

**To What Extent Can The
film “Clueless” By Amy
Heckerling (1995) Be
Considered an Example of a
Postfeminist Film?**

FILM EXTENDED ESSAY

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Introduction:

The 1995 film “Clueless” by Amy Heckerling is widely considered a disruption of the ‘chick flick’ genre. With quotable one-liners and a distinctly female-orientated narrative that holds rich interactions outside the discussion of men, it metamorphosed the genre completely. Taking the usage of the “male gaze” and converting it to a female-focused one, with strong female leads and a focus on friendships. However, whilst watching the main character ‘Cher’ bounce around on my screen in a ditzzy daze I couldn’t help but feel as if something was off, was this film truly an example of a postfeminist film, or was that merely a widespread misguided perception?

With this film, Heckerling examined the portrayal of female protagonists and characters in films, to use a quote from the book *“Refocus: The Films of Amy Heckerling”* edited by Frances Smith *“It’s a disgusting industry. I can’t stomach most of the movies about women. (...) I just saw a movie last night – but again with the fucking wedding and **the only time women say anything is about men.**”*. We can see Heckerling’s anger towards the industries’ portrayal of women wasn’t an isolated one, as many who follow the post-feminist movement felt the same way. Often she would speak up about the industry in hopes that more women would be encouraged to take up more prominent roles, thus why making the film “Clueless” and its portrayal of a teenager’s high school life was quintessential to not only her, but the rest of the ‘90s female generation to have an example of “accurate” representation.

However, Heckerling has been criticized for warping the already set archetypes to be even more stereotypical. As well as not realistically representing a teenage girl’s life and the various conflicts associated with this tumultuous period of growth, but also creating a

negative basis for subjects such as sex to be discussed. In fact, Dr Susan Hopkins from the University of Southern Queensland describes the three main female characters – Cher, Dionne and Tai – as “*an embarrassing disappointment to feminism.*” (Philosophy Now) and goes on to describe their superficiality.

In order to comprehend the film from a broader perspective, it is important to validate the above opinions and analyse the connection between post-feminist film analysis and “Clueless”. Leading to the research question: “**To what extent can the film “Clueless” by Amy Heckerling be considered an example of a post-feminist film?**” This essay will discuss the feminist and postfeminist theory in relations to film history, then analyse both sides of the argument and evaluate how the idea of post-feminism has been used in “Clueless”, later synthesising a conclusion of whether or not Heckerling’s film can be described as post-feminist or not, based on the evidence and my supported opinions of the film.

Feminism, Post-feminism and Film:

Feminism is a word used today in every form of media to conceptualise a movement of unity and equality for women, a movement that allows women to take back their position in workplaces, homes and society, a movement that helps break our societies oppressive tendencies. It is a word often connoted with liberal-minded people and can be perceived as either a positive, empowering title or a dirty, radical theory. The extremities of perspectives on this theory can be seen in the example of Pat Robertson, a former Republican presidential candidate who stated that “*The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians.*” (ThoughtCo.) The multitude of opinions on this matter is what makes it a much-discussed movement, which can lead to certain boundaries when asking whether something is post-feminist or not. The first wave of feminism occurred in the 19th and early 20th century, focusing mainly on the right to vote. Currently, there are many different branches of feminism such as second-wave, intersectional, white, third-wave and post-feminist (UAH). Each one holding the same idea that women should be given equal rights but with different ideas on how we should achieve them and which rights are most important.

Post-feminism is a term used to describe the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and the subsequent decades (UCPress). It was used as a way of rejecting outdated ideas and pushing forward in gaining equality, not only in legal systems but now in society. Post-feminism came as a result of a new generation of women dissatisfied with the current feminist movement, with more and more women demanding to be respected the same way as

men. The textbook *“Understanding Film Theory”* defines post-feminism as *“ideas of empowerment and liberation with an emphasis on freedom to choose from a range of options. Women now claim agency over their bodies and how they chose to dress and act.”* (R. Doughty and C. Etherington-Wright). The textbook also discusses the *“positive endorsement of consumerism”* and *“the avoidance of the constraints of binary thinking.”* Both are prominent ideas held throughout the post-feminist movement. Post-feminism offered a critique of the current feminist agenda, as the more modern society progresses, the more the demands of being a career woman, mother and wife in one had become. The idea that women could use their sexuality as empowerment had become mainstream by the late '80s and this could be seen through many different kinds of media and pop culture, especially in films.

A result of this movement can be seen through the studies done to expose the ever-present gender inequality. A University of Pennsylvania study was done on the *“Trends of Sexual and Violent Content by Gender in Top-Grossing US Films”* by Jamieson A. Bleakley, on 855 different successful films from the 1950s to 2006, showing that on average there were two male characters to one female one (Mass Media and Health). A response to some of the findings in the study was the Bechdel Test. The Bechdel Test became a prominent example of post-feminism's influence on media. Created by American cartoonist Alison Bechdel, the Bechdel Test provided a way for society to comprehend how the representation of women in fiction is just as important as the representation of women in real life. That these fictional women are more than just an object of desire, have complex personalities like their male counterparts and actual woman, and that they aren't being painted as being unsubstantial disposable bimbos. The rules of the Bechdel Test are relatively simple; 1) the piece of media must at least have two named female characters 2) they have to interact with each other and

lastly 3) their interaction has to be about something besides a man (Bechdel Test). Although these demands are rather simplistic, to this day only 56% of 8160 films on the Bechdel Test database pass all three rules (Bechdel Test). Which is a rather bleak statistic to have in our supposedly progressive environment.

Another response originating from the movement is the introduction of Feminist Film Theory to cinema. Feminist film theory is often based on opinions and criticisms that arise from how the public scrutinizes women (Film Theory). Either how they are portrayed in films, how they have managed to deliver their portrayal of characters and atmosphere, or how the distinction made between male and female in films affect societies' interpretations of the two different genders. This theory began alongside the second wave of feminism. Some say that it has been "*hypothesized by scholars that the parts of the women in a movie or drama is only the perception of the society about women and their functionality in the craft.*" (Film Theory). This theory has become quite influential and aims to improve the "gender divide" in films by exemplifying when a film does not meet the moral requirements of tests such as the Bechdel.

A Clueless Analysis:

Heckerling's coming of age film came at the end of the decade, where this genre dominated Hollywood. With films such as *Heathers* (1989, Lehmann) and *The Breakfast Club* (1985, Hughes) setting the mould for stereotypical characters, conflicts and plots to be used for years upon years. Sitting at the end of a period of male-dominated viewpoints on youth, society and culture. Heckerling understood how damaging this genre had become with the catty, materialistic, airheaded female "leads", the seemingly perfect male romantic interests and impressionable teenagers devouring these films and messages more than ever. Thus the film "Clueless" came to be. Different from all previous high school themed films because it is made by a woman, is based off a woman's work, showing empowered women and in part – a response to the male-orientated industry. Acting as a social satire to the entire industry, *Clueless* exposed the detrimental features of the genre through excessively placed ironic dialogue, characters, plot, setting, mise-en-scene and impeccably ridiculous costume design. Heckerling and her team left no part of the film missing, (it's even in the name).



Figure 1. Cher held at gunpoint (Heckerling)



Figure 2. Girls fixing bandaged noses and talking about nose jobs (Heckerling)



Figure 3. Cher not having any clothes to wear (Heckerling)

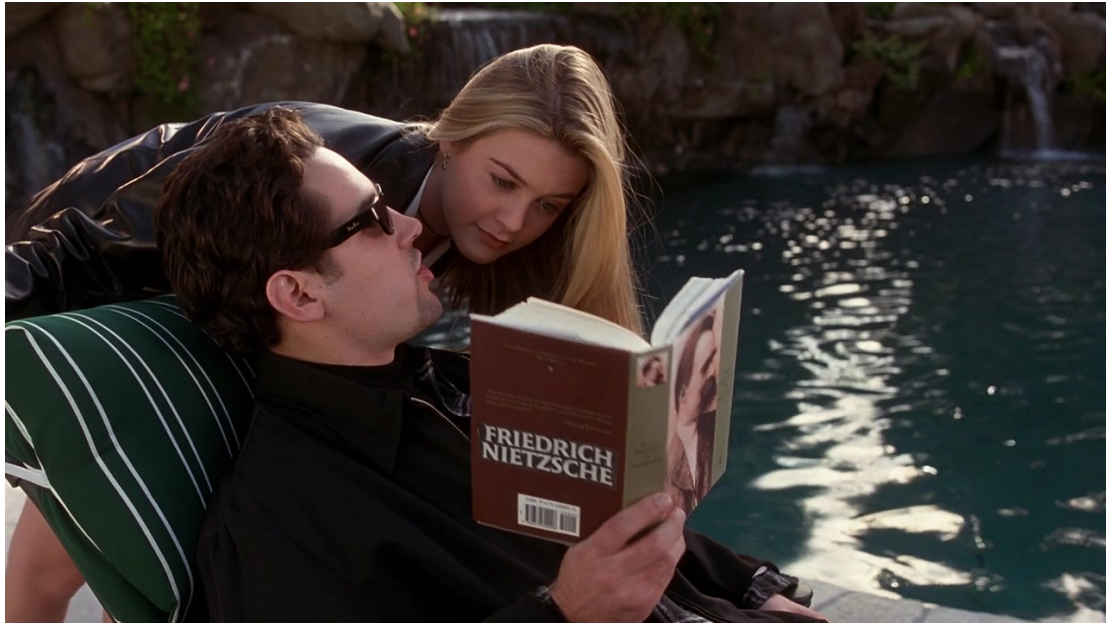


Figure 4. Cher's stepbrother Josh teaching her about Nietzsche (Heckerling)

Heckerling's production team were able to portray much of the irony through costumes such as in Figure 3, where Cher is seen to be complaining about having nothing nice to wear whilst being surrounded by an excessive amount of brightly coloured and textured clothes. However, it is not only the women of the film that are obsessed with their appearances but every single different clique or character. Each one having a distinctive way of dressing, emphasising their stereotypes (Figure 5). Further showing Heckerling's critique on how preoccupied society is by fashion and having a label. In Figure 3 the mise-en-scene perfectly captures the playful attitude of Heckerling's film, with a nod to Cher's namesake in the left-hand corner. The irony which practically drips from every scene throughout the film is used as a tool to mock the film industries interpretations of a teenage girls' life. That all girls care about are their looks, their materialistic items and that they have no room in their minds for more substantial and beneficial knowledge. Figure 4 shows this as Cher's seemingly unproblematic stepbrother tries to teach her about Nietzsche and his philosophical theories. Again in this scene, the props and costumes used by the production team on the character Josh – from the all-black outfit to the goatee and the Nietzsche novel – was to make

a satirical comment on the character trope of the obnoxious, melancholic artist often seen as the mysterious love interest in many '90s rom-coms. These interpretations of common character tropes and the various extreme or controversial plot points (such as Cher falling in love with her stepbrother) show irony is used as a tool to portray the obscurity of these inaccurate or damaging representations.

Clothing plays a very influential part of the film as Cher often relies on clothing to make a statement about who she is, who she associates herself with and who she wants to attract. Heckerling has done this to play on the idea that girls are materialistic and obsessed with appearances. Hence why in Figure 6 we get a panning shot of a row of skimpily clad extras waiting in line for their turn at playing tennis. No one would typically wear these items to play sports, but in films, teenage girls are expected to display themselves, Heckerling made sure her costume choices were as over-the-top as her stereotypical characterisations to truly highlight the hysterical irony.

Figure 1 and 2 also show how Heckerling and her production team have used irony to showcase the surreal way of living that most “valley girls” lived. The industries misrepresentation of what a teenager’s life should be like could affect how audiences think women should behave. These two scenes act as a mockery on an entire class of people and express Heckerling’s disdain at the current pandemic of vanity held by them. For example, it would be unrealistic for any sane person to argue whilst being held at gunpoint –especially for something as superficial of a reason as not wanting to ruin their clothes– like Cher does in Figure 1 nor would you see a bunch of extras tending to their nose jobs in the middle of high school, as if it was normal.



Figure 5. Group of outsider guys and their fashion (Heckerling)



Figure 6. Group of girls in PE (Heckerling)

Another reason as to why “Clueless” has been thought of as one of the most iconic post-feminist pieces of film is due to how “Clueless” actually passes all three rules of the Bechdel test, albeit a lot of the conversations held between the girls is about boys and attracting them. “Clueless” also arguably holds one of the strongest, self-assured and empowering female protagonists in cinema. Cher is not swayed by most boys’ advances on her and she knows she has the right to say no whenever she wants and is not afraid of using that power, which is a message often not discussed in the industry. She also does the majority of what she does out of goodwill and wanting to help others achieve their best potential. Although it has been argued that her intentions are actually quite selfish, (TWSS) Cher always reminds us of the satisfaction that comes from helping others.



Figure 7. Cher’s friend group (Heckerling)



Figure 8. Tai's great story (Heckerling)



Figure 9. Cher and Dionne's retail therapy (Heckerling)



Figure 10. Cher doing her makeup (Heckerling)

It is important to mention how “Clueless” celebrates and accepts being a “girly-girl” and the friendships that come with that. Throughout the film, we get montages of Cher and friends doing their makeup, shopping or gossiping. It shows femininity in a wholesome light instead of a negative one. Rather than shaming girls for their interests and pride in their looks, the film shows how women can like clothes, boys and makeup, yet still be in control of their own dignity. The lighting almost always paints Cher and her friends in a dreamlike glow adding to the idea that they can do no harm and are just innocent kids having fun, like in Figure 8, 9 and 10. Heckerling could’ve put these multiple sequences and dramatic costumes as a way of taking back from the industry the innocence these activities held. As girls who acted like this were often shamed for being too materialistic or vain. The act of taking back this sense of identity is very much in tune with the postfeminist movement as it allows women to reinvent what it means to be a “girly-girl”. The trio consisting of Cher, Dionne and Tai have a dynamic not seen in many other films, where three girls – instead of gossiping and being catty to one another – are instead uplifting one another and being there for each other. If conflicts arise they are realistically resolved and at the end of the day the audience is

reminded of the overall message; that we must never resort to cheap insults, especially when it degrades or shames other women for their beliefs. Reinforcing the idea of strength in friendship and expressing vulnerability, something teenage girls are presumed to prioritise. Cher's group is also quite diverse as seen in Figure 7 – no tokens or sidekicks – which was almost never represented in films at the time, showing again how accepting of differences girls can actually be, whether, through race, class or interests, friendship and support can be formed through anything. Thus Heckerlings post-feminist message of acceptance, diversity and empowerment can be seen throughout the film.

Postfeminist to a point:

From another perspective, if the film is not viewed ironically, it conveys a very different message. A message of succumbing to the ‘male gaze’, of exchanging uniqueness for basic beauty standards and perpetuating destructive stereotypes. Consequently, the film has managed to gain significant amounts of criticism due to the fact that the cheeky and ironic portrayal used in the film was lost amongst some audiences, and therefore not as successful in promoting its postfeminist ideas.



Figure 11. Dionne helps Cher get ready for a date (Heckerling)



Figure 12. Cher trying to seduce a classmate (Heckerling)



Figure 13. Cher all dressed up for a boy (Heckerling)



Figure 14. Dionne driving in the wrong lane, how typical. (Heckerling)

Although Cher has a firm understanding of the importance of her own independence she is still fixated on finding “the one”, not only for her but for everyone else around her. The majority of the film is spent on her teaching the audience (and Tai) on how to successfully seduce a man. She mentions constantly to “*Draw attention to your mouth and the nape of your neck*” (Clueless) as actions one should take to “*Feel sexy*” and attract a man. The shots of the film follow this rule too, as seen in Figure 10 and 12. The camera settles and focuses on Cher and her mouth, demonstrating but also making a spectacle of Cher. This can be seen as an example of “the male gaze”, where women in films are portrayed solely as sexual objects for men’s pleasure or are just there to act pretty. Though this film is quite tame compared to most, the “male gaze” is still ever pertinent in it and this can be seen through the multiple shots of pretty girls dressed ever so slightly scandalous, crude jokes placed here and there and the overt sexualisation of Cher.

In fact, in the entire film, everything Cher does is to impress some boy. The misogynistic undertones are hidden by the supposedly happy go lucky message of the film,

yet, it is seen through how one dimensional the female characters are compared to the boys. They go shopping, try to learn how to drive and watch exercise videos for the boys, Cher does get into current affairs towards the end of the film but that is only because she was trying to attract Josh (A Feminist Ruins). The boys, on the other hand, aren't as superficial, they care about art, they read, they have more substance to them, whilst the girls are portrayed as "ditzzy". Even the supposedly smart ones. What's worse is that they don't mind being called this as long as they are called "Gorgeous" or "Beautiful" afterwards, they rely on male validation to make themselves feel important. The fact that they aren't aware of this harmful behaviour or how detrimental it is to them and their society shows through how they talk to one another. For instance when Cher and Dionne are talking about Christian and Cher's failed relationship, "*He does dress better than I do. What would I bring to the relationship?*" (Clueless). The film also heavily relies on the ongoing joke that women can't drive and it is often used excessively as a punchline throughout the film as seen in Figure 14, demonstrating how "useless" woman are at basic skills. Again showing how the film perpetuates disruptive stereotypes instead of providing safe representations for audiences.

Additionally, the film also shines a negative light on sex and sexuality. Instead of encouraging each other and educating each other on safe sex habits, the girls shame each other. Either because they're a "slut" for dressing promiscuously or a "prude" because they're a virgin. Tai even makes an example of this when she has an argument with Cher and questions "*Why should I listen to you? You're a virgin who can't drive*" (Clueless). This negative view on sex is perpetuated by the girls, not the men of the film, showing how toxic femininity is damaging due to the fact that its women questioning each other's worth based on their sexual attitude and values. This pinning of women against women is exactly what post feminists were trying to fight against. Against the stereotypes set by the patriarchy,

against this damaging mind set that sex is an activity that women should be ashamed of, and against the idea that women are only valued based on their relationships with men.



Figure 15. Cher mothering her dad

Another odd joke Heckerling chose to include in the film is how Cher was constantly looking after her father as if this capable middle-aged man was not able to look after himself. Cher packs away the groceries, makes sure Mel is eating healthy (as seen in fig 15), helps him with his work and cleans the house. Again perpetuating another stereotype of women solely being housewives or maternal figures and not being useful for anything else. Heckerling shows us how we have accepted this odd behaviour as normal and presents to us how far we still have to go in changing. However, Heckerling might've done this as to make the film palatable for her generation. Consequently, this narrative is very contradictory to the postfeminist movement as the main purpose of the revision of the feminist theory was to include the idea that women are more than just maternal figures, they can be career women too. They can have an identity besides just being a mother. Thus, by using Cher to represent the opposite of this ideology, women in film potentially get further oppressed.



Figure 16. Cher and Dionne have a talk with Tai



Figure 17. Tai's makeover is complete

Cher's main goal throughout the film was for everyone to find happiness through love, and she was going to make sure everybody got it, no matter what changes of their personality they had to make. Whether it was her teacher, Tai or herself, Cher managed to re-make each individual to suit the current beauty expectations, and always with the end result of attracting a man. Throughout recent film history, we can see the makeover trope be used as

a tool to advance the plot, enhance character development or used because of the genre the film is in. However, the subtext of this 'tool' is that women have to change themselves to be perceived as beautiful and fit into the conventional beauty standards of society, eradicating all sense of uniqueness, and all for the hopes of finding a partner that would deem them attractive enough. The idea that a makeover can "fix" individuality, teaches teenagers that it's better to be like everyone else instead of themselves, which is not a healthy mentality to have. This can be seen in the film as Tai loses all sense of what made her Tai and approaches a minor identity crisis. She is introduced as this slightly messy, artsy, stoner who just wants to be liked (Figure 16) and when Cher takes her under her wing Tai comes a duplicate of Cher as seen in Figure 17, hurting her own unique characteristics in the process. This again goes against the postfeminist agenda that the film supposedly strives for, as individuality and a sense of identity is a main part of the theory.

Conclusion:

With a larger than life plot and misogynistic undertones, *Clueless* creates unrealistic and damaging expectations for teenagers and women to look up to. However, if viewed through an ironic lens the film is a postfeminist masterpiece dripping with cynicism and sarcasm with every catchy phrase, colourful costume and ridiculous plot point. To conclude, Amy Heckerling's 1995 film *Clueless* owes its successful status to its iconic characters and portrayal of the postfeminist dilemma and helps reevaluate what it means to be a feminist. Unfortunately, this message of acceptance and empowerment has been lost upon some audiences and critics as they have taken the film quite literally. Which would enhance the negative ideas and stereotypes connoted with being a woman. Depending on how you interpret the film it can be viewed as postfeminist or not, which to me is the mastery behind "Clueless" as it leads us audiences and therefore society to question what it means to be a teenage girl and a woman in today's modern and ever-evolving world.

I personally believe that this film can be described as postfeminist. As it passes the Bechdel test, helps us reevaluate our ideas of women's roles in society as well as our unrealistic beauty expectations and even raise awareness on what healthy female friendships should look like. But as with everything, "Clueless" should be taken with a grain of salt as Heckerling doesn't completely manage to convince audiences of these issues, and as mentioned before, it has the danger of being misinterpreted. Of course as with every film, from the initial release the progressive tone of the film will appear to decrease as the years go on as we as a globalized society will progress too. Perhaps, in the future, there shall be other films such as *Clueless* to help us analyse our own actions and movements, but for now, Cher shall remain to teach us the importance of friendships, women and the freedom of individuality.

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