

The “Smart” Teen Film 1990–2005: Identity Crisis, Nostalgia, and the Teenage Viewpoint  
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As a site for the negotiation of coming-of-age dilemmas and crises of identity, the teen film may be seen to have manifested certain tendencies over the turn of the millennium. “Classical” teen film has persisted, particularly in the subgenres of teen horror, comedy, and romance, and “teen activity” films have emerged, particularly around dance and sport. However, a different kind of teen-focused film—what I describe as the “Smart teen film”—has emerged between 1990 and 2005 in the intersection between independent and mainstream cinema. This diverges from generic conventions, in tone and structure, to such an extent that in some cases it cannot be recognized as “teen film” at all. At the same time, its central thematic concerns broadly mirror those of the more conventional teen film.<sup>i</sup>

While portrayals of youth culture have appeared in American film since the “juvenile delinquent” cycle of the Depression, and 1950s production catered to demarcated youth audiences, it is in the 1980s, and particularly in the work of John Hughes, that we find conventions solidifying into what might be termed its classical form.<sup>ii</sup> While definitional approaches vary,<sup>iii</sup> certain characteristics persist: the teen film will be aimed broadly at the age group it depicts; will centre the experiences, emotions, and identity formation of teenagers; will resolve its narrative in the context of the teenaged rather than adult characters featured; will utilize contemporary or slang language; and will present adult perspectives and ambitions as antithetical to those of teenagers. There is a distinction to be made here, therefore, between teen films—which speak to teenagers—and films which speak *for* or *of* them.

Moving away briefly from the teen *milieu*, the term “Smart film” denotes, as per Jeffrey Sconce,

[A]n American school of film-making that survives (and at times thrives) at the symbolic and material intersection of ‘Hollywood’, the ‘indie’ scene and the vestiges of what cinephiles used to call ‘art films.’ (Sconce 2002: 351)

For Sconce (*ibid.*), the Smart film is characterized by a blank, ironic, or distanced tone or “sensibility,” and a focus on the male white middle class, particularly in its hyper-awareness of the semiotics of media analysis and consumer culture; a fascination with the notions of habitus, the politics of taste, and cultural position-taking; a focus on personal identity, identity crisis, or identity development, particularly relating to political positioning; and a sense of the family as a locus of dysfunction, miscommunication, and alienation.<sup>iv</sup>

This tentative taxonomy facilitates the reading of Smart film in broadly generic terms, although this “tendency” of the 1990s and early 2000s is interpreted elsewhere as a kind of auteurial outcropping (Hanson 2002; Mottram 2006; Waxman 2005) or industrial trend (King 2009; Levy 2001; Tzioumakis 2006). Owing much to art house and “indie” aesthetics, it encompasses an aesthetic approach employing a distanced or ironic tone in disentangling the social disaffection and ambivalent personal mores of its protagonists. This is often combined with a reflexive or circuitous focus on disrupting narrative structures, calling on the French New Wave as much as the New Hollywood of the 1960s and 1970s. Smart films utilize formal play with generic structures in order to articulate crises of identity, work, class, politics, and ethics, particularly around ideas of personal and collective responsibility and social engagement, sexuality, masculinity, and “the future.”

The Smart approach may seem removed from the mainstream teen film described above; however, a number of these films place at their centre the concerns and crises of teenaged characters in ways which mobilize teen film discourse—albeit in forms that militate against them being described *as* teen films. In my analysis of three of them—*Rushmore* (Anderson 1998), *Brick* (Johnson 2005), and *Election* (Payne 1999)—I show that the Smart films of the 1990s and early 2000s hybridize the teen film in ways which reflect problematic American public and institutional discourses around youth culture and displace the teenage viewpoint in favour of adult audiences mobilizing discourses of nostalgia and irony.

The question begs as to why an outcropping of films of this nature might have occurred, and clues emerge in a growing tendency following the end of the 1980s to marginalize youth and youth cultures.<sup>v</sup> When Catherine Driscoll (2011:4) writes of “a tendency in the genre itself to take a moral tone that understands adolescence as both object of training and subject of crisis,” she notes the potential for framing adolescence as a liminal state requiring guidance, or policing. At the turn of the millennium, some (Grossberg 2001; Giroux 2002) observed not simply a changed outlook on American teenagers—moving from a “pedagogical” perspective of the kind Driscoll outlines, to viewing them explicitly as a threat or problem—but also material changes to their status and condition, including AIDS, narrowing options for access to further education, and paranoia about violence from (rather than towards) young people.

For Henry Giroux,

[Y]outh have become the central site onto which class and racial anxieties are projected. Their very presence represents both the broken promises of capitalism in the age of deregulation and downsizing and a collective fear of the consequences wrought by systemic class inequalities and a culture of “infectious greed” that has created a generation of unskilled and displaced youth expelled from shrinking markets, blue collar jobs, and any viable hope in the future. (Giroux 2002:286)

He argues that “the United States is at war with young people” (ibid.) on multiple fronts: via the fortification of their schools, reductions in spending on education and health, their incarceration, exclusion from public spaces, and enforced absence from political and civic life. Cast as consumers and objects rather than citizens, the cynicism that Giroux (ibid.: 300–301) claims “substitutes resignation and angst for any viable notion of resistance, politics, and social transformation” has found fertile ground.

As part of a wider social project privileging the ineluctable logic of global capitalism over the individual or collective future of citizens, teenagers have been framed as “superpredators, spiralling out of control” (ibid.: 284). This has fed into representations of marginalized youth, such as in the distinctly Smart *Ghost World* (Zwigoff 2001), which Giroux (ibid.: 297) regards not as a traditional “rite-of-passage” through troubled adolescence, but as attempts to “address how marginalized youth attempt to negotiate, if not resist, a political and social landscape that offers them few hope and even fewer opportunities to see beyond its ideological and institutional boundaries.”

Lawrence Grossberg (2001: 113) similarly argues both that “youth is increasingly de-legitimated, that is, denied any significant place within the collective geography of life in the U.S.,” and that public and institutional discourses which de-legitimate youth are part of “an attempt to [...] celebrate the youthful rebellion of the 1960s, while legitimating the generational abandonment of those very ideals in the 1980s” (ibid.:120). The generic alteration of the teen

film over the late 1990s and early 2000s can be seen as part of this generalized turning-away from notions of equality, liberation, and collectivism and towards a more atomized, individualistic, and above all consumerist, society. The disquiet engendered by this transition is at the heart of the Smart teen film.

### The “Smart” Teen Film

*Rushmore* (Anderson 1998) is in one sense a “classical” teen picture—siting protagonist Max Fischer (Jason Schwartzman) squarely within a world of private-school privilege and wealth, then transposing him into an unfamiliar public school system. A blue-collar outsider, lying about his barber father’s career as a “neurosurgeon,” Max occupies a distinctly Smart liminal space: nerd and nonconformist, he satisfies neither trope; intellectually under-achieving but not conventionally rebellious, he enthusiastically involves himself with the school’s extra-curricular activities. Simultaneously aspiring to the sophistication and independence of adulthood and reluctant to outgrow adolescence, Max’s identity is so bound up with his place at school that his sudden-death academic probation and subsequent expulsion from Rushmore come as an intense shock. This—primarily class-grounded—crisis of identity drives the film, behind its narratively privileged crises of romance and masculinity. Whether with the object of his romantic fantasies (Olivia Williams’ Miss Cross), or industrialist Herman Blume (Bill Murray), with whom he has both a father–son and a romantic rival relationship, Max is *performing* ersatz adulthood. The film punctures this inflated vision, restoring Max to what is seen as a more “authentic”—although more limited—teenage identity.

As in many teen pictures,<sup>vi</sup> life is framed as a masculine competition for sexual resources, here rendered absurd by the fact that the object of Max’s affections is both a teacher and a grieving widow. Max is surrounded by a culture of *braggadocio*, with sexual activity seen as a rite of passage, and his pursuit adopts models of masculine behaviour which reveal themselves to be both misogynistic and, unusually for a teen film, ineffectual. Courting her with self-conscious references to opera, Max’s comparative—although clearly inscribed as misguided and humorous—verbal sophistication and desire to behave in a socially prescribed “adult” serve to wrong-foot and manipulate his target. Max’s behaviour would be aggressive, sinister and controlling in an adult or non-comedic context, but here it emerges as the product of adopting a counterfeit persona, linked with his conflicting desires to become an autonomous adult and to remain sequestered at Rushmore. Only when Cross punctures Max’s sense of himself as an adult, sexually powerful male can she deflect his sense of entitlement, and Max’s fantasy of ownership and “perfect” intellectual harmony collapses in the face of her adult sexuality, eliciting a complicated empathy for the obsessive, confused teenager.

Max’s romantic competitor Blume, introduced via a notably class-oriented speech,<sup>vii</sup> occupies a similarly liminal position. A working-class “interloper” within his own privileged family, Blume performs classical teen film roles, by turn surrogate father, romantic rival, and adult driven to petty revenge by the machinations of a (comically) vengeful teen. The film links these roles at several points, as when Blume compliments the ingenuity of Max’s attempt on his life. His role as father figure emphasizes the film’s complex engagement with class: Max denies the existence of his (affectionate, nurturing) father because he contradicts his own aspirational tendencies. Yet Blume is no patrician WASP, and the integration of Max’s “real” and “symbolic” fathers is accomplished without disruption to Max’s sense of ethnicity or class; it is his teenage identity which is the site for struggle.

Max is embedded in a narrative enacting several classical teen themes, but given adult complexity through its tone. What significance can Max's performance of adulthood be expected to have for teen audiences? In that adolescence itself can be seen as a period of personality formation, it may provide reassurance regarding their own social status, their problematic liminality. However, Anderson's whimsically ironic approach produces a kind of winking nostalgia best accessed through the lens of retrospective adult subjectivity, in contrast to the classical teen film's direct address to teenagers. Rushmore as a school is heavily idealized, thereby mythologizing the teenage state, and Max is "method acting," or playing, at adulthood; viewing the innocence of Max's worldview beneath his faux-sophisticated veneer from an *adult* perspective produces a pleasurable dualism. As the outsider "loser" Max must be recuperated into adolescence by simultaneously accepting and transcending his position within the teenage hierarchy,<sup>viii</sup> but the heroic status given to his stubbornness, precocious knowledge, and struggle for reinvention carries a strongly Smart-inflected link between identity, irony, and loss of innocence.

*Brick* (Johnson 2005) is by contrast a curiously postmodern hybrid: a teen noir. A labyrinthine journey through drug dealing and teenage pregnancy, its distinctive characteristic is its style. Reminiscent of the classic gumshoe detective stories of the 1940s, it foregrounds its jazz soundtrack, stark blue palette, modernist architecture, and quirky interiors that call to mind the surreal detective series *Twin Peaks* (1990–1991). Stylistically, the effect is of ironic mystification; long shots refuse identification with young detective Brendan (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), intermixed with jump cuts, fades, tableau-style framing, and at times ultra-slow pacing. While the narrative is clearly teenage-oriented, this stylistic experimentation<sup>ix</sup> may function to exclude or displace teen viewers—who might otherwise identify with the protagonist through the film's narrative and framing—in favour of adults.

Embroided in a search to find his missing ex-girlfriend Emily, and subsequently her killer, Brendan explores the hidden drug networks in his school. Here, all relationships (bar that with his classically bespectacled nerd sidekick, "Brain") are potentially treacherous, linking the dangers of the criminal underworld with the duplicity of teenage interactions. Education features only by its absence; "real" action occurs outside the classroom, which must be escaped in order to achieve an "authentic" education.<sup>x</sup> Self-possessed and resourceful, Brendan functions as an adult, but the school's hierarchy draws directly from the classical teen film's tropes—rich girls, aggressive jocks, drama queens, delinquents, and social refuseniks, each symbolically linking with their noir counterpart—the femme fatale, the muscle, the showgirl, the heavy, and the mysterious stranger—in generically complex ways.

Here, drugs pose no particular danger; but unguarded emotions towards one's peers may prove fatal. Brendan is marked out as a loner by his choice of lunch venue, with "lunch" as a recurring social marker. The question "Where you been eating?" tracks hierarchical interactions as much as physical location; searching for Emily, Brendan's first question is always "Who's she been eating with?" The seductive Laura (Nora Zehetner) offers him not just (untrustworthy) affection, but also a sense of illicit hierarchical dissolution when she courts him by saying "You think nobody sees you. Eating lunch behind the portables ... I always seen [sic] you."

This sense of impenetrably codified teenage hierarchy—breachable only in extremis, as by Brendan's desperate search—is augmented by the complex language employed. This renders the text somewhat opaque, combining 1940s formality and reclaimed slang, but it has the ring of authentic teen argot in its clarity to its *desired* audience and impenetrability to those

outside. “Outside,” too, are authority figures: parents are absent from this world, which features one<sup>xi</sup> adult figure, assistant headmaster Mr. Trueman (Richard Roundtree), with whom Brendan trades information. Notably, “snitching” is permissible in neither the teen nor noir code, and to avoid generic dissonance the film must therefore construct their relationship as one of equals—in contrast to the way in which the trickster or rebel figure disrupts the school hierarchy of the classical form. Similarly, a common element in teen-adult “nemesis” relationships within teen film is the adult’s humiliation or debasement of themselves in the process of exacting petty revenge against the teen.<sup>xii</sup> As Trueman remains professional at all times, this hierarchical reversal cannot occur, and so the film evacuates a teenage-centred framing in favour of a more adult consciousness of hierarchy.

In noir style, Brendan tactically exploits his knowledge of the relationships and activities of others, reveals the killer (then himself killed, via Brendan’s cold-blooded manoeuvring), and exposes senior players within the drug ring to the authorities. The outcome of the film, however, does not display any moralistic or pedagogical impulses, adhering more to a fatalistic, bleak Smart/noir tendency to refuse resolution in the form of a “happy ending.” Brendan exposes the callous manipulations of femme fatale Laura, who has engineered Emily’s death. Unmasked by Brendan, she reveals that the baby with which Emily was pregnant was in fact his, and the film ends to the abrupt cessation of the atmospheric jazz soundtrack, replaced by the sound of passing traffic. This sonic rupture leaches the film of its historical-mythic generic contexts and references, leaving us with a more squalid, tragic—but contemporary, rather than anchored in a quasi-noir hinterland—conclusion.

Where *Brick* revels in its game-playing, *Election* (Payne 1999) ironically juxtaposes visual and narrative elements in ways which reflect deep-seated adult ambivalence about youth. In particular, it foregrounds unease regarding female teenage sexuality, sometimes elided by the conventional teen film (which tends to assume relationships between teenagers as “equal,” rather than problematizing their gendered power structures). Teacher Jim McAllister (Matthew Broderick) plots to destroy ambitious, precocious Tracy Flick (Reese Witherspoon) by thwarting her efforts to be elected as student president, after her illicit affair with his colleague results in the man’s dismissal. As befits black comedy, this extraordinary piece of victim-blaming produces deliberately uncomfortable set pieces, which—in a sophisticated elaboration of classic teen film—centre on adult hypocrisy, utilizing ironic distance to extract maximum valence from the satirically loaded gap between voiceover and image, or the gulf between characters’ thoughts and their actions.

McAllister nurses his antipathy to the over-achieving Tracy even as he pictures her face while having sex with his wife; his loathing grows to absurdist proportions as he attempts to sabotage her election. Unsympathetic but vulnerable, Tracy, whose desire for a “proper” form of adult autonomy makes her the butt of contemporaries’ jokes, is out of step with conventional female teen representations. Too sexual to be a “good girl” or nerd, too engaged and preppily enthusiastic to be a rebel figure, she is a liminal being who provokes discomfort in adults and teenagers—in McAllister’s case a complex mixture of distaste and sexual arousal. This disquieting breach of stereotypes, alongside the generic friction between black comedy and teen film, forces a complex subject positioning of condemnation and empathy for McAllister’s manipulations.

When McAllister encourages both naive but popular jock Paul (Chris Klein) and his sister Tammy (Jessica Campbell) to enter the election race, the political process is both lampooned and seen to break down under the force of corruption, as we see the (comic) depths

to which McAllister's obsession will plunge him. A trenchant illustration of the film's Smart origins is Tammy's election speech. Where Tracy lectures with adult intensity, and Paul stumbles childishly over his words, Tammy revels in the futility of taking the election seriously, rallying the school with "We all know it doesn't matter ... Who cares? Don't vote at all!" Proclaiming that the school president exerts no power, here conventional politics are rejected, although the question of what might replace them remains unanswered. The film is, as with many teen pictures, an incitement for teenagers to see beyond adult "doublethink."

Indeed, it is the abandonment of adult notions of failure and success, and the highlighting of hypocrisy and self-delusion as employed to sustain adult worldviews, which provides what resolution there is. Marginalized within her own family (largely for her status as an adopted, rather than birth child) and as a lesbian, it is Tammy who comes closest to a happy ending. While she loses the election to Paul—later elected prom king, and living an idealized teen film party lifestyle—her punishment for making trouble is to be sent to a Catholic all-girls school. McAllister's and Tracy's fates remain intertwined. Fired from teaching, he becomes a museum guide, a reversal of fortune which he approaches in a distinctly Tracy Flick-like spirit of aggressive positivity. However, as they cross paths a final time, his conviction that she "lied and cheated" to win the election and "ruined [his] life" leads him to aggressively throw his drink at her limo and flee. For Tracy, college seems something of a let-down, and we meet her last as intern to a Republican senator. The ending of the film mirrors the beginning—Tracy involved with a powerful man—in a manner privileging the adult McAllister's perspective and not hers; that is, framing Tracy as an opportunistic predator using her sexuality to advance her own aims.

This may constitute a punishment for Tracy—a misogynistic fate for a character whose only real crime is ambition, although compatible with the tropes of teen fiction. We may also read it as punishment for having failed to embrace adolescence, having traded her "authentic" youth for a feigned adulthood; this reading foregrounds adult nostalgia, thereby reinforcing the film's Smart tonality, rather than its teen film elements. This is also seen in the ending, where a clichéd early statement of Tracy's—"You have to hold on to your dreams no matter what"—is rendered ironic not just through the film's tone, but also by McAllister's last-line conclusion regarding his straitened circumstances: "that's what's great about America. We can always start over." However, to read the film un-ironically for once, perhaps this ending constitutes a final rebuff to the notion that adulthood equals success, leaving the "real" teenagers, Paul and Tammy, to their innocent triumphs.

## Conclusions

Certain tropes appear across both the classical and Smart teen form, and some are especially relevant in exposing the parallels between Smart film generally and the teen film in all its aspects—for example, the privileging of the white suburban male heterosexual, and a corresponding marginalization of female or non-white characters. In both, the teenage or immediate post-teenage years are presented as a liminal, potentially transformational space, the site of crises of identity formation and personality consolidation. The development of a workable personal philosophy is central to both the classical and Smart teen film form, although the extent to which characters are transformed by this varies; in the classic teen film, characters strive (sometimes unconsciously) for a holistic integration of the self, whereas the Smart iteration hints that the self cannot be made truly whole.

Both focus on structures of empowerment and disempowerment in an oppressive world, and the socially bounded limits of acceptable or possible action within it. Violent or aggressive responses are only seen as appropriate where an ideological or structural apparatus is perceived as oppressive, bureaucratic, or antithetical to freedom of expression—including school and the family, whose expectations are sometimes presented as crippling or stultifying. The school-based student hierarchy is represented as restrictive and codified, and the consequences associated with its breach can be severe; this element is often linked with class. An emphasis within the school hierarchy is often laid on the transformational capacities of the outsider, bohemian, trickster or nerd character, or those who self-define as “marginalised”: this is complicated in Smart films by the erosion of boundaries between character types. Self-expression and personal autonomy are often seen as antithetical to participation at a familial or wider social level; this links to a focus on the futility of participating in adult society or politics, insofar as these are seen as governed hypocritically, by corrupt or petty authority figures. Neither adults, nor the attainment of adulthood, offer a clear solution to teenage problems.

There are differences, of course. The Smart film comes closer to presenting teenagers as a “threat” or problem than the classic 1980s form does, in line with trends described by Giroux (2002) and Grossberg (2001). A more complex moral framework is at play in the Smart films, where strategic but miserable disengagement from the (adult) social world can be privileged over what is seen as “dumb” teenage happiness. The key to explaining why Smart has refocused the “teen” rubric is the axis of empowerment and disempowerment: accessing this dynamic via teenagers, a group which tends to be seen as lacking agency, allows the films to address preoccupations around agency and identity which are muddled when directly addressing adults, presumed to possess authority and autonomy. Adult viewers, therefore, are permitted to simultaneously reflect on teenage misadventure from a privileged, nostalgic, perspective, and to vicariously or covertly (re)negotiate social and intellectual conceptions of youth.

Above all, in these films it is the teenage viewpoint, that generic cornerstone of the teen film, which appears to have been displaced from its key position. In a period when all film is increasingly targeted to youth audiences, the Smart teen film may be a heavily ironized reaction to accusations of juvenilization; but the transposition of the form’s generic conventions to a more adult space turns teenage characters into abstracted ciphers, onto which adult nostalgia can be projected. These are films which speak *of* teenagers, although they do not presume to speak to or, crucially, *for* them, and if there is a pedagogical element to them, it is one directed at adults—and it is this absence which demonstrates the evacuation of youth from public space and discourse to which Grossberg and Giroux refer. To view teenagers as a “threat” or problem in the present, renders nostalgic all that was once considered “teenaged”: thus, the concentration of representations of them in films which produce a nostalgic, bittersweet, or ironic effect in their portrayal. However, if genre is the mythic reworking of societal concerns, and if Smart cinema is a “cinema of disillusionment,” it seems appropriate that it would co-opt teenage representations and mythically rework notions of youth, which is after all the traditional territory of those ideals the loss of which Smart appears, covertly, to bemoan—idealism and optimism.

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<sup>i</sup> *Donnie Darko* (Kelly 2001), *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (Solondz 1995), *Ghost World* (Zwigoff 2001), and *The Squid and the Whale* (Baumbach 2005) qualify along with works featured here.

<sup>ii</sup> As Roz Kaveney (2006: 3) notes, Hughes' work "created or solidified many stock expectations and character types."

<sup>iii</sup> Kaveney (2006) sees characterization, class, and the foregrounding of soundtrack as key; Driscoll (2011) centralizes the idea of onscreen adolescence as a liminal state; Shary's (2014:13) broad perspective notes that "the youth genre is based on the ages of the films' characters"; Bailey and Hay (2002: 218) frame it as a matter of setting: the home, the school and the shopping mall functioning as "spaces in which the social identities of youth find articulation."

<sup>iv</sup> Sconce (2002) also describes narrative and stylistic features not directly relevant to this work, including a fractured or episodic narrative structure, the use of synchronicity as an organizing principle; blank or incongruous narration emphasizing distance between the text and the audience; textual continuity slowed and de-intensified to produce a stylized, almost tableau effect.

<sup>v</sup> While beyond the scope of this period and topic, I believe this tendency links with the emergence of online



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cultures (e.g. 4Chan and Reddit) which have been described as disaffected, and nihilistic, and these cultures' contemporary permeation of political and social "real life."

<sup>vi</sup> Indeed, Kaveney (2006: 21) writes of Hughes' "sometimes Neanderthal sexual politics."

<sup>vii</sup> Blume emphasizes that he is sending his children to Rushmore as it is one of the "best schools in the country" but continues: "Now, for some of you, it doesn't matter. You were born rich, and you're going to stay rich. But here's my advice to the rest of you: take dead aim on the rich boys. Get them in the crosshairs. And take them down. Just remember: they can buy anything. But they can't buy backbone."

<sup>viii</sup> He evokes Ferris in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (Hughes 1986), a "trickster" figure who sees himself as above and/or outside the adult world.

<sup>ix</sup> Shared with non-teen Smart films including *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino 1992), *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino 1994), *Dark City* (Proyas 1998), *Memento* (Nolan 2000), and *Pi* (Aronofsky 1998).

<sup>x</sup> This mirrors the classical teen film, wherein the school hierarchy plays a structuring role, but "true" enlightenment must be sought outside of pedagogical settings, as in *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes 1985), *American Pie* (Weitz 1999), and many others.

<sup>xi</sup> Apart from drug trader The Pin (Lukas Haas), who lives with his mother, is chauffeured in a converted minivan, and is "supposed to be old, like twenty-six" but is embedded deeply in the teen world.

<sup>xii</sup> As per the archetype of "the Humiliation of the Obsessive Authority Figure" (Kaveney 2006: 45).