

Amy Heckerling Isn't Clueless About How to Connect with an Audience

*Clueless*, written and directed by Amy Heckerling, is a teen comedy set in Los Angeles that follows the story of Cher Horowitz, who goes from a spoiled, high school student to a confident and self-aware young woman. The plot is mapped by her interactions with her friends, teachers, and potential love interests. Despite it being over two decades old the film continues to enjoy popularity and has been labeled a teen classic. This longevity can be attributed to its ability to connect with the main demographic of American adolescent and preadolescent young women. The cause of this continued appeal is illustrated in the romantic comedy's trailer that utilizes humorous dialogue, which is conveyed through zooms, costumes, and editing, the stardom of Alicia Silverstone, and music. All these elements are meant to entice and persuade viewers to go see the film.

The overall structure of the trailer is slightly similar to that of the film. However, the trailer edits out Cher's transformation from a shallow, rich girl to a kind, self-aware teen. Rather, it highlights Alicia Silverstone's character and the absurdity of the things she says. The trailer contains a good amount of the most iconic bits including the line "Ugh as if!" and the scene where Cher, Dionne and her boyfriend Murray are driving on the freeway. But the trailer leaves out most of the plot that pertains to Tai, the new girl at school that Cher and Dionne try to befriend and make over to be popular. Also, all of the romance isn't included in the trailer. Christian, Cher's first potential love interest is briefly shown and Josh, Cher's second love interest is only shown once, while the two are kissing on the stairs. The entire second half of the movie, focuses a lot on Cher's relationships with both of these characters, so it is peculiar that

the trailer all but emits these characters. One reason for this, could be to attract a larger audience by not revealing that the film is centered largely around love and relationships. This featured in the trailer definitely demonstrates the “vaudeville mode” of audience address. Meaning that the trailer tries to convey that there is something for everyone in the film. “The rhetoric of ‘something for everyone’ is usually posted within the generalized framework of an individual genre. Thus, the vaudeville mode of trailer address emphasizes the role of attractions along with narrative and generic elements, all considered as equally desirable aspects of commodified spectacle” (Kernan 19). Since the trailer is obviously aimed at teenage girls, the inclusion of in the film would only add to their appeal. However, by omitting this from the trailer, it allows for a different kind of audience to be attracted to the movie as well, one that would be interested in the comedy.

One of the main ways that the trailer connects with its potential audience is through humorous dialogue that is short, succinct and snappy. The trailer utilizes zooms, costumes, and short snippets of dialogue to illustrate a satirical view of the rich Beverly Hills teens, showing the audience an exaggerated version of the characters that is intriguing. The trailer opens with one of Cher’s speeches in her class. She uses the word “like” a lot, refers to Haitians and Haitiens, and compares a governmental issue to her planning a party for her lawyer father. Then it cuts to a scene of Tai saying that Cher and Dionne talk like “grown-ups.” Through the dialogue, editing, zooms, and costumes, the viewer really gets a caricature like preview of what each character is like. Cher is the popular, ditzy blonde which is depicted through her speech in class that is a slow zoom into her talking spliced with the faces of her confused classmates. Dionne is clearly Cher’s right-hand woman because she is always next to Cher. The two best friends are also in a number of various relatively fashionable outfits, displaying their wealth and

concern about looking good. Tai is the clumsy outsider which is seen through her outfits and a sequence of her being clumsy, like falling down the stairs and getting hit in the head with a shoe. Finally, Amber is the snobby girl that Cher dislikes, with a is displayed with a shot of Amber saying whatever is a snippy tone and Cher asking if big hair is coming back while Amber fixes her hair. The dialogue in the trailer intrigues the teen demographic because it is all “teen-speak.” In fact, “before writing the screenplay, Heckerling spent considerable time around her characters’ real-life counterparts; she watched plays and debates at Beverly Hills High School, attended skateboarding contests, and loitered beside groups of girls in clothing stores” (O’Meara 138). Heckerling took the time to research how teens speak to one another and the slang they use, it is very accurate, present and accentuated or even exaggerated in the film. Consequently, teenagers from a strong connection to the dialogue because they know people who talk like the characters or use the vernacular themselves. Understanding dialogue is a key part of grasping the film and in the case of *Clueless*, younger audiences actually have an advantage.

Another way that the trailer engages the audience is through the star personas of Alicia Silverstone, the lead actress and Amy Heckerling, the writer and director. At the time of *Clueless*’ release in 1995, Alicia had starred in her first big movie, *The Crush*, where she plays a teenage girl who sets out to ruin an older man’ life after he rejects her affections. Her role in this film This debut definitely put Silverstone on the map, despite the movie not doing well with critics. A critic at Variety said, “her choice as the MTV Movie Awards’ newcomer of the year seemed like something of a joke in 1993 (“The Crush” was a rather reprehensible movie), she certainly lives up to that promise here” (Lowry) and another critic at the New York Times said, thus far famous mostly for being famous (mostly in Aerosmith videos), Ms. Silverstone finally gives a film performance that clicks” (Maslin). Another reason for her huge popularity at the

time was that she was the cast in three different Aerosmith music videos. She was often referred to as the “the Aerosmith chick” as a result of this. After watching the Aerosmith videos, Amy Heckerling decided to cast her as Cher. Therefore, because of her popularity at the time of the film’s release, Alicia Silverstone’s name is the only one actor we see in the trailer. In the case of Amy Heckerling, the very first movie she directed was *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, a movie about a year in the life of high school students. This film was quite successful and helped launch a lot of young actors’ careers. Since this movie was so impactful and successful, the trailer for *Clueless* has a title card that states, “From the Director of Fast Times at Ridgemont High.” The casting of Alicia Silverstone is intended to make a connection with teenage girls, who by 1995 was very popular, especially after winning the MTV Movie Awards and starring in Aerosmith videos. Therefore, a lot of young girls looked up to Silverstone. But also using Heckerling’s own star context as the director of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, is an appeal to a slightly older demographic. *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* came out in 1982 and was rated R. It is similar to *Clueless* in that it focuses on high school kids but is raunchier and less female oriented. Teenage girls in 1995 were too young to have seen *Fast Times*, so it is an attempt to pull in a young adult audience that enjoyed her last high school movie.

The last way the trailer attempts to persuade the viewers to go see the film is through music. Out of all the things the trailer could focus on, at the very end of it, a title card states that the movie will feature new music from the Beastie Boys, Counting Crows, Radiohead, Coolio, Luscious Jackson and several others. The trailer itself features one of the new songs, which is *Supermodel* by Jill Sobule. The eclectic mix of artist and music “undeniably taps into Generation X sensibilities and a 1990s context wherein listening practices foregrounded reductive constructions of genres and demographics and selected parties in the music, television, and film

industries sought to replace existing industrial discourses by revaluing musical hybridity and diversity” (Aslinger 126). During the 90s, there was an increase in teens listening to a mix of different genres and the music in the film is a perfect mix of many different genres. “*Clueless* depicts, in broad brushstrokes, teen audio cultures in the 1990s under the swath of the “alternative” radio format and the selective uptake of hip-hop in white, middle-class taste cultures. The soundtrack is timely in its response to burgeoning indie rock, alternative, and riot-grrrl music scenes and modes of production” (Aslinger 127). The 1990s saw an increase in popularity of alternative genres of music, especially hip-hop, due to the increased airplay on big radio stations that lead to the mainstreaming of the genre. The appeal of rap and hip-hop was that it was new and embraced a counterculture. As more people were exposed to rap and hip-hop, the more popular it became. The appeal of hip-hop was similar to that of rock music a few decades earlier. The selection of music and especially the incorporation of rock music in the film also has a lot to do with Heckerling trying to utilize Silverstone’s star person since she was the star in three Aerosmith videos. Overall, the diverse soundtrack is another attempt to attract teenage girls who are being to expand their taste and explore new genres of music.

In conclusion, the lasting popularity and acclaim that *Clueless* enjoys can be attributed to the films ability to attract a wide audience, specifically preteen and teenage American girls as well as young American women. The trailer is an excellent blueprint to identify how the director Amy Heckerling goes about doing this. Heckerling utilizes popular teenage personas such as “clumpy outsider” Tai and “mean snob” Amber to relate to a wide variety of personalities. The trailer’s dialogue adopts and even exaggerates the use of common slang to form a bond with the young female demographic she is trying to reach. The trailers’ use of zoom, costumes, and editing exhibits both the character’s and the audience's values and priorities. Lastly; Heckerling

capitalizes on the rising stardom of Alicia Silverstone and the emerging music scene to tap into what the past audience believed was trendy and what sparks a feeling of nostalgia for contemporary audiences.

## Works Cited

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