



## REFOCUS: THE FILMS OF AMY HECKERLING Ed. Frances Smith and Timothy Shary. Edinburgh UP, 2016. 265 pp. \$120.00 hardcover.

Emily L. Newman

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ghetti Western is “approached as a unit of culture that has traversed space and time, encompassing temporal journeys as well as physical ones within “transcultural” readings” (10). Fischer hopes that this volume will “advance scholarly debates around the significance of Italy’s popular cinema of the 1960s and 1970s and its ongoing influences on our contemporary culture” (10), and I see no reason why it should not. The new

avenues of discovery offered by *Spaghetti Westerns at the Crossroads* will doubtless encourage another groundbreaking collection about the transnational Western. All in all, Fisher’s collection is a very welcome addition to the study of the Western.

Sue Matheson  
University College of the North

Sue Matheson is an associate professor in the Faculty of Arts, Business and Science at University College of the North. Books she has edited include *Westerns and the Classical World*, forthcoming from McFarland, and *A Fistful of Icons: Frontier Fixtures of the American Western* (McFarland, 2017). She is currently the book review editor for *The Journal of Popular Film and Television* and serves on the advisory board of *The Journal of American Culture*.

## REFOCUS: THE FILMS OF AMY HECKERLING

Ed. Frances Smith and Timothy Shary.  
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Over twenty years have passed since the influential and repeatedly imitated *Clueless* (1995) made its theatrical debut. Written and directed by Amy Heckerling, who had already established herself with *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) and *National Lampoon’s European Vacation* (1985), *Clueless* revolutionized teen films, showing strong, independent young women valuing female friendships. Her post-*Clueless* career has seen highs and lows, but her contributions to cinematic history are invaluable, and as the essayists demonstrate, Heckerling is a worthy inclusion in *ReFocus: The American Directors Series* (edited by Robert Singer and Gary D. Rhodes).

Amy Heckerling has never been just a director. Her career extends to writing and producing, spearheading a number of films that further transitioned into television shows. While focusing on her films more than her TV shows, the contributors do a good job of emphasizing the breadth of her work. In an insightful introduction, Frances Smith and Timothy Shary provide important background information, presenting her career chronologically. This allows for an understanding of her successful rise and her more recent oft-delayed projects, with mention of her latest achievements in television directing. Significantly, this project has big goals; as they state:

Our aims for this collection are twofold: to unpick the often complex presentations of gender, language, and desire in Heckerling’s film and television work, and in so doing, to go some way toward examining her contribution to the landscape of contemporary

popular Hollywood cinema. . . We seek to re-examine, and ultimately to restore, Heckerling’s place in Hollywood. (2)

To that end, the book is divided into four parts, allowing the editors to clearly prioritize significant moments and themes in her career. “Part I: Heckerling in Teen Film and Television” continues the work of the introduction. Allowing deeper conversations on the film and television versions of *Clueless* and their prioritization of female friendships (Susan Berridge), a larger discussion of gender positioning in her teen films (Zachary Finch), and the strategic textual references of her later films (Mary Harrod). This creates connections across different films from various periods and these essays define and elaborate on the persistent themes of Heckerling’s films: strong women and feminism, subverting typical gender dynamics, issues regarding age (both youth culture and the act of getting older), nostalgia and “metageneticity” (the mixing of popular cinematic formulas).

The second part is more focused and specific, titled “Part II: Ingenuity and Irony in the Heckerling Lexicon.” These two essays stand out from the rest, particularly in their more limited approach. Andrea Press and Ellen Rosenman detail a case study comparing *Clueless* (loosely based on Jane Austen’s 1815 novel *Emma*) with a more faithful BBC adaptation of *Emma* (2009), surveying both public- and private-school students examining their response to the class dynamics of the film. From this small study, they were able to see and examine the way that American culture struggles to deal with class in any substantial way, and while *Clueless* may broach the subject, it is often more superficial than any significant analysis. In examining how Heckerling’s experiences of studying students and language in person, Lisa Richards illustrated her innovative approach to dialogue, in which she memorably created her own uses for terms and phrases. If evidenced by the “whatevers” and “as ifs” that

are still uttered today, Heckerling’s dynamic use of language has had a lasting impact over twenty years.

Devoted to the strong female characters that persist in her films, “Part III: Femininity, Aging, and Postfeminism” posits that Heckerling has often taken an uncommon position on womanhood. Claire Jenkins explores *Look Who’s Talking* (1989), which presents a single, career-minded mother who eventually finds love with a nurturing man. Both Betty Kaklamanidou and Murray Leeder explore aging, with Kaklamanidou investigating how *I Could Never Be Your Woman* (2007) reverses the stereotypical younger woman/older man by having the older Michelle Pfeiffer fall for Paul Rudd, and also discusses the un-aging but older vampire women as they deal with much younger men. Leeder focuses on *Vamps* (2012) and the complicated role of immortality and aging, particularly in light of an American culture that values youth.

Lastly, “Part IV: Reflections on the Heckerling Oeuvre” situates Heckerling amongst her contemporaries. From dealing with the strength and empowerment of young women in *Clueless* (Stefania Marghitu and Lindsey Alexander) to comparing her work in the 1980s and 90s to that of John Hughes (Kimberly M. Miller), this section reinforces the intentions clearly laid out by the editors in the introduction. In one of the strongest chapters of the book, Lesley Speed looks at the overall career of Heckerling in both film and television, emphasizing her skillset beyond being just a director.

Overall, I do believe this book makes the case for Heckerling’s importance, especially in the reevaluation of her career in the context of being an undervalued and underappreciated director. However, in many ways, this collection also reinforces the frustrations and disappointments she has faced later in her career. Her more recent films had very little viewership, and while a few essayists did tackle them in their chapters, they

do not have the same lasting impact nor are they of the same quality as her earlier work like *Clueless* or *Fast Times*. While interesting analyses of these films are presented, the weakness of these films is simultaneously made apparent. Further, while her TV directing work is mentioned, it is not critically addressed, perhaps because her contributions to many of the shows are minimal (i.e., directing only one episode of a show's longer run). And yet, I think there is more to be analyzed regarding what shows and episodes she has specifically worked on, potentially connecting to themes in her earlier work. Similarly, I wanted more explanation for the past fifteen years, including more detailed discussion and critical evaluation of the problematic releases of her last films. While suggestions were hinted at in the introduction, none of the essays seriously addressed these shortcomings.

Nonetheless, the editors and contributors did an excellent job showing the impact and continued relevance of *Clueless*, *Fast Times*

at *Ridgmont High*, and the *Look Who's Talking* films. I was particularly struck by the evaluation of the language and words used in her films, as well as the subtle ways that Heckerling was able to place women and women's issues into the films in a way that was not isolating and did not result in her films being labeled as "chick flicks." While many of the earlier chapters rely fairly heavily on theory, the essays in Part IV seem particularly useful for students and those hoping to get a sense of Heckerling's oeuvre. The chapters represent a wide variety of approaches and engagements with her films, which allows an accessibility to the text, as well as generating a text that is useful in a number of different fields. As a whole, the book is thoughtfully put together, and while I would have liked to see more considered analysis and positioning of her late films and television directing, the editors have put together a collection that shows Heckerling's contributions extend beyond *Clueless* and

*Fast Times*. Additionally, Smith and Shary are supporting and assuring that an underappreciated female director's career has considered and substantial evaluation, an honorable task indeed.

Emily L. Newman  
Texas A&M University—Commerce

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Emily L. Newman is Associate Professor of Art History at Texas A&M University—Commerce who specializes in contemporary art, gender studies, and popular visual culture. She recently published *Female Body Image in Contemporary Art: Dieting, Eating Disorders, Self-Harm, and Fatness* (Routledge, 2018) and co-edited (with Emily Wittsell) *ABC Family to Freeform TV: Essays on the Millennial-focused Network and Its Programs* (McFarland, 2018) and *Lifetime Network: Essays on "Television for Women" in the 21st Century* (McFarland, 2016), among other journal articles, interviews, and reviews.

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#### AMERICAN POSTFEMINIST CINEMA: WOMEN, ROMANCE, AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

By Michele Schreiber. Edinburgh UP, 2015. 208 pp. £19.99 paper.

In her well-researched and cogently argued book, Michele Schreiber explores the disconnect between the reality of women's personal, economic, and social gains and cinematic representations of women in the twenty-first century—contemporary Hollywood films overlook the fact that American women comprise nearly half of the labor force and are marrying later in life (or not marrying at all). As Schreiber asks in her "Introduction":

What, then, do we make of the fact that in contemporary popular film, the lives of these women are still represented almost exclusively in the romance genre, which is not only one of the oldest and most classic of female-oriented forms, but a form in which marriage is the desired narrative resolution? (2)

Examining examples of Hollywood films made between 1980 and 2012 that comprise what she terms "the postfeminist romance cycle," *American Postfeminist Cinema: Women, Romance, and Contemporary Culture* offers a nuanced answer to this question and highlights how "pleasure and critique can coexist" in the way that we experience

these visual texts (4). This study encourages readers to explore the complex questions around gender, sexuality, and power that these films allow spectators to navigate through the intoxicating genre of romance.

Before delving into her close readings of selected films from the postfeminist romance cycle, Schreiber provides a helpful historical grounding for her discussion. Chapter 1 traces a genealogy of female-centered romance films: "a classical romance film, *Kitty Foyle* [1940], the feminist romance film *An Unmarried Woman* [1978], and the postfeminist romance film *27 Dresses* [2008]" (27). Schreiber examines how each subgenre draws upon tropes of the romance film and reflects the sociopolitical issues affecting women in the era in which each movie was made. This brief historical overview sets the stage for Schreiber's assertion that postfeminist romance film "is always about more than romance. It is about the social and political hot-button issues that get negotiated, sometimes contained but frequently and egregiously unresolved, that are intertwined with the romance" (45). Moreover, she points out that the postfeminist romance film, unlike the feminist romance film, does not elicit a powerful response, as "critics of these contemporary romance films rarely find anything political in them" (45). For example, although *27 Dresses* was dismissed as "too cliché-ridden," even within the conventions of the romance film, she asserts that it nevertheless engages with some of the pressing issues facing women, which in-

clude the challenge of balancing the desire to be an empowered, independent woman with the desire for love, marriage, and children.

In subsequent chapters, Schreiber analyzes a number of postfeminist romance films that grapple with the complexity of what it means to be a woman in the twenty-first century. Organizing them topically instead of chronologically, she illustrates how certain tropes recur in various forms within this vast genre. Chapter 2 examines the "ameliorative function" of postfeminist romance cinema, namely the ways in which its tropes, narratives, and concerns are reflected in other media, including social media, advertisements, and popular fiction. Citing Jason Mittell's work on generic discourses, Schreiber asserts that genres "should be understood not as closed, inflexible entities but as culturally operative" (57). This chapter is particularly fascinating, because it highlights the recursive quality of these romance narratives across different media and the "cyclical interdependence of the two discourses of fiction and everyday life [that] is a hallmark of postfeminist culture" (81) by analyzing how self-help books like *The Rules: Time Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right* (1995), television advertisements for dating websites like eharmony.com, and fictional romance films like *Must Love Dogs* (2005) feed into each other, collectively "pit[ting] a fantasy-driven sentimentality, often associated with women and driven by fictional or historically retrograde conceits, against a more practical and calculated outlook as-