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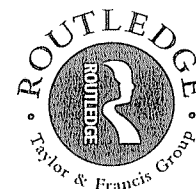
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11 *Clueless* in the neo-colonial world order

Gayle Wald

Seldom has a contemporary US 'teen flick' risen to the levels of both critical and commercial popularity attained by Amy Heckerling's 1995 film *Clueless*, an Americanized and updated version of Jane Austen's novel *Emma*.¹ One of four Austen film adaptations released in US cinemas in the space of two years (the others were *Sense and Sensibility*, *Persuasion* and a much-hyped version of *Emma* featuring Gwyneth Paltrow), *Clueless* not only attracted generally high critical regard in the mainstream and independent film press, but in its video version the film became a fast best-seller, particularly among the young female teenagers who were its primary target audience. Indeed, in a year that also witnessed the release of Larry Clark's frankly dystopian *Kids*, a movie with which it was frequently contrasted in reviews, the fate of *Clueless* seemed almost as charmed as that of its protagonist, the ever fortunate Cher Horowitz. Modelled on Austen's heroine Emma Woodhouse, Cher lives a life that appears as orderly and abundantly provided for as her overstocked clothes closet, as seen in the film's opening sequence. It is a life untouched by the social and familial conflict, drugged-out confusion or sexual turmoil that characterize other cinematic depictions of adolescence, including Heckerling's own classic *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982). Or as cultural critic Cindy Fuchs observed in a review in the *Philadelphia City Paper*, 'As "teen movies" go, *Clueless* is obviously, self-consciously, lightweight: there are no suicides, no violence, no generational battles . . . no class or money angst . . . no racial conflicts . . . no sexual crises. . . . The world of the film is ideal, shimmering, stable.'²

It is this 'ideal, shimmering, stable' world of *Clueless* and of its protagonist Cher (played winningly by Alicia Silverstone) that I seek to interrogate in this essay. More precisely, I'm interested in using *Clueless* to explore the role of cinematic representation in the construction of national and cultural citizenship, as well as to examine the gender, race and class dimensions of the national narratives produced by a contemporary Hollywood film explicitly addressed to an audience of adolescent and pre-adolescent US girls. The impetus for my enquiry into *Clueless* emerges, at least in part, from silences and elisions in the critical literature on nation, Empire and US cinema. While scholars have recognized the status of US films as global commodities (that is, commodities whose paths of dissemination mirror the paths of global capital), mediating the production of national narratives for 'foreign' as well as domestic audiences, they have been reluctant to interrogate how notions of

nationhood and national identity circulate in films that do not explicitly promote jingoistic fantasies of US global supremacy. At the same time, they have often failed adequately to theorize the *gendering* of nationalist discourses in US cinema, overlooking in particular the possibility that these may be voiced, embodied or symbolized by female protagonists whose sphere of influence is more likely to be the home than the boardroom or the battlefield. Yet while *Clueless*, a clever adaptation of an English comedy of manners, would seem quite remote from the innumerable Hollywood action and suspense films that wear their nationalist desire on their sleeves, primarily calling upon women to establish the heterosexuality of male heroes, this essay argues that it is no less likely a site for the production or negotiation of national narratives and fantasies (Boose 1993: 587–91). Rather, what we find in *Clueless* is a representation of national citizenship that is inextricably tied to, and mediated through, the representation of commodity consumption, heterosexual romance, and class and gender 'cluelessness'.

Fuchs's useful oxymoron of a world at once 'shimmering' and 'stable' anticipates my method of reading *Clueless* as a film structured around contradictions, especially concerning Cher's status as a privileged First World 'consumer citizen'. Like *Emma*, *Clueless* centralizes the narrative of its protagonist's development from eager orchestrator of others' social affairs to object of her own heterosexual romance, a process depicted as both inevitable and desirable, particularly in so far as it corresponds to Cher's loss of a cluelessness that inures her to her privileged place in the 'real' world. At the same time, in pursuing this narrative end – one dictated by the precedent of Austen's text as well as by the exigencies of market and genre – *Clueless* subsumes or deflects many of the questions raised by its portrayal of Cher's national and class agency. In so doing, I argue, the film situates the subjectivity of its protagonist at the intersection of competing narratives of gender itself; for while it represents Cher as a 'First World' girl who deploys her cluelessness in order to 'innocently' access power, it also suggests that such cluelessness stands in the way of her 'successful' gendering according to the demands of the marriage plot.

In this essay I engage the following questions. How does *Clueless* envision citizenship, and more particularly how does it use the alibi of a critique of 'clueless' citizenship to justify and enable a certain gender narrative? How does the film construct Cher's identity through her pursuit of commodities, and how is this representation related to US cultural fantasies of consuming the world? How does the film use the character of Cher to construct the nation – or national/imperial desire – as itself innocent or clueless? In rendering Cher's cluelessness a narrative obstacle to heterosexual romance, what light does the film shed on the power relations implicit in its own 'girling' of national discourse?

As these questions imply, in my analysis, *Clueless* is characterized by a degree of ideological and narrative ambiguity that I also find in its heroine, who is neither entirely clueless about her social location nor entirely capable of constructing an alternative to the imperatives of heterosexualization and romantic coupling that largely determine the direction of the film's ending. This reading of Heckerling's film in turn contributes to my larger argument about the ways that conventional narratives of gender ultimately frustrate the capacity of economically privileged

that Cher can remain ignorant/innocent of her own relations with Lucy, and thus of her own position within a gendered economy of national, race and class privilege.

First World–Third World encounters and the (re)construction of gender

While the conventions of the romance narrative require that Cher be ‘rewarded’ for her compliance with a patriarchal script of gender in her acquisition of a boyfriend, it is significant that the film cannot bring about such narrative closure without the intervention of a scene of gendered violence that is itself inscribed by issues of First World–Third World relations. In particular, the scene in question stages a paradigmatic ‘encounter’ of the gendered First World subject with the violence and disorder of the ‘street’, as Cher, abandoned by Elton on the way home from a party (notably after fending off his unwanted sexual advances), is mugged in a deserted parking lot while making her way home from the distant neighbourhood of Rainbow Heights. The location of the mugging scene is significant because it offers a symbolically ‘Third World’ locale (as the name ‘Rainbow Heights’ implies) as the site in which Cher’s class privilege does not ‘work’ to guarantee her safety and agency as a woman, as it does in the ‘First World’ domestic sphere. Although in her immediate response to the mugging Cher continues to insist on her classed invulnerability to gendered violence – she frets loudly at the loss of her cellular phone and the state of her muddied designer dress, for example – at the same time *Clueless* undercuts her comic interpretation of the mugging scene by using it to lay the groundwork for the refashioning of her gender identity and thus for her gradual acquiescence to the romance plot. The scene begins to serve such a legitimizing function with regard to gender when Cher calls Josh, himself in the middle of a date, to ask him to drive out to Rainbow Heights to pick her up. On the one hand, the phone call situates Cher within a gendered economy of power and mobility, in which women are victims and men rescuers, and in which Cher’s plea for help constitutes a form of passive consent – if not an active invitation – to romantic courtship. Yet on other hand, the scene also serves a complementary function in engendering masculine desire, providing the first occasion in which Josh sees Cher not as a spoiled Beverly Hills brat, but as a ‘woman’.

The mugging poses the most obvious danger to Cher; yet it is additionally dangerous within the context of *Clueless*’s efforts to ‘domesticate’, or otherwise rhetorically tame, the questions the assault raises. By immediately recuperating it as comic, and by using it to initiate the anticipated romance narrative between Cher and Josh, the film avoids having to explicitly contemplate the chastening effects of such violence on Cher’s gender identity. In narrative terms, the mugging could itself signify as a moment of crisis, in which Cher might be led to question her own social and ideological alliances, and yet instead it becomes the moment when she recognizes that her interests lie in following a patriarchal script of femininity. In a sense, we might therefore conclude, the scene represents two distinct, if related, kinds of violence: a real violence whose effects are disavowed, and a symbolic, or rhetorical violence that is necessary to the film’s expected narrative closure.

The film’s disciplining of gender through the romance plot becomes particularly clear in its representation of the effects of her newfound interest in Josh on her previous enthusiasm for shopping. Whereas at the beginning of *Clueless* Cher’s identity is defined almost entirely through her role as a consumer (of goods, labour and other people’s romantic pleasure), gradually she learns to re-conceptualize her desires, realizing that fulfilment lies not merely or only in the possession of material goods but in the possession of a boyfriend. This shift in Cher’s relation to consumption is ironic, if only because Cher is accustomed to finding in shopping – an activity which, significantly, she is more likely to associate with leisure and feminized sociability than with domestic labour – a form of surrogate agency. As she reasons, even when she has a particularly ‘bad’ day at home or at school, spaces where she is expected to submit to paternal/patriarchal authority in a fashion becoming her gender (that is, to be a ‘good girl’), she can always make herself feel better by going shopping. At the mall, Cher submits only to the authority of her own desires; whereas home is a space of generational and gendered conflict, the mall is contrastingly a space of perfect equivalence between want and its fulfilment.⁹

In so far as shopping is a form of gendered and classed agency for Cher, it becomes all the more ironic that her habits of consumption are represented as inconsistent with the expression of erotic desire for Josh, who, brimming with paternalistic college affectation (he reads Nietzsche, eschews popular culture and at one point dons a black beret), deems her interest in items such as clothes, make-up and exercise videos frivolous. At his suggestion, Cher even takes it upon herself to engage in charitable activities, such as helping to organize a food drive; she also makes a point of dressing down in his presence and of wearing make-up less conspicuously. However, these apparently more ethical forms of consumption that Josh stands for are ultimately revealed to be a different form of domestic virtue to which Cher must accede if she wants to have a romantic relationship with him. The film wants viewers to applaud Cher’s transformation by contrasting her behaviour in the mall, where her habits of conspicuous consumption make visible her cluelessness to her class privilege, with her behaviour around Josh, where she is noticeably more self-conscious and self-critical.

Heckerling underscores these changes in Cher’s attitude and appearance with a more sparing use of voiceover in the scenes that feature Josh and Cher, thereby signifying that Cher sheds superficiality and gains in interiority as she becomes closer to Josh. (Here again, however, the film is somewhat ambivalent, since while their romantic attachment is presented as a happy confluence of romance and social convenience – after all, they not only share the same house but the same class status – the incestuous overtones of their attachment enforce a sense that Josh and Cher are potentially mismatched.)

‘Girl Power’ and US Film

As the film’s resolution makes clear, Cher’s cluelessness serves conflicting ideological functions. On the one hand, it is inextricably linked to her agency as a gendered and classed First World subject. Being clueless means that Cher is spared the burden of

critical self-consciousness that falls to subjects who cannot peremptorily assume that others will greet their presence with warmth and appreciation, or who take for granted a certain freedom of self-expression and/or movement. It also invests her with an aura of gendered innocence that she can draw upon in negotiations with more powerful and/or authoritative figures, from her father to her debate teacher to the man who mugs her. On the other hand, to the degree that it signifies ironically, her cluelessness opens up a space for audience critique of Cher's class and race privilege. In this sense cluelessness offers a means for 'clued in' viewers to realize a critique of the national prerogatives that Cher's social and economic entitlement assumes – but only to a degree, since it never actually threatens the terms of stable audience identification with Cher as a likeable protagonist. Finally, and in so far as it is construed as an impediment to the development of a successful heterosexual romance narrative, Cher's cluelessness represents that quality that she must shed in order to become a more conventional cinematic heroine. For Josh to like her, in other words, she must demonstrate through example (rather than mere suggestion) that her cluelessness is merely an aspect of a performance of femininity that she uses to ward off potential romantic suitors.

My attempt to map the ideological function of cluelessness in Heckerling's film finally suggests that cluelessness may be a metaphor for ideology itself – specifically, that 'system of ideas' around issues of gender and class that Cher must shed in order to be rewarded with Josh's (and the audience's) love by the end of the film (Gramsci 1971: 377). Yet even if 'cluelessness' constitutes the terrain upon which Cher acquires subjectivity and consciousness, nevertheless, the fact that the film pairs her relinquishing of cluelessness with her embrace of gendered domestic virtue remains deeply problematic, suggesting that the 'price' of her insight is submission to the heterosexual romance narrative. Here, too, cluelessness becomes a rhetorical strategy of the film itself, which requires that the audience similarly assent to the revision of Cher's gendered identity, even if we do not welcome the film's insistence on romantic coupling as a narrative climax, in so far as this revision is conflated with her growth in self-consciousness. Just as, through her attraction to Josh, Cher learns to construct her femininity in conformity with his interests and desires; so, too, the audience is led to order its desire in conformity with the romance plot and with the attendant 'gendering' of the cinematic heroine, who wins our approval and admiration for having gained in 'humanity'.

Here *Clueless's* own status as a cultural commodity becomes particularly salient. In the United States, where it had its biggest audience, *Clueless* was an unanticipated hit, grossing \$57 million at the box office and spawning a weekly television series featuring members of the movie cast. Subsequently *Clueless*, a film that was originally based on a pilot for a television show, became a moderately successful Fox television series featuring many of the members of the film cast, with the exception of Silverstone, the film's greatest asset. (Here it is notable that the TV show locates Cher in a 'pre-Josh' period, allowing for the formulation of plots centring on Cher, her friends, and their various 'clueless' adventures, rather than the determining 'master-plot' of heterosexual romance.) In turn, the commercial success of the film – and, to a lesser degree, its TV spin-off – has been widely credited with sparking a

trend in the marketing of films specifically for teenage girls, who are perceived by industry executives as an 'emerging' and highly profitable audience.

Yet while *Clueless's* commercial viability and the marketing trends it has encouraged might attest to the 'consumer power' of US teenage girls (and could conceivably be a harbinger of such power), they also raise questions concerning the cinematic construction (or reproduction) of national, race and gender identities, both 'domestically' and abroad. In a recent *New York Times* article, for example, Joe Roth, the chairman of Walt Disney Studios, reasoned that film executives are eager to target teenage girls because they may be counted on to generate increased profits for multinational corporations: 'They're easier to market to, compared to the older audience, because their tastes are very specific', he is quoted as saying. 'They come to a movie over and over again if they like it. They don't work; they don't have families to raise. They're available consumers with money' (Weinraub 1998: B4). Roth's notion of teenage girls as an audience of 'available consumers' who 'don't work' is telling, not only for its emphasis on girls' perceived docility and therefore their commercial exploitability, but for its conflation of 'girlhood' itself with leisure and commodity consumption. Moreover, in so far as his vision of what girls 'want' is predictably market-driven, it is difficult to read his allusions to 'girl power' (à la English pop group the Spice Girls) as anything but cynical. According to Roth, girls are being rewarded for their loyalty and dependability as consumers with their 'own' films; and yet if *Clueless* is what they want, films like *Titanic* are what they are (and dependably will be) given.

I have hastened to add this account of *Clueless's* ongoing influence within the US film industry in order to outline potential intersections between the discourse of marketing and the discourse of gender, as well as to suggest connections between the apparent 'spending power' of 'First World' girls and the representation of gendered agency in Heckerling's film. In *Clueless*, as I have argued, Cher is made to realize the bounded nature of her own gender identifications, which are themselves structured in and through the film's narrative of First World–Third World relations. Hence notions of classed and gendered domestic virtue may be recuperated as the rationale for the expansion of national identities, as the winningly patriotic conclusion of Cher's Haiti speech demonstrates. They also serve as the ideological machinery driving Cher's transfer of libidinal energy away from consumption and instead toward heterosexual coupling, such that she does not need to be 'convinced' to like Josh, but eventually comes to recognize romance as the object of her 'own' desire. Given that (at least by the *New York Times* account) *Clueless* and Cher are paradigmatic, respectively, of the kind of commercially visible movies and 'empowered female teen characters' that Hollywood sees girl audiences as 'wanting', then the highly touted consumer 'agency' of US girls may be no less problematically tethered to the embrace of conventional gender and class narratives cloaked in the rhetoric of the charming, the cute, or the clueless.