

## **Hyping the Hyperreal: Postmodern Visual Dynamics in Amy Heckerling's *Clueless***

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### **ABSTRACT**

An iconic staple of 1990s Hollywood cinema, director-screenwriter Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* (1995) is a cult classic. This article examines the film's postmodern visual dynamics, which parody hyperreal media culture and its connection to feminine teen consumerism amidst the image-saturated society of mid-'90s era Los Angeles.

**Keywords:** *Clueless*; Amy Heckerling; Jane Austen; *Emma*; Popular Culture; Visual Culture; Film Studies; Media Studies; Postmodernism; Hyperreal

A contemporized reworking of Jane Austen's 1816 novel, *Emma*, director-screenwriter Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* (1995) stands out as a notable cultural artifact of 1990s Hollywood cinema. While an abundance of scholarly articles exist on how Heckerling adapted the key plot dynamics of Austen's novel for a postmodern audience,<sup>1</sup> this article will largely eschew such narrative analysis in favor of focusing on the film's unique postmodern visual dynamics, which constitute an insightful parody of hyperreal media culture and its particular connection to feminine teen consumerism amidst the image-saturated society of mid-'90s era Los Angeles.

Less an adaptation of *Emma* than a postmodern appropriation, *Clueless* pays parodic homage to an oft-overlooked thematic element embedded in its source text. Transposing the decadence of *Emma*'s upper echelon Regency-era society for the *nouveau riche* decadence of Beverly Hills and its attendant culture of conspicuous consumption, the film focuses on the travails of its affluent sixteen-year-old heroine, Cher Horowitz (Alicia Silverstone), whose narcissistic preoccupations revolve around consumerism and fashion. By emphasizing the spectacular nature of postmodern consumerism in mid-'90s era Los Angeles, the film reworks a key theme from the novel, which draws attention to the historic onset of consumerism and the bourgeois practice of shopping for luxury goods. Set in the fictional village of Highbury, *Emma* draws attention to how both the town's gentry and its rising bourgeoisie partake of the then relatively new ritual of shopping for luxury goods at Ford's, the village's local store.

As literary critic Adela Pinch notes, "Historians of shopping have seen the era of *Emma* as a crucial moment in the development of consumer culture, one in which luxury shopping could become in [Sir Walter] Scott's phrase, 'social habit' – habit that allowed for an everyday sense of connection to the larger social world" (Pinch xxii). Pinch's comments can of course be related to the realm of the visual, for Regency-era consumer culture was not just about purchasing goods, but also about being *seen* within the larger social sphere. As both the director and screenwriter of *Clueless*, Heckerling appears to have picked up on this consumerist theme from Austen's novel, for her film cleverly explores a postmodern culture in which image has become everything. To borrow an insight from Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), one might say that *Clueless* offers a depiction of a corporate-dominated spectacular society in which social relationships have become "mediated by images" (Debord 12).

### ***Clueless* and Amy Heckerling: A Brief Overview**

The sleeper hit of the summer of 1995, *Clueless* was a Paramount production that cost thirteen million dollars to make but ended up grossing nearly fifty-seven million dollars at the North American box-office alone (Douglas 101). A critical success as well as a commercial one, the film went on to win the 1995 National Society of Film Critics Award for Best Screenplay. In addition to inspiring a popular television series of the same name that aired on ABC from 1996-1997 and UPN from 1997-1999, *Clueless* revitalized the then sagging teen movie genre by igniting a filmic wave of youth-oriented adaptations of literary classics like Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1997), Alfonso Cuarón's *Great Expectations* (1998), Gil Junger's *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999 [an adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* (c. 1593-1594)]), and Tim Blake Nelson's *O* (2001 [an adaptation of *Othello* (c. 1603-1604)]).

Marked by vibrant visual dynamics that simultaneously complement and parody consumer culture, *Clueless* was also a notable influence on the visual style of such future so-called "chick flicks" as *Legally Blonde* (2001), *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White, and Blue* (2003), and *Mean Girls* (2004). Indeed, *Clueless*'s enduring popularity and influence have been most recently materially attested to in Australian pop star Iggy Azalea's music video "Fancy" (2014), which functions as an overt simulational homage to some of the film's most

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[1] Previous scholarship on *Clueless* includes examinations of the film's relationship to adaptation (see Parrill; Galperin), genre (see Mazmanian), and feminism (see Hopkins).

famous scenes. In this regard, *Clueless* has proven to be of such popular historical significance that Heckerling is now currently in the process of working on a treatment for a spectacular Broadway musical adaptation (Handler).

Bronx born and raised, the prodigiously talented Heckerling (b. 1954) studied film at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts and then earned an MFA in Directing from the American Film Institute Conservatory in Los Angeles. A teen comedy veteran when she began working on *Clueless*, Heckerling had first risen to prominence with her Hollywood directorial debut, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), which significantly influenced '80s-era American popular culture by helping ignite the decade's teen comedy craze upon which director John Hughes would subsequently secure his fame. An adaptation of Cameron Crowe's 1981 novel of the same name, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* is today regarded as iconic for its depiction of 1980s Southern California teen culture. In 2005 the Library of Congress selected the film for preservation in the United States Film Registry.

### ***Clueless* and Teen Consumerism**

Clearly, Heckerling found the American youth landscape had changed by the time she began drafting *Clueless* in the early '90s, for she had not depicted the lives of Ridgemont's students as being anywhere near as colonized by consumerism as those of her teen characters in *Clueless*. While, for example, the teens in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* spend time at the local mall, they experience a far more ambivalent relationship to this corporate space than do Cher and her friends, who view the mall as a consumerist haven. Taking note of this distinction in *Branding: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers* (2003), cultural critic Alissa Quart notes, "The Sherman Oaks Mall in *Fast Times* is strange to the movie's characters: a giddily forbidding fortress of mirrored walls, a place where one practices a future of wasting one's life in dead-end jobs or being hit on by older men. . . . In *Clueless*, by contrast, the mall is the film's safe space . . ." (Quart 86).

This seismic shift towards teen consumerism was undoubtedly influenced by the increasing popularization of MTV music videos and teen-oriented commercials that developed throughout the '80s and early '90s. Whereas *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* had been released in 1982, roughly one year after the launch of MTV, *Clueless* seems both a byproduct of and a commentary on the hypercommodified, image-driven teen culture that had since developed in MTV's wake. Indeed, as a film produced at the dawn of the '80s, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* was itself out of sync with the more stylized MTV-oriented youth fare that would come to define American popular culture throughout the decade. As cultural critic Susannah Gora writes in *You Couldn't Ignore Me If You Tried: The Brat Pack, John Hughes, and Their Impact on a Generation* (2010), the film conveys a "laid back 1970s feel" that makes it seem "more like an important predecessor to the later eighties teen movies than a true part of that canon" (Gora 5).

### **Hyping the Hyperreal: Postmodern Visual Dynamics**

By the time of *Clueless*'s inception, MTV had become an internationally recognized logo that was part and parcel of corporate America's burgeoning global expansionism. This increasing omnipresence of American corporate capitalism and its attendant culture of advertising and conspicuous consumption had not gone untheorized in academic quarters, for the '90s witnessed the relative popularization of such postmodern theorists of so-called "late capitalism" as the American Marxist critic Fredric Jameson and the French poststructuralist Jean Baudrillard. While Jameson's 1991 book, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, was read by academics and intellectually curious readers alike, Baudrillard had been embraced as something of an academic superstar in America from roughly the mid-'80s onwards. In 1986 he even authored a popular travelogue entitled *America*, which offered his philosophical meditations on his travels throughout America's media-saturated consumer society.

Commenting on Baudrillard's emergence as a public intellectual, scholar Richard J. Lane notes, "During

the 1980s and 1990s, Baudrillard travelled and lectured around the world, putting most of his energies into the ‘non-academic’ side of his work” (Lane 2). It was somewhere within this period that Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality began to gain popular intellectual currency as a term used to denote a postmodern simulational culture composed of advertising, filmic, and televisual images that seemingly improve on reality while also simultaneously and paradoxically leaving it behind. Characterizing this hyperreal condition in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Baudrillard associates the “aesthetics of the hyperreal” with “a frisson of vertiginous and phony exactitude, a frisson of simultaneous distancing and magnification, of distortion of scale, of an excessive transparency” (Baudrillard 28).

An intensely visually attuned filmmaker who formally studied her craft in an academic setting, Heckerling has alluded to her familiarity with Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality and its influence on *Clueless*. Discussing her film in a retrospective 2006 interview, Heckerling described *Clueless* as possessing an overtly hyperreal visual texture, noting, “I wanted to treat high school the way Merchant Ivory films treated England in the 1800s. I wanted a *hyperreal* [emphasis added], stylized, more elegant vision of reality” (qtd. in Rapkin). Yet if the visually sumptuous Merchant Ivory adaptations of various literary classics have blurred the boundaries between historical reality and fantasy, then *Clueless* takes things a step further by parodying the youth-oriented media images of its era via its “hyperreal hyperrealism.” To this end, the film functions as both a parody of hyperreal media culture and an incisive critique of hyperreality’s own relentless excess. Indeed, as sociologist Michael Ryan has wryly observed, “Even hyperreality has the ability to become hyperreal. . . . In other words, the beautiful as more beautiful than the beautiful in fashion, the real as more real than the reality of television, sex as more sexual than the sex in pornography” (Ryan 387).

Alluding to *Clueless*’s distinct hyping of hyperreal media culture in his glowing July 19, 1995 review of the film, Roger Ebert writes,

“So, OK, you’re probably like, what is this, a Noxzema commercial?”

First words of *Clueless*. That’s exactly what I was like. The hand-held camera was tilting crazily, showing the sun-blessed teenager of Southern California, and I’m like – what is this, an MTV video? Then Cher, the heroine of the movie, says the line and breaks the ice. Not Cher who won the Oscar. Cher the heroine of this movie. A little later she explains that she and her friend Dionne “were both named after great singers of the past who now do infomercials”. . . . *Clueless* is a smart and funny movie, and the characters are in on the joke. (Ebert)

Ebert’s indication of initial befuddlement at the MTV-like camerawork that frames *Clueless*’s opening shots speaks volumes about the film’s stylized visual dynamics, which parody the hyperreal, jolt-dominated MTV music videos that had become a staple of ’90s-era popular culture.<sup>2</sup>

By the dawn of the ’90s, MTV was known not just for its jolt-dominated televisual effects, but also for the apparent influence these media effects were having on the neurocognitive processes of American teens. As Gora notes, MTV “changed, fundamentally, the way in which narrative was presented, notoriously reducing the American attention span in the process” (158). Fittingly, *Clueless* includes a sly, self-reflexive scene that humorously illustrates the influence of such jolt-driven media fare on Cher’s neurocognitive state. The scene occurs as Cher, the perennial matchmaker, surveys the teachers’ lounge of her high school with the intent of finding a suitable female love interest for her debate teacher, Mr. Hall (Wallace Shawn). Presented from

[2] As *Adbusters* magazine founder and anti-consumer activist Kalle Lasn notes in his book *Culture Jam* (1999), a jolt is “any ‘technical event’ that interrupts the flow of sound or thought or imagery.” Referencing cultural critic Jerry Mander’s 1978 book, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, Lasn notes that while Mander’s 1978 statistics had indicated an average of ten jolts per minute in regular television programs, ’90s-era MTV programming had reached an astounding average of “sixty events [jolts] per minute” (Lasn 15).

Cher's point-of-view, the scene incorporates jerky MTV-like camera movements that emphasize her erratic gaze, which is symbiotically linked to her haphazard voiceover in which her thoughts easily wander from the ostensible task at hand to a conspicuously placed chocolate bar: "The trolls in the math department were actually married. Ooh, Snickers."

Throughout *Clueless*, Heckerling places verbal and visual elements within a particularly accentuated symbiotic relationship, for a good deal of her film's witty dialogue is heavily dependent on references to visual culture. In having Cher compare the film's opening images of her West Coast lifestyle to a Noxzema skin wash commercial, Heckerling was obviously catering to the visual literacy of "hip" young audiences of the era given that Noxzema's '90s television commercials were famous for featuring beautiful, trim, flawless skinned young girls who were presented as the very paragons of girlish perfection. Every such Noxzema commercial of the era concluded its display of hyperreal, idealized girlish beauty with the same superficial, sloganeering voiceover, which proclaimed, "Noxzema girls get noticed."

### **Postmodern Visual Dynamics and the Female Teen**

Getting noticed within the spectacular realm of Los Angeles's vainglorious, youth-obsessed culture is, of course, the main concern of Cher and her female friends. One of the most interesting aspects of *Clueless* resides in how it slyly draws attention to how young women have been conditioned to cultivate themselves for visual presentation. As art critic John Berger notes in *Ways of Seeing* (1972),

To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself... She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another. (Berger 46)

While *Clueless* may chiefly be a film about being young and female, it is obvious that the image-deluged postmodern society that Cher and her female friends inhabit is very much a man's world, in which women are subject to the implicit surveillance of an overarching male gaze.

It was the British film theorist Laura Mulvey who famously defined and schematized this male gaze in her essay "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema" (1975), in which she argued that a patriarchal unconscious had "projected its fantasy onto the female figure, which is stylized accordingly" (Mulvey 33). By harnessing Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and applying it to the domain of classic Hollywood cinema, Mulvey argued that Hollywood had been historically complicit in perpetuating patriarchy by consigning women to disempowered cinematic roles in which they were rendered mere passive objects of an active, objectifying male gaze. Intriguingly, *Clueless* includes a scene that rather notably anatomizes the core principles of this male gaze, while also implicitly challenging its patriarchal, heteronormative foundations.

The scene occurs as Cher sits in Mr. Hall's class seductively crafting her attire so that a hint of her bare shoulder will be visible to her handsome new high school classmate, Christian (Justin Walker). Coyly waiting for Christian to take notice of her sexualized appearance, Cher makes the following comments via voiceover: "Sometimes you have to show a little skin. This reminds boys of being naked, and that makes them think about sex." Given that Cher is at this point unaware of the fact that Christian is gay, she does not realize that he is romantically and sexually immune to her crafted appearance. In essence, the scene reinforces how the heteronormative male gaze has been historically constructed and privileged at the expense of the gazes or

viewing pleasures of others (i.e., in this instance gay men).

An inherently self-reflexive text, *Clueless* is as much concerned with images as it is with image making and the consequent manner in which mass media has the ability to influence and shape popular conceptions of social reality. In one of the film's early scenes, Cher sits in her bedroom and uses her desktop computer to preview and select the clothes that she will wear for the day. Given that *Clueless* was released just prior to the popularization of the World Wide Web and the attendant Internet boom that would occur in the mid-'90s, the film's sardonic conceptualization of this link between technology and fashion was uncannily prescient. By following a template of computer-generated images in order to determine how she should dress, Cher is engaging in a form of third-order hyperreal simulation in which the model has come to precede and determine the real, for as Baudrillard notes in *Simulacra and Simulation*, "the simulacra of simulation" is "founded on the information, the model, the cybernetic game" (121).<sup>3</sup>

This issue of the model preceding the real is also suggested via the Barbie-like physiques for which Cher and her African American best friend, Dionne (Stacey Dash), strive. The duo seemingly suffer from what has been colloquially termed "Barbie syndrome" to refer to the manner in which young girls seek to emulate the physical appearance and lifestyle associated with Mattel Corporation's iconic Barbie doll. As they venture throughout Los Angeles's consumer-driven landscape clad in their flamboyant clothing, these perpetually body-image-conscious ingénues evoke the notion of Barbie and her early '90s African American companion doll, Shani. In consummate hyperreal fashion, the pair have seemingly mistaken dolls based on non-existing existing female anatomical measurements for the real. Indeed, the Barbie mold bears no feasible relation to the anatomical reality of a woman's body given that its designer, Jack Ryan, engineered it to accord with a male fantasy of the female form.

Although Heckerling presumably chose not to address this Barbie theme too directly given the notoriously protective copyright zeal with which Mattel Corporation has historically presided over its Barbie products, *Clueless* contains one overt reference to the doll.<sup>4</sup> It occurs in a notable context when Josh (Paul Rudd), Cher's father's ex-stepson (the child of his ex-wife, whom he married after Cher's mother died), accuses Cher of treating the tomboyish Tai (Brittany Murphy) as her personal "Barbie doll" via an elaborate makeover project, in which she attempts to transform the Brooklyn born and bred girl into a West Coast debutante.

While *Clueless* takes evident glee in mercilessly parodying the popular mass-mediated visual culture of its era, it is also very much a social satire of Los Angeles's superficial West Coast society. As Cher remarks of her gaudy, *nouveau riche* mansion's faux neoclassical architecture, "Isn't my house classic? The columns date all the way back to 1972." In this sense, *Clueless*'s setting provides yet another avenue for Baudrillardian theorization, for Los Angeles was a favorite source of analysis for Baudrillard. As he famously contends in *Simulacra and Simulation*, Los Angeles is home to Disneyland, which is "presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest [of society] is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation" (12). Elaborating further upon Los Angeles's hyperreal geography, Baudrillard notes, "Enchanted Village, Magic Mountain, Marine World: Los Angeles is surrounded by these imaginary stations that feed reality, the energy of the real to a city whose mystery is precisely that of no longer being anything by a network of incessant, unreal circulation" (13).

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[3] Summarizing Baudrillard's orders of simulation in *Jean Baudrillard* (2000), Richard J. Lane writes, "With first- and second-order simulation, the real still exists, and we measure the success of the simulation against the real. Baudrillard's worry with third-order simulation is that the model now generates what he calls hyperreality – that is, a world without a real origin. So with third-order simulation we no longer even have the real as part of the equation" (86-87).

[4] Discussing the issue of copyright in *Popular Culture: A User's Guide* (2010), Susie O'Brien and Imre Szeman note, "Mattel, which jealously guards its major product, Barbie, has been one of the companies to press its [copyright] claim over its product the farthest" (144).

Los Angeles is, of course, also home to Hollywood's celluloid dream factory, which generates the hyperreal filmic, televisual, and advertising images of feminine perfection that have played a crucial role in shaping North American femininity's skewed perceptions of social reality. The power such media-generated images possess to adversely affect young women's feelings about their own bodies had reached a particularly disturbing point by the early '90s. As Lasn notes in *Culture Jam* (1999),

Nine out of ten North American women feel bad about their bodies. A 1992 survey of eleven- to fifteen-year old Canadian girls revealed about 50 percent thought they should be thinner. . . . If you randomly survey North American women, you'll find that around 50 percent of them are on a diet. If you ask adolescent girls and young women, you'll find that figure around 60 percent. Healthy young women are sometimes led by magazines or unscrupulous cosmetic surgeons to believe they suffer from such "afflictions" as "violin deformity" (a flaring of the hips, which is in fact many women's natural body shape) or "batwing disorder" (loose skin under the arms, which is in fact quite normal) – and feel compelled to go under the knife to remedy them. Some models have removed their bottom ribs to accentuate the thinness of their waists. (Lasn 75)

Despite its status as a popular teen comedy, *Clueless* drew surprisingly marked attention to this then burgeoning North American issue of negative female body image.

In scenes at Cher's Beverly Hills high school, for example, Heckerling includes numerous incidental shots of teenage girls whose noses are obscured by bandages. Such shots constitute an obvious satirization of the emerging consumer culture of cosmetic surgery, which was becoming increasingly targeted towards young girls during the '90s via such procedures as rhinoplasty, breast augmentation, and liposuction. In one of *Clueless*'s most oft-quoted scenes that also appeared in its original theatrical trailer, Cher's high school nemesis, Amber (Elisa Donovan), explains to her female physical education teacher (Julie Brown) why she can't participate in gym class, noting, "My plastic surgeon doesn't want me doing any activity where balls fly at my nose," to which Dionne sardonically replies, "There goes your social life." Humorous as such scenes may be, they suggest a compelling point about cosmetic surgery. In drawing such marked attention to the bandaged visages of Cher's female classmates, Heckerling presents cosmetic surgery not as surgical enhancement but rather self-mutilation.

As Virginia L. Blum observes in *Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery* (2003), "Young children and adolescents receive their body images wholly from the outside. The adolescent girl, especially, enters the world tentatively and waits for it to say yes or no to her face and body" (2). The roles that Hollywood and consumer culture play in affecting the body ideals of young women are in this regard undeniable, for as Blum writes, "The body is nothing until it is jolted into being by the image of something it could become – a movie star, a supermodel, a beautiful body" (54). In hyperreal fashion, aesthetically manipulated images of beautiful actresses and models have come to be accepted as real in contemporary society, for as Blum notes, "The beauty of images symbolizes what is now experienced as their essential lure, and plastic surgery is the cultural allegory of transforming the body into an image, an allegory that is deeply linked to the effects of a celebrity culture" (61).

A link between the fashion industry and female body image is implicitly foregrounded as Cher and Dionne primp Tai during the film's makeover sequence, which is set to Jill Sobule's satiric pop song "Supermodel" (1995), which features the following lyrics:

I don't care why my teachers say,

I'm gonna be a supermodel.

Everyone is gonna dress like me,

Wait and see. (Sobule)

Obsessed with comparing their daily food intakes, Cher and Dionne strive to maintain lithe, trim bodies, which they accentuate with revealing, form-fitting fashions. When Cher prepares to depart her mansion for a date wearing a tight white dress that could pass for a slip, her father, Mel (Dan Hedaya), expresses incredulity, and the following exchange occurs:

MEL. What the hell is that?

CHER. A dress.

MEL. Says who?

CHER. Calvin Klein.

The designer *du jour* of the era, Calvin Klein is today notorious for having pushed female body image to a new low during the '90s. Throughout the decade one of his star models was the waif-like Kate Moss, who was known for her seemingly prepubescent body that spawned what came to be known as the "heroin chic" look in fashion.

Reflecting on Calvin Klein's borderline exploitative commodification of the teenage form throughout the '90s, Lasn writes,

As no other company in the last fifteen years, Calvin Klein has commodified sex, and in the process brutalized our notions of sexuality and self-worth... Most people remember his 1995 campaign in which young models were crudely filmed in cheesy wood paneled basements as an adult voice called instructions from the wings. The ads reeked of chicken-hawk porn. Advertising Age's Bob Garfield called it "the most profoundly disturbing TV campaign in TV history." The spots so offended public sensibility that they prompted an investigation by the U.S. Justice Department to determine if the models were underage or child-porn laws were violated. (Lasn 176)

As the key player in '90s fashion, Calvin Klein, Inc.'s advertising campaigns promoted hyperreal images of the very teen-lean forms for which Cher and Dionne strive. Obviously Heckerling was conscious of the significant impact Calvin Klein was having on youth culture of the era. While at least two of the slip-like dresses Cher wears are Klein designs, *Clueless* is also peppered with references to the rapper Marky Mark (today known as the actor Mark Wahlberg), who was then known for his 1992 appearances in popular Calvin Klein underwear advertisements.

### **Popular Pedagogy: Postmodern Visual Dynamics and Teen Culture**

Marked by a pastel-drenched color scheme, *Clueless* parodies the popular visual style of various teen-oriented advertisements, films, music videos, and television programs of its era. The film's Los Angeles setting and its shots of Cher's high school, for example, evoke the overall mise-en-scène of the popular Fox television series *Beverly Hills, 90210*. As scholar E. Graham McKinley observes in her book, *Beverly Hills 90210: Television, Gender, and Identity* (1997), this television series was especially popular with teenage girls: "In 1992, a startling 69 percent of female television viewers watched this show" (16). To be sure, teens picked up on these hyperparodic elements, for as John Wiltshire notes in *Recreating Jane Austen* (2001), when Los Angeles teens were questioned as to what they thought about *Clueless*, they remarked that it was "way exaggerated" (qtd. in Wiltshire 53).



Obviously, Heckerling was under no illusion about the type of film she was making, for *Clueless* is first and foremost a rather gleeful teen comedy, which contains a requisite happy ending in which Cher ends up with her love interest, Josh. In this regard, *Clueless* stands apart from such later critical postmodern filmic fare of the '90s as *The Matrix* (1999) and *Fight Club* (1999), which offer radical critiques of consumer culture.<sup>5</sup> While *Clueless* may not constitute a postmodern *détournement* of spectacular society given its rather conscious status as a popular commercial text, Wilthshire's comments suggest that the film clearly did succeed in parodying the spectacular, hyperreal images of postmodern teen visual culture to which youth audiences had grown accustomed.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, Heckerling recognized that young people can be entertained by popular visual culture and yet also learn something from it – a fact evidenced by the scene in *Clueless* in which Josh's pretentious university girlfriend, Heather (Susan Mohun), misattributes Polonius's line "To thine own self be true"(1.3.78) from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c. 1600) to Hamlet himself, thereby triggering the following exchange with Cher:

CHER. Hamlet didn't say that.

HEATHER. I think I remember *Hamlet* accurately.

CHER. Well I remember Mel Gibson accurately, and he didn't say that. That Polonius guy did.

It is surely appropriate that Cher should in this instance cite not Shakespeare but rather Mel Gibson, a popular leading man of the '90s, for one could indeed argue that the visual medium of film had by this point emerged as the dominant literature of a postmodern era.

Although *Clueless* is today routinely studied in university and college English courses, pedagogical emphasis is generally placed on how Heckerling adapted the plot dynamics of *Emma* for a contemporary setting rather than on her film's status as a rich visual text. Filled with an assortment of overt and veiled allusions to various figures drawn from the history of both "high" and "low" visual culture throughout the ages, *Clueless* stresses the cultural power of images via nods to such visual maestros as Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli, French impressionist Claude Monet, director Stanley Kubrick, pop artist Claes Oldenburg, children's writer and cartoonist Dr. Seuss, and classic Hollywood film star Betty Grable – amongst numerous others. While some may contend that such intertextual referencing is mere confirmation of Fredric Jameson's view that late capitalism entails an ahistorical postmodern culture of pastiche in which "depth is replaced by surface" (Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 12), I would argue that *Clueless*'s intense visual awareness stems from its production at the cusp of a pictorial turn during the mid-'90s when American society approached the Internet boom, which would result in the proliferation of an online culture in which social relationships would become increasingly mediated via images.<sup>7</sup>

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[5] Jean Baudrillard's influence on *The Matrix* is hinted at in an early scene in the film in which the character Neo / Thomas A. Anderson (Keanu Reeves) conceals money and discs of illegal software inside a hollowed out simulacrum of Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981). In later describing the nature of the Matrix to Neo, Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) remarks, "Welcome to the desert of the real." The lines are, of course, a thinly veiled allusion to Baudrillard's following lines in *Simulacra and Simulation*: "It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. *The desert of the real itself* [sic]" (Baudrillard 1).

[6] A technique embraced by Guy Debord (1942-1994) and the neo-Marxist Situationist International (1957-1972), the *détournement* was characterized by Debord as "the fluid language of anti-ideology" (Debord VIII.208, 146). By removing an image from its intended context and repositioning it, the Situationists sought to rupture the spectacle by jarring individuals out of ideology.

[7] The phrase "pictorial turn" was coined by visual theorist W.J.T. Mitchell, who uses it to refer to a "turn to the visual" during "specific moments when a new medium, a technical innovation, or a cultural practice erupts in symptoms of panic or euphoria (or both) about 'the visual'" (Mitchell 94).

To this end, it is useful to turn again to Jameson, who in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), proposes that postmodern subjects have lost the ability to map their positionalities amidst late capitalism's "great global multinational and decentered communicational network" (44), and thus require "[a]n aesthetic of cognitive mapping – a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system" (54). Although *Clueless* does not hide its obvious complicity with capitalist consumerism, it does succeed in parodying the postmodern media culture of its era via its hyperreal hyperrealism. In this regard, the film is amenable to Jameson's notion of instilling cognitive mapping via pedagogy, for in keeping with Russian literary critic Viktor Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarizing readers via language designed to "render[] the everyday unfamiliar" (Sim 168), Heckerling was perhaps attempting to visually defamiliarize young people's – and in particular young women's – accustomed perceptions of mass media images so that they might be "clued in" to viewing them more critically.

## CONCLUSION

Similar to how Anita Loos's 1925 novel, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, satirized female consumerism during the roaring 1920s just prior to the stock market collapse of 1929, Heckerling's film offers an exaggerated visual depiction of the culture of American girlhood amidst the consumer-driven, image-saturated society of the economically booming 1990s.<sup>8</sup> As Lesley Stern observes in her article "Emma in Los Angeles: *Clueless* as a Remake of the Book and the City" (1997), Heckerling's film is a "movie about movies, about the place where movies and dreams are manufactured, and about what it is like to be young and female in today's multi-media world" (Stern). By employing a hyperparodic, hyperreal take on the nature of hyperreal media itself, Heckerling ultimately crafted a clever, historically prescient film that employed keen postmodern visual dynamics to shed light on the popular visual culture of its era. In this regard, *Clueless* surely deserves recognition for being a far more clever film than its moniker might initially suggest.

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[8] Heckerling has acknowledged that Loos's novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925) helped inspire *Clueless* (Saito).

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