostic notion of sperm containing

spiritual knowledge was familiar to Luc Jouret of the Solar Temple, Samael Aun Weor of Universal Gnosticism, and other spiritual masters.

Ranieri's philosophy of sexuality is outlined in his filmed speeches for two subgroups in NXIVM—Jness and Society of Protectors (SOP).¹³ Jness, a women-only group, described as an “an ongoing exploration of what it means to be a woman,” was founded in 2006 and promoted by actor Allison Mack. It consisted of eleven eight-day workshops costing \$5,000 each. The all-men's subgroup SOP was founded in 2011 and involved martial arts training and participation in “readiness drills” “to keep them on alert in case they were ever needed in an emergency,” for example, “if a member ever went missing.” According to Mark Vicente, it was a “boot camp” whose aim was to “build character” and turn its members “from little boys into men.”¹⁴ Jness members were taught that women were innately “irresponsible, if not narcissistic, self-absorbed, and inclined to cast themselves as the victim.”¹⁵ In his speeches for Jness and SOP, Vanguard proposed that both sexes, in their path towards self-realization and better relationships, should realize that men are essentially polygamous, whereas women are naturally monogamous. Ranieri might be compared to eschatological polygamists like Joseph Smith, Love Israel, and Ben Ammi, or to prophets of polyamory such as Raël and David Brandt Berg. The difference is that Ranieri—who lived communally with his female administrators and considered DOS initiates as his lifelong “wives”—was the *only* man practicing polygamy in NXIVM.

Ranieri's controversial career imploded at the crest of the #MeToo movement, which highlights the pervasive sexual harassment, abuse, and assault of women in a variety of life and work contexts. Ranieri's detractors compare him to Harvey Weinstein and Jeffrey Epstein. Catherine Oxenberg observes in *Seduced* that the *New York Times* waited until the #MeToo movement hit the media, then suddenly found the NXIVM story to be relevant. The question often asked is, why did so many intelligent, highly-educated, privileged, beautiful, and (mostly) *mature* women (unlike Epstein's underage victims) surrender to Ranieri, with his false promises and cruel depredations? But is Vanguard so very different from other prophet-founders of new religions who have been accused of exploiting women for their own self-gratification, using them to enhance their charismatic display (such as Rajneesh and Raël), coaching them in acts of self-abasement (such as Love Israel and David Brandt Berg), or featuring feminine nudity in their rituals (such as Anton LaVey)? Their treatment of women has been explained as a product of the 1960s sexual liberation movement, as spiritual applications of free love and love-ins of the counterculture. Thus, for scholars of alternative religions in America, the level of public outrage towards Keith Ranieri might appear surprising, considering that many other male

charismatic leaders have imposed similar ordeals on their female followers without suffering consequences.

In the wake of #MeToo, however, we find a new class of exploited women—not Weinstein’s aspiring actresses, nor Epstein’s underprivileged teenagers, but wealthy, classy, successful, beautiful women who abased themselves before a geeky megalomaniac in the name of what? spiritual realization? female empowerment? What made Raniere’s behavior more reprehensible than that of other guru sexual predators is that his control over his female devotees was more duplicitous, coercive, and cruel. The adult women in DOS were told it was an all-female secret society quite apart from NXIVM, in which women, rather than men, were their “Masters.” Keith Raniere, in fact, was the Grandmaster and architect of this social experiment. DOS women were told that the brand represented a Latin symbol of the elements. Only later was it deciphered as KR—what Vanguard referred to as his monogram. They were assured the brand would be tiny, the size of a quarter. It was much bigger. One woman thought it would be a tattoo. None of them realized ahead of time that the branding ceremony would require being held down, naked, and screaming for twenty minutes of searing pain under a cauterizing pen. Nor did they know that the video of their painful ordeal would be sent straight to Vanguard.

Well-known former deprogrammers Rick Ross and Steve Hassan appear in both *The Vow* and in *Seduced*, presenting their interpretations of cult-like behavior and applying a one-size-fits-all analysis to NXIVM. Sociologist Janja Lalich talks of coercive control. It is true that Vanguard went to extraordinary lengths to guarantee loyalty and punish his detractors. DOS women were required to provide “collateral”—explicit photos of their genitals or recorded testimonials of their own or their loved ones’ criminal actions (usually imaginary). This collateral was used to blackmail them into silence. DOS women followed brutal weight loss diets that led to menstrual dysfunction and hair loss to achieve what Raniere deemed as sexy skinny; to others it looked more like concentration camp skinny. Fasting in world religions is, of course, nothing new; threats of reprisals to traitors and defectors are occasionally found in secret societies and sects (for example, the Peoples Temple); and some new religious movements are notoriously litigious towards career apostates (for example, Church of Scientology). But in NXIVM these patterns were notable in their viciousness, cruelty, and degradation.

I highly recommend both *The Vow* and *Seduced* for their insightful and detailed accounts of one of the most fascinating, outrageous #MeToo cases in the field of new religions studies. I also recommend both of the docuseries for their exploration of the sudden, spectacular demise of a new religion, which has become a currently explored topic in new religions studies.¹⁶ Researchers can enjoy two docuseries and then

construct their own, updated understanding of NXIVM's rise and fall with the extra data found in media reports, court proceedings, and Frank Parlato's blog. Season 2 of *The Vow* is scheduled for 2021, so stay tuned.

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ENDNOTES

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