Emma in Los Angeles: Clueless as a remake of the book and the city

by Lesley Stern

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Cher Horovitz, handsome, clever and rich, had lived nearly sixteen years in LA with very little to distress or vex her. Just like Emma Woodhouse. Emma it’s true is a little older — nearly twenty one — at the beginning of Jane Austen’s novel than Cher is at the beginning of Amy Heckerling’s movie, and Emma, so we are told, lived not in LA, but ‘in the world’. These minor differences aside, there is something uncanny in the way that Cher reprises the role that Emma Woodhouse vacated in 1816. We are told that Cher did not have an ancient and glorious lineage, though not in the novelistic tradition: both she and her best friend Dionne are named ‘after great singers of the past who now do infomercials’.

The movie begins with a spinning overhead shot of a group of girls having fun in a car — in a white jeep which careers all over, as does the hand-held camera, as do the colors to initiate a montage of Cher and her friends having fun — shopping, driving, kidding about by the pool. The colors are garishly bright, every frame is crowded, energetic, and music pumps out. Before too long one of the girls in the opening emerges as ‘heroine’ both on the image track and in a narrating voice over: ‘So OK, you’re probably thinking, “Is this, like a Noxema commercial, or what?” But seriously. I actually have a way normal life for a teenage girl. I mean I get up, I brush my teeth, and I pick out my school clothes.’ Having picked out her faux-haute-couture school clothes with the aid of a mix-and-match computer programme, to the accompaniment of David Bowie’s ‘Fashion Girl’, Cher’s day begins. We are introduced to her father, a wealthy litigation lawyer, and are given a bumpy tour of the neighbourhood as we set off for school with her, driving past the Beverly Hills mansions, pick up her friend Dionne sporting an extravagantly exotic hat, and proceed to school, exchanging greetings and trading insults en route.

This account might seem to render the links between this teen movie set in LA and a novel of manners set in a nineteenth century English village tenuous. But let us backtrack to the first paragraph of the novel: ‘Emma Woodhouse had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her’ (27). A few pages on we find that ‘the world’ is in fact Highbury, a ‘large and populous village almost amounting to a town’. It is this conflation between the world and the village that gives to Emma much of its poignancy — a parochialism derived from the characters’ conception of the world and misconception of their place in it provides a source for satire, and simultaneously a stage for the enactment of a certain ethnocentric impulse (focusing on the day to day lives of ordinary middle class people) that heralded a new modernity in the novel. And it is precisely this conflation (between world and village), along with the dual impulse to satirize and to elaborate a kind of fictional ethnography, that provides a key to Clueless and its central conceit: Los Angeles as a village, a village peopled by teenagers who think that Beverly Hills is the centre of the world...

From certain critical perspectives, we might note, Jane Austen’s satire has been dubiously regarded. As Edward Said has pointed out, her preoccupation with the local served not as fodder for satire, but rather to consolidate and advance the interests of Empire, of the West — by figuring a little patch of England as universal, as center, home, norm. Other critics, arguing from a feminist perspective, have drawn attention to the particularity of Austen’s modernist impulse — that her novels brought onto centre stage a world that had not previously been deemed suitable for literary treatment. She conjured up a new world of women and although she certainly subjected this world to satire, and simultaneously a stage for the enactment of a certain ethnographic impulse (focusing on the day to day lives of ordinary middle class people) that heralded a new modernity in the novel. And it is precisely this conflation that gives to Clueless and its central conceit: Los Angeles as a village, a village peopled by teenagers who think that Beverly Hills is the centre of the world...

Just as Jane Austen gave the novel a newly modernist inflection through stretching generic boundaries, so Amy Heckerling renovates old rhetorical devices in the service of new insights and pleasures. By reading Emma through the lens of a contemporary genre — the teen movie — and by rendering this teen world through a predominantly feminine consciousness, through conjuring up a girl’s world, she exercises the sort of fictionally ethnographic exploration epitomised by Austen. Like Austen she asks — what are the preoccupations, language, courting and/or dating rituals, fashion, mores of a wealthy and privileged group of young people? And like Austen she transforms a documentary rendering of the quotidian into an imaginative and lively delight in fictionality.

Via a quite distinctive rhetorical modality a space is created in which we can both identify the unrelenting banality and callow foolishness of these characters and also delight in their engagement in witty wordplay and visual jokes, their hyperbolic sense of style, the strings of quotations and misquotations, the way in which they generate a new female topology and language: ‘cruising the crimson wave’ (having your period), ‘hymenally challenged’ (being a virgin), ‘boinkfest’ (lots of sex), ‘full-on Monet’ (‘It’s like...')

It is my contention that it is through certain remaking strategies, a consciousness of intertextuality if you like, that LA materializes as a particularly interesting configuration of spatial and cultural tropes. Just as Cher and her friends take particular delight in the make-over, so the film exercises a make-over on both the city and the book, throws the place itself into relief as a patterning of repetition and difference. In thus giving prominence to the remake as an explanatory device a question inevitably arises and the question is this: is it necessary to have read Emma in order to make sense of and truly enjoy Clueless?

Clearly Clueless appeals to different audiences who bring to the movie different knowledges and expectations, but what makes it particularly fascinating is that it actually assumes, through the heterogeneity of its references and allusions, that quotidian knowledge is informed by and woven out of a diversity of cultural practices — not just those of the book. Cher does indeed have an ancient and glorious lineage, though not in the novelistic tradition: both she and her best friend Dionne are named ‘after great singers of the past'.

Clueless is characterised by an utterly engaging impulse — an impulse at once utopian and comic — to remake or refashion the world.

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Emma is both a comedy of manners and a cautionary tale. It takes a simple social percept which is dramatized through a largely episodic structure. It centers on a motherless young woman, wealthy, endowed with ‘the power of having rather too much her own way and a disposition to think a little too well of herself’. Assuming the role of a kind of female Svengali she adopts and undertakes the transformation of Harriet, new to the village. Whilst orchestrating her protege’s social elevation Emma arranges a series of romances for Harriet, but as the matchmaking goes repeatedly wrong our heroine is revealed as supremely clueless when it comes to sex and romance. Eventually she realizes her own snobbishness and blindness not only to others’ desires but to her own. With self-revelation (and a touch of remorse) comes reformation, romantic fulfillment and a happy ending — that is to say, marriage.

Mr Knightley is the old family friend who is also her brother-in-law and also the only person who dares criticize Emma. Eventually she realizes that he is the one she loves. Before this, she falls for Frank Churchill, who like Harriet, is an outsider. In her flirtation she fails to discern Frank’s snobbery, that he is in love with Jane Fairfax (though indeed this knowledge is largely withheld from the reader as well). This capacity for misreading the signs of attraction, sometimes willfully, sometimes ignorantly, leads Emma into lots of trouble. Dismissing the object of Harriet’s affection, Mr Martin the farmer, she becomes convinced that Mr Elton (whom she deems more socially suitable) is enamoured of Harriet, failing to see what is obvious to the reader and some other characters — that it is Emma he is in love with.

Cher is also motherless, wealthy and far-from polite litigation lawyer. Mr Knightley becomes Josh, a student of environmental law and the son of one of her father’s previous wives — therefore a sort of step brother. The two outsiders are Tai (the Harriet figure) who arrives from the East with a broad Bronx accent and Christian (the Frank Churchill figure) who arrives from Chicago and is gay. Mr Elton, the snobbish vicar becomes the snobbish Jaguar-driving college boy Elton, and Mr Martin the farmer becomes the dope smoking, skateboard-boarding loady, Travis, who takes the bus to school. Jane Fairfax disappears from the film and there is a new figure — Dionne, a rich black girl who is Cher’s best friend.

Emma, who is wealthy enough not to have to work, spends most of her time socializing, refining her accomplishments painting, playing the piano, reading and deciphering riddles, cultivating the art of conversation, doing occasional good deeds, thinking about sex and romance, talking obliquely but at great length about sex and romance, doing sex and romance via matchmaking and flirting.

Cher, who is wealthy (and smart) enough not to have to try too hard at school, spends most of her time hanging out with her girlfriends, learning to drive, shopping, flaneusing in Rodeo Drive, dieting, exercising to Steel Buns, watching Ren and Stimpy and Beavis and Butthead on television, refining her dress sense, cultivating the art of the argot, eventually doing some good deeds, thinking about sex and romance, talking ostentatiously and at great length about sex and romance, doing sex and romance via matchmaking and flirting. In both book and movie the plot progresses episodically, configuring and reconfiguring character clusters via a series of social events.

The topology of Highbury or LA environs are mapped out in the same movement by which social relations are charted — through detailed descriptions of travel and modes of communication.

In the movie updating the modernization is manifest in a process of Los Angelisation, and teenzification. Los Angeles and the adolescent phenomenon are connected through the motif of modernity, of updating, of contemporaneity. Configured by the generic imperatives of a teen movie LA comes itself to signify the modern, the contemporary, the new, the now, the cool and the stylish, the fashionable. Modernity is here not merely a descriptive category, but a process of transformation, a process which is not simply an updating of old fashioned modes of communication, but an actual performance of that updating. The process actually effects a certain transformation in the very experience and notion of contemporaneity.

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Clueless belongs to a fine lineage, it belongs not only to a group of films that feature girls coming of age, but more specifically to a group of such films set in LA, all of which involve the conceit of a bimbo or ditz with a credit card who turns out to be a sassy, smart-talking, inventive young woman who takes control of her destiny through the conquering of space and time. The conquering of time entails a utopian rather than nostalgic and dystopic vision, and the conquering of space (and this is where LA enters the equation) involves taking control of the freeways and of that cinematographically mesmerizing maleicud vehicle — the motor car.

Cher and Dionne do not love their cars in the way that Paul Newman in Hud say, loved his pink cadillac; they love driving and the control that driving promises. The big joke here is that in fact they can’t drive, they are learning, and none too successfully, but to great comic effect. Interestingly, in the transforming of Emma into Clueless, the conversion of carriages into cars and the replacement of endless walking by continuous driving both indicates a very neat series of substitutions and also suggests that the process of updating does more than simply find contemporary signifiers for old fashioned modes of communication. The process actually effects certain transformations so that when we get a sense of what it’s like to be young and female today. Where Clueless differs from the boys-and-cars-and-sex genre of movies is that it links the car not primarily with sex but with fashion. There is no simple inversion here — for these girls the car is not a substitute for a man, but rather a means of autonomy and a link in the great chain of fashion. For many women I’ve talked to about this movie one of the most exhilarating and hilarious moments is Cher driving in platforms — it is an emblematic and enduring moment in the feminisation of the movie image of Los Angeles.

Much of the humour of Clueless is played out on and around fashion. But the humour is not at the expense of style. Certainly the moral precept of Emma is narratively played out — matchmaking as the central plotting device is also a mechanism for the moral improvement of the heroine. Cher learns that the Beverly Center is not the center of the world, and that there are people less fortunate than herself, but she does not give up on style. And although she is made fun of there is a degree to which she is in on the joke.

On one level Cher’s adoption and make-over of Tai faithfully follows Emma’s adoption and make-over of Harriet, but in terms of Hollywood the model is more complicated. The Svengali story is of course not exclusive to Hollywood but it has prospered here: Gigi, My Fair Lady, Pretty Woman. Almost by definition the Svengali figure is male — and this is because the narrative is concerned with feminisation, with educating a woman to take up her proper womanly place. Cher Horowitz is the first woman I can think of who occupies this position. Cher gets her come-uppance much more severely than Professor Henry Higgins or the slimy Gaston or the horrible Richard Gere (who all emerge triumphant in their projects), but it’s not at the expense of women, nor at the expense of fashion. Clueless is every bit as stylish as the other films. The emphasis on fashion certainly comes through in every frame, but the feminist twist comes from Jane Austen (literature) in another (film). The fidelity that is so imperative here — insofar as there is a motivation to preserve a classic text — is primarily conservative, even nostalgic. The modernity of Clueless derives from the generic choices that Heckerling makes. Most simply it is in the choice to turn an early nineteenth century comedy of manners into a late twentieth century teen movie. Clueless is remarkably faithful as a structural repetition, and inventively divergent in terms of incidentals. In fact it is the tension between these two that generates pleasure.
The Australian rapper paid homage to Clueless in canary yellow tartan famously worn by Alicia Silverstone in the 1995 American comedy. Vamping it up Iggy style, the bubbly 23-year-old took over a high school in Los Angeles and stepped into the shoes of Cher Horowitz, the film's lead who spends her days playing matchmaker, helping friends with fashion choices and looking for a boyfriend. Fancy that! Iggy Azalea turns into iconic 1990s star Cher in classic cult movie Clueless for her latest video Fancy. Dressed in that yellow tartan that showed off her toned figure, a garish V-neck sweater and knee-high socks, Iggy dances around as her long, blonde locks flowing freely by her side, as she raps to her new track. ‘Clueless’ Remake In Early Development At Paramount With ‘Girls Trip’s Tracy Oliver Producing. by Anthony D’Alessandro. October 25, 2018 2:27pm. The movie put a number of young actors and actresses on the map who flourished in the wake of the pic’s release including Alicia Silverstone, Paul Rudd, Breckin Meyer, Jeremy Sisto, Stacey Dash, and the late Brittany Murphy. In the movie, Silverstone played superficial, but well-intention teen Cher Horowitz who is trying to find love while living life with her curmudgeon litigator father played by Dan Hedaya. Scott Rudin and Robert Lawrence produced the original movie which spawned a TV series that initially launched on ABC for one season before moving over to Paramount’s former UPN network to Los Angeles is a city of endless entertainment. Start Exploring. Select a Category Activities Culture Events Hotels Nightlife Restaurants Sports Tours & Sightseeing. Clueless became one of the sleeper hits of 1995, giving the then-unknown Silverstone a breakthrough role, and spinning off a television show and a series of books. Silverstone and Dash play Cher and Dionne, two super-rich Beverly Hills high school students and best pals who “adopt” newcomer Tai (Murphy). Down and Out in Beverly Hills is a 1986 remake of Jean Renoir’s 1932 classic, Boudu Saved from Drowning, directed by Paul Mazursky and starring Nick Nolte, Bette Midler and Richard Dreyfuss.
The way popular modern adaptation of Jane Austen's Emma, which centered around Beverly Hills teen Cher Horowitz (played by Alicia Silverstone), was lensed in and around Los Angeles in early 1995. Read on for the ultimate guide to each and every locale featured in the movie – like, all 40 of them. Cher’s house from Clueless | Photo by Lindsay Blake. One of the few prominent Clueless locations actually located in Beverly Hills, Dionne’s Tudor-style mansion can be found in the flats, just off Sunset Boulevard. A fence has since been added to the property, along with quite a bit of foliage, but it is still recognizable from its silver screen appearance.