

AMY HECKERLING



I fell in love with Amy Heckerling when, in *Clueless*, Cher (Alicia Silverstone), pressed to talk about that teenage obsession, virginity, said, "You see how picky I am about my shoes, and they just go on my feet." A perfectly pert quip: hard to argue with, and delivered with the sparkling Valley Girl energy for which the film (also written by Heckerling) is justly famous. Throughout a somewhat patchy filmography (including *Look Who's Talking*, episodes of *Gossip Girl* and *The Office*, and the uncharacteristically clichéd *I Could Never Be Your Woman*) Heckerling has still, thanks to the crown jewels of *Clueless* and *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, proven herself to be one of the few directors respectful of girlish folly and possessed of a sly sense of visual humour.

It's easy (too easy) to talk about good girls and bad girls when you talk about teen movies. Heckerling's handling of the high school caste system is far more appealing than, say, *The Breakfast Club*, where the teens are posited as "relatable" but may as well be wearing signs around their necks. In Heckerling's high school hallways, the good girls and the bad girls conspire together, and any introduction of stereotype is intentionally pushed to a stylised level of ridiculousness (no teenage stoner has ever actually acted as stoned as Sean Penn did as Spicoli).

Heckerling cares about a lot of things that are too often slighted in film: namely female friendships, but also fashion and class. Look at Cher and Dionne (Stacey Dash), united in plaid and alpha femaleness, but willing to take the comparatively frumpy Tai (Brittany Murphy, may she rest in piece) under their wing. Heckerling won't let you forget: these girls are self-aware. "Cher's main thrill in life is a makeover. It gives her a sense of control in a world of chaos," says Dionne. You can practically hear her winking at the boys who might brush the movie off. *Clueless* is, of course, inspired by Jane Austen's 'Emma', and in an interview, Heckerling said, "If Emma were around today, she'd be making a film." Heckerling likes the idea of girls taking control — of their friendships, their sex lives, their outfits — and presents it in a non-didactic, poppy way.

Everyone knows Linda (Phoebe Cates) emerging from the pool and taking off her red bikini top in *Fast Times*. It's not the male-gaze-fest it could be. By literally making the scene a masturbatory fantasy, and cutting it short when Linda runs into the bathroom to get a q-tip, Heckerling pokes fun at the salivating male crowd. Similarly, after girl-next-door Stacy (Jennifer Jason Leigh) has disappointing sex with Mike (Robert Romanus), the next scene shows Linda and Stacy wearing the cutesy stripped uniforms of the fast food restaurant (at the mall, natch) at which they work and both cutting into a phallic slab of meat. The good girl and the bad girl, performing together a gesture of misandry and girl talking. Like Cher, they're way smarter than the boys might initially think. Heckerling's movies don't explicitly come out and state themselves as feminist (though, for the most part, they are). Rather, they're far more likely to take into account all the clichés that exist about girls, exploit them playfully and finally say, "Whatever!" *Abbey Bender*