

Managing Expectations: Reassessing the Promise of Consent

Context

Consent is not a neutral concept but one loaded with meaning. In mainstream culture consent is largely assumed in a positive light as a feminist concept representing equality. The new visibility of consent reflects the successes of Western feminism but has been critiqued for delimiting sexual ethics to a narrow focus on agency that relates problematically to patriarchy and neoliberalism. Taking a step back from concerns with the practicability of consent and the co-option of consent by power, we can observe that there is no concept of consent that is reserved for the sexual encounter. As such, sexual consent is underdefined in feminist theory and criminal law (Cefai 2023). From the perspective of cultural studies, the claim that consent is a cultural concept should have implications for how we understand the relationship between consent, sex and sexuality, but these are little understood. One way to gain further understanding of these implications is to examine how consent as a cultural concept is located materially within cultural contexts, and thus how consent gains meaning. While we cannot resolve the power-laden ambiguities of consent, its discursive proliferation calls for a new theorisation of consent's conceptual precepts.

Claims

The examination of what a particular media example tells us about consent, and how girls and boys, men and women, negotiate consent, too easily invites generalised applicability as the principle of representation. Instead, this project enquires into the intersecting historical social and cultural phenomena that link consent affectively to other cultural concepts. This intervention is twofold: (1) consent will be reinterpreted as a cultural concept located in the historical sensorium by media and processes of mediatisation; (2) genres of consent rather than consent's ideological abstraction or discourses of representation will be examined to account for how consent becomes relevant to the unfolding of a social encounter. That is, this project will claim consent as a concept that is intrinsic to social life and also key to the mediation of social life by power.

Method

The project undertakes a study of three specific historical moments that shine a light on the mediation of consent by transformations in media (particularly, the shift from mass to social media affecting all media) and the linked affective genres by which the politics of consent are mediated to the subject. These historical moments are understood as case studies of the history of the present of consent, allowing a detailed consideration of how consent has been defined according to our expectations of what consent is and does, when, how and for whom, and in what context. Following the work of Lauren Berlant (2011), the research understands genre as an affectively-invested zone of expectations about the narrative shape a situation will take, by which historical change is made sensible from within the affective life worlds of subjects. Even in its abstraction, consent always bears upon a situation and is thus implicated in how one acts and how collective experiences move forward and bring about change. This cultural studies theoretical methodology draws insight about affective genres from literary studies, cultural anthropology, feminist and queer scholarship, critical race and decolonial scholarship, and promises to radically reorient the concept of consent to questions of (1) the temporality of social life and (2) ways of being in relation with others in worlds populated by difference. I will define what I call the "promise of consent" according

to my study of the claims made in the name of consent, the retroactive interpretation of how consent has underlined the articulation of social injustice by social movements, and the as yet unyielded potential of consent as a critical concept.

(1) Consent as Choice Feminism will be tracked to the emergence of post-feminism in the mid-1990s (e.g. *Friends* 1994-2004) in which sexism was defined as “fun”. The predominance of post-feminism is signalled by a confluence of representational events from around 1998-2008 when the GFC signalled a new phase of austerity and precarity (McRobbie 2007). The roots of choice feminism, understood as the psychic principle of commodified, neoliberal, entrepreneurial and other forms of contemporary manufactured feminism, will be identified and analysed in Western media examples of broadcast cable and satellite television from around 1995. I will analyse the set of motifs shaping audience expectations of nonconsent signalled by women’s joyful participation in sexism and how these have informed the emergence of choice feminism as a neoliberal genre of consent.

(2) Consent as the New Trauma will be redefined in relation to contemporary articulations of ‘popular feminism’ (Banet-Weiser 2018) and ‘neoliberal feminism’ (Rottenberg 2018). Trauma is a national genre that describes the historical present as a scene of exception to ordinary life. Berlant (2011) subsequently suggests that instead we consider the ordinary force of disruption as ‘crisis ordinariness’ while critically interrogating what becomes perceivable in mainstream culture as traumatic. I will analyse how genres of cultural criticism including feminism are being transformed by the platformisation of media, and how this transformation gives rise to the “new trauma” of nonconsent.

(3) Consent as World-Making will be described according to recent black and Indigenous study. Guided by the concept of ‘consent not to be a single being’ (Moten 2017), I will analyse the conceptual and material genealogy of consent in black and Indigenous study to understand how consent has been conceptualised in relation to freedom, capture and selfhood in conditions of racial exploitation, extractive capitalism and contemporary colonialism. My analysis of this literature will produce an account of how consent is implicated in the solidity and solidarity of experience according to black and Indigenous culture. I will examine the mediating relationship between poesis and consent to understand how consent has been and can further become a world-making praxis, an infrastructure of feeling for earthly survival.

In each of these contexts genres of consent move nonconsent to the fore of consent’s expectations. For each, a genre of consent qualifies consent as a type of promise. Consent promises clarification, reasoning, communing, convening, transgression, liberation, recourse for further action. This research produces an account of how the promises of consent are lived in genres of expectation, how they replace assumptions about sovereign agency normatively associated with consent with possibilities for social action.