

**CONSENT CULTURE AND
TEEN FILMS**
ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY IN US MOVIES



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INTRODUCTION

BY 2019, THE CONCEPT OF affirmative consent (“yes means yes”) had become so prevalent in US culture that it was edited into the film *Good Boys*. While the word *consent* does not appear in an April 4, 2017 version of the script, the released film includes numerous instances of verbal consent—even one when the tween boys decide to practice kissing on what they think is a “really pretty CPR doll” but is actually a sex toy. In the scene, Max leans in for a kiss on the doll, and his friend Lucas yells, “Stop! What are you doing? . . . You can’t kiss someone without their permission. Remember from assembly?” So Max asks the doll (a stand-in for his crush Brixlee), “Can I kiss you?” to which Lucas (playing Brixlee) ultimately responds, “I consent.” The humor of the scene, drawn from the absurdity of obtaining affirmative consent from a sex toy, emphasizes the impacts of consent culture, or what we might call the cultural prioritization of obtaining clear consent in all interactions—particularly sexual ones. In an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter* about the film, director and cowriter Gene Stupnitsky says, “[Consent] is very real and something that should be addressed. . . . There’s a long history of movies being on the other side of that, and I think going forward it’s imperative for filmmakers, as the world evolves, to evolve with it.”¹ Clearly, Stupnitsky intended *Good Boys* to be on the “right” side of consent culture and that meant explicitly taking sexual consent into account.

Such attention to consent in contemporary teen films represents a significant change from decades earlier. In 1980s teen films, boys routinely treat consent as irrelevant by spying on young women in locker rooms and bedrooms and tricking or coercing girls into sex. However, as affirmative consent has been increasingly culturally prioritized, studios and filmmakers have adapted the plots and scenes accordingly. Date rape is no longer a joke, and young women’s



Fig. 0.1. In the 2019 film *Good Boys*, the boys practice consent on what they think is a CPR doll, but is actually a sex toy.

desires are no longer transgressive. In addition, as actors, directors, and audiences have demanded greater diversity in representation, queer teens are no longer relegated to the sidelines, and leading roles in teen films now span a range of racial and ethnic identities.

However, despite these transformations, consent has remained complex for teens in films, even in the first few decades of the twenty-first century. Girls are still shown navigating subtle and not-so-subtle coercion, while boys often are portrayed as always already consenting. Queer teens are depicted forcing themselves into unpleasant heterosexual encounters, and trans youth are shown subjugated by parents who control decisions about their gender-affirming care. Numerous contemporary teen films reveal how consent in practice can be much more perplexing than implied by “no means no” and “yes means yes.” In *Consent Culture and Teen Films: Adolescent Sexuality in US Movies*, I trace the history of adolescent sexuality in US movies and look at dozens of early twenty-first-century teen films in which youth are shown as having ambiguous control over their bodies and their sexualities—despite the advances of consent culture. These moments, I argue, reveal the biases and flaws in our affirmative consent framework as well as in our assumptions about youth sexuality, ultimately exposing the need for a more nuanced way forward.

FROM RAPE CULTURE TO CONSENT CULTURE:
THE EMERGENCE OF AFFIRMATIVE CONSENT

Sexual consent is a slippery concept to define, leading one scholar to declare flatly, “There is no consensus on an encompassing definition of sexual consent.”² While consent’s “moral magic” or its power to distinguish a permissible act from an impermissible act is largely agreed on, the specific interpretation of consent can vary widely depending on individual contexts.³ Peter Westen in *The Logic of Consent* argues that although we have a “general sense” of what the term means, distinct cases expose how, in fact, we “have only vague and conflicting notions of what we mean by consent.”⁴ These “diverse meanings” can result in “theorists who seem to be directly debating each other” instead “talking past one another.”⁵ As Westen suggests, this disconnect carries the “risk” of “failing to think and communicate clearly about normative values to which we are committed.”⁶ In other words, while most people support a consent framework, it is not always clear what is meant by the term or how it manifests in practice.

Even as a legal construct, consent can be hard to pin down with definitions that vary state by state in the United States. Some states avoid defining consent at all, instead articulating the meaning of nonconsensual acts like sexual assault and rape.⁷ Nevertheless, researchers, scholars, sex educators, schools, institutions, and governments routinely do attempt to define sexual consent. In its simplest form, sexual consent is permission for a sexual act. When broken down further, consent can be understood as “an internal experience” and/or “external communication.”⁸ In other words, consent can be intangibly thought/felt and/or embodied via what one says/does. Westen similarly breaks down consent into “attitudinal” consent (i.e., willingness) and “expressive” consent (i.e., verbal or other articulation of consent) and notes that in the eyes of a legal jurisdiction, consent might be defined as either or both. The contemporary discourse of affirmative consent emphasizes a clear articulation of verbal consent with the presumption that an eager yes would correspond to an internal willingness. Many related policies and guidelines thus highlight several components as necessary to validate consent, such as Planned Parenthood’s definition, which outlines how consent must be “informed,” “specific,” “freely given,” “enthusiastic,” and “reversible.”⁹

Consent culture represents a concerted effort to shift our cultural norms from trivializing nonconsent to focusing on clearly expressed consent. In short, consent culture is a response to rape culture. For decades, many have argued that widespread sexism has created a society that accepts and even encourages

sexual assault through cultural ideas, educational practices, laws, institutional policies, and media representations. As Sarah Projansky in *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* suggests, “depictions of rape are a pervasive part of this culture, embedded in all of its complex media forms, entrenched in the landscape of visual imagery.” Such ubiquity “naturalizes rape’s place in our everyday world, not only as real physical events but also as part of our fantasies, fears, desires, and consumptive practices.”¹⁰ In an attempt to address rape culture in the 1980s and 1990s, many educators, activists, and others began to stress “no means no.”

Since then, the sex-positive movement, which advocates women’s and girls’ sexual agency, revised the mantra to “yes means yes.” While no should be respected, ensuring consent requires not only the lack of a no but also an enthusiastic yes. At its core, consent culture is based on this principle of affirmative consent—hearing and articulating yes is the key to making an interaction valid. Consent culture is guided by a widespread conviction that consent matters deeply and the belief that free, informed, and mutual consent is a key to building a better world without domination, without force, and without violence. Consent culture stresses that sexual interactions are but one (albeit important) instance of consent and that consent is a learned cultural behavior—for example, children develop consent skills from being asked, not forced, to hug a relative and from learning that they too need to ask before hugging a friend.

In 2008, Jaclyn Friedman and Jessica Valenti published the volume *Yes Means Yes!: Visions of Female Sexual Power and a World without Rape*, in which they highlight their move toward affirmative consent. In the introduction, they write, “So often it seems as if the discourse is focused solely on the ‘no means no’ model—which, while of course useful, stops short of truly envisioning how suppressing female sexual agency is a key element of rape culture, and therefore how fostering genuine female sexual autonomy is necessary in fighting back against it.”¹¹ Friedman and Valenti distinctly stress the necessity of cultural change, stating that the contributors seek “to heal a sexual culture that is profoundly broken” and to “explore how creating a culture that values genuine female sexual pleasure can help stop rape, and how the cultures and systems that support rape in the United States rob us of our right to sexual power.”¹² Ultimately, they suggest how a turn towards consent culture or affirmative consent might best address the roots of rape culture.

While the phrase *consent culture* had been used occasionally during the twentieth century in the contexts of labor, government, and healthcare, it appears that in the 2010s, the term suddenly became widely adopted by US media.¹³ Although it would be difficult to pinpoint an exact source for this

surge, Kitty Stryker's blog, *Consent Culture*, is often cited as bringing prominence to the term.¹⁴ By 2014, *consent culture* had become mainstream enough for inclusion in Urban Dictionary which states, "A consent culture is one in which the prevailing narrative of sex is centered around mutual consent. It is a culture with an abhorrence of forcing anyone into anything, a respect for the absolute necessity of bodily autonomy, a culture that believes that a person is always the best judge of their own wants and needs." The definition clarifies that "consent culture is also one in which mutual consent is part of social life as well," meaning that consent is required for *all* interactions—from hugging and tickling to talking to someone, even stating, "Don't want to try the fish? That's fine."¹⁵ In 2017, Stryker published the compilation *Ask: Building Consent Culture* with the goal of encouraging conversations "not just about the issues around consent in daily life, but also what we can do about them—a friendly yet firm call to action."

There is no one precise moment when consent culture came into being. However, numerous journalists and scholars often highlight the first college affirmative consent policy developed by the feminist student organization Antioch Womyn in 1990 at Antioch College as a historical moment. Their Sexual Offense Prevention Policy (SOPP), revised over the years, outlined tenets such as "consent is required each and every time there is sexual activity" and "each new level of sexual activity requires consent." It also included specifics such as intoxication and sleep invalidate consent; consent can be withdrawn at any point; and "silence is not consent." In their emphasis on "yes means yes," the policy clarified that "body movements and non-verbal responses such as moans are not consent" and stated that it was the responsibility of the sexual initiator to obtain consent and the recipient to respond verbally.¹⁶

In 1993, this policy became the object of national ridicule when it was parodied on *Saturday Night Live*'s "Is It Date Rape?" sketch with Mike Myers with lines like "May I elevate the level of sexual intimacy by feeling your buttocks?" Affirmative consent, at this time, seemed excessive and preposterous—it was "held up as the apotheosis of political correctness," according to Kristine Herman, one of the Antioch Womyn authors. Meanwhile, the policy had already been in effect for two years without controversy; students took it to be "normal and status quo."¹⁷ Decades later, such a policy is now commonplace at colleges across the United States.

The evolving discourse of consent culture has been negotiated by and through legislation and landmark cases regarding sexual consent on college campuses. A 1985 study with over six thousand undergraduates conducted by Ms. and Mary P. Koss concluded that one in four undergraduate women "had

an experience that met the legal definition of rape or attempted rape.”¹⁸ The study later became adapted into the book *I Never Called It Rape* published in 1988. Several US Supreme Court cases in the 1990s then established that Title IX must protect student victims of sexual violence and harassment: a 1992 decision confirmed student victims of sexual harassment could be awarded monetary damages in certain cases, and a 1999 decision concluded that Title IX covered both student-student sexual harassment and teacher-student harassment.¹⁹ These judicial battles played out alongside growing mainstream awareness of campus sexual assault. In the aughts, campus sexual assault continued to be recognized as a serious and pervasive issue, with cases from the Air Force Academy, Rutgers University, Duke University, and numerous others making national headlines.

A tipping point came in 2011, when the Obama administration’s Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR) presented schools a nineteen-page “Dear colleague” letter that outlined the specific steps to prevent and respond to accusations of sexual harassment and violence under Title IX. The letter defines “sexual violence” as “physical sexual acts perpetrated against a person’s will” and states that drugs, alcohol, and certain disabilities can invalidate consent. There is no explicit mention of affirmative consent in the letter. Still, the effects of the OCR’s actions would prove significant. Colleges had long tried to sweep campus rapes and sexual assaults under the rug by suppressing reports and statistics. Suddenly, this tacit strategy was outed as a national issue, and federal funding was on the line for compliance in handling such cases according to the OCR guidelines. In May 2014, the OCR took it even further with the “unprecedented step” of publishing the names of fifty-five colleges and universities under investigation for Title IX compliance, which included elite institutions like Harvard Law School and Princeton University; public universities like Michigan State University and Ohio State University; and private institutions such as Boston University and Sarah Lawrence College.²⁰ As R. Shep Melnick states in his Brookings report “Analyzing the Department of Education’s Final Title IX Rules on Sexual Misconduct,” the OCR in 2014 articulated a “new paradigm” for sexual harassment regulation” one intended to “change the culture on the college campuses . . . to cure the epidemic of sexual violence.” This paradigm shift, Melnick states, “replaced the courts’ focus on identifying and punishing the perpetrators of on-campus sexual misconduct with a much broader effort to change social attitudes and to mitigate the effects of sexual assault wherever it occurs.”²¹ Such a statement points to how the OCR saw the transition from a rape culture to a consent culture as necessary to solving the complex problem of campus sexual assault. In 2014, California

became the first state to require colleges to specify affirmative consent policies for students. Others have since followed.

In 2015, *Saturday Night Live* once again performed a consent sketch, “Teacher Trial,” which depicted a teen boy (played by adult Pete Davidson) in a court detailing his sexual assault by two women teachers. A straight-faced attorney questions the student who expresses how pleasurable their three-way was and how it earned him respect from his peers, all of which attracts approving nods from his dad and fist bumps from the judge. The joke implies the impossibility of a young man’s being sexually assaulted by an adult woman teacher, perpetuating an unfortunate belief that men and boys are always already consenting to sex. However, this time, *SNL* got more than laughs—the skit immediately received abundant backlash on Twitter with viewers calling the sketch “gross and unnecessary,” “Not cool. Not funny,” and “a new low.”²² Consent culture clearly had changed how viewers reacted to such sketches, and the rise of social media facilitated their ability to communicate their dissatisfaction to each other and *SNL* itself. As I elaborate further in chapter 5, consent culture can be viewed as linked to what has been termed *cancel culture* as audiences demand accountability from public figures, celebrities, and media.

The shift to consent culture has been the result of countless voices advocating change. In between these two *SNL* skits, there have been essays, blog posts, hashtags, conversations, court cases, and, of course, films, television, and other media that together have transformed the mainstream way of thinking about consent. As an example of how long and how many voices it can take to shape a cultural transition, consider the #MeToo movement. Tarana Burke first posted the hashtag on MySpace in 2006, but it wasn’t until 2017 that Alyssa Milano tweeted, “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet.” The response was overwhelming and went much further than simply direct replies to Milano. At that moment, many felt comfortable posting their stories publicly for the first time, partly because they were no longer isolated survivors but members of a growing movement highlighting the harms of rape culture and demanding a better way forward.

A SEX-CRITICAL APPROACH TO CONSENT

Consent culture is not without flaws. Harvard Law School professor and attorney Janet Halley, in “The Move to Affirmative Consent” in *Signs*, argues that the move to affirmative consent is actually a “conservative” one that “poses the possibility of a vast new criminalization”; “install[s] traditional social norms of male responsibility and female helplessness”; and “foster[s] a new, randomly

applied moral order that will often be intensely repressive and sex-negative.”²³ Halley pinpoints the central question often asked when using consent as the key to ethical or legal interactions: Should consent be defined as “subjective” or “performative”²⁴, that is, as a “state of mind” or a “performative act”?²⁵ Halley argues that discrepancies could result in an individual verbally consenting to a sexual act that they *do not want* and refusing to verbally consent to a sexual act they *do want*. In other words, an emphasis on performative consent “come[s] at the cost of enabling people to punish their sex partners for engaging in sex that the complainants passionately desired at the time.”²⁶

This confusion over consent impacts real-world interactions. In focus groups, college students often express that they are either unfamiliar with their school’s consent policies or are unable to determine how to put the policies into practice. In one study, students described how nonsexual/sexual and nonconsensual/consensual interactions “blur into one another” leading the researchers to call for consent to be thought of as a “cumulative phenomenon” as opposed to a single consensual or nonconsensual event.²⁷ In addition, many theorists note how consent for sexual acts is often interpreted by participants through nonverbal cues like body language, making affirmative consent even more confusing.²⁸ Other ambiguities can derive from the fact that consent frequently is given “prospectively” (beforehand) or “retrospectively” (after the fact) and not “contemporaneously” (in the moment), as Westen notes.²⁹ For example, one might consent to a sexual act but feel differently as that sexual act begins and proceeds. Or one can engage in an act and then feel differently about it afterward.

The fact that consent proves to be an incredibly ambiguous and tenuous framework for sexual interactions is often glossed over, except by certain sex researchers and legal scholars.³⁰ Yet I would argue that Michel Foucault’s 1978 prediction appears to have become true: “sexuality will no longer be a kind of behavior hedged in by any precise prohibitions, but a kind of roaming danger, a sort of omnipresent phantom.” This scenario, Foucault suggests, ushers in a “new regime for the supervision of sexuality,” one in which legal and medical institutions “try to get a grip through an apparently generous, and at least general, legislation.”³¹ In other words, it is no longer particular sexual behaviors and relationships (sodomy, miscegenation, etc.) that are controlled; rather, sex itself has become understood as a “roaming danger” that needs constant attention, regulation, and enforcement.³² Yes, consent culture emerged out of a legitimate and urgent need to protect individuals from sexual harassment, assault, and exploitation. But consent culture has also elicited a new era of discussing and policing sexual relations. And ironically, affirmative consent

does *not* automatically resolve a key concern amid rape culture—eradicating the abundance of unwanted and pressured sexual interactions. When verbal assent is emphasized as the essential factor in ethical and legal sexual interactions, unwanted sexual encounters can still be consensual. In other words, a yes might not always mean yes. Such an issue also has been raised by radical feminists like Catharine A. MacKinnon who argue that “the sharp line drawn by liberals between consensual and nonconsensual sex falsifies the degree of coercion imposed upon women by men in our ordinary sexual lives.”³³ Some radical feminists take this argument quite far, suggesting the impossibility of women’s heterosexual consent—not a stance I would support. Still, it is quite possible that affirmative consent has provided a deceptive sense of security about how rape culture can be addressed and resolved.

In recognition of all the complexities of consent, I position myself within a sex-critical approach to consent, seeking to bridge the common schism in feminism between sex-positive and radical feminist ideologies. This approach recognizes the urgency of critiquing and disrupting rape culture and prioritizing consent while avoiding value judgments about the range of sexualities, gender identities, desires, and practices. A sex-critical approach emphasizes the importance of examining, calling out, and rewriting dominant “sexual scripts” that imply primarily one way of being sexual—typically “penile-vaginal intercourse that happens between one cisgender man and one cisgender woman,” as Milena Popova observes in the book *Sexual Consent*. Such scripts, Popova contends, create a “clear line of progression” between “the starting point of sex somewhere around kissing and touching, and the endpoint at a cisgender man’s ejaculation.”³⁴ Lisa Downing, who coined the phrase *sex critical*, underscores that in this approach, “all forms of sexuality and all sexual representations should be equally susceptible to critical thinking and interrogation about the normative or otherwise ideologies they uphold.”³⁵ I would add that this way of thinking also offers an opportunity to look more critically at sexual consent itself, by seeking to understand and unravel complexities instead of avoiding them through oversimplifications.

In looking at how consent culture impacts teen films, I aim not to provide pat answers but rather to demonstrate some of the more troubling aspects of consent depicted through this body of films. I recognize too that adolescent sexuality is not a single monolithic idea but rather a range of desires, experiences, and subjectivities, some of which are more visible than others in the genre. For example, trans, nonbinary, gender-questioning, and bisexual teens remain less commonly depicted—even now. Topics, themes, characters, and plots for teen films are not only crafted by adults but also filtered by an industry

that relies on producing popular content marketed to a wide audience for economic gain. Thus, I would argue that omission does not necessarily suggest the lack of importance of an issue among actual youth but rather signals a lack of mainstream focus and acceptance in adult society. Adolescent sexuality ultimately exists within an adult world of laws, rules, and cultural meanings and yet is also full of its own rebellions, contradictions, and resistances.

A DEFINITION OF TEEN FILM

While there are numerous interpretations of what we mean by “teen films,” for the purposes of this study, I define them as coming-of-age movies marketed to youth and/or adults. Ultimately, I am interested in how portrayals of youth by adults have shaped and continue to shape our ideas of adolescence, sexuality, and consent. For this reason, I have chosen not to limit my definition to films marketed to teens. Certainly, teen audiences have comprised a formidable demographic for the genre, even the industry as a whole. In *Signifying Female Adolescence*, Georganne Scheiner argues that “a clear teen culture came into being” as early as the 1920s, and that it was that culture which shaped both the content and marketing of films for decades to come.³⁶ Others highlight the 1940s as the era when the concept of a “teenager” emerged and the industry became more conscious of youth as drivers of ticket sales, ultimately taking the form of “teenpics” in the 1950s, as Thomas Doherty suggests. Other shifts in the genre over the last half century have also been driven by youth. In the book *Generation Multiplex*, Timothy Shary argues that the 1980s represented a particular flourishing of the teen film due to adolescents who flocked to movies in malls and theaters. In the early twenty-first century, youth audiences again have been instrumental in bringing about the transition from in-person theatrical screenings to video on demand (VOD) platforms like Netflix and Hulu.

Still, I do not view teen films as being solely for youth. Many contemporary teen films are rated R by the Motion Pictures Association (MPA), so teenagers under age seventeen would be unable to watch them in a theater without an accompanying adult. Similarly, numerous VOD teen films like Hulu’s *Plan B* (2021) are rated TV-MA or “mature” and designated only for logged-in users over the age of eighteen.³⁷ So, it seems no leap to argue that teen films are not exclusively for youth. I would even contend that teen films have long been positioned for adults—the teen sex comedy, in particular, with its nudity and sexual humor is often marketed as voyeuristic entertainment for adults. Such R-rated films explicitly target adults nostalgic for the teen films of their own generation—*Blockers* (2018) brings parents into the foreground of the teen sex

comedy plot, *The To Do List* (2013) takes place in the 1990s, and *Good Boys* mixes adult humor with naive preteen boys.

In fact, adults might be partial to the youth genre because, as Shary says, “teen films hold a special place in the hearts of almost all moviegoers, since we have fond and frustrating memories of the films that spoke to us in our adolescence.”³⁸ Catherine Driscoll too notes that the “sensibility” of the teen film—marked by Robert Benayoun’s description of “normal qualities of youth: naïveté, idealism, humor, hatred of tradition, erotomania, and a sense of injustice”—ensures an “appeal” beyond teens.³⁹ Universal themes alongside the simple fact that every adult experienced their own youth draws adults into the potential, if not always the intended audience. And ultimately, in this book, I seek to unravel what teen films suggest about cultural notions of adolescent sexuality—whether they are marketed to adults, youth, or both.

Perhaps quite obviously, teen movies are generally not *by* teens. As Shary notes in his book *Teen Movies: American Youth on Screen*, there is no “cinematic tradition of movies made by children, unlike many of other marginalized groups in U.S. history.” While youth certainly produce their own media, they typically are not involved in the writing, directing, and producing of feature-length films. The prevailing assumption has been that “adults could portray the youth experience based on their personal memories and current observations; the only creative input young people actually had was in performing the roles adults designed for them.”⁴⁰ As a result, Shary notes, “screen images of youth have always been traditionally filtered through adult perspectives.”⁴¹ Even sporadic exceptions, such as books written by teen girls and adapted into movies such as *The Outsiders* (1983) and *The Kissing Booth* (2018) or scripts written in collaboration with teens such as *Thirteen* (2003), still involve adult screenwriters, directors, and producers who ultimately shape the resulting visual narrative.

The fact that teen films are made by adults, not adolescents themselves, presents a unique question for the study of the genre not always acknowledged by critics and scholars—might teen films lag in their resonance by years or decades as a result of their adult points of view? Of course, the adolescents in teen films are not necessarily representative of actual youth in any period—as Driscoll in the book *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction* suggests, “probably few people have ever felt their adolescence was accurately portrayed by teen film.”⁴² In fact, teen films so often draw on a stock set of characters and themes, one cannot help but wonder if they are less drawn from any past or present reality but are rather, as Driscoll suggests, more indicative of Fredric Jameson’s concept of “pastiche,” or imitation without an original or referent.⁴³ The teens

conjured by “teen films” reside more in adults’ imaginations than in reality, and the plots often contain recycled narrative patterns.

While teen films are fictional, they are also a manifestation of the discourses around youth. Jon Lewis argues that teen films are “the *principal* mass mediated discourse of youth”—one “that rather glibly and globally re-presents youth as a culture.”⁴⁴ Teen films both reflect and influence ideas about adolescents, even though they are not always representative of actual youth. Jacqueline Rose makes an analogous argument in a study of children’s literature stating, “There is no child behind the category ‘children’s fiction,’ other than the one which the category itself sets in place, the one which it needs to believe is there for its own purposes.”⁴⁵ Ironically, children’s fiction, as Henry Jenkins describes, “tell[s] us far more about adults, their values, their aspirations, their emotional needs, than such stories tell us about children’s actual experiences.”⁴⁶ Similarly, teen films imaginatively conjure and invent the notion of the “teen.” At times, teen films appear to be a double fiction—not necessarily accurately representing youth nor created for them. Rather the concerns that emerge through the teen films of each era represent the fears and beliefs of the adults who make them, watch them, and regulate them.

Aligning with numerous other scholars of adolescence in film, I allow my definition of teen movies to blur beyond the strict limits of characters aged thirteen to nineteen. In the teen movie genre, *teen* often serves as a stand-in for *youth* or *adolescent*, terms that imply a stage of life rather than a specific age. The definition of an adolescent is itself a moving target, currently characterized by individuals between the onset of puberty through their twenties. In general, I look here to films that depict the journey of a sexual coming of age in adolescence, whether the characters are tweens (such as in *The Tale* and *Good Boys*) or are in college and beyond (such as in *Boy Erased*). That said, most protagonists in the films included in my study are high school age—and there seems to be a particular prevalence within teen romance/sex films to set the story during senior year of high school or the summer before college, likely to position the characters as mature enough for sexual exploits.

Teen films, of course, encompass an array of subgenres. Shary breaks down the US contemporary youth genre into five categories: school films (usually comedies), delinquency dramas, horror films, science films, and love/sex films.⁴⁷ I focus largely on the dramas and comedies of this last subgenre—love/sex films. Like Shary, I view horror films as a distinct subgenre, so they are not included in my study. I also do not focus on G-rated children’s films such as animated Disney features since I also consider them a distinct subgenre. Within the love/sex subgenre, as Shary notes, are stories about the desire for

(and obstacles to) sexual knowledge/experience and stories about the desire for (and obstacles to) romance. I add in other subcategories including stories about sexual abuse that prioritize the adolescent's point of view, such as *Precious* (2009), *Diary of a Teenage Girl* (2015), and *The Tale* (2018); stories that focus on gender transitioning, such as *3 Generations* (2015); and stories that focus on a teen's experience in conversion therapy, such as *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2018) and *Boy Erased* (2018).

Furthermore, my focus on teen *films* precludes my delving into how adolescents have been depicted on television, VOD, or web series. My omission of episodic programming in this study does not suggest its irrelevance but is simply a result of my examining the through line of over one hundred years of the teen film as a specific and unique genre. Although it is certainly possible, perhaps even likely, that shorter form and episodic content will eventually supplant feature-length films, the teen film remains a robust genre with strong market potential. In fact, some of the most watched films on Netflix in recent years have been teen films, such as *The Kissing Booth* and *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018), both of which inspired trilogies.

I limit my study in this book to films produced in the United States.⁴⁸ Teen films, of course, are an international art and product. There is no doubt that US cinema is influenced by work and trends across the globe, just as it wields influence around the world, and some of the most groundbreaking work indeed has emerged from filmmakers outside of the United States. For example, there are numerous instances of trends that began in Europe—such as European films' depicting explicitly queer youth protagonists years before US films. However, my exclusive focus on US cinema enables an examination of teen films in direct relation to cultural forces and laws regarding visual culture and youth sexuality that are unique to the country. For example, the United States has some of the strictest laws against child pornography in the world, a fact that continues to shape visual depictions of youth sexuality even now.

One of the limitations in reviewing any aspect of US film history is the fact of an industry that has been long guided by racism, sexism, classism, heteronormativity, ableism, and cis sexism. Youth of different races, ethnicities, classes, gender identities, abilities, and sexualities have been omitted from most of film history, just as directors, producers, and executives have tended to be white cis men for over a century. Groundbreaking films by women and people of color have long been excluded from awards like the Oscars and archives like the National Film Registry. These obstacles have made it frustratingly difficult to find depictions of diverse teens from a range of perspectives throughout US cinema history. As a result, the definition of "teen film" has leaned white, heterosexual,

and cisgender. In this study, I have made a conscious effort to seek out a more diverse range of teen films from the independent film arena—both in recounting the history of sexuality in the genre and in selecting twenty-first-century films for my study. While many studies in teen films tend to omit or gloss over early cinema, I also attempt in chapter 1 to illuminate some early examples worth another look. However, one chapter cannot comprehensively represent a complete history of the genre, and there clearly remains a continued need for more studies emphasizing race and the range of sexualities and gender identities in teen films throughout US history.

Perhaps the single most important characteristic of the teen films included in my study is a clear point of view from the youth's perspective. For this reason, I tend to exclude films where childhood is shown as the stepping-stone to a story about adulthood, such as *Riding in Cars with Boys* (2001), as well as films in which the adolescent's point of view is not primary, such as in *The Kids Are All Right* (2010). However, I do include a film like *The Tale* since writer/director Jennifer Fox specifically prioritizes the child's (Jenny's) voice alongside that of her adult self (Jennifer). In fact, Jenny's voice is one of the key features of the film, so much so that in one scene Jenny looks into the camera and insists that she is the hero of the story. Although I recognize the tenuousness of adolescent subjectivity within *any* story told by adults, I look to stories that provide the illusion of such subjectivity. In other words, I do not argue that teen films depict an actual contemporaneous adolescent point of view but rather suggest how this imagined subjectivity articulates the current cultural concerns, fears, and fascinations of adults regarding adolescence.

SEXUALITY IN TEEN FILMS IN THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Consent culture has undoubtedly curbed certain depictions in film and television, while encouraging others to flourish. As the arbiter of depictions of adolescent sexuality, filmmakers of teen films undoubtedly respond to cultural pressures and norms. In many ways, consent culture provides filmmakers a new production "code"—one that suggests not what is morally decent, but rather what is ethical in contemporary society. In subsequent chapters, I address how consent culture influences specific thematic depictions of adolescent sexuality in teen films during the early twenty-first century—and how these films reveal some of the tacit dilemmas of consent.

In chapter 1, "Regulating Adolescent Sexuality in US Cinema: From Censorship to Child Pornography Laws," I provide an overview of the history of US

regulation of adolescent sexuality—from the silent era to contemporary films. I examine the impact of key movements of censorship, rating systems, and child pornography legislation, and I highlight several films that circumvented barriers with groundbreaking or surprising representations of adolescent sexuality. Concern for protecting children has significantly shaped and continues to shape how adolescent sexual behavior is visualized through film. As I reference dozens of teen films throughout the decades, I demonstrate that although anxiety for adolescents' exposure to ideas about sex through film has waned, concern over the sexual exploitation of minors has grown. Ultimately, this chapter provides a context for those that follow, tracing a history of adolescent sexuality in US teen films from the inception of cinema in the 1890s through the twenty-first century.

In chapters 2 and 3, I show how teen films expose specific flaws in the affirmative consent discourse. In chapter 2, "Flipping the Heterosexual Script and Race-Based Sexual Stereotypes in Teen Comedies of the 2010s and 2020s," I look to a number of recent US sex comedies like *The To Do List*, *Banging Lanie* (2020), *Blockers* (2020), *American Pie: Girls' Rules* (2020), and *Sex Appeal* (2022) and romances targeted to younger audiences like *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, *Sierra Burgess Is a Loser* (2018), and *The Half of It* (2020) that rewrite the stereotypical heterosexual script by placing girls in the role of the sexual aggressor. In many ways, these films represent the gains of consent culture, feminism, the call for more women directors, and demands for greater diversity in films. Many of the girls playing aggressors are also multiethnic—Aubrey Plaza (*The To Do List*) is Puerto Rican American; Leah Lewis (*The Half of It*) is Chinese American; Lana Condor (*To All the Boys I've Loved Before*) is Vietnamese American; Piper Curda (*American Pie: Girls' Rules*) is Korean American; Madison Pettis (*American Pie: Girls' Rules*) is Black American; and Geraldine Viswanathan (*Blockers*) is Indian Swiss. As a result, these films push against not only the heterosexual script but also race-based sexual stereotypes. However, such films persist in problematic narrative patterns, such as relying on non-consent as part of the plot and perpetuating the stereotype that teen boys are always already consenting. In particular, many of these films use nonconsent as humor or plot device—and such a structure only seems possible amid consent culture by switching genders. Ultimately, I argue that these teen films expose affirmative consent as a highly gendered discourse where consent is taken into account for girls more than boys.

In chapter 3, "Queering Consent: Navigating Performative and Subjective Consent in Queer Teen Films," I describe how queer US teen films highlight another failing of the affirmative consent discourse—how it can be ineffective

at protecting against undesired and unpleasant sexual encounters. Here, I outline how queer teens moved from the sidelines into leading roles of independent teen films in the late 1990s, culminating with *Love, Simon* (2018), the first Hollywood film to feature a homosexual protagonist in the genre. However, many recent cis queer and questioning characters in films such as *Alex Strangelove* (2018), *Blockers*, and *A Girl Like Grace* (2015) depict consent as troubling—the teens are shown as initially not consenting to their own sexual impulses and thus force themselves into heterosexual encounters that they neither want nor enjoy. Furthermore, recent films such as *Boy Erased* and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* depict older teens “consenting” to conversion therapy, which again accentuates how constrained and coerced affirmative consent can be. I conclude the chapter by looking at the film *Princess Cyd* (2017), which rewrites the queer script in a nuanced and affirming way, recognizing nonconsent but also underscoring sexuality as a continuum and open-ended exploration.

In chapters 4 and 5, I highlight how teen films resist oversimplifying consent and agency regarding youth. In chapter 4 “I Was Not Lolita: Child Sexual Abuse and Children’s Agency in *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* and *The Tale*,” I look at two recent US films that recount the statutory rape of cis girls by adult men—situations that imply the impossibility of consent. In earlier eras, young girls were frequently depicted as sexually precocious in films such as *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Pretty Baby* (1978), *Manhattan* (1979), and *Blame It on Rio* (1984) or even as dangerous sexual aggressors/predators toward older men in *Poison Ivy* (1992), *The Crush* (1993), and *Election* (1999). With the passing of the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, the sexualization of girls discourse, and increased recognition of childhood sexual abuse (CSA), twenty-first-century films clearly avoided blaming girls for statutory rape and incest. However, what became lost in this turn is the acknowledgment of girl survivors’ sexual desire, curiosity, pleasure, and choices. For example, the 2009 adaptation *Precious* omits the girl’s orgasms so prominent and discomfiting in the original novel *Push*, begging the question of whether it would have been impossible to highlight her status as a victim with that aspect in the film. In this chapter, I suggest that two recent films, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* and *The Tale*, present a new way of imagining CSA stories as more complex narratives of girls who voice desires and make choices even while depicting them as exploited by adult men. These films challenge us to rethink the Lolita narrative and recognize how youth might assert choices and maintain a distinct point of view, even in stories where consent is ethically impossible.

In chapter 5, “The (In)Visibility of Trans Teens: 3 *Generations*, *Adam*, and *Boy Meets Girl*,” I look at how US trans teen films render visible a unique problem

regarding consent—how can we even know that youth consent to the stories told about them? After over a century of near invisibility, trans teens have finally started to emerge in a handful of recent independent breakout movies. President Biden repeatedly has called trans rights the “civil rights issue of our time.” I would add that for youth, trans rights are also a consent issue of our time. Adolescents must rely on parents to consent to their gender-affirming care, and over a dozen US states are weighing bills to prevent minors from obtaining this care even *with* parental consent—such a law passed in Arkansas in April 2021 and other states since have followed suit.

In this chapter, I look at how audiences express dissent (or nonconsent) for specific depictions of trans youth pointing out the intrinsic link between consent culture and “cancel culture,” the movement to hold people accountable publicly for undesired actions and representations. While trans activists clearly advocate more stories by and about trans individuals, they also protest the visibility of films with problematic plots and insensitive elements. Two recent films, *3 Generations* and *Adam* (2019), received abundant social media backlash as audiences and activists sought to erase them. In recognition that these stories cannot be detached from the many extratextual elements that impact actual trans youth’s lives, I consider what is rendered (in)visible through these two films and the more affirming under-the-radar independent feature *Boy Meets Girl* (2014). While *Boy Meets Girl* did not find a large audience despite its overwhelmingly positive reviews from critics and fans, *3 Generations* and *Adam*, along with the issues they raise, also were largely overlooked due to their being “canceled.” Such continued invisibility for trans youth in the genre has forced the issues that these films raise about gender and sexuality—such as the unspoken cisness of the affirmative consent discourse—to remain in the background.

In my conclusion, “Adolescent Sexuality and Adult Imagination,” I draw together key issues raised in my earlier chapters—the flaws embedded within the affirmative consent discourse; the challenge of accessing stories from a youth’s point of view; and the urgency to attribute sexual agency to youth. At the same time, I shift my discussion from the fictional to the nonfictional world via a discussion of youth “sexting,” the practice of sending and receiving sexual images and videos. Teen films represent a fundamental problem of representation—the sexual stories about youth are not by youth, nor would youth necessarily find them accurate portrayals of their lives. So what happens when young people take cameras into their own hands to display their sexual selves to each other? Although teen films routinely imagine adolescents in sexual situations, there remains quite a bit of apprehension in the

United States around youth sexuality. In this chapter, I detail how the sexting discourse initially was shaped by adults' anxieties around a toxic connection between youth and sexuality. However, youth not only wrested back this story but also altered the legal ramifications of their actions by the sheer prevalence of the behavior. As adults were forced to recognize the ubiquity of teen sexting, it became unsustainable to prosecute and impossible to label the behavior deviant. Ultimately, I suggest how adolescent sexuality discourses might be framed by adults, but youth nevertheless wield formidable power both to create their private sexual selves and transform public discourses about their sexuality.

As I elaborate throughout the following chapters, consent culture has ensured that sexual consent is routinely taken into account in early twenty-first-century teen films. However, whether intentionally or not, many of these films simultaneously demonstrate the elusiveness and even the irony of consent as a goal. When tweens seek to obtain consent from an inanimate doll—as the characters in *Good Boys* do—it is evident that consent has not only become the de facto ethical framework but also remains somewhat comically so. In teen films, we are confronted by innumerable problematic aspects of consent in practice—youth say yes when they clearly feel no (such as in *A Girl Like Grace* and *Alex Strangelove*); they insist on a consent and agency adults deem invalid due to their age (such as in *Diary of a Teenage Girl* and *3 Generations*); and they regret their sexual experiences (such as in *Lady Bird* and *Banging Lanie*). Consent, in other words, has not been shown as relieving youth from the complex negotiations and emotions that emerge as one comes of age and embarks on sexual encounters. While consent culture certainly has provided some of the language during these cinematic moments, it is strikingly evident that those words often fall short. Consent, it turns out, has not been the panacea we had hoped—that is, at least, not according to teen films.

NOTES

1. Stupnitsky, quoted in Chuba, "Seth Rogen."
2. Sternin et al., "Sexual Consent," 2.
3. Hurd, "Moral Magic of Consent."
4. Westen, *Logic of Consent*, 2.
5. Ferzan, "Clarifying Consent," 195.
6. Westen, *Logic of Consent*, 3.
7. For more information on how each state defines consent, see RAINN, "How Does Your State Define Consent?"
8. McKenna, Roemer, and Orsillo, "Predictors of Sexual Consent," 1491.
9. Planned Parenthood, "What Is Sexual Consent?"
10. Projanksy, *Watching Rape*, 2–3.

11. Friedman and Valenti, *Yes Means Yes!*, 6.
12. Friedman and Valenti, *Yes Means Yes!*, 7–8.
13. Essays from the 1980s (including Kelly and Norman, “Fusion Process for Productivity Improvement”) quote Dr. William Ouchi’s 1981 “Theory Z” essay, which defines consent culture as “a community of equals who cooperate with one another to reach common goals.” Note that the Google Books Ngram Viewer (which dates back to 1800) registers only a few blips for the phrase “consent culture” before a sharp rise in 2011, and the phrase *consent culture* does not register on Google Trends (which dates back to 2004) until 2012.
14. Dymock, “Towards a Consent Culture.” The blog was launched in 2011.
15. Urban Dictionary, s.v., “consent culture.”
16. Lukianoff, *Unlearning Liberty*.
17. NPR, “History behind Sexual Consent Policies.”
18. Zimmerman, “Campus Sexual Assault.”
19. See the Supreme Court cases: *Franklin v. Gwinnett County Public Schools* in 1992 and *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education* in 1999.
20. Stratford, “U.S. Names Colleges under Investigation.”
21. Melnick, “Analyzing the Department of Education’s Final Title IX Rules on Sexual Misconduct.”
22. Yakas, “This ‘Teacher Trial’ Rape Sketch.”
23. Halley, “Move to Affirmative Consent,” 258–63.
24. Halley, “Move to Affirmative Consent,” 265.
25. Miller and Wertheimer, *Ethics of Consent*, 10.
26. Halley, “Move to Affirmative Consent,” 277.
27. Hardesty et al., “Indiscrete.”
28. See Archard, *Sexual Consent*; Hickman and Muehlenhard, “By the Semi-Mystical Appearance of a Condom.”
29. Westen, *Logic of Consent*, 247.
30. See Bergelson, “Meaning of Sexual Consent”; Gruber, “Anti-Rape Culture”; Halley, “Move to Affirmative Consent”; Simpson, “Challenging Childhood.”
31. Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, 281. From the interview “The Danger of Childhood Sexuality” from 1978 included there.
32. Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, 281. Note that the US Supreme Court case *Lawrence v. Texas* rendered moot laws against sodomy in several US states.
33. Miller and Wertheimer, *Ethics of Consent*, 225.
34. Popova, *Sexual Consent*, 80–81.
35. LD, “What Is ‘Sex Critical.’”
36. Scheiner, *Signifying Female Adolescence: Film Representations and Fans*, 3.
37. The restrictions for TV-MA rating seems to depend on platform. Hulu, at <https://www.hulu.com/ratings>, describes TV-MA as content “specifically designed to be viewed by adults and therefore may be unsuitable for children under 17” and says, “To watch TV-MA content on Hulu, users must be logged in and over the age of 18.” Netflix, at <https://help.netflix.com/en/node/206>, categorizes TV-MA as “For Mature Audiences. May not be suitable for ages 17 and under.”
38. Shary, *Teen Movies*, 3.
39. Driscoll, *Teen Film*, 2.
40. Shary, *Teen Movies*, 2.
41. Shary, *Generation Multiplex*, 2.

42. Driscoll, *Teen Film*, 1.
43. Driscoll, *Teen Film*, 90.
44. Lewis, *Father-Daughter Incest*, 2. Emphasis mine.
45. J. Rose, *Case of Peter Pan*, 10.
46. H. Jenkins, "Just a Spoonful of Sugar."
47. Shary, "Course File," 40.
48. I recognize biases inherent in using "America" and "American" to convey the United States of America. As a result, I use either United States or US throughout this text.

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