

6 GENERATION Z ON SCREENS, 2005–2023

Adolescent interests continue to evolve toward ever faster technologies and increasingly invasive communication, and still teen movies remain reliant on familiar narrative conventions (learning about life, finding romance, questioning sex, fleeing danger) as the industry attempts to innovate with more fantastic settings and styles. Thus, a series of high-profile franchises about dystopian and whimsical worlds found enormous appeal in the early twenty-first century for the generation now known as Millennials, who aged out of their teens by the early 2010s, and then gave way to the children of Generation X, who were subsequently (if lazily) labeled Generation Z.¹ While the traditional romcoms and sex quests of past generations were curtailed, the industry continued to engage youth with evolving political concerns about sexual and gender identities (and less so race, class, and ability), and even broadened the market for pre-teen youth with a flourishing “tween” genre. Most recently, the movie industry has joined in an almost seamless merging of adolescent media products, as film, television, and internet properties have become all but equally experienced by youth. Teens continue to eagerly engage with stories about their culture, but the “screen” has become “screens” and the subgenres of youth themes have become ever more mingled.

Fantasies of a Youthful Future

Following the postmodern turn of teen horror in the 1990s and the parodic mode popularized by the *Scream* and *Scary Movie* franchises, the subgenre seemed to reach a nadir of invention around the turn of the century. By that point, the entire young adult literature market was enjoying the charms of the *Harry Potter* book series, in which a boy learns to become a wizard as he ages through adolescence. Not long after the first film appeared in 2001, Hollywood slowly turned its interests away from explicitly gory aspects of youth horror and toward a more family friendly means of appealing to young fears and fascinations: the fantasy film.

While *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001) and its seven sequels in the ten years thereafter were all huge box office bonanzas—and were all British productions about British youth funded by American studios—Hollywood initially found little success in duplicating the phenomenon, which offered a wide age appeal, a relatively mild message for youth about overcoming fear and finding friends, and, most profitably, an apparently endless stream of spin-off products. Early attempts at tapping into this burgeoning market for marvels, such as *Tuck Everlasting* (2002), *Freaky Friday* (2003), and *Ella Enchanted* (2004), were moderately profitable by comparison, though when the studios lifted a core idea from the *Harry Potter* series with *Sky High* (2005) and *Zoom* (2006), by featuring teenagers in schools for superheroes, the results were less lucrative.

Studios nonetheless continued releasing further fabrications over the next years, always searching for a blockbuster to finance a franchise, and resulting in a relatively consistent output of teen fantasy films thereafter. Young viewers were endeared to these films, if not at theaters then on home video (on DVD, or later, streaming), because their teen characters tended to be smarter and less passive in their clashes with oddities than the numerous cowering casualties in gorier slasher films. Further, the stories offered youth a form of escape that they could potentially command, through daunting yet seemingly possible capacities to, for instance, explore life after death, communicate with spirits, overcome evil with virtue, and (most similar to slasher films) defeat monsters with their own power.

These films offer a wide range of explanations for their ethereal machinations, and tend to hinge upon relatively straightforward characterizations of teens. Youth either confront phantoms or deities in gaining

deliverance from their adolescent plights, find themselves in strange new worlds that they must survive to prove their bravery, or discover latent superpowers that endow them with the ability to surmount their personal problems. Nerdy characters can thus turn tough and cool; disregarded teens become valuable saviors; unpopular pariahs gain appreciable recognition. Likewise, families can be sustained or reunited by their children, teenage ambitions can be validated, and civilization can be liberated from blights that only youth can conquer. Teens in these stories usually realize that they must face bewildering forces greater than they are, and most are able to gain control over such forces, yet if they are greedy, careless, or disrespectful, then they perish accordingly. Most often, abuses of authority are met with castigation, while mastery of mystery is rewarded.

Frances Smith has studied the popularity of films that depict teens in a “posthuman” realm during the twenty-first century, now that current teenagers have not known life without internet connections to information and communication. Indeed, it is within adolescence, “during which the teenager holds neither childhood or adult identities, that the possibility of disrupting the norms that constitute the human may reside.”² This disruption explains the appeal of zombies, vampires, and superheroes for youth, though cybernetic integration of people and machines has been more explicit in movies about adults (e.g., *The Terminator* and sequels, 1984–2019; *Robocop* and sequels, 1987–2014; *The Matrix* and sequels, 1999–2021; *I, Robot*, 2004; *Iron Man* and sequels, 2008–13). Teens in movies tend to travel within a less technologically sophisticated realm, in contrast to how much they are otherwise dependent on computer devices, which seems to betray adults’ fears of youth power.

Thus, most teen fantasy films deal with the dread accompanying potentially lethal enigmas from a long tradition of mythologies based in natural fears of the unknown. Darkness, wilderness, oceans, and of course death have all been origins of such myths, from which have sprung monsters, plagues, and demons, all of which have compelled humans to defend themselves against impending doom with solutions as mundane as knowledge or as exotic as the occult. A particularly metaphysical monster that became relatively common in the late 2000s was the zombie, a corpse raised from the dead that slowly feeds on living humans. After a wave of successful zombie films in the early 2000s directed at adult audiences, the

industry resurrected the teen-oriented *Return of the Living Dead* series (1985–93) with two weak sequels in quick order, *Necropolis* and *Rave to the Grave* (both 2005).

These and other teenage zombie movies over the next few years were not exactly illustrious, regardless of their quantity: *Die and Let Live*, *Pathogen*, and *Automaton Transfusion* were all released in 2006, followed by *Make-Out with Violence*, *Dance of the Dead*, and *Deadgirl* in 2008. Then two 2009 films did gain some attention, the less popular being *Jennifer's Body*, about a girl who becomes a succubus after being sacrificed in a ritual for her supposed virginity, which now causes her to feed on young men. The cleverly comical *Zombieland* (2009) was more profitable with its cast of admired actors, including Oscar nominee Abigail Breslin as a twelve-year-old on a cross-country trip with her older sister, cautiously forming an ersatz family with other human renegades in the wake of a zombie apocalypse. The zombie trend waned in the following decade, despite sporadic modest hits like *Warm Bodies* (2013) and *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* (2019), and an odd short revival in 2015 with *Scouts Guide to the Zombie Apocalypse*, *Freaks of Nature*, and *Maggie*.

The specific threat of zombies for teens seemed to be subsumed within monsters from the subconscious over the next decade, as *Nightmare on Elm Street* (2010) became a profitable remake and *It* (2017) became a huge hit, but otherwise these types of fright fests were sparse, with examples such as *Under the Bed* (2013), *The Barn* (2016), and *Wilding* (2018) earning minor attention. Instead, the monster that dominated youth cinema by the early 2010s was a throwback to classic horror, the vampire. By the end of the 2000s, Hollywood landed upon the domestic fantasy franchise it had longed for after the booming sales of Stephenie Meyer's four-book *Twilight* series, which yielded five movies from 2008 to 2012, earning over \$1.3 billion at the U.S. box office and over \$3.3 billion worldwide.

The first film introduced high school junior Bella (Kristen Stewart), who quickly becomes enchanted by her pale classmate Edward (Robert Pattinson), an elusive yet attentive vampire whose cold demeanor is in ripe contrast with her Native American friend Jacob (Taylor Lautner), himself harboring the secret that he's a werewolf. Over the course of the first sequel, *New Moon* (2009), after Bella has fallen in love with Edward, she nonetheless remains attracted to Jacob; the next sequel, *Eclipse* (2010), advances the tension over whether Bella will agree to be "converted" into a vampire



Fig. 6.1: In the *Twilight* films (2008–12), bewitched Bella (Kristen Stewart) falls in love with vampiric Edward (Robert Pattinson, *right*) while she enjoys the prolonged attention of werewolf Jacob (Taylor Lautner, *left*). The five films combined fantasy, romance, action, and horror elements for extremely profitable success.

after she agrees to marry Edward. Themes of erotic craving and romantic devotion thus permeate the story, with a certain dedication to chastity that exposes the series' conservative moralizing.

The final *Twilight* novel, *Breaking Dawn*, was one volume, but the likely profits to be made by expanding the story must have impelled the studio to break it into two movies (which, after all, was the strategy with the final *Harry Potter* installment the previous year). After Bella and Edward's wedding in *Part 1* (2011), she quickly becomes pregnant and appears to die during childbirth, though she is saved by Edward's venom and Jacob "imprints" on her daughter to provide a lifelong guardian. This sets up *Part 2* (2012), in which Jacob aligns with Edward and Bella as they gather a force of international allies to defeat an army of mystic villains in a climactic battle. The series thereby fulfilled a litany of typical goals in teen fantasy: the validation of belief in supernatural powers, the triumph of good over evil, the satisfaction of romantic longing, and the restoration of order to family and culture.

As abundant attention was cast upon the *Twilight* films, audiences were also treated to a wide range of other paranormal youth phenomena through *Let Me In* (2010), *Bad Kids Go to Hell* (2012), and *Beautiful Creatures* (2013). What *Twilight* had demonstrated, however, was the appeal of teens who could harness fantastic powers rather than being victimized by them, which was consistent with the emergent genre of the 2000s that came to dominate the 2010s: the superhero movie. While most of these tentpole productions would gather wide interest from young audiences (and huge revenues for their studios), few franchises actually featured teens as protagonists, with examples like *X-Men* (2000–2020), *Hellboy* (2004–19), *Batman Begins* (2005–12), and *Iron Man* being all but exclusively the domain of adult characters. The key exception has been the three *Spider-Man* series so far, each of which begins with a teenaged title hero, first played by Tobey Maguire in three *Spider-Man* movies (2002–7), then Andrew Garfield in two *Amazing Spider-Man* movies (2012 and 2014), and most recently Tom Holland across no less than seven movies as the character became part of *The Avengers* stories in 2016 before Holland was featured in *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), *Far From Home* (2019), and *No Way Home* (2021). The *Spider-Man* films are built on the core conflict of adolescent males navigating their ascent to authority—initially manifested via web-spinning skills and extreme strength after a bite from a radioactive spider—while also facing familiar struggles to woo their crushes and cope with the disdain of adults.

Youthful fantasies otherwise maintained the darker themes promoted by *Twilight* in the late 2000s, and so alongside the lighter superhero movies, there emerged a startling wave of dystopian hellscape set in other worlds and/or other times. Once again, the studios sought franchise potential, first with massive robots in *Transformers* (2007), which ran to four sequels by 2017 while introducing a new character in *Bumblebee* (2018), and then with social competition in *The Hunger Games* (2012–15), which became an enormous success and demonstrated that powerful girls could lead these films.³ Alas, the dynamic concepts of such stories did not always fulfill their box office promise. *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (2010), an updating of traditional Greek mythology, only yielded one sequel in 2013. Another series with a female lead, *Divergent* (2014), started strong until its sequel *Insurgent* (2015) had a rather tepid reception, and then plans to adapt the concluding *Allegiant* (2016) into two films

were scrapped after this final entry flopped. *The Maze Runner* (2014) delivered solid earnings with a lower budget until its two sequels in 2015 and 2018 yielded diminishing returns.

The stories in these films all suggest troubling times ahead for teens, who demonstrate heroics as they remedy devastation wrought by the adults who preceded them, parables that implicitly speak to children's growing recognition of the environmental and cultural calamities they are inheriting. The ongoing climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–23 may yet factor into the perspectives of traumatized youth of the 2020s, who also witnessed the only violent transfer of power in modern U.S. history when President Trump attempted to subvert the inauguration of his successor in 2021. That same year, *Voyagers* became one of the first films to depict youth culture in the future reacting to the ecological cataclysm that is now feared.

Teen fantasy films continue to tackle many everyday concerns of youth—broken families, the need for friends, finding love, gaining respect—and for generations they have often imparted to young viewers some hope for a brighter future. Through their confrontations with life and death, such films gave youth a dose of encouraging empowerment within their otherwise unreal stories and highly commercial contexts. Their mixed messages persist all the same, particularly when teens are placed in perilous settings that expand beyond the terrors of home or school. Teens in series like *Return of the Living Dead* and *Twilight* encountered fantastic circumstances in realistic locales, while the dystopian themes of films since the 2010s have depicted youth within entire realms of unnatural menace. Examples after *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* abound, including *The 5th Wave* (2016), *Beyond Skyline* (2017), *Ready Player One* (2018), *The Darkest Minds* (2018), *Alita: Battle Angel* (2019), *A Quiet Place Part II* (2020), *Dune* (2021), and *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022). Teens still gain control and resolve their respective crises in most of these fantasies, offering hope to youth facing nightmares, though the nightmares themselves have become increasingly global, if not universal, and the survival of youth beyond them has become increasingly questionable.

The Dubious Demise of the Teen Romcom

The first romantic relationships for teenagers are filled with often dramatically confusing and overwhelming emotions, yet the output of movies about

young love was starkly inconsistent for many decades. While the romantic comedy genre for adults has enjoyed a fairly steady slate of releases, the strikingly short cycles of teenage examples reveal a parallel to the nature of young love itself: it does not last for long. After the last major wave of productivity at the turn of the millennium, the teenage romcom largely faded away, and two decades later, we still see teen romance itself, though its *comedy* quotient has been strained by numerous forces.

Certainly the movie industry would continue making teen romcoms with some consistency if they retained their appeal, but like an adolescent crush, after arising with unexpected intrigue, they engage in some short-term excitable success, and soon fade under the weight of idealistic expectations. The teen romcom of each generation, though it may traffic in the same longings and aspirations of youth as the previous generation, must cater to the mores and morals of the most current youth population, detached from the signifiers of its predecessors. This is why no teen romcom cycle has ever endured for more than a few years.

Yet something changed specifically in the early 2000s, which is discernable in the chronology of teen romcom trends. Where the customary teen romance had at least enjoyed sporadic waves of popularity for a few generations, the celebration of kooky young love in American cinema has become sadly rarer in the past two decades. The most critical culprits in this shift appear to be Hollywood's inability to appeal to youth with sincere stories respecting the stakes of young romance, and more so, the rise of internet culture, which has desensitized youth to the mystiques of love and sex, oversaturating them with cynical clinical information. American movies now seem often unable to appeal to young lovers who have ample evidence for just how artificial romance is in the first place.

Twentieth century productions of teenage romcoms had cycled through trends with fluctuating levels of interest: high during the beach party phase of the 1960s and the sex comedy phase of the 1980s, low during the more austere 1950s and somber 1970s. The 1990s were again less enthusiastic about youth subgenres as a whole, and while some teen romcoms still appeared (*Clueless*, 1995; *Trojan War*, 1997), they did not truly regain momentum until the end of the century. The stories also remained steadfast in their heterosexual pairings in this decade, with rare exceptions only emerging as outliers in the indie scene, such as *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (1994) and *Edge of Seventeen* (1999). Against the

1998 impeachment of President Clinton for his “non-sexual relations” with a young intern, and foreseeing competition for junior consumers from the internet, Hollywood revived its appeals to young viewers with numerous films celebrating romantic pursuits, some now broaching sexual conquests (as in *American Pie*, *Coming Soon*, *Cruel Intentions*, and *Election*, all 1999), and just as many with more purely romantic ambitions, such as *Drive Me Crazy*, *Never Been Kissed*, *She’s All That*, and *10 Things I Hate About You*, which were all released in 1999 as well.

This fin de siècle enthusiasm for adolescent love represented the most concentrated attention the teen romcom had enjoyed since the mid-1980s, and young frolics were once again celebrated ahead of the imminent backdrop of increasingly conservative public politics, as the nation moved into a new century under the fallout of the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Once again, for just a few years, the return of romance to the teen genre heralded how the industry was re-embracing the subject across diverse plotlines, such as depictions of gay love (*But I’m a Cheerleader*, 2000), sports (*Love & Basketball*, 2000), mental illness (*Donnie Darko*, 2001), racial difference (*Save the Last Dance*, 2001), and even religion (*A Walk to Remember*, 2002). To be sure, some of these films were indeed taking on substantive issues that held little humor, yet youth could still find romcom satisfaction in films with titles that bespoke their levity: *Mad About Mambo* (2000), *Whatever It Takes* (2000), *Get Over It* (2001), and *The Princess Diaries* (2001). For some time, youth were invited back into the delights of daydreaming about crushes becoming steadies and love finding its way into their hearts.

Yet after this brief cycle predictably ran its course in just a few years, the little bit of love teens found in movies throughout the rest of the decade tended to carry substantial gravity, as seen in *All the Real Girls* (2003), *The Door in the Floor* (2004), *Step Up* (2006), *Georgia Rule* (2007), and perhaps most perilously, the *Twilight* series that started in 2008. At the same time, while teen comedies were still gaining popularity, as witnessed by *Orange County* (2002), *What a Girl Wants* (2003), *Mean Girls* and *Napoleon Dynamite* (both 2004), *John Tucker Must Die* (2006), *Superbad* (2007), and *Sex Drive* (2008), such hits tended to elide (or omit) romantic plotlines for the sake of family drama, school shenanigans, sexual pursuits, and homosocial relationships. The few films of the 2000s that did attempt some level of humor in the romantic pursuits of their teen protagonists—*How to Deal* (2003), *Saved!* (2004), *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2005), *Juno*

(2007), *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist* (2008), and *I Love You, Beth Cooper* (2009)—did not traffic in the lighthearted mishaps and misunderstandings of past teen romcoms, as if youth were no longer free to explore romance without the threat of tragedy. In all of these films, the teens become pregnant and/or get stalked by bullies and/or resent their romances. The decade had little humor, or even positivity, to offer teenagers looking for models of love.

Soon thereafter, the fantastic and futuristic stories discussed in the previous section were effectively neutered in their handling of young love. For all the supposed allure of sexy vampires and werewolves in the *Twilight* films, the romance of the girl protagonist was incessantly frustrated, and when she finally got married and consummated the relationship in the fourth film—making teen audiences wait the entire length of high school for fleshly fruition—she *immediately* became pregnant and *died during childbirth*. The faint appeal of romance in the dominant teen franchises of this era relied on an undeniable masochism, far from the comedic realms of past years.



Fig. 6.2: Olive (Emma Stone) boldly declares in *Easy A* (2010) that she wants her life to be like a 1980s movie with a chivalrous boyfriend, but the complicated stakes of sex and love in the new century lead her to falsify her erotic exploits.

When teen romance was presented in less apocalyptic settings in the 2010s, it was still suffused with misgivings that rendered love less laughable. A salient case in point was one of the best of the subgenre, *Easy A* (2010), which explicitly calls for a return to teen romcoms of the 1980s as its protagonist, Olive (Emma Stone), desperately tries to extricate herself from gender stereotyping to find a presumably old-fashioned boyfriend. As Frances Smith points out, “It is the protagonist’s disillusion with the sexual double standards of the present that prompts her to desire a return to the Eighties teen movie.”⁴ In a tactic to expose sexist hypocrisy that eventually backfires, Olive agrees to a series of fraudulent scams to suggest she is prostituting herself to the boys in her class, and builds a massive public spectacle around the loss of her virginity, an escapade that is conveyed via an online video diary, which is observed by the salacious male audience at school so desperate to enjoy her derision. Though Olive does overcome this imbroglio and rides off into the sunset with a decent guy at the end, she endures a considerable compromise of her reputation for the sake of achieving the romance. *Easy A* in many ways illustrates the essential impossibility of teen romcoms within the current generation: young love has been turned into a media commodity that its own participants no longer trust.⁵

Teen love stories have remained strained at best, mining minimal humor as they attempt to assess conditions of adolescent romance. The more sensitive entries in this effort—*Restless* (2011), *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (2012), *The Spectacular Now* (2013), *The Fault in Our Stars* (2014), *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* (2015), *Some Freaks* (2016), *Everything, Everything* (2017), *Five Feet Apart* (2019), *Words on Bathroom Walls* (2020)—continually remind youth of the doom awaiting them when they do fall in love: not only do most of the romances fail, but the young lovers in many of these films are afflicted with serious illnesses. In addition to being depressing, few of them are successful at the box office.

Hollywood has certainly not abandoned teen romance altogether, and the subject still finds some patchy humor in lighter fare such as *The Kissing Booth* (2018), which had enough success in the streaming market to generate two sequels by 2021. Alas, romantic protagonists generally cannot escape the piercing critical glare of social media, and so often expressions of affection are quickly corrupted by miscommunication, as in *The DUFF* (2015), *The Edge of Seventeen* (2016), *Sierra Burgess Is a Loser* (2018), *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* (2018), and *The Half of It* (2020).

Teenagers barely have a chance to check their feelings before they are reified and bartered in online exchanges among classmates, which is also the case in *Love, Simon* (2018), one of an increasing number of films depicting the ongoing difficulties of romance among queer youth (detailed in the next section).

Young love on screen has thus become more arduous than amusing. Whether the teenage romcom ever returns to its celebratory days of generations past—and whether it returns at all—depends on a variety of factors. The intensity of public life is not lessening for children growing up under the surveillance of social media, and their access to information about the disappointments and dangers of romance will only increase, so the young population is not well primed to entertain romcom fantasies. On the other hand, fantasy may be the very panacea youth turn to within the synthetic state of twenty-first century America: resisting the promulgation of so many media dictates and the disputes over so much fake news could compel teens to once again embrace romantic possibilities. The film industry would still need to show further faith in depicting teens as genuinely interested in romance beyond its capacity to validate internet notoriety. This requires some level of experimentation with narrative and romantic traditions, as seen in examples like *Boyhood* (2014), *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (2015), *American Honey* (2016), *Speech & Debate* (2017), *Every Day* (2018), and *Banging Lanie* (2020), all of which were made within the independent sector.⁶ These films suggest that youth still want love in rather realistic and holistic forms, while the *form* of their representation breaks with generic and social traditions.

If teen movies can indeed redirect the prevailing path of dour depictions that young love has taken in recent years, and if the youth audience can find some solace in considering more humane and humorous outcomes for their romantic pursuits, the teen romcom may yet return. Given the cultural and industrial conditions at hand, we may best hope that real teenagers do not wait for movies to provide paradigms of young romance, and instead, somehow, find love beyond mediated experience.

Revising Sexuality, Gender, and Race

Perhaps the most notable shift in youth roles of the early twenty-first century has been the slowly improving depiction of teens who are not white

male heterosexuals, the population that dominated all of American cinema throughout the previous century.⁷ Certain trends in the 1990s had led to some reflection on youth conditions for underrepresented populations, such as the African American crime cycle early in that decade, or the prominence of tough girls by mid-decade, as previously detailed. Fortunately, these trends were harbingers of further sensitivity around issues of race and gender that would become more commonly addressed in films of the new century.⁸

Though Black and female characters had occasional visibility in teen films of the past century, any adolescent outside the bounds of cisgendered heterosexual norms was an aberration before the 1990s. After a few roles for queer youth began to expand in that decade, by the 2000s, stories focused on gay and lesbian teenagers became more plentiful. Almost all of these protagonists remained cisgendered youth until the following decade, and all the films were independent productions, until Hollywood studio Twentieth Century-Fox took a chance with *Love, Simon* in 2018. Nonetheless, the evolving presence of queer youth in American movies and culture was undeniable.

Gay and lesbian teens who had often been depicted as effectively pathological, like those in *Bully* (2001), *The Mudge Boy* (2004), and *Pretty Persuasion* (2005), faded away as filmmakers offered more informed portraits of queer youth in *Running with Scissors* (2006), *The Sensei* (2008), and *Pariah* (2011). At the same time, the industry indicated increasing comfort with challenging gender norms through farces like *She's the Man* (2006), *Another Gay Movie* (2006), and *Were the World Mine* (2008). To be fair, these movies were met with mixed reviews and varying levels of attention, but the gradual increase of such nonconforming roles in American cinema over the following years was undoubtedly indicative of the further integration of queer youth into culture at large.

For comparison, few films in the 2000s depicted queer kids beyond the binary of gay and lesbian attraction between teens; two exceptions were *Wild Tigers I Have Known* (2006), in which a thirteen-year-old boy takes on a feminine identity, and *Spork* (2010), about an intersex girl. As the next decade progressed, more films considered a broader spectrum of gender identities and sexual preferences for youth, such as *Gerontophilia* (2013), with a teenager who is attracted to older men; *Boy Meets Girl* (2014), one of the first fully developed depictions of a trans girl protagonist; and



Fig. 6.3: Trans actress Michelle Hendley plays Ricky in *Boy Meets Girl* (2014), who has an affair with a girl before her male best friend finally declares his love for her, a trans twist to a classic romcom triangle.

3 Generations (2015), following the transition of a teen girl to a boy. Among the most imaginative examples is the fantasy *Every Day* (2018), in which a girl falls in love with a teenaged entity that changes bodies daily at random. The protagonist thus enjoys loving the same person across different genders and races, yet this endless inconsistency dooms their relationship.

As queer youth came to be featured in romantic plots such as *Jack and Diane* (2012), they also became more visible as supporting characters in stories about heterosexual youth like *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (2012). By 2015, a multitude of films began depicting queer teens so often that these roles became virtually generic; that year alone produced *Ekaj*, *Henry Gamble's Birthday Party*, *I Am Michael*, and *Take Me to the River*, each about gay boys. Queer girls were meanwhile featured in *Dope* (2015), *Devil's Domain* (2016), *First Girl I Loved* (2016), *Teenage Cocktail* (2016), *Princess Cyd* (2017), and *Adam* (2019), one of the most controversial stories in this realm, since it features a cis boy posing as trans to attract a lesbian.

Smaller indie productions remained the major province of these stories, including four more in 2016 that featured gay boys. *As You Are*, *King Cobra*, and *Spa Night* were limited to niche markets, but *Moonlight* was



Fig. 6.4: *Moonlight* (2016) follows Chiron (Ashton Sanders) as he grows up under traumatic domestic conditions and slowly comes to terms with his identity as a gay Black man. The film's artistry and poignancy made it one of the few movies about a teenager to ever win the Academy Award for Best Picture.

widely celebrated, becoming a rare film about youth—and the first about queer youth—to win the Best Picture Oscar. In its sensitive handling of an abused boy's ascent to adulthood through repressing his attraction to a male friend, the film simultaneously explored issues of family turmoil, drug trafficking, and racial strife, all rendered in a rich visual style. The veneration of *Moonlight* suggested the film industry had grown more accepting of narratives about queer youth, although anguish remained a key ingredient to subsequent stories.⁹ Thus, higher budgets were granted to *Call Me by Your Name* (2017), *A Boy Erased* (2018), *Booksmart* (2019), and *Joe Bell* (2020), all of which featured queer youth struggling to declare and/or express their sexuality.

Struggle is a natural aspect of adolescent development, yet it continues to disproportionately dominate the discourse of queer youth movies like the landmark *Love, Simon* and the confrontational scenarios of *Speech & Debate* (2017), *Alex Strangelove* (2018), *The Miseducation of Cameron*