



ReFocus

The Films of Amy Heckerling

EDITED BY
FRANCES SMITH AND TIMOTHY SHARY





ReFocus: The American Directors Series

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“But seriously, I actually have a way normal life for a teenage girl”:
The Teenage Female
Empowerment Payoff in Amy
Heckerling’s *Clueless*

Stefania Marghitu and Lindsey Alexander

When fans go online to pay tribute to Amy Heckerling’s 1995 cult classic *Clueless*, the film’s fashion and slang are often at the forefront. Through the film’s styling and language, Heckerling creates a cultural representation of female power. That sense of power and playfulness—achieved via feminine practices—still resonates with women today. *Clueless* commemorations are rooted in an appreciation of Heckerling’s pastiche of fashion and slang. For instance, a widely shared YouTube video provides a montage of every outfit that protagonist Cher Horowitz (Alicia Silverstone) wears in the film, while a boutique clothing brand dedicated its 2013 collection to the film’s femme-centered styles.¹ Heckerling transformed the pivotal plotlines of Jane Austen’s 1815 novel *Emma* into a high school coming-of-age story, and set a new standard for the female-driven teen film. This essay will reveal that the oft-quoted and most culturally-defining components of *Clueless* were, in fact, not particularly representative of teenagers of the time, but instead were molded by Heckerling as a means of ousting the male-centric teen film and grunge era with a cultural collage of decades of feminine fashion and slang as a female-dominant alternative. Rather than giving in to established approaches of the teen film genre, Heckerling proves to be a true postmodern master of pastiche, remaking classic literature under the guise of a present-day setting but with a retro representation that evokes the late 1970s and early ’80s, from its bright attire to the lingual resurgence reminiscent of California beach babes and ’80s Valley Girls. Cher, memorable for shopping and slang, uses these powers, often denigrated as superficial, to navigate societal hierarchy and gain power. Whether Cher is using a scantily clad outfit as an innocent seducer or her argumentation skills to go from average student to honor roll, Heckerling writes a tongue-in-cheek script that displays how young women can wield power.



Figure 10.1 Cher organizes her immaculate wardrobe with a futuristic computer program on her desktop computer.

Arguing against the Marcusean theory of consumerism as sexist, the feminist cultural critic Ellen Willis writes:

For women, buying and wearing clothes and beauty aids is not so much consumption as work. One of a woman's jobs in this society is to be an attractive sexual object, and clothes and makeup are tools of the trade. . . . When a woman spends a lot of money and time decorating her home or herself. . . . it is not idle self-indulgence (let alone the result of psychic manipulation) but a healthy attempt to find outlets for her creative energies within her circumscribed role.²

While the grunge era of the late '80s to early '90s—pairing the DIY punk ethos of the '70s raw masculine energy of heavy metal and Generation X malaise—already succeeded in subverting disparate subcultures of different eras, Heckerling continues the same method with a different pattern. She favored designer fashions and pop culture as currency for her teenage characters. For example, Cher wears brands like Calvin Klein and Fred Segal, and can quote *Hamlet* on the basis of the 1990 Mel Gibson movie adaptation. We will explore how Heckerling's inspiration stems from the late '70s to the early '80s, the era of her first high school film, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), and how she blended chic aesthetics from the past with current fashion trends to produce a savvy script for *Clueless* that relied on real pop culture references but fabricated slang. Postmodernism is a patchwork of high and low culture, but the director was a pioneer in weaving together eras of style and trends to construct

a "contemporary" representation, particularly for teen films. *Clueless* launched fashions and vernacular, and in so doing promoted feminine-dominant culture and provided the standard for female-centered teen media, along with modes of fandom and appreciation.

Heckerling helped create a '90s-styled mainstream femme culture for female teens that celebrated fashion and beauty as well as self-realization and personal growth. Aligned with postfeminist, or post-second-wave or third-wave feminist attitudes, *Clueless* does not question gendered identity as a social construct, and instead chooses to celebrate femininity and feminine modes of consumption as empowering for its protagonists. Throughout the coming-of-age teen narrative, however, Heckerling's film asserts that there is more to life, and room for Cher to develop as a self-actualized adult who cares about larger issues. Cher does not simply transform into a socialite who donates money to good causes. She becomes a vigilante for less fortunate individuals who have lost their homes and possessions during a natural disaster. She is less concerned with her looks and more preoccupied with her causes and helping her father's trial, yet she maintains her beauty and style. She also realizes that saving her virginity for celebrity heartthrob Luke Perry is not the most ideal option, and comes to see that she is in love with her intelligent and thoughtful ex-stepbrother Josh (Paul Rudd), who motivated her to become a better person.

Whereas female-dominated teen films such as John Hughes's *Sixteen Candles* (1984) and *Pretty in Pink* (1986) still focused on boy-girl romances as the narrative focal point, *Clueless* offered more in terms of a female teen lead who was, admittedly, interested in her burgeoning love life, but also friendships, family, cultural pursuits, self-improvement, and personal happiness. While Cher's do-good impulses might be somewhat misplaced in making over Tai (Brittany Murphy), she does subvert the stereotypes associated with a wealthy high school Beverley Hills socialite. She doesn't want to be seen as "a ditz with a credit card." In her quest for self-actualization, Cher doesn't lose her personal style, but she becomes less vapid and more interested in becoming a self-conscious contributing member of society, while still maintaining her femininity and confidence. (Her budding romance with Josh furthers this interest. But it's important to note it does not *spark* her goals of personal betterment, so the film does not solely revolve around the romance between Josh and Cher.)

Future media works such as *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (WB/UPN, 1997–2003) would go on to challenge *Clueless's* standard by showing that a pretty, feminine, teenage blonde could be "badass," while the TV series praised the outsiders, nerds, and outcasts over the stylish and beautiful popular kids. *Clueless's* goal at the time it was released seemed more about showing a confident, empowered, feminine teenage girl as a protagonist, something that

was missing from the American zeitgeist. Furthermore, Heckerling does not devalue or condescend to the teenage female experience, and treats her protagonists as young adults rather than children.

When *Splitsider* contributor Alden Ford first watched *Clueless* in 2011, the journalist marveled at the pro-feminine attitude of the film:

The feminist odds seem starkly against *Clueless*—at first glance there doesn't seem to be much to recommend a movie about a cute, rich blonde that gets her grades, her friends and her man by being cute, rich and blonde. But against those odds, *Clueless* is a film about a girl who takes responsibility for her own actions, takes care of the people she loves, finds what she wants, and makes a series of good choices to get it. What more could you ask of a protagonist of any gender?³

Clueless still produces strong feelings for viewers who remember the film in terms of their own youth, as well as viewers who dissect its relevance today. Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White point out that the most notable thing about Heckerling's project is its reception:

Clueless successfully addressed a teenage interpretive community, both in and outside of the United States, which quickly adopted the film's style in fashion and slang. Young women's "use" of the film was generally positive. *Clueless* validated and enabled (coded) communication among young girls, who, far from being treated yet again as know-nothings, were now the only ones fully "clued in."⁴

From an industrial perspective, the film was a monster sleeper hit in the summer of 1995, gaining \$56 million at the domestic box office.⁵ As Kyra Hunting asserts, the movie made the entertainment industry take notice of the potential financial impact of female audiences and consumers. Hunting cites industry observer Isabel Walcott, who stated that *Clueless* allowed for a new movement of teen films that "opened people's eyes to the fact that if they could get teenage girls to come to a movie, they could make a killing."⁶ Hunting proves that *Clueless* precedes films such as *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996), *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997), *She's All That* (Robert Iscove, 1999), and *Never Been Kissed* (Raja Gosnell, 1999), as well as TV series like *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, *Dawson's Creek* (WB, 1998–2003), and *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998–2004), in this "niche teen programming" trend, not only through its box office success, but through the demand for *Clueless*-related products, including everything from the TV spin-off and book series to the CD-ROM game and Mattel dolls. The film's success thus triggered the film and television industry to further investigate teenage girls as a substantial demographic.

The film's reception and fandom remain remarkable today, twenty years after its original theatrical release. Screenings abound, from the 2014 LA Film Fest to quote-alongs at Austin's Alamo Drafthouse Cinema and London's Prince Charles Cinema. In an e-mail interview, the Prince Charles Cinema's Head Programmer, Paul Vickery, stated that the London landmark has commissioned the screening event "about three or four times over the past few years," yielding an audience over 200 every time, with the first couple of screenings completely sold out at 285 attendees. Audience participation is high, and Vickery states that dressing up and quoting along are encouraged at the event. Vickery asserts that the majority of the crowd, who are 70 percent female, arrive in "their best '90s ensembles,"⁷ adding that he believes the film "stands above a lot of the films of its kind and time because it had a wider view on things. It's just a great *teen* movie, not a great '90s movie. Which is why it's loved by so many different kinds of people."⁸ He also maintains that the age group varies from 18 to 35 years old. This range bridges a generational gap between Generation X and Millennial women; some were Silverstone's contemporaries, growing up in the same era with Cher, while a considerable number of participants were not yet born when the movie was originally released. This splits the audience in two—those who remember coming of age in the mid-'90s and those who do not. However, both groups invest in "re-living" the film. Vickery said one can clearly distinguish between those who grew up with the film and those who are viewing it on the big screen for the first time simply by age. But he claimed that, regardless of this, every fan knew the film equally well.⁹

This ageless appreciation is also evident in online fandom and beyond. An August 2011 YouTube clip posted by *WORN Fashion Journal* entitled "Every Outfit Cher Horowitz Wears in *Clueless* in Under 60 Seconds" yielded over 300,000 hits as of September 2014, and everywhere from popular feminist blog *Jezebel* to *The Huffington Post* quickly shared the video.¹⁰ Brands like LA-based Wildfox Couture pay direct homage to the film's style in new collections and photo shoots. Their Spring 2013 "Clueless Collection" proudly praises the film for changing "girl world forever":

Everything about the "Clueless" world captured a generation of girls who wanted it all, and who were going to look great getting it. Amy Heckerling created a bold new take on the modern girl amidst the sea of grunge that filled the 90's. Wildfox's Spring 2013 collection pays tribute to Heckerling, capturing the spirit of "Clueless" and their iconic leading ladies. We're the Kids In America!¹¹

Wildfox designer Kimberly Gordon further touches on how the film impacted on her, and how its fashion functions as a distinct mode of feminine expression:

I have always wanted to express something creatively that is more than just fashion: it's a feeling, a lifestyle, it's about being a girl. It's capturing a moment. I think I felt it first when I was about 12, around when *Clueless* came out, and I was so in love with the characters, I didn't just love the clothes, I loved the girls who wore the clothes—which made me want to wear them even more.¹²

As Gordon implies, the fashions are iconic because of the meaning with which they are imbued. For Gordon at least, and perhaps many other female viewers, that meaning directly corresponds to “being a girl.” Wildfox’s line, which featured homages to the film’s iconic looks as well as shirts emblazoned with sayings such as “I’d Rather Be Shopping,” may at some level appeal to a society constructed with sexism, but their irreverent comments also showcase humor, women’s buying power, and general ennui. This attitude, also apparent in the film, marks the postfeminist or third-wave era, in which femininity and power are interconnected.

Social media sites such as Pinterest and Tumblr are inundated with fan-created commemorations of *Clueless*; mobile app technologies attempt to mimic the film’s computer program that stores personal wardrobes and identifies matching pieces; and link-sharing monolith *BuzzFeed* frequently provides lists that commemorate and deconstruct the cultural facets of *Clueless*. Online tributes in popular press as well as user-generated sites help pinpoint the film’s most defining and memorable characteristics for fans.

Online commemorations also help pinpoint that *Clueless* fans pine for the film’s fashion and slang above all, while the tenth anniversary *Clueless* DVD (*Whatever!* edition, 2005) shows how Heckerling developed these specific defining characteristics of the film. Special features on the DVD uncover that none of these factors was symptomatic of the '90s. Charlie Lyne, a 23-year-old filmmaker and film journalist who would have been about four years old when *Clueless* premiered, explores how *Clueless* allowed the US film industry to produce a diverse variety of teen films after its surprise success. This increase in more eccentric teen films is evident in his 2014 documentary debut, *Beyond Clueless*, which strings together clips from over 300 movies from the late '90s as the various coming-of-age narrative arcs of the teen film genre unfold. Lyne believes that the success of *Clueless* can be traced to a “sincere interest in really working out who a teenage audience was.”¹³ Heckerling’s conscious choice to place *Clueless* in the present was thus crucial for its connection to teens of the time. Although she essentially created a fantasy world, Heckerling also sat in on Beverly Hills High School classes to gain an understanding of her subjects.¹⁴ After *Clueless*, a boom occurred for the high school film, bringing about individualized and quirky tales, as Lyne states: “The brilliant thing about *Clueless* was that it inspired risk in the teen genre; it gave studios and

filmmakers the impetus to take more risks in a genre that was often defined by formulas and traditions."¹⁵

Though *Clueless* as a coming-of-age comedy points out the ironies inherent among the young, beautiful, and rich, it also does not inherently mock its protagonists' consumption. For instance, while Cher's wardrobe-planning computer program is funny, it's also something many fashionable viewers at the time may have coveted. In recent years, popular press and blogs praise wardrobe organizing mobile applications owing to their likeness to the film's original system, as if *Clueless* fans were waiting for their own since the film's premiere.¹⁶ Cher's insistence on taking photographs of her outfits over simply looking at a mirror nearly foreshadows the surveillance young women hold over their bodies and images through their mobile phones. For Cher, shopping is an outlet for creativity, a reflection of herself, as it is for her peers Dionne (Stacey Dash) and Tai. Cher's focus on fashion—though problematic as regards her cluelessness to class-consciousness—gives her power on the social scene. She also uses language, slang in particular, to negotiate and navigate her way through high society—from arguing for better grades to initiating new members of her tribe. Both offer social mobility that is available to women and minorities.

From Austen's narrative to Cher's iconic namesake, women's storytelling and cultural reverence pervade *Clueless*. In Hollywood, it is still rare for a literary film adaptation, or any film, period or contemporary, to incorporate a female screenwriter, director, and non-sexualized protagonist.¹⁷ Cher's voiceover is established in the opening scenes, and she soon begins her morning routine while scanning her digital wardrobe. Audiences quickly understand that *Clueless* will be seen through her eyes. The '70s are referenced frequently in the film, echoing an era of lifestyle feminism in which popular products were geared toward women consumers with cultural cache and economic means. David Bowie's 1980 anthem "Fashion" plays extradiagetically as Cher explains "but seriously, I actually have a way normal life for a teenage girl." Soon after, she explains in voiceover that she and Dionne are named after "great singers of the past who now do infomercials," that is, Cher and Dionne Warwick. Cher is white and Dionne is black, yet race is otherwise never an issue for the friends as they share a common tie of economic privilege and mutual tastes. Cher later remarks how Dionne and her boyfriend's distinct style and manner of verbally arguing is a result of their multiple viewings of the Ike and Tina Turner biopic, *What's Love Got to Do With It* (Brian Gibson, 1993). Cher returns from school only to ask, "Isn't my house classic? The columns date all the way back to 1972." Defining the '70s as a classical period is funny, but also cues viewers in to what era Heckerling's film will draw from to manufacture "new" trends. Thus, appreciation of the cultural artifacts of the '70s as a "classic" period is established early on.

A newfound '90s appreciation is also applicable to high school students today, as can be seen through the popularity of Nirvana T-shirts coupled with floral prints and Doc Martens boots. For a teenager, and for teens of a digital era—true of Gen-X viewers and certainly of Millennials—time passes extremely quickly. Knowledge of the past is more easily accessible through the Internet. But instead of the surfers, stoners, and Spicolis of *Fast Times*, in *Clueless* we see a feminine and female-dominated culture—shopping, styling, and makeover skills reign. In place of the sexual negotiations girls make in *Fast Times* and other popular teen films, Cher uses her negotiation skills to get better grades in school, while she remains naïve and generally uninterested in how sexuality plays into male-female relationships. She rejects Elton's sexual advances, and is later rejected by a closeted gay friend. And it is important to reiterate the significance of Cher as an active agent, rather than a passive commodity of the male gaze. As Ben Aslinger elaborates on Silverstone's own transition from her sexualized roles in music videos for Aerosmith's "Cryin'" (1993), "Amazing" (1993), and "Crazy" (1994) into a fully-fledged film star: "Heckerling did something interesting by turning the largely silent spectacle into a complicated living, speaking character in a film that challenges rock discourse and its idea about gender."¹⁸

Male-targeted rock music and its sexualized videos dominated the early '90s. Grunge, a previously alternative rock genre, also infiltrated the mainstream through the success of Seattle natives Pearl Jam and Nirvana. Nirvana front man Kurt Cobain committed suicide just over a year before *Clueless* was released, but Heckerling spent years pitching her film when the malaise of the male-dominated grunge era was still widespread. This era also witnessed a



Figure 10.2 Cher chastises her male classmates' blasé attitude toward fashion.



Figure 10.3 While newcomer Tai (left) serves as the fashion outcast, her style reflects the standard of the time.

decline of female-focused mainstream media, including teen films. Following grunge's decline after Cobain's death, no musical genre or cultural attitude dominated youth culture, leaving an opening for new influences. As Alice Leppert writes, "When Cher and Dionne decide to make Tai over, the film sounds its death knell for grunge."¹⁹ Although this type of makeover is a common trope in teen cinema, such as Ally Sheedy's goth-to-glam transformation in *The Breakfast Club* (John Hughes, 1985) or Rachel Leigh Cook's nerd-turned-homecoming-queen material conversion in *She's All That*, this transition from masculine to feminine is more about a cultural shift toward teenage girls feeling more confident about themselves than just about their validation by the opposite sex. Tai arrived at school as an inarticulate and uncertain tomboy, but her exterior feminine makeover—complete with soft knits, high hemlines, and springy curls—transformed her into a more poised peer of Cher and Dionne. Cher tries to mold Tai into her own disciple, but by the end of the comedy, Tai has defined her own romantic parameters, separate from the strict code of the popular standards, dating a hippie skateboarder (whom Cher initially prohibits). In the meantime, Cher also defies her own rules, falling for someone far from her celebrity crush Christian Slater and far from social acceptability: her ex-stepbrother, Josh. College-aged Josh is initially introduced sporting a flannel shirt and listening to Radiohead, which Cher coins as "complaint rock" that dominated college radio stations of the era.

Despite a predominantly '90s soundtrack largely rooted in new alternative music, four of the fourteen songs in *Clueless* came from the *Fast Times* era, and three of its contemporary anthems are in fact covers of this time. On *Clueless*,

Maureen Turim writes that “compared to earlier teenage high school sagas scored by rock music, this film uses its music less to establish the period and tastes of the teens depicted than to offer other perspectives, some that even comment critically or ironically on their rich enclave.”²⁰ And as Aslinger has noted, the *Clueless* soundtrack is

timely in its response to burgeoning indie rock, alternative, and riot grrrrl music scenes and modes of production, and it is timeless because it manages to deploy then-contemporary music and cover versions of older songs to represent teen growing pains and identity struggles.²¹

In online tributes, fans commemorate the *Clueless* soundtrack far less than its fashion and slang, yet the film’s music also fuses both retro and contemporary styles from different eras. However, Cher and her cohort do not discuss their musical preferences as often or as passionately as they engage with their mutual, perpetual love of fashion, makeovers, and shopping. Therefore, the soundtrack remains on the periphery of the fashion, especially compared to music-centered youth-oriented films of the ’90s such as *Empire Records* (Allan Moyle, 1995) and *Wayne’s World* (Penelope Spheeris, 1992). While *Clueless* revived the fashion and slang of the ’70s into the ’90s, *World’s* inclusion of Queen’s 1976 “Bohemian Rhapsody” led to the song’s rise to #1 and #2 on the UK and US charts respectively.²²

Instead of primarily being identified through a retro or contemporary rock, pop, or hip-hop subculture, music genre serves as an augmentation or enhancement of each character or social type’s fashion style in *Clueless*. In fact, music super-fandom is affiliated with pompous male snobbery through Cher’s peer Elton (Jeremy Sisto), whose first line in the film is about his misplaced Cranberries CD. He further name-drops his father’s connections in the music industry as a legitimization for his status as an ideal suitor worthy of Cher. While music may not be a primary passion for the film’s female leads, it still adds nuance to the principal protagonists. For example, in the film’s first scene, The Muffs’ “Kids in America” initially introduces Cher and Dionne’s popular social group with a glossy, fun, youthful, feminine pop anthem, while Jill Sobule’s “Supermodel” follows Tai’s makeover. Make no mistake: Sobule’s punk track still critiques the vapidness of exuberant femininity and consumerism, yet doesn’t serve as a tirade on the women themselves, but instead the culture of female bodies as commodities surrounding it. This song choice also reflects Tai’s reluctance to simply mimic her new friends’ look, and as the song foreshadows, by the end of the film she establishes her own hybrid style, taking from her past and her peers. Music is again a signifier of a teenager’s identity, just as we can tell that the mainstream teen boys are identified with contemporary grunge and alternative rock.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Cher was initially interested in a romantic partner outside these norms. In the DVD special feature "The Class of '95: About Like, Casting and Stuff," the cast and crew discuss how Cher's initial love interest, Christian (Justin Walker), was attractive to her because of his vintage Rat Pack style. This rare refinement was emphasized by his appreciation of retro wear, jazz, classic Hollywood, vintage cars, and 1960s colloquialisms. When Cher is informed he is gay, it emphasizes her virginity and sexual naivety. The coded talk in which Murray (Donald Faison) informs Cher that Christian is gay operates through that distinct Heckerling mixture of literary and pop culture references, which we will later discuss in detail:

Murray: Your man Christian is a cake boy!

Cher and Dionne: A what?

Murray: He's a disco-dancing, Oscar Wilde-reading, Streisand ticket-holding friend of Dorothy, know what I'm saying?

Cher: Uh-uh, no way, not even!

Murray: Yes, even! He's gay!

Dionne: He does like to shop, Cher. And the boy can dress.

Heckerling compresses the signifiers of taste that can define a young gay man into one sentence: disco as a genre; Oscar Wilde as an author; Barbra Streisand as a singer and public persona; and Dorothy (by way of Judy Garland and her status as a gay icon) as the protagonist from *The Wizard of Oz*. Christian functions in contradistinction to his unsophisticated classmates whom Cher chastises in one of her most memorable voiceovers, backed with a 1995 World Party cover of Mott the Hoople's 1972 song written by Bowie, "All The Young Dudes":

So okay, I don't want to be a traitor to my generation and all, but I don't get how guys dress today. I mean, come on, it looks like they just fell out of bed and put on some baggy pants and take their greasy hair—ew—and cover it up with a backwards cap and like, we're expected to swoon? *I don't think so!*

Yet even the teenagers in this montage are dressed in livelier garb than the typical grunge disciple; perhaps this is a Southern Californian take on the Seattle standard by the film's costume designer/stylist, Mona May. In the DVD special feature "Fashion 101," Heckerling admits that the protagonists' attire was "not really what kids were wearing, it's more hyper style."²³ Throughout *Clueless*, Cher and her fellow fashionistas flaunt the three P's of '70s fashion: polyester, pastels, and platforms. When new girl Tai arrives dressed like her male peers in an oversized black shirt with a troll on it, baggy

dark Dickies-style pants, and flannel shirt, she is the anomaly among her class, but true to the era. Any male classmate could also easily wear the same outfit, and it would have been the norm. Teenage girls took on grunge's "alternative" style, as there was no alternative to grunge available.

The film's most ubiquitous ensemble, a near-uniform (both in that it resembles a schoolgirl outfit and in that it cycles through the movie in several variations) is a bright plaid/tartan schoolgirl outfit, consisting of a matching mini-skirt and blazer or cardigan, often with supplemental knee-high socks. We see Cher and Dionne wear their own versions of the look in the protagonists' introductory school scene, and Tai gives her take on the outfit the day after her makeover. The girls thus maintain their own unique flairs within the confines of the uniform. Cher makes fun of Dionne's large Dr. Seuss-like top hat, while Dionne jests that her friend's white furry bag looks like a skinned collie. And while these two maintain a crisp and preppy style, Tai is still looser with her choices, showing she is simultaneously less mature and more approachable. (Likewise, Tai's color palette is darker, maintaining her East Coast roots.)

Further into "Fashion 101," May states that she had no intention of recreating the popular grunge norm, and instead hoped to create a new look inspired by color and femininity, "something fresh and new to emulate."²³ Even the use of the tartan as a pattern and fabric is a female re-appropriation of the popular alternative-rock era's form of plaid and flannel. This "uniform" of Cher and her peers is certainly suggestive of the '60s infantilized "girlish" style; so while the '70s is the root of influence, the overall sartorial attitude of the film is a blend of retro and high fashion design. Even the underground female-dominated riot grrrl movement saw its leaders, such as Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Kill, incorporating the feminine schoolgirl look. So although uniforms do signify conformity, at the time this look conformed to a girlish postfeminist sensibility, and as such, Cher, Dionne, and Tai each tailor the uniform to their individual tastes. Indeed, frequenting vintage shops and incorporating retro wear, mixing high and low designer brands, and generally taking inspiration from eras of the past to create something modern—this still defines today's fashion for young women, with no small thanks to *Clueless*. Cher and Dionne frequent malls in Los Angeles, name-dropping The Galleria and Contempo Casuals in the film, suburban-friendly shopping experiences for teenage girls, while also referencing high-end brands like Fred Segal and Alaïa.

Just as Aslinger describes the careful collection of the *Clueless* soundtrack as both timely and timeless, the film's wardrobe choices adhere to the same mind-set. Heckerling commissioned May to create a bright and hyper feminine style. The stylist, who had an established fashion career, said she consciously transferred runway models' looks to more accessible teenage fashion.

In an interview celebrating the eighteenth anniversary of *Clueless*, May addresses her choices as being based on picking trends that would last beyond the era: "We wanted to make it timeless, and it really stood the test of time. I can watch *Clueless* now and there's still stuff we can wear."²⁵ Because current trends had little to offer and could become easily dated in retrospect, May turned to history:

I like to use references from the past, iconic looks like Sophia Loren sexiness and 1960s go-go boots, which are always good no matter what era you put them in. Mini-skirts from the '70s, plaids, the Bonnie and Clyde look with little sweaters, and the 1960s sweater sets that we put Cher in. These timeless, iconic pieces that live forever, that we see our mother[s] wear and then we wear, can be reinterpreted over and over. It's using the past in the best way possible.²⁶

In her book *Neo-Feminist Cinema: Girly Films, Chick Flicks and Consumer Culture*, Hilary Radner claims that "*Legally Blonde* [Robert Luketic, 2001] continues a trend established with *Clueless* in which fashion is seen to have an intrinsic interest for the viewer, independently of the manner in which it serves to illuminate and illustrate the character."²⁷ For Radner, both of these films represent how feminist values of independence and education are popularized and de-politicized in female-centered mainstream Hollywood films, ultimately retaining a postfeminist (or third-wave feminist) attitude, as Cher and Elle (Reese Witherspoon in *Legally Blonde*) preserve their feminine charm and fashion-forward sensibility while achieving their inner goals. Both films fall under what Radner calls neo-feminist cinema, heeding teen coming-of-age narrative tropes as well as classical Hollywood and female empowerment plots. These films challenge viewers' perceptions of young, feminine, and stylish women, suggesting that beauty and intelligence are not mutually exclusive. *Clueless* in many ways accomplished the same thing for the female teen film that *Sex and the City* achieved for female-dominated television shows, formulating a style that Emily Nussbaum used to describe *SATC* in contrast to male-dominated TV programming like *The Sopranos* [HBO, 1999–2007]: "high-feminine instead of fetishistically masculine, glittery rather than gritty, and daring in its conception of character."²⁸

Young female audiences are receptive to the style-as-power threads running through *Clueless*. In the following section, we will explore the wide-reaching impact of that reception. Certainly, the most popular, successful, and wide-reaching demonstration of *Clueless* style in recent years is 24-year-old Australian rapper Iggy Azalea's 2014 music video for "Fancy." In less than four minutes, the video recreates a majority of the film's most iconic outfits and scenes. By September 2014, the official YouTube video views stood at a

rounded 257 million hits. Azalea's personal stylist and the stylist for the video, Alejandra Hernandez, detailed the collaborative process with Azalea and her own adoration of the film's fashion.²⁹ As a testament to the pervasiveness of the film's hold on contemporary fashion, Hernandez was able to find a version of every outfit but one, and the video used approximately 275 individual ensembles. Azalea requested that Cher's black-and-yellow plaid schoolgirl outfit be an exact replica, because it was the most iconic, and this was the only ensemble that was made anew, not gathered from vintage collections. Strangely, the most difficult item to find was a yellow sweater vest to accompany the outfit. Hernandez stated that her cousin Franc Fernandez (best-known for making Lady Gaga's infamous "meat dress") created the replica of Dionne's white plastic Dr. Seuss-like top hat with an embellished black bow, as it was the only other difficult item to procure.³⁰

Hernandez stated that May always used one clothing item that teenagers could easily find at most clothing stores in order to promote accessibility for young viewers, alongside expensive designer and vintage or retro clothes. Hernandez uses the same approach in all of her styling projects, with Azalea and in the "Fancy" video. Alongside the abundance of vintage wear, they also collaborated with Adidas, Converse All Stars, Doc Martens, and Birkenstocks for the video, all brands popular in the '90s that are witnessing a fierce resurgence today. In 2012, for example, online retailer ASOS reported that its Doc Martens sales jumped more than 200 percent from the previous year.³¹ By the summer of 2014, Birkenstocks sales rose 30 percent within a year, and celebrities such as Mary Kate Olsen and Julianne Moore were seen sporting the sandals.³² The "Fancy" video also united the grunge and feminine aesthetics, rather than bifurcating the two as the film did, illustrating how many of today's teens fuse the '90s styles, especially through the multitude of extras in the video's party sequence. This portrayal accurately depicts today's fashion sense and appropriation of past cultures and aesthetics alongside one another. Post-*Clueless* sensibility evokes a teenager wearing a girly and form-fitting floral dress alongside a pair of bulky, masculine Doc Martens boots. For Heckerling, this is once again challenging understandings of high and low culture and style.

Azalea and Hernandez's collaboration on the "Fancy" video brought together both Azalea and *Clueless* fans. Azalea, of course, didn't merely give a nod to a favorite film or cast of characters, but also banked on gaining notoriety and capitalizing on a young, strong female audience loyal to *Clueless*. Jason Lipshutz of *Billboard* magazine asserts that Azalea's "Instant Classic Music Video" was a key ingredient of the rise of "Fancy" as a number one summer hit, rhetorically asking readers, "Really, who doesn't have a soft spot for *Clueless*?"³³ Upon the video's premiere, Jordan Valinsky of the current and political affairs site *The Week* praised the video's attention to detail:

Children of the '90s, get ready for a flashback: Australian rapper Iggy Azalea and British singer Charli XCX just dropped the music video for "Fancy," and it's an amazing #tbt tribute to 1995 rom-com masterpiece *Clueless*. Shot at the same high school the movie was filmed at, Azalea plays a badass version of Cher Horowitz, decked out in a spot-on version of Horowitz's then-stylish boxy blazer and platform shoes. There's even a shout out to Dionne's near car crash at the 1:20 mark. This will just have to hold us over until there's another rerun on Comedy Central.³⁴

In a 2014 interview, Heckerling applauded Azalea's high-budget and spot-on effort, claiming, "It looked like they had more money for the video than I had for the movie," and going on to say she was "extremely flattered" and "thought she [Azalea] was amazing."³⁵ The brief interview also led Heckerling to discuss her early stages of the *Clueless* Broadway musical, adding that pop star Katy Perry expressed interest, and that maybe even Azalea herself can contribute.³⁶

The film's slang is the only facet as influential as the fashion, and it maintains a similar hold on audiences. *Clueless* exported the Valley Girl-style speech Californians are now (in)famous for, and as linguist Carmen Fought explains, the language actually works as a character within the film.³⁷ Yet, while some of the language is reminiscent of '70s and/or west coast slang, much of it is completely fabricated by Heckerling, not a totally realistic representation of '90s culture. While this layering of new, old, real, and fake may

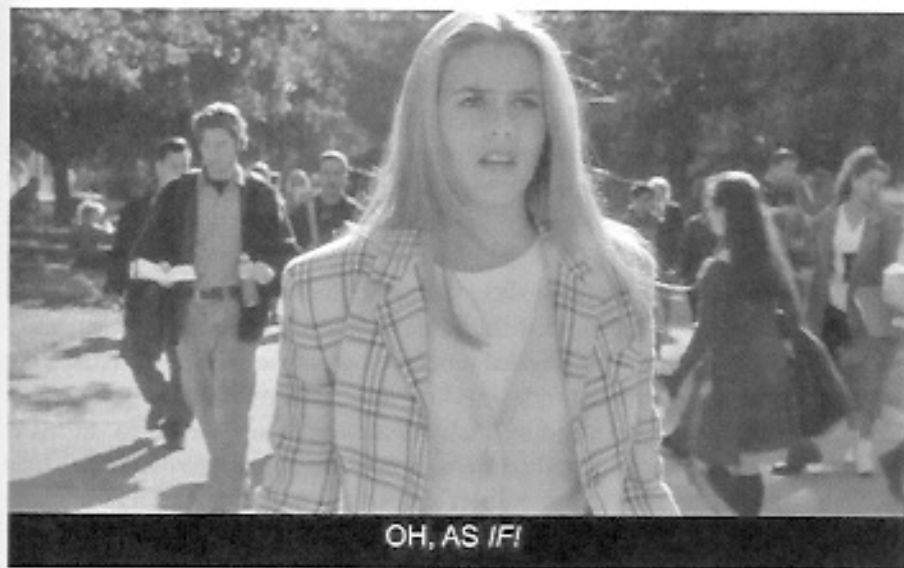


Figure 10.4 "Oh, as if!"

be typical of postmodern pastiche, it is worth noting that the slang Heckerling invented caught on among viewers and infiltrated everyday language. In *Slang: The Topical Dictionary of Americanisms*, Paul Dickson writes that the film was "Hollywood's attempt to package teen slang." He highlights the power of *Clueless*, stating that it "brought an odd new syntax in which 'all' and 'like' became the salt and pepper of a new dialect."³⁸ This packaging of slang extended to full-on fabrication. For instance, using "Betties" to describe beautiful women drew from contemporary slang, more specifically from *The Flintstones* (ABC, 1960–6). However, this existing (if outdated) slang was intertwined with Heckerling's own choice language, such as "Baldwin" to describe a handsome man, inspired by the famous Hollywood brothers, as established in the DVD special feature "Creative Writing" (2005).³⁹ Because it fits in believably with the existent slang, this term seamlessly enters the *Clueless* lexicon the director creates, and the pastiche culture, including its lingua franca, is all the more convincing because of its reliance on old terms and new. Though the film presumably was to reflect '90s culture back at audiences, the fun-house mirror added layers of meaning to the language.

So why does Heckerling willfully attempt to invent a language, and why does it catch on like the wildfire that won't be put out? And regardless, why have viewers adopted a language most know didn't predate the film? One obvious answer is that language creation is fun. As previously mentioned, when writing and in pre-production, Heckerling sat in on classes at Beverly Hills High, and got a pulse on the then-contemporary slang, styles, and attitudes of affluent LA teens. She then combined her encyclopedic pop culture knowledge with the mannerisms of present-day teens, including Silverstone's. Codifying a teen language becomes an added obstruction or challenge for the writer: how far will audiences extend their willing disbelief for a comedy? But avoidance of difficult issues isn't Heckerling's style. (She doesn't shy away from more serious social issues that teens confront in *Fast Times*.) Rather, it seems that Cher and her friends' use of slang legitimates teenage speech patterns and vernacular. Similar to the way hippie slang set the counterculture apart from the "squares" of the '60s, the coded speech of teens confounds the grown-ups that surround them. But piecemeal, that language is then taken up by the prevailing pop culture. Likelier, this *Emma* adaptation adopts the many ideas of makeover from the original text, even going so far as to "remake the past . . . in the new fashions, styles, and desires of the present."⁴⁰

It isn't incidental that the film includes this invented language, nor is it hidden. In fact, in marketing the movie, a booklet was released entitled *How to Speak Cluelessly*, which was a short dictionary to define the terms of the film.⁴¹ This guide not only emphasizes the artifice of film as a medium and the language the script promotes, but also acts as a decoder ring for teenagers themselves. This kind of strategizing anticipates the film as a world-building

cultural phenomenon, or at least a cult classic, that would penetrate American diction, without seeming too cheesy to be adopted. It plays up the falsity and campiness of such an endeavor, while offering a guidebook for life imitating art supposedly imitating life. (Of course, teens weren't the only ones desirous of being hip to the scene. Scripps-Howard News Service even ran a short article entitled "Don't Go Postal: Here's a Guide to *Clueless* Speak," directed at those over the age of eighteen who might go see the movie.⁴²) This reveals that *Clueless* was fun enough for girl viewers, and clever enough for adult audiences. But the intrigue of so-called *Clueless* speak did thoroughly capture teenage interests, according to writers at *The Dissolve*, a film website that is a branch of Pitchfork Media, a noted hub for music aficionados. In a 2014 dissection of the film (which largely focuses on a love of the movie's language and slang), Genevieve Koski remembers:

When the film first came out, people seemed to fixate on *Clueless*' semi-invented slang—your "Whatevers" and "As ifs!"—to the extent that I remember a "Clueless Glossary" poster for sale at my local Sam Goody, with bubble-letter, candy-colored definitions of terms like "Monet" and "Surfing the crimson wave" . . . The same way Tai is in awe of Cher, my peers and I were similarly dazzled by this funny, quirkily eloquent girl. Even after we stole a couple of *Clueless*' more famous expressions, we never really talked like its characters. But we absolutely *wished* we did.⁴³

Like Tai, *Clueless* aficionados were transformed by Cher. Fan appreciation for and interest in the movie's slang didn't end with the film's marketing push. In 2013, *The Daily Beast* published its "*Clueless* Glossary: Buggin', Cake Boy, and More '90s Slang from the Film."⁴⁴

Yet, the very use of the lingo is a form of exclusivity. When Cher, the queen of vernacular, snags flannel-clad Josh, the intellectual must convert, if half-heartedly, to slang. In the film's final scene, he interjects, "I'm buggin' myself," mixing his girlfriend's casual colloquialisms with his college-bound proclivity toward proper grammar. Once initiated into this new world of language, characters become savvier and, at the same time, appear more intelligent. As Cher and Dionne's "project," Tai is a misfit until she is transformed physically through a fashion-and-cosmetics makeover, and also becomes fluent in the culture, which very much includes the language. All the while, our judgment of the newcomer through Cher's perspective allows us to be put on Cher's level of power. Tai even moves from being impressed with Cher's social group ("You guys talk like grown-ups") to turning the language against Cher to one-up her, asking if Cher thinks she's a "mentally-challenged airhead" before calling her a "virgin who can't drive" and saying she's "Audi."⁴⁵ Tai has moved to the upper echelons of high school society, or at least uses language

to convince her former superior of her newfound status. When the student has become the master, Heckerling employs language—not only a trendy wardrobe—to show it.

This Heckerling brand of cultural understanding and social adeptness serves as an indicator of a “new” kind of intelligence. Cher shows her own cleverness through her understanding of language, particularly when she corrects the date of stepbrother-turned-love-interest Josh about who gives a speech in *Hamlet* (Franco Zeffirelli, 1990). She remembers the language because she’s seen the Mel Gibson version. The pseudo-intellectual college-aged woman represents “old” intelligence as a prematurely unhappy academic. She insists she remembers the actual play, and conspicuously uses “proper” English; however, she is proven to be full of hot air, a know-nothing. In the movie, slang such as *whatevers* and *as ifs* flavor discussions ranging from pop philosophy to pop culture. The Valley Girl-isms are put on a par with self-revelation. For instance, in her epiphanic monologue toward the end of the film, Cher uses “totally” and “wiggling out” while realizing her deep feelings for Josh. Cher may use language stereotyped as less intelligent, but she is able to discuss literature and recognize existentialism in *The Ren and Stimpy Show* (Nickelodeon, 1991–6). This subverts stereotypes about young women and language. The so-called upward lilt that is much maligned on the Internet today could carry information just as significant as an academic text or a more authoritative, stilted voice. In fact, the young characters who don’t use the same slang, such as pre-makeover Tai, are shown to be less intelligent and less self-aware than those that do.

In capturing a femme-centric perspective, *Clueless* revealed one of the culturally recognized powers of teenage girls and young women: social fluency. The movie itself serves as spoof and guide of social fluency. By learning the lingo and wearing the right shoes, knowing when it’s OK “to spark up” but not to sit on the lawn, the movie delivers a popularity primer. While Cher’s change of heart—her realization that this focus on status is “clueless”—undercuts this somewhat, the film still illustrates the importance of Cher’s skillset, and the marketing for the film served as a how-to guide on coolness, especially the pamphlets and posters that worked as slang decoders. As Willis implies, this traditionally feminine role, as consumer, as socialite, isn’t totally vapid: it’s one of the ways a woman can assert her power. The script’s dialogue and vocabulary, real and coined, were so effective that some have been sewn into everyday conversation. Some viewers emulated the styles the movie showed, and adopted the Valley Girl-isms. The most convincing example may be the use of full lines of dialogue—not just select words—to respond to situations in real life. Now possessing cult resonance, the mashed-up language of *Clueless* crosses generational bounds that continue to pervade pop culture. Anecdotally, “That’s way harsh, Tai,” serves as a quick, humorous response to severe commentary.



Figure 10.5 "Whatever."

Heckerling's manufactured slang and styles resonated with female audiences. Through repeat viewings, quoting the movie in everyday life, and even copying the costumes, it may be that some viewers don't simply yearn for high school glory days or the fun of a favorite comedy, but for a woman-controlled culture. In fact, even men in the film must submit to women as rulers of language. When Murray calls Dionne "woman," she says, "Murray, I have asked you repeatedly not to call me woman." He excuses himself, then must explain: "Okay, but street slang is an increasingly valid form of expression. Most of the feminine pronouns do have mocking, but not necessarily misogynistic undertones." This interplay works triple-time: it holds up the woman as the leader in the relationship and in cultural policing, while mixing anti-woman sentiment; it underscores the importance of pop culture and slang in the film; and it displays wit as a social requirement. Arguably, for the 97-minute run time, men in the audience—not just male characters in the film—must also submit to, or at least must tolerate, women's rule of language and cultural policing, too. In *Clueless*, Heckerling's inventive language and dress code make the world run topsy-turvy, with young women at its helm. There, being conspicuously quick and charming are just as important as nabbing the best designer dress.

The draw of the lingo is the power it gives its speaker. This exclusivity, the secret language of the beautiful, of the popular, of the young, might be what viewers find themselves yearning for, even though the language isn't totally historically accurate regarding pre-1995 American life. While it's not by any

means a "nostalgia film," as a cult classic it has in some ways come to represent the "Girl Power"⁴⁶ movement of the '90s.

Yet, *Clueless*'s representation of female empowerment is not problem-free. While the language is classed through references to designer brands and expensive locales, arguably anyone can learn to use slang. But fashion is a different story. Though grunge culture and the pop scene following Cobain's death may have left a vacuum, virtually all American teenagers could afford ripped flannel shirts and flip their caps backwards. The dandy fashions Cher requires of herself, her friends, and her suitors require serious cash.

However, in *Clueless*, class supersedes other forms of heterogeneity. Though the movie features women as the key players and a relatively ethnically diverse cast, there is little, if any, class difference. Cher, her posse, and their families are obviously moneyed, and Cher drives a new Jeep and resides in a palatial mansion. If clothes are markers, Tai may be the one female representative of the middle-earners in the film,⁴⁷ but Cher, in her condescending act of charity, can help Tai rise in social rank if she gives her the proper tools: hair dye, a belly shirt, lingo, and a seat at the right lunch table. *Clueless* may showcase '90s aesthetics and the postmodern quality of drawing on many twentieth-century eras, but it also may appeal to some viewers' desire for less complicated socio-economic hierarchies, in which anyone can move up or down the social ladder by playing by the rules. Language may be used for verbal sparring within the film, most notably between Cher and Josh, but even gender-based epithets, such as when Elton calls Cher a "bitch," are deflected. Race, class, and gender boundaries are easily transcended in Cher Horowitz's world, and they are rarely addressed within the film as an issue.

Heckerling establishes a rare privileging of the female teenage narrative: Cher is a precocious virgin who has no interest in finding a mate, but is involved in improving her own self-worth, scheming to improve her grades, having a relationship with her father, and connecting to her female friends. She maintains her beauty and fashion sense while transforming into a do-gooder, and falls in love with her goofy, intellectual stepbrother instead of finding the most generically ideal partner. While there is a narrative romantic closure for Cher, she pokes fun at the idea of her marriage in the film's final scene. The director created a vibrant space for female audiences to emulate in their everyday lives, establishing an empowering female-focused landscape that changed the way they could perceive high school and its onscreen potential. Heckerling's adaptation reached cult status through her innovative use and distinctive materialization of youthful fashion and language. She provided an unprecedented attentiveness to the state of the experience of female American teenagers, acknowledging that they are closer to adulthood than childhood at such a critical transitional stage.

NOTES

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- 44 Anna Klassen, "'Clueless' Glossary: buggin', cake boy, & more '90s slang from the film," *The Daily Beast*, 19 July 2013. Available at <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/07/19/clueless-glossary-buggin-cake-boy-more-90-s-slang-from-the-film.html>> (last accessed 19 January 2015).
- 45 Though some would maintain the line is "outtie," simply a means of saying goodbye or "I'm out," we would assert that because it's a homophone of luxury car-brand Audi and because it is in a film with a significant focus on social mores, it is a substantially classed dismissal. Supporting this, the closed captioning on the DVD also lists the line as "Audi," not "outtie."
- 46 "Girl Power," a sort of pop feminism that emphasized a girly aesthetic and gender equality, is an idea that the Spice Girls, a female British power-pop group, brought to mainstream consumers, and was popularized in the 1990s. For more, see McDermott, Maeve, "The Girl Power Philosophy of the Spice Girls," *Nat Geo TV Blogs*, 20 June 2014. Available at <<http://tvblogs.nationalgeographic.com/2014/06/20/the-girl-power-philosophy-of-the-spice-girls/>> (last accessed 30 January 2015).
- 47 Travis and his friends could potentially serve as a male middle-class counterpart; however, the correlation between savvy or expensive clothes and status is less remarkable for men in the movie. Cher's famous monologue about the popular male fashions of "baggy pants," "greasy hair," and "backwards cap[s]" underlines this point.

