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Beneath their surface frivolity and boisterous humour, the films of Amy Heckerling use comedy to address themes such as gender difference, adolescent sexuality and parenthood. Although the association between female directors and genres such as teen film, comedy and romance has been seen to reinforce a gendered hierarchy, close analysis of Heckerling's work offers a more complex view of the relationship between women directors, teenage audiences and Hollywood entertainment. This article situates Heckerling's most well-known films, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), *Look Who's Talking* (1989) and *Clueless* (1995), in the context of the significance of some female film directors in contemporary Hollywood. While her films exemplify Hollywood's tendency to absorb and de-politicise feminist values, Heckerling's career also reflects the role of contemporary female film directors in expanding teen film and low comedy beyond their traditional masculine preoccupations.

Female authorship and youth cinema

Amy Heckerling's films, like those of contemporary female directors such as Penny Marshall, Penelope Spheeris and Martha Coolidge, emerge from an intersection of gender roles, product differentiation and industrial organisation. Given that the power of the Hollywood director has diminished since the 1970s
A World Ruled by Hilarity: Gender and Low Comedy in the Films of Amy Heckerling through the industry's increasing focus on marketing (Schamus in Neale and Smith, 1998, 102), a director's work is now more likely than ever to reflect the influence of economic factors. Yet the figure of the author has not disappeared from this context: authorship has a widespread significance in the marketing and advertising of contemporary Hollywood films, and this article draws upon accounts of Heckerling's films to which perceptions of her authorial role as director are central. The relationship between women directors and contemporary Hollywood is fundamental to the recurrent significance of themes such as gender difference and adolescent sexuality in Heckerling's films.

The positioning of Amy Heckerling as an *auteur* serves as a way of highlighting the increasing influence of women in the cinema. Whereas 1970s feminist film criticism distanced itself from *auteurism* on grounds that “a stake in *auteurism* possibly paralleled an investment in patriarchal authority” (Lane, 2000, 44), feminism has subsequently come to embrace the idea of female authorship as both a political strategy and a means of addressing “the reinvention of the cinema that has been undertaken by women filmmakers and feminist spectators.” (Mayne, 1990, 97). The concept of female authorship offers, in particular, a way of asserting female agency in the context of women's relationships to “the institutions of cinema”.(Mayne, 97). In Hollywood, for instance, women directors are liable to become “pigeon-holed” through working in genres such as comedy, melodrama and teen film (Lane, 37). Equally, most female directors are restricted to projects with middle range budgets that are “dependent” upon the box office returns of current blockbusters (Lane, 37). Despite the problematic relationship between women directors and the Hollywood industry, however, Christina Lane maintains that directors such as Martha Coolidge and Kathryn Bigelow are “primary makers of meaning who deserve attention.” (Lane, 45). Viewed in this context, Amy Heckerling's career can be seen to have benefited from opportunities to direct films with low- to middle-range budgets.

Heckerling's positioning as an *auteur* can be seen to defy Hollywood hierarchies of budget and genre. In the traditional gendered hierarchy of film genres, crime thrillers, biopics, historical dramas and gangster films are more prestigious than teen film, romantic comedy, contemporary melodrama and broad comedy. The critical mechanism which perpetuates this privilege has been identified by Maltby and Craven with genre theory's tendency to “valorize ... patriarchal and masculine concerns, by which certain genres have been accorded an increased cultural status” (Maltby and Craven, 1995, 132). Yet Heckerling's directorial career has developed on the basis of, not despite, her preference for working in the genre of comedy (Firstenberg and Heckerling, 1995, unpaginated), and her willingness to work in low prestige genres such as
the teen film, with which few established directors traditionally choose to be
associated. For instance, her unexpectedly well received first feature film, *Fast Times* (1), was made possible by the economic
ubiquity of low-to-middle range films, and does not seem to have limited her
subsequent career opportunities. As Christina Lane has suggested, Heckerling's
continuing success in gaining studio support for her projects may be partly
attributed to her ability to complete films within budgetary constraints (Lane,
231, n.7). With *Clueless*, Heckerling's decision to return, as
an established director, to a low prestige genre is pivotal to the teen film's recent
acquisition of increased critical praise and cultural value.

Until recently, few teen films have escaped the negative connotations of this
genre's historical links to the "controversial content, bottom-line bookkeeping,
and demographic targeting" of the exploitation film (Doherty, 1998, 10). Indeed,
Thomas Doherty's definition of the teen film as "a product of the decline of the
classical Hollywood cinema and the rise of the privileged American
teenager" (Doherty, 14) is a reminder of the genre's fundamental estrangement
from the classical Hollywood canon. Within this context, the relationship between
*Clueless* and the recent resurgence of Hollywood teen
to films can be viewed as central to the genre's acquisition of increased critical
recognition and, in some instances, respect. In addition to
*Clueless*, the recent cycle of teen films includes box office
successes such as *American Pie* (Paul Weitz,
1999) and *Cruel Intentions* (Roger
Kumble, 1999), as well as Heckerling's later film *Loser* (2000).
Through having brought greater critical attention to Heckerling's work (2)
*Clueless* has resulted in her being positioned as a teen
film *auteur*, thus suggesting a shift in the generic hierarchy
toward the admission of forms that had been perceived to lack cultural value. An
important dimension of Heckerling's role in the teen film's increased cultural
status is the fact that *Clueless*, an adaptation of Jane
Austen's novel *Emma*, set a precedent for a proliferation of Hollywood
teen-targeted adaptations of classic works of literature. Later examples of this
cycle include *Cruel Intentions*,
*Ten Things I Hate About You* (Gil Junger, 1999) and *O* (Tim Blake Nelson,
2001). In this way, the success of *Clueless* brings together
youth-targeted entertainment, *auteur* films and the literary
canon.

The positioning of Heckerling as an *auteur* defies the
individualism of orthodox *auteurism*. At first glance, the
fact that both *Fast Times* and
A World Ruled by Hilarity: Gender and Low Comedy in the Films of Amy Heckerling

Clueless are based on novels by other writers appears to undermine Heckerling's entitlement to principal credit for these films. Yet in each of these films, the most memorable elements are those which deviate from the original novel. In relation to Fast Times, for instance, William Paul observes that Heckerling's depiction of sex presents an "imbalance" between male and female perspectives that is absent from Cameron Crowe's eponymous novel, on which the film is based (Paul, 1994, 192).

Similarly, Lesley Stern argues that in Clueless the central "impulse ... to remake or refashion the world" (Stern in Naremore, 2000, 225) is symptomatic of a modernity which distinguishes the film from the novel, and which is epitomised by "generic choices that Heckerling has made". The incisive comic portrayal of contemporary Los Angeles life in Clueless is the result of Heckerling's decision to "turn an early nineteenth-century comedy of manners into a late twentieth-century teen movie", rather than involving a desire to "preserve a classic text" (Stern, 226). In the films of Amy Heckerling, the remodelling of established narrative scenarios around contemporary female perspectives is facilitated by Hollywood's tendency to privilege collaboration and intertextuality over individual authorial mastery. Heckerling's teen films are central to a dynamic relationship between female film directors and American entertainment cinema.

Valley Girl

Fast Times and Clueless exemplify the increasing involvement of women directors in Hollywood's production of films targeted at its "core audience of teenagers and young adults" (Kramer, 1999, 294). For instance, Heckerling's career has been paralleled by that of director Martha Coolidge, who also began her Hollywood career by directing teen films, such as Valley Girl (1983) and Joy of Sex (1984). More recently, the films of Penelope Spheeris (Wayne's World, 1992; The Little Rascals, 1994), Betty Thomas (The Brady Bunch Movie, 1995) and Gina Prince Bythewood (Love and Basketball, 2000) suggest a significant and continuing association between female directors and youth-
targeted genres. Indeed, Rachel Abramowitz observes that teen comedy was “the one genre permitted [to] tyro female directors” in early 1980s Hollywood. (Abramowitz, 2000, 144). Abramowitz explains that *Fast Times* was the product of “the cinematic age of the male adolescent ... the era of *Porky's* [Bob Clark, 1981] and *Risky Business* [Paul Brickman, 1983].” The teen genre was relatively available to female directors because it “was cheap and relatively commercial, and it didn't require stars. Teens were not considered quite full people in Hollywood ... and neither were women.” (Abramowitz, 144). Although the majority of teen films are still directed by men, the reputations of some high-profile female directors are now based upon youth-targeted films.

The relationship between women directors and youth films echoes a traditional association between “the mass/youth and the female spectator”, in which both young people and women are depicted as being incapable of resisting the lure or manipulations of the cinematic image. As Vicky Lebeau explains, this association stems from “a legacy of cultural pessimism” which has been criticised by feminists and popular culture scholars for denigrating the spectator at the levels of both “the social and the sexual” (Lebeau, 1995, 22). Yet the involvement of women directors in the production of youth-targeted films also problematises the theoretical stereotyping of young and/or female spectators. Indeed, the high profiles that films such as *Clueless* and *Wayne's World* have enjoyed suggest that the role of the female director of Hollywood youth entertainment is potentially an influential one, with a capacity to shape audience viewing habits as well as tastes in music, fashion and verbal slang.

Heckerling's career can be seen to follow an exemplary curve from low-budget films to high-profile box office successes. Within two decades of directing her first feature film, her acquisition of auteur status highlights the increasing significance of the relationship between female directors and Hollywood youth cinema. The association between Heckerling's work and the cultural status of low genres can be considered further with reference to comedy and contemporary feminism.

Post-feminism and Low Comedy

Heckerling's most well-known films link female characters with humour that belongs to a tradition of vulgar or low comedy. In his study of this comic tradition, William Paul demonstrates that “the vulgar” (Paul, 3) encompasses a range of comic styles, from the slapstick of Charlie Chaplin through the bawdy comedy of Lenny Bruce to the exploitative depiction of adolescent sexual strivings in *Porky* 's. Yet these examples all share a tendency to make
repeated references to the functions of the lower body, particularly the genitals and the digestive system. As Mikhail Bakhtin argues in his analysis of the writing of François Rabelais, comedy that places emphasis on the lower body has a capacity to satirise social privilege through affirming universal bodily functions, thereby celebrating a triumph of collectivity and abandon over authority (Bakhtin, 1984, 18-19). The term low comedy reflects both the class origins of this festive defiance of elitism, and the privileging of the lower body.

In Heckerling's films, comedy is frequently used as a means of rendering palatable potentially confrontational themes. In *National Lampoon's European Vacation*, for instance, the character of Clark Griswald (Chevy Chase) is positioned as an embodiment of cultural insensitivity and aggressive ignorance, qualities that often characterise stereotypes of American international tourists (3). This is exemplified by a sequence that takes place at a festival in Germany, in which Clark's participation in a traditional dance provokes a brawl that culminates with the Griswals being chased out of town by irate locals. In this sequence, the film comes close to presenting an overtly critical view of ignorant Americans (who were likely to form part of the film's audience), while using slapstick comedy to mask the subversive potential of this theme. For instance, a sequence in which the Griswals' overloaded car hurtles through a marketplace and becomes wedged in a narrow archway is, on the surface, more concerned with the family's foolishness than with their domineering attitudes to other cultures. Nevertheless, there is undeniable satiric power in the film's pervasive tendency to position the Griswals, especially Clark, as objects of ridicule. Heckerling's use of comedy as a means of rendering social tensions accessible to general audiences is symptomatic of the satiric potential of humour that privileges the physical over the verbal and spiritual.

In films such as *Fast Times* and *Look Who's Talking*, the use of low comedy can be seen to extend the cinematic depiction of female perspectives. Significantly, the cinematic tradition of low comedy has usually been dominated by male writers and performers: this is a tradition in which women have more often been positioned as victims of practical jokes than as active participants (Wood, 1986, 216). Yet the recent association between female film directors and vulgar comedy implies that women's increased socio-economic agency has contributed to enhancing female comic freedoms. Indeed, Heckerling aspired in her youth to become a writer for *Mad* magazine (Firstenberg and Heckerling, 1995, unpaginated). Subsequently, *Fast Times* has received recognition for employing the subgenre of vulgar teen comedy as a framework for focusing upon issues such as teenage pregnancy, abortion and promiscuity.
On one hand, *Fast Times* shares with earlier vulgar teen comedies, such as *Porky*'s, a tendency to construct comic scenarios around themes such as masturbation, oral sex and sexual fantasy. On the other hand, however, Heckerling's positioning of a female character, Stacy, as the agent of a sexual quest is fundamentally a "deviation" from the male-centred vulgar comedy tradition (Speed, 1995, 25). Robin Wood explains that the relationship of *Fast Times* to the vulgar teen comedy tradition involves fulfilling "certain bottom-line generic conditions that must be satisfied for such a film to get made at all", while bringing an "enlightened and intelligent" perspective to depictions of adolescent sexuality (Wood, 217). The films of Amy Heckerling use low comedy as a means of reconciling a male-centred generic framework with the portrayal of female perspectives.

The involvement of women in directing teen comedies has expanded cinematic depictions of gender through negotiating the reinvention of generic conventions. For instance, Christina Lane's account of Martha Coolidge's avowedly feminist approach to directing identifies the strategic significance of films which incorporate implicitly feminist themes while accommodating male perspectives:

> With an ... eye on the marketplace, Coolidge declares, 'When you have [a film with] overtly feminist themes or an overconcentration on female issues, ... men say they won't [see the film]. That kind of film isn't as successful as a movie that is driven by women wanting to go to it but that doesn't turn men off.' Coolidge's comments suggest
that she generally... targets an audience... of both women and men, and therefore she must balance the content and address of her films [to] accommodate several kinds of gendered viewing experiences. (Lane, 66)

In the production of *Valley Girl*, for instance, director Coolidge responded to the producer's demand that “we must have naked breasts in this movie four times” by devising scenarios in which the spectator is encouraged to identify with female characters (4). The relevance of this approach to understanding Heckerling's films is linked to the ways in which her films, like those of Coolidge, incorporate female perspectives into generic frameworks that were not traditionally thought to be feminine.

In Heckerling's films, women are as likely as men to actively participate in sequences involving low humour. A scene in *Fast Times* depicts the character of Linda (Phoebe Cates) using a carrot to demonstrate fellatio to the inexperienced Stacy. In *Johnny Dangerously* (Amy Heckerling, 1984) the protagonist screens an educational film which is intended to discourage the viewer from “abusing” himself. The film includes animated images of testicles taking baths and lifting weights. In *National Lampoon's European Vacation*, a sequence set in a British hotel depicts Clark mistakenly climbing into another woman's bed, while his wife invites a complete stranger to join her in the bath. In *Look Who's Talking*, a baby boy's response to glimpsing a buxom woman's cleavage is to exclaim, “Lunch!” *Clueless* conveys a wickedly satirical view of the quest for the ideal body through depicting facial plastic surgery as a routine experience for affluent American teenagers. The potential feminist significance of the use of low comedy in Heckerling's films can be elaborated with reference to recent debates concerning feminism's relationship to humour.
The involvement of women such as Heckerling, Coolidge, Penelope Spheeris ([*Wayne's World* [1996], *Senseless* [1998]]) and Betty Thomas ([*Private Parts* [1997]]) in directing low comedy films has been paralleled by the increasing interest of feminist film critics in mainstream entertainment genres. Yet the sizeable body of feminist film criticism that exists on popular screen genres, from soap opera to horror and pornography (5), tends to throw into relief the scarcity of feminist analysis of mainstream entertainment forms that derive amusement from references to taboo bodily functions (6). Indeed, there is unfortunate irony in the fact that the first sustained analysis of an Amy Heckerling film, Robin Wood's seminal 1986 examination of [*Fast Times*], appeared in a book in which gender is addressed through a concern with sexuality, rather than from a primarily feminist perspective (Wood, 215-221). Meanwhile, Jacinda Read has cited evidence that by 1991 there existed a widespread perception that feminist political views were incompatible with a sense of humour (Read, 2000, unpaginated). Within this context, films such as [*Fast Times* and *Valley Girl* can be viewed as the work of a minority of female film directors whose generic allegiances were somewhat at odds with the traditional feminist eschewal of low comedy. In recent years, however, the high profiles of films such as [*Wayne's World* and *Private Parts* suggest that the relationship between women and low comedy is changing. The integral involvement of women directors in the recent resurgence of Hollywood low comedy films has been paralleled by increasing debate concerning ways in which comic genres may be reconciled with feminist beliefs. A consideration of the potential feminist significance of broad humour can be developed in relation to the recent popularisation of feminist values.

Whereas second wave feminism was “anti-consumption, often in a quite puritanical manner” (Brunsdon, 1997, 84), the emergence of “post-feminism” can be linked to the widespread consumption of representations of women and feminist values. Indeed, post-feminism's shift away from 1970s feminism is fundamentally identified with the popularisation and de-politicisation of values associated with feminism. This shift is associated with an era in which feminism's earlier twin goals of attaining equal rights and undermining patriarchal society were succeeded by a “[m]ainstream feminism” which stood “unambiguously for [the] assimilation” of women into existing hierarchies, “with the proviso ... that women would somehow 'humanize' the positions into which they were assimilated.” (Ehrenreich, 1989, 215-216). The assimilation of feminist goals to the preoccupations of advanced capitalism also facilitated a wider dissemination of feminist beliefs. For instance, Jacinda Read's survey of reviews of
The Accused (Jonathan Kaplan, 1988) draws attention to the widespread influence of feminism upon “common-sense” beliefs, even though such beliefs are often not “attributed to feminism or identified as specifically feminist.” Paralleling the popularisation of feminist values, the use of low comedy in Heckerling's films helps to banish an outdated equation between female achievement and humorlessness by expanding the range of genres through which female perspectives can be conveyed.

Heckerling's films develop low comic scenarios around experiences which are specific to female characters. Whereas low comedy films such as Revenge of the Nerds (Jeff Kanew, 1984) and Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery (Jay Roach, 1997) privilege masculinity through employing locales such as fraternity houses and men's public toilets, Heckerling's films often emphasise female perspectives of experiences such as sex, menstruation, abortion, childbirth, weight fluctuations, exercise and breastfeeding. In Clueless, for instance, Cher (Alicia Silverstone) explains her absence from class by informing her teacher that she was “surfing the crimson wave”, a reference to menstruation. In National Lampoon's European Vacation, Audrey Griswald (Dana Hill) is overcome by a fear that gaining weight will alienate her boyfriend, Jack. When she believes that he has left her for another girl, she immediately commences an eating binge. In Look Who's Talking, the humorous depiction of Mollie's (Kirstie Alley) pregnancy is punctuated by scenes in which she vomits in the middle of a conversation, swigs stomach medicine and gulps several litres of apple juice. The development of comic scenarios around female perspectives of intimate or disconcerting bodily experiences is a recurrent motif of Heckerling's films.

Gendered uses of low comedy are highlighted in these films through an interplay between female and male bodily experiences. In Fast Times, for instance, the vulgar teen comedy's staple theme of masturbation is used to highlight conflicting gendered responses to sexual self-indulgence. The sequence in question depicts the character of

Brad (Judge Reinhold) masturbates in the bathroom while gazing out a window at Linda, who is by the swimming pool. Whereas other vulgar teen comedies, such as Porky's, devote minimal screen time to female perspectives, Fast Times here shifts the narrative’s focus away from male fantasy to provide a female perspective of Brad’s surreptitious behaviour. The sequence begins with a subjective evocation of Brad’s daydream, in which Linda removes her bikini top and offers herself to him. After the scene has established Brad’s fantasy, however, the camera shifts to a more objective view of the scenario by following Linda as she leaves the pool and enters the house in search of a cotton bud. The culmination of this shift is an embarrassing encounter that takes place between the two characters when Linda accidentally intrudes upon Brad in the bathroom. In this way, the scene’s initial complicity in Brad’s fantasy is undermined through being eclipsed by the banality of Linda’s quest, and by his embarrassed response to an unexpected encounter with the object of his fantasy. The association between the privileging of female characters and the production of a detached view of male fantasy in Fast Times prefigures Look Who’s Talking’s emphasis on female responses to bodily experiences.

In the films of Amy Heckerling, low comedy extends the screen depiction of female perspectives beyond traditionally female genres. Through incorporating female perspectives into a tradition which has usually focused upon males, her films can be seen to align feminist values with popular entertainment. A more sustained examination of the relationship between gender and low humour in Heckerling’s films can be developed with reference to the depiction of maternity in Look Who’s Talking.

Gender, maternity and body humour

In its focus upon female perspectives of the traditionally feminine concerns of pregnancy and parenthood, Look Who’s Talking can be seen to develop a style of low humour that is relatively unfettered by male-defined generic constraints. Look Who’s Talking’s positioning of maternity as a catalyst for humour can be linked to a long-standing relationship between women and comedy. In Bakhtin’s analysis of low humour in the work of Rabelais, for instance, the bodies of pregnant women are positioned as emblems of the folk carnival’s capacity to function “as a site of insurgency” (Russo, 1995, 62). Mary Russo explains that pregnant women in Bakhtin’s work embody the themes of excess, transition and rebirth, which are central to carnivalesque “grotesque realism”:
The grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change. The grotesque body is opposed to the Classical body which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism; the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the world. Bakhtin finds his concept of the grotesque embodied in ... terracotta figurines of senile, pregnant hags. (Russo, 62-63)

Moreover, Bakhtin's assertion that “the old hags are laughing” (Russo, 63) has been embraced by feminist film theory as an early configuration of female defiance through laughter.

Kathleen Rowe draws upon Bakhtin's work in her study of the feminist value of contemporary screen comedy. Central to her analysis is the figure of the unruly woman, who is defined as an “ambivalent figure of female outrageousness and transgression with roots in the narrative forms of comedy and the social practices of carnival” (Rowe, 1995, 10). Rowe explains that the unruly woman is willing to offend and be
offensive. ... [H]
er sexuality is
neither evil and
uncontrollable ...
nor sanctified and
denied like that
of the virgin/
madonna. ... [T]
he unruly woman
often enjoys a
reprieve from ...
fates that often
seem inevitable to
women under
patriarchy,
because her home
is comedy and the
carnivalesque, the
realm of fantasy
and inversion
where, for a time
at least, the
ordinary world can
be stood on its
head. ” (Rowe, 10-11)

Central to the unruly woman's embrace of the capacity to offend is the use of comedy as a means of assertion in the face of the discouragement of female agency and growth. Indeed, Russo observes that Bakhtin's portrayal of the defiant laughter of the pregnant woman is simultaneously “loaded with ... connotations of fear and loathing around the biological processes of reproduction and of aging.” (Russo, 63). The use of low humour in Look Who's Talking suggests a defiance of the difficulties of single motherhood, in a society in which individualism and materialism have eclipsed the traditional carnivalesque values of collectivity and regeneration.

In Look Who's Talking, the humour of the female protagonist is depicted as a response to moments of despair. In particular, Mollie's responses to childbirth and child-rearing involve the recurrent use of humour which is dark, variously angry and pessimistic, suggesting the recourse to humour as a means of counteracting fear or depression. When Mollie is in labour, for example, her response to a midwife's
response that she slow her breathing is to roar, “Fuck my breathing!” in a voice which is dubbed to allude to that of the possessed girl in The Exorcist (William Friedkin, 1973). Indeed, the association between the stresses of motherhood and the grotesque takes on a recurrent significance when Mollie apologises to her infant son, Mikey for looking “like I could play the lead in Night of the Living Dead [George Romero, 1968]”. Fundamental to the comic role of the grotesque in Look Who's Talking is Mollie's fear of choosing an inappropriate man to be Mikey's father.

The likening of adult masculinity to a childlike state can be viewed as an extension of the grotesque in this film. Sarah Harwood has positioned Look Who's Talking as a central instance of the “highly privileged” status that childhood held in 1980s Hollywood films, as well as in the wider society (Harwood, 1997, 124-5). Yet the significance of the theme of childhood in this film is by no means limited to the depiction of biological infancy. Indeed, Harwood notes that the theme of childhood in 1980s films often takes the form of

the adult
'child' [who is]
represented within
a familial
structure, still
working through
the Oedipal
scenarios of their
own maturation
while initiating
that of the next
generation ([a
theme] represented
in about a third
of the top box-
office films of the
decade)" (Harwood, 124)

Within this context, a tendency for male characters to be positioned as embodiments of suspended development has been attributed to screen entertainment industries' attempts to attract male viewers while avoiding stereotypes that might offend other social groups: “As long as men are in power, they are the one group that [screen industries] can ridicule without fear of
reprisal." (Gates, 2000, 1-3). In *Look Who's Talking*, low comedy is crucial to the likening of contemporary masculinity to a childlike state.

The two main prospective fathers for Mikey, James (John Travolta) and Albert (George Segal), are depicted as being slaves to instant gratification and spontaneous sexual urges. For instance, Albert's admission that he can't make a commitment to the pregnant Mollie because he is "going through a selfish phase" is underscored by the hedonism of his repeated exclamation that "I'm gonna burst if I don't kiss you soon!". Indeed, in one scene Mollie dreams that Albert's head explodes because she refuses to comply with his urges. Equally, Mollie's perception of James as an irresponsible thrill-seeker is reinforced in a scene in which he shows her how to fly an aeroplane and, in mid-air, jokingly invites her to place her hand on his "stick". The film's theme of suspended male development is underscored by the depiction of Mollie's father, who has no dialogue and is shown laughing inanely while turning the pages of a magazine. Yet *Look Who's Talking"s* use of low comedy in depicting female perspectives also envisages the possibility of a positive interplay between gendered comic perspectives.

The association in this film between maternity, comedy and despair is juxtaposed with a comic interaction between the dark humour of Mollie and the lighter, more buoyant humour of the central male characters. When Mollie goes into labour and is driven to the hospital by James, for example, his attempts to use humour as a means of lifting her spirits establish a dynamic which is subsequently repeated throughout the film. Indeed, this comic interplay becomes fundamental to the sexual tension which develops between Mollie and James, and which culminates in their romantic union. An example of the film's linking of humour and reconciliation is a sequence in which James shows up at Mollie's apartment after Mikey's birth. Despite Mollie's resistance to his flirtations, James here seeks to cheer her up again. Indeed, Mollie relaxes to the point where she pauses to watch James show Mikey how to add milk to a cup of coffee. While James is taking a sip of the coffee, she chooses to reveal that the milk he is drinking is breast milk. This revelation not only forms a punchline for the scene, but prompts an outburst from James that amuses Mikey, thus establishing a precedent for James to visit Mollie and Mikey again. In this way, *Look Who's Talking" builds upon its critique of contemporary masculinity through envisaging low comedy as a means of alleviating tensions between the sexes.

The films of Amy Heckerling have attracted large audiences to narratives which centre upon female characters, while developing an association between women and low comedy. Her films are pivotal to a growing association between female
film directors and youth-targeted Hollywood films. While this association is
redolent of a traditional hierarchy of film genres, Heckerling's teen films are also
products of a period in which this genre has acquired greater cultural value.
Moreover, her work helps to counteract the male domination of low screen
comedy through positioning women as active participants in comic scenarios. Far
from being limited by genres which traditionally lack prestige, Heckerling's films
use comedy as a means of communicating, through entertainment, diverse
experiences of pleasure and pain.

This article was refereed.

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Endnotes:

1. Joel Ryan, "How Fast Times Flies", Swing, July/August 1997, p. 69. Fast Times was made for US$4.5 million and
grossed over US$27 million. Figures obtained from the Internet Movie
Database and The Numbers, respectively.

2. See, for example, Tom Doherty, "Clueless Kids", Cineaste, vol. XXI, no. 4, 1995, pp. 14-16; Lesley
Stern, "Emma in Los Angeles: Remaking the Book and the City", in James Naremore (ed.), Film
Adaptation, Athlone, London, 2000, pp. 221-238; and Jenny Piston, "Teenage Consumption, Satire, and Class Struggle
in Amy Heckerling's Clueless", The Projector Booth: An Online Film Discussion Community

3. National Lampoon's European Vacation's portrayal of international tourism as a minefield of animosity between nationalities
is echoed in Heckerling's account of location shooting for the film: "It was just horrible because we'd hop from one country to another to another
and in every place the crew was new. They didn't care about us, they
didn't care about the project. ... [You would] go to a place where you say,
okay if we can shoot in front of this monument we could do this, and then..."
if we build a this or a that we could do a joke about blah blah. And then you come back on the day you're supposed to shoot, and then they've put everything in scaffolding. ... And suddenly everybody needs bribes, but nothing's going to change." (Firstenberg and Heckerling, 1995 [unpaginated].) 


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