CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Femininity, ageing and performativity in the work of Amy Heckerling
Authors	Smith, Frances
Publication date	2015-11-01
Original Citation	Smith, F. (2015) 'Femininity, ageing and performativity in the work of Amy Heckerling', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 10. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.10.03
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.10.03
Rights	© 2015, The Author(s) - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Download date	2026-11-07 05:02:51
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/5980

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

alphaville
JOURNAL OF FILM AND SCREEN MEDIA

Femininity, Ageing and Performativity in the Work of Amy Heckerling

Frances Smith, University College London

Abstract: *This article concerns the complex negotiation of ageing and femininity in Amy Heckerling's two most recent films*: I Could Never Be Your Woman *(2007) and* Vamps *(2012). These films are positioned as part of the contemporary postfeminist media culture, (Gill, 2007) noting the scrutiny received by the ageing female body, and its changing status under the prevailing cultural norms of femininity. However, Heckerling's films also demonstrate a sense of play with these gender norms, and so calls to be read also in terms of Judith Butler's theorisation of performativity (1990; 1993; 2004). This article contends that Heckerling's representation of liminality and indeterminacy—in her teen movies, and later work alike—provides a way for women to carve out an autonomous identity that humorously demonstrates the absurdity of mediatised constructions of femininity. Her work, then, is more complex than has hitherto been acknowledged, and the piece concludes by calling for the director and screenwriter to be repositioned as a significant female voice in 21st century screen media.*

A pivotal scene occurs towards the middle of Amy Heckerling's *I Could Never Be Your Woman* (2007) when television producer Rosie (Michelle Pfeiffer) enters the reception area of a TV studio where two other producers are discussing casting. As one (Peter Polycarpou) proposes a series of accomplished female actors, the other (Mackenzie Crook) dismisses them variously as "hags", or, in the case of actor Emma Thompson, "Brit hag". Even those women who have taken steps to stall the ageing process do not escape this scrutiny. They in turn are ridiculed for their "excessive", "pointless", or "insurmountable" plastic surgery. We do not discover who the producers eventually choose, as an incensed Rosie grabs one of them by the chin, reminding them of the varied and numerous accolades accumulated by those women they have so quickly rejected. In common with much of Heckerling's work, *I Could Never Be Your Woman* depicts identities in flux. In particular, her latest films explore the double-bind faced by ageing women in a postfeminist media climate. That is, if women have not visibly worked on their appearance, they can be derided as "hags". If, however, the labour on their appearance is all too apparent, they open themselves up for derision for having so vainly attempted to retain their youthfulness.

This article examines the portrayal of femininity and ageing in two recent films written and directed by Amy Heckerling: *I Could Never Be Your Woman* and *Vamps* (2012). In so doing, I will demonstrate how Judith Butler's conceptualisations of performativity and recognition might consider the question of how age and the ageing body affects the construction of gender identity. Although progress has been made since the release of her first feature – *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) – in the early 1980s, as a prominent female screenwriter and director of mainstream comedy films, Heckerling is still a relatively rare figure in Hollywood.[1] As such, this article's secondary aim is to highlight the work of this longstanding female practitioner of contemporary Hollywood genre cinema.

I have stated that Heckerling's films are produced within a postfeminist media culture, a term that requires some unpacking. For the purposes of this article, I draw on Rosalind Gill's conceptualisation of a "postfeminist sensibility" that characterises the contemporary media landscape (148). For Gill, this multifaceted sensibility should itself be the object of analysis, rather than serving as an analytic lens for something else. The postfeminist sensibility, Gill argues, possesses a number of abiding features, among which an "emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline … [and] a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment" (149). Within this highly contradictory framework of freely chosen labour and extensive surveillance women must be seen to take steps to lessen the impact of their ageing, while this labour is at once presented as freely chosen and disavowed.

Concerns around ageing, and its attendant mitigation, are particularly heightened in postfeminist media culture, which, as Diane Negra argues, "thrives on anxiety about ageing" (12). Idealisation of youthfulness, particularly in Hollywood, certainly predates the emergence of postfeminism. Yet the primacy accorded to youth and, especially, the figure of the girl has become particularly acute of late. Tracing the symbolic currency of the girl in contemporary culture, Sarah Projansky's study of "spectacular girlhood" observes how even adult women are persistently infantilised as "girls" (20). The postfeminist valorisation of girlhood provides a further differentiating factor from second-wave feminism, whose advocates are presumed to be of the past and, thus, older. In consequence, while "girl" retains dismissive overtones, to *continue* to be read as a "girl" in the postfeminist signifying economy also brings with it a currency that many women strive to maintain.

Amy Heckerling: Postfeminist Auteur?

This article's focus on a number of works by one single director warrants at least some consideration of that most patriarchal of institutions, the auteur. Significantly, not one of the directors Andrew Sarris identifies in his "pantheon" as worthy of the label of auteur is female, a fact that goes unacknowledged in his work. To date, Kathryn Bigelow remains the only woman to have secured an Academy Award for Best Director,[2] while Heather Savigny and Helen Warner ruefully observe how each successive year brings with it a female-helmed success story that seems to foretell an increased, lasting interest in films directed by, or aimed at, women, while the status quo remains largely unchanged (112). In this climate of undervaluing female filmmakers, even beginning to consider Heckerling as an auteur assumes the status of a feminist act.

Heckerling's specialisation in traditionally low-status genres, namely the teen film and the romantic comedy, began to emerge in the early 1980s, when critics such as Robin Wood questioned whether it was possible, or indeed desirable, for women to produce mainstream films, given that such conventional fare is always already embedded in patriarchal ideology (186).[3] Certainly, there are elements of Heckerling's work, particularly in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, that bear the hallmarks of the era's more chauvinistic material. However, I will demonstrate that Heckerling succeeds in reworking and rearticulating Hollywood genre cinema in ways that are sympathetic to women.

In contrast to Bigelow, who has always sought to deny the significance of her gender as a filmmaker, Heckerling frequently decries the sexism of the film industry, while on screen her work interrogates how women negotiate the demands of normative femininity.[4] I remain sceptical of essentialist conceptions of female authorship, wherein women are cast at a

remove from mainstream culture by virtue of their femaleness. Nevertheless, Heckerling has succeeded in incorporating a female-oriented slant within largely restrictive narrative frameworks. Even in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High,* which was allocated to Heckerling by Universal Studios, she is invested in the female characters to the extent that Wood deems the film's conclusion as a corrective to the exclusive focus on the male characters in the closing scenes of *American Graffiti* (186). In the literal and classical sense, then, Heckerling can be regarded as a director of "women's films".

Heckerling's films often portray key, transitional moments in women's lives. The two works for which she remains best known, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *Clueless* (1995), portray lives of teenagers, figures who are distinguished by their liminality, in so far as their identities are understood not yet to be fully consolidated into adulthood. Outside of her teen films, Heckerling's work demonstrates an interest in key moments of change and negotiation in female identities. In the years between *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *Clueless*, Heckerling directed her highest-grossing film to date, *Look Who's Talking* (1990), in which a woman comes to terms with her new identity as a mother, and learns to balance the competing demands of a career and a fulfilling romantic life. Not coincidentally, the film's release followed the birth of Heckerling's own daughter, Mollie, in 1985. The combination of screenplays that mirror developments in Heckerling's life and recurring acting and backstage personnel, among whom Wallace Shawn, Alicia Silverstone, Paul Rudd, Kirstie Alley, and costume designer Mona May, combine to create the sense of a particular "Heckerling universe" throughout her work.

It is perhaps a consequence of Heckerling's increasing sense of precarity as an ageing woman in Hollywood that her most recent work has staged a meditation on the politics of ageing and femininity. While *I Could Never Be Your Woman* focuses on the business of halting the ageing process within the heightened environment of the California television studio, *Vamps* focuses on the lives of two vampires who, following the logic of vampirism, do not physically age. With meagre box-office takings of just over $3000 ("*Vamps*"), *Vamps* failed to capture the interest of fans of the all-conquering *Twilight* franchise (2008–2012), which concluded in the same year. Despite its low-budget aesthetic and camp overtones, *Vamps* merits our attention for its ability to interrogate how desirable an eternally youthful appearance without effort—seemingly the holy grail of postfeminist culture—might actually be.

It is possible to attribute Heckerling's recent turn to television to the low box office takings of her latter two films.[5] *I Could Never Be Your Woman* and *Vamps* certainly endured unusually difficult journeys to the cinema screen, with Heckerling citing problems with inexperienced producers and snags in securing viable distribution rights.[6] Although it is certainly true that these two films do not possess the quality of Heckerling's most successful work, even their most waspish reviewers do concede that the films constitute effective, if somewhat clumsily conceived (particularly in the case of *Vamps*) treatises on the politics of maintaining currency as an older woman.[7] Indeed, Heckerling's work retains a sly wit that allows her to interrogate normative gendered identities and expectations as women move between different roles throughout their lives.

Both *I Could Never Be Your Woman* and *Vamps* retain a playful ambivalence towards the two primary attitudes to the ageing process, namely acceptance and manipulation. While notions of "ageing well" and "age-appropriate behaviour" are put forward by a number of characters, these are certainly not the accepted truisms that are constructed as in other

contemporary Hollywood fare that explore similar themes.[8] While Heckerling portrays her characters' fear of their imminent physical or cultural obsolescence, she also celebrates the choices made by women to defy the "natural". Such resistance is apparent in *I Could Never Be Your Woman,* in which Rosie is plagued by insistent, aggressive fantasy figure Mother Nature (Tracey Ullman), who states that her "insides are rotting away", confronting her with the inevitability of the ageing body. Her emphasis on gendered behaviour as "natural" and, it is implied, immutable, corresponds to the reassertion of sexual difference as "natural" that Gill observes in postfeminist culture (158). However, as Mother Nature's shrill claims are increasingly ignored, *I Could Never Be Your Woman* further reinforces Heckerling's distinct sense of play with gender identities and expectations.

Heckerling's playful attitude to gender and age norms can be seen to reflect Judith Butler's theorisation of gender as performative. Drawing from Lacanian and Foucauldian theory alike, Butler's complex work warrants more consideration than I can grant here. However, what is significant for this article is that, for Butler, endlessly repeated "acts, gestures and desires" in fact constitute the very gender identity from which they purport to emanate (85). Gender, then, is not a natural phenomenon as Mother Nature would have it, but one that is constructed and, perhaps most importantly, subject to change. Significant too is Butler's claim that despite a repeated compulsion to occupy a position on one side of a gendered binary or another, the idealised masculinity or femininity envisaged by this binary is impossible to embody (60). The impossibility of (re)encountering the gendered ideal is particularly important in the analysis of ageing identities, in which the reversal of the ageing process can never occur.

A further argument of Butler's that has significant implications for this article is the claim that gender identity is structured through recognition, without which continued viability as a subject is not possible. In order for this mutual process of recognition to occur, Butler maintains that there must be a shared set of norms through which the subject can be validated (31). Complicating matters, the ageing female body challenges existing norms of femininity since, as Imelda Whelehan points out, such norms remain "predicated on youthfulness and fecundity" (qtd. in Gwynne and Muller 89).

Butler's contention that gender norms are contingent and arbitrary is demonstrated in the didacticism of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *Clueless*. The former portrays how ideas of adult, gendered behaviour come to be understood and assimilated in a comically misguided way by teenagers. While Stacy (Jennifer Jason Leigh) is advised by her older, and allegedly more sexually experienced, friend Linda (Phoebe Cates), Mike (Robert Romanus) takes Mark (Brian Backer) under his wing in order to help him pursue Stacy. For Jean Schwind, such advice is "cool coaching"; that is, "when a more experienced or savvy friend […] imparts vital information to a peer about how to avoid looking or acting like a loser" (1020). The film derives comedy from the appalling suggestions given by the characters. While Linda recommends that Stacy succumb to the advances of twenty-six-year-old Ron (D.W. Brown), Mike instructs Mark to act aggressively around Stacy, with predictably bad results. In emphasising the dubious origins of this advice, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* can be seen to call attention to the absurdity of normative gender roles.

Clueless follows *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* in its portrayal of a didactic relationship between the film's teenage characters. In this case, however, Cher (Alicia Silverstone) and Dionne (Stacey Dash) make over new arrival Tai (Brittany Murphy), whose grunge clothing marks her as "clueless". For Alice Leppert, Cher's language recalls the

sisterly, imperative tone of teenage fashion magazines (131). Quoting Angela McRobbie's research on British teen magazine, *Jackie* (1964–1993), Leppert notes that, despite the familiar and chatty tone adopted by such publications, they nevertheless make clear that the routines, products and rituals they prescribe are "absolutely necessary" (McRobbie qtd. in Leppert 132). By taking up this language, while also making clear that Cher, as the mouthpiece for these views, holds a somewhat ignorant worldview, Heckerling is seen once again to interrogate the validity of the imperatives to which so many young women subscribe.

The film's advocacy of self-scrutiny and negotiation of traditional gender roles positions *Clueless* as part of postfeminist culture. Nevertheless, Heckerling's film succeeds in highlighting the ludicrousness of the demands to conform to a particular construction of femininity. Although Cher is never overtly mocked, *Clueless* does draw attention to the vanity of her claim that, as "someone older" than Tai (by all of a month), Cher has the necessary authority to advise her. Cher and Dionne's—and later, Tai's—adherence to a particular construction of femininity is undeniably shown to have its social rewards. Yet, by showing that their popularity and style are the work of a precise labour on the self, the film can be seen to denaturalise their femininity and reveal it as a performative construction that is available for manipulation. As the following sections demonstrate, this interest in highlighting the complex and contradictory demands placed on women, particularly as they enter transitional moments in their lives, is a central feature of Heckerling's later work.

Defying Mother Nature in *I Could Never Be Your Woman*

As noted earlier, Heckerling's two most recent films turn their attention from the construction of idealised femininity in the heightened environment of the American high school to the portrayal of the ageing process. As with *Look Who's Talking,* there are autobiographical resonances in *I Could Never Be Your Woman*, as Rosie's position as a producer for the fictional teen show *You Go Girl* echoes Heckerling's own stint as a writer and producer for the first series of *Clueless* (1996–1999), a television series based on the eponymous film.

Although principally set in the television studio, *I Could Never Be Your Woman* begins with a domestic scene that reveals the impact of postfeminist media culture on masculine identities. When Rosie's former husband Nathan (Jon Lovitz) drops off their daughter Izzie (Saorise Ronan), it emerges that Nathan has left Rosie to marry a younger woman and that, as a consequence, he feels some pressure to maintain a youthful appearance. In this scene, for instance, he wears a baggy singlet and shorts, with a baseball cap worn backwards, a conspicuously juvenile ensemble rendered all the more so by their use in *You Go Girl*. In contrast to the show's young actors, though, Nathan's baseball cap is worn to conceal the dressing on his newly installed hair plugs. Elsewhere, Nathan badgers a television producer to tell him he looks thirty-two (he is forty-nine) and by the end of the film has procured a chin implant "because then you don't need a facelift". Although much of this is played for laughs, there is a degree of pathos in Nathan's vanity and the invasive procedures he feels required to undergo to retain his currency as the vigorous partner of a younger woman.



Figure 1: Nathan (Jon Lovitz) and Rosie (Michelle Pfeiffer) demonstrate the impossibility of retaining their youthful appearance in *I Could Never Be Your Woman* (Amy Heckerling, 2007). High Fliers Films Ltd., 2007. Screenshot.

Lovitz's open, pudgy face, short stature and high-pitched voice mark Nathan as feminised, allowing him to be positioned as an available object to be made over in a way that, until relatively recently, had been reserved for women. Since the early 2000s, television shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003–2007) and *Ten Years Younger* (2004–Present) have sought to improve men's appearances (and, typically, other aspects of their lives too) in order to secure a relationship with a female partner. The two principal assumptions that underpin this process are expressly postfeminist. Firstly, these programmes presume that women no longer require a (male) romantic partner for their financial security. Secondly, it is assumed that, in consequence, women have sexual desires and requirements that must be met in order to attract and maintain their interest. What is also clear, though, is that, just as the ageing woman confounds existing norms of femininity that are predicated on youthfulness and fecundity, so too does the feminisation accrued by ageing masculinity complicate conventional ideas of masculinity. The absolute distinction between masculinity and femininity that Butler theorises is thus troubled by these ageing identities, and attempts to mitigate the effects of ageing.

Like Rosie, Nathan is a television producer, a medium that mandates extreme scrutiny over one's age; and yet, in *I Could Never Be Your Woman,* television appears to provide a space in which aged identities might be manipulated. Forty-year-old Rosie's position on *You Go Girl* illustrates Timothy Shary's contention that media aimed at teenagers is never produced by the audience at whom it is aimed (2005: 2). While Heckerling was widely praised for her ability to keep her finger on the pulse of contemporary teenage trends,[9] *I Could Never Be Your Woman* sees Rosie soliciting advice from Izzie on current teen vernacular. In this way, Heckerling's film arguably demonstrates the inauthenticity of teen culture, as one that is created and recirculated by the older generation.

Such an assimilation of younger identities also occurs at the level of the film's casting. In *I Could Never Be Your Woman*, Rosie is forty years old, yet she is played by Michelle Pfeiffer, an actor closer to her fiftieth than her fortieth birthday, while thirty-seven-year-old Paul Rudd plays twenty-nine-year-old Adam, who is himself playing the role of a seventeen year-old in *You Go Girl*. There is a double play with ageing in the case of the show's star, Brianna, who is played by one of the stars of *Clueless,* Stacey Dash. While Brianna is supposedly in her mid-twenties, and struggling to maintain her positioning as a teenager in the show, Dash was herself thirty-nine years old. Dash's case is an intriguing one, since her role(s) in the fictional *You Go Girl* and in *I Could Never Be Your Woman* alike

implicitly recall her work in *Clueless,* with which, like costar Alicia Silverstone, she remains indelibly associated. As discussed previously, Projanksy argues that women are "girled" in postfeminist culture (20). Significantly, too, she also claims that girlhood "clings" to women who have attained celebrity in childhood (Projansky 18). The play with ages in *You Go Girl* and *I Could Never Be Your Woman* demonstrates that, while there is social capital in being positioned as youthful, it can also inhibit and restrict the roles for which an actor is cast.

The film's backstage setting allows *I Could Never Be Your Woman* to shed light on the construction and, thus, the inauthenticity of star images. Shortly after Adam is cast as a clumsy, nerdish character in *You Go Girl*, Rosie and the show's stylist (Graham Norton) set about creating publicity images to promote their new star. A brief makeover ensues as Adam tries on a series of outfits and styles at the conclusion of which even he is surprised by the perfection of his appearance. The show's mercurial star Brianna Minx is also portrayed as wholly inauthentic. Asked to contribute to an anti-smoking campaign, she hands her cigarette to an assistant, before looking seriously into the camera to state: "I would never, ever, date a smoker," after which she resumes smoking again, seemingly oblivious to this contradictory behaviour. Significantly, such moments of inauthenticity are conveyed on screen, allowing the supposed integrity and coherence of the star image to be interrogated.

It is Brianna who inadvertently articulates the central paradox of performativity, ageing and mutability. When faced with the imminent cancellation of *You Go Girl* in favour of less expensive reality programming, she complains about the arrival of younger, teenage stars, protesting: "I was a teenager before any of them." Brianna's evident frustration speaks to the impossibility of instantiating idealised gender that Butler describes. For Butler, despite the continued compulsion to cite the norms of idealised masculinity and femininity, these are always impossible to embody wholly. In Brianna's case, her status as an idealised figure of teen femininity in *You Go Girl* encourages her belief that she can, in fact, embody these norms. However, her ability to do so is compromised by her positioning as a woman in her twenties, where the scope of gender norms is different from those of a teenage girl. That the teen identity she claims is no longer appropriate to her age is indicated through costume, as the girlish, frilled, pink cropped tops and short shirts conversely work to emphasise the adulthood of their wearer. The inauthenticity of the set of *You Go Girl* provides a means of demonstrating how idealisations of gender are not static and fixed, as Butler theorises, but morph and change not only according to prevailing cultural norms, but also to the age of the subject who attempts to embody them.

The inauthentic environment portrayed in *I Could Never Be Your Woman* allows the film to undercut postfeminist media culture's valorisation of the supposedly "natural". As we have seen, "natural" comes to stand in for labour that has been disavowed. Not to work on one's appearance, is to be regarded as a "hag". Alternatively, to make visible the work involved in resisting the ravages of the ageing process is to be regarded as hopelessly vain. The unspoken ideal, then, would be a woman who engages in some degree of subtle cosmetic surgery, and who conspicuously disavows any such labour on the self.

In *I Could Never Be Your Woman,* the natural is embodied by Mother Nature, whose voiceover at the beginning of the film aligns the natural world with traditional, clearly defined gender roles, a status quo that, she claims, has been undermined by the arrival of the "baby boomers". This "selfish" generation are depicted in a montage linked by dissolves of various women whose achievements distinguish them from their supposed biological destinies as wives and mothers. Mother Nature, then, is positioned as tacitly antifeminist, and

it is in this context that she introduces Rosie jogging around a track or, as she puts it, "trying to moisturise her way back to thirty". By aligning the natural world with ideologies that restrict women's freedom, Heckerling's film can be seen to demonstrate both the contingency of the supposedly natural, and the need for reform of these prevailing, gendered ideas.

Mother Nature's arguments initially persuade Rosie that her relationship with Adam is doomed. When the couple have lunch at a restaurant soon after Adam's first episodes of *You Go Girl* have been broadcast, their waitress (Cassandra Bell) approaches him flirtatiously and asks him to pass on her details to the television studio. While Adam seems not to be receptive to her charms, the film cuts to a point-of-view long shot of the waitress as she serves coffee to other customers. This shot scale brings the contours of the waitress's body to Rosie's—and the viewer's—attention, and Mother Nature intervenes to note how much more suited in age the waitress would be for Adam, observing how her "perfect hip-to-waist ratio radiates fertility". Mother Nature not only voices conventional ideas of gender, but also Rosie's conscience, as a result of which she briefly ends her relationship with Adam.



Figure 2: Mother Nature (Tracey Ullman) observes how the waitress' "perfect hip-to-waist ratio radiates fertility" in *I Could Never Be Your Woman* (Amy Heckerling, 2007). High Fliers Films Ltd., 2007. Screenshot.

By the end of the film, though, Rosie has grown in confidence, such that she is able finally to dismiss Mother Nature's criticisms. Asking "what's so good about nature anyway?" Rosie lists the problems brought about by earthquakes and famine and enumerates the virtues of the modern world. Indeed, Rosie defends the complexities of human relationships that have moved beyond the simple designation of dominant stag and fertile doe. As *I Could Never Be Your Woman* concludes with Rosie's resolution to "stay passionate and enjoy life" with Adam, Heckerling can be seen to allow her character to refuse her recognition as middle-aged, and to carve out an identity that both acknowledges the numerical fact of her age, while disentangling her behaviours from that biological immutability.

"Staying Young is Getting Old": Refusing Eternal Youth

As in *I Could Never Be Your Woman,* refusing recognition is a central theme of *Vamps,* in which a quirk of government bureaucracy threatens to expose the vampires to agents of Homeland Security who are intent on eradicating them. Despite *Vamps'* focus on vampirism, the film's central concerns are nostalgia, ageing, and cinema stardom. Being

vampires, the film's two protagonists, Goody (Alicia Silverstone) and Stacy (Krysten Ritter), are spared from the physical ravages of ageing that Mother Nature so loved to describe in *I Could Never Be Your Woman*. However, it is precisely because of their effortlessly youthful appearances that the pair must keep abreast of popular trends and youth culture in order to pass as plausible night-school university students, and thus evade the notice of the authorities. In contrast to Butler's theorisation, in which recognition is necessary to survival, in *Vamps* the characters' survival depends precisely on their not being recognised as vampires. The focus of ageing thus shifts from management of the physical inevitability of ageing, as in *I Could Never Be Your Woman*, to carefully controlling the vocabulary, fashion and tastes of the film's elderly protagonists.

The emphasis on bodily gestures and choices of vocabulary call attention to the endless, repeated labour of gender performativity. Just as Butler theorises that idealised gender can never be fully instantiated, so *Vamps* deftly shows the ways in which the ever-changing vicissitudes of fashion render a viable "youthful" identity increasingly perilous. Since Stacy is considerably younger than Goody, it is typically the former character who polices Goody's less successful choices. Indeed, Goody is irritated to discover that a favoured pair of trousers are now deemed "mom jeans", providing an all-too-clear signal of one's age. Stacy is similarly dismissive of an ensemble that Goody defends as worn by actor Keira Knightley, and is aghast that Goody is not able to discern the difference between clothing donned for a role in a period drama and that which the actor might wear in her free time. Further, Stacy is critical of Goody's anachronistic exclamations, such as "spiffy". Instead, she advises Goody to try abbreviations, such as "GTG", as a way of communicating a need to leave. Throughout the film it becomes clear that, while Stacy enjoys her belonging within the youth culture community, Goody finds this positioning increasingly restrictive and demanding.



Figure 3: Stacy (Krysten Ritter) advises Goody (Alicia Silverstone) on youth culture in *Vamps* (Amy Heckerling, 2012). Metrodome Distribution Ltd., 2012. Screenshot.

Vamps acquires considerable poignancy from its casting of Alicia Silverstone in the lead role. As we have seen, Silverstone rose to fame as a result of her starring role in *Clueless* and, like Dash, is seared in the popular imagination as a teenage girl.[10] Goody's situation, having to ape the mores of youth culture when she is several decades older, can be seen to provide a (somewhat extreme) reflection on Silverstone's star persona. Indeed, Silverstone participates in anniversary events and nostalgia screenings that arguably work to contain the star as an image of eternal youthfulness. Further, *Vamps* sends up the imperative to "age

well"—to labour on oneself without obvious effort, as Goody encounters a former boyfriend (a considerably weathered Richard Lewis) who is astonished to see that, unlike him, she hasn't "aged a day" since he last saw her in 1965. Although Goody initially deceives him by pretending to be her daughter, the fact that her continually youthful appearance is initially perceived to be possible, or indeed desirable, presents a commentary on the narrow range of feminine identities sanctioned within postfeminist culture.

Within *Vamps,* cinema stardom is connected with vampirism. On one level, Goody's love of the work of James Cagney further reinforces her lack of connection with contemporary culture. What is more, though, *Vamps* shows how, like vampirism, the cinema screen is able to halt the ageing process. Certainly, the films (or, the "flickers", as Goody calls them) capture Cagney's eternally youthful image even as the actor himself has been dead for a number of years. Cinema can therefore be seen to grant Cagney the power that the film's vampires possess: to be both dead and not-dead simultaneously, if only within the confines of his onscreen performances. *Vamps* makes clear the connection between vampirism and cinema's power to arrest the effects of ageing.

The central mission of the two leading players—to evade the authorities—is hampered by their "stem" Cisserus (Sigourney Weaver), who converted Goody and Stacy in order to serve as fashion models. Of course, since vampires have no reflection, mirrors are useless to her. In her sexual voraciousness, vanity and bloodlust, Cisserus embodies the threat represented by the older woman. Indeed, she pursues a Hispanic actor with whom she has become enamoured having watched him in a television soap opera and is surprised when he turns her down. Closer to home, she idly orders a "pizza guy" whom she kills at her apartment. Any pathos for the character, who loves fashion yet cannot see her own reflection, is marred by her reckless killing, which contrasts with the more cautious habits of the film's other vampires, who subsist on road kill. Cisserus can be seen to represent the liminality of the older woman, one who is not yet (and, in this case, will never be) of old age, but one who is in excess of biological norms of femininity.

Like the images on the cinema screen, then, *Vamps* portrays characters who never age and never die. The vampires' eternal life brings to the fore the endlessness of the repeated labour of individual bodily gestures, which taken together constitute gender identity in Butler's theorisation. In contrast to the buoyant tone meted out in *Clueless,* which presents such labour as a source of pleasure, *Vamps* shows how such endless labour on the self can be wearying. There will always be new fashions, technologies and vocabulary to keep up with, any slip of which would give away the vampires' identity as imposters in youth. Goody and Stacy eventually conclude that "staying young is getting old" and resolve to kill Cisserus, which, the film tells us, will restore the pair to their true ages, one hundred and seventy-one and forty respectively. Goody initiates this plan in full knowledge that killing Cisserus will bring about her imminent death, thereby revealing the extent to which she now feels unable to assimilate further new trends and maintain a youthful identity.

Upon killing Cisserus, Goody ages quickly on screen, soon assuming a wrinkled appearance with wispy, white hair. As a last request, she asks to go to Times Square, to be "at the centre of things" as she dies. As she ages, the camera cranes around Goody, who contemplates her surroundings. These shots are crosscut with her sepia-tinted memories of how the space has developed since the nineteenth century. The changes that have taken place in New York City over the course of Goody's lifetime are a source of ongoing fascination throughout the film, and contrasts with the immutability of the vampires' own bodies. It is

consequently the radical difference between the early industrial past of lower Manhattan and the vast metropolis in which Goody now stands that demonstrates Goody's obsolescence. These changes are resonant for Heckerling too, as a native of the Bronx and former student at NYU. Just as in *I Could Never Be Your Woman,* it is once again a refusal of an enforced identity—of one that keeps up-to-date with the ever-changing mores of youth—that affords Heckerling's female characters some degree of autonomy.

Concluding Remarks

It is clear that Amy Heckerling is a distinct voice within the contemporary Hollywood landscape. While her latest two films have not been financially successful, they nevertheless demonstrate a complex and nuanced engagement with issues concerning femininity and ageing in postfeminist culture. Heckerling provides a wry interrogation of gender norms, both demonstrating their absurdity and allowing the female characters depicted to create an autonomous space wherein their identities can flourish. Heckerling's focus on spaces of liminality—between childhood and adulthood; youth and middle age; life and death—allows her work to explore the hinges in cultural constructions of femininity. The status of these girls and women as in-between identities allows their different positioning according to their age to be explored and, possibly, undermined. Perhaps most radically, *Vamps* shows how ageing is not simply a matter of declining physicality, but of continuing to maintain contemporary currency. Ultimately, Heckerling (and her contemporary currency as a commentator on feminist and postfeminist culture) deserves greater recognition as a distinct female voice in twenty-first century screen media, and it is my hope that this article has contributed to such a discourse.

Notes

[1] See Martha M Lauzen's recent report on the number of female directors working in Hollywood today.

[2] For *The Hurt Locker* (2008).

[3] From the vantage point of the present day, Wood's pronouncements on the possibilities for the female director are probably too essentialist. It is possible to think of male directors, such as Paul Feig, who have challenged conventional Hollywood gender roles, and of female directors, like Kathryn Bigelow, who call not to be perceived as female film-makers, but ask instead to be associated with a particular category of film-making (Jermyn and Redmond 4).

[4] For one recent example of Heckerling decrying Hollywood's sexism, see Dowd.

[5] Since 2007, Heckerling has directed a number of episodes of female-led comedies and dramas such as *The Carrie Diaries* (2013–2014), *Gossip Girl* (2007–2012) and *Suburgatory* (2011–2014).

[6] See Silverstein.

[7] See for instance Andrew Schenker (2012) on *Vamps*, and Nathan Rabin (2008) for two examples of criticism that acknowledges the merits of these two films.

[8] I am thinking here of *Something's Gotta Give,* (Dir. Nancy Meyers, 2004), *As Good as it Gets* (James L Brooks, 1997), *It's Complicated* (Nancy Meyers, 2009) or *Hope Springs* (David Frankel, 2012), for example.

[9] See Friedlander.

[10] One signal of this is the frequency with which her teen work is referenced in recent interviews ostensibly dealing with her current roles. See her interview with Alexis Soloski.

Works Cited

American Graffiti. Dir. George Lucas. Universal Pictures. 1973. DVD

As Good as it Gets. Dir. James L Brooks. Sony Pictures. 1997. DVD.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* London: Routledge, 1990. Print.

Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender.* London: Routledge, 2009. Print.

The Carrie Diaries. CW. 2013–2014. Television.

Clueless. Dir. Amy Heckerling. Paramount, 1995. DVD.

Clueless. ABC. 1996-1999. Television.

Dowd, Maureen. "The Women of Hollywood Speak Out." *The New York Times.* 20 Nov. 2015. Web. 6 Jan. 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/magazine/the-women-of-hollywood-speak-out.html>.

Fast Times at Ridgemont High. Dir. Amy Heckerling. Universal Pictures, 1982. DVD.

Friedlander, Whitney. "'Clueless' director Amy Heckerling on Sporadicus and the Hate-e-ans." *Variety.* 18 Aug. 2015. Web 9 Jan. 2016. <http://variety.com/2015/film/news/clueless-director-amy-heckerling-1201570676/>.

Gill, Rosalind. "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10:2 (2007): 147–66. Print.

Gossip Girl CBS. 2007–2012. Television.

The Hurt Locker. Dir. Kathryn Bigelow. 2008. Lionsgate. DVD

Hope Springs. Dir. David Frankel. Sony Pictures, 2012. DVD.

I Could Never Be Your Woman. Dir. Amy Heckerling. High Fliers Films Ltd., 2007. DVD.

It's Complicated. Dir. Nancy Meyers. Universal Pictures, 2009. DVD.

Jermyn, Deborah, and Sean Redmond (eds.). *The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow: Hollywood Transgressor.* London: Wallflower Press, 2003. Print.

Lauzen, Martha M. "The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind the Scenes Employment of Women on the top 250 films of 2014." Web. 25 June 2015. <http://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/files/2014_Celluloid_Ceiling_Report.pdf>.

Leppert, Alice. "'Can I Please Give You Some Advice?' *Clueless* and the Teen Makeover." *Cinema Journal* 53.3 (2014): 131–7. Print.

Look Who's Talking. Dir. Amy Heckerling. Columbia Pictures, 1990. DVD.

Negra, Diane. *What a Girl Wants? Fantasising the Reclamation of the Self in Postfeminism.* London: Routledge, 2009. Print.

Projansky, Sarah. *Spectacular Girls: Media Fascination and Celebrity Culture.* New York: New York UP, 2014. Print.

Queer Eye for the Straight Guy. Bravo. 2003–2007. Television.

Rabin, Nathan. 2008. "My Year of Flops: The New Batch: Case File #105 *I Could Never Be Your Woman.* Web. 8 March 2016. <http://www.avclub.com/article/my-year-of-flops-the-new-batch-case-file-105-ii-co-2163>.

Savigny, Heather, and Helen Warner. "'Where Do You Go after *Bridesmaids*?': The Politics of Being a Woman in Hollywood." *The Politics of Being a Woman: Feminism, Media and 21st Century Popular Culture.* Eds. Heather Savigny and Helen Warner. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 112–31. Print.

Schenker, Andrew. 2012. "Vamps: Review." Web. 8 March 2016 <http://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/vamps>.

Schwind, Jean. "Cool Coaching at Ridgemont High." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 41.6 (2008): 1012–32. Print.

Shary, Timothy. *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema*. 2nd ed. Austin: U of Texas P, 2014. Print.

Silverstein, Melissa. "Interview with *Vamps* Director Amy Heckerling." *Indiewire*. 9 Apr. 2012. Web. 11 Jan. 2016. <http://blogs.indiewire.com/womenandhollywood/interview-with-amy-heckerling>.

Soloski, Alexis. "Alicia Silverstone: 'I Went on a Quest to Change the World.'" *The Guardian.* 26 June 2015. Web. 12 Jan. 2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/jun/26/alicia-silverstone-new-play-of-good-stock>.

Something's Gotta Give. Dir. Nancy Meyers. Columbia Pictures, 2003. DVD.

Suburgatory. Warner Brothers. 2011–2014. Television.

Ten Years Younger. Channel 4. 2004–Present. Television.

"*Vamps.*" *Box Office Mojo*. Web. 30 June 2015. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=vamps.htm>.

Twilight. Dir. Catherine Hardwicke. Summit Entertainment. 2008. DVD.

The Twilight Saga: New Moon. Dir. Chris Weitz. Summit Entertainment. 2009. DVD.

The Twilight Saga: Eclipse. Dir. David Slade. Summit Entertainment. 2010. DVD.

The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 1. Dir. Bill Condon. Summit Entertainment. 2011. DVD.

The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 2. Dir. Bill Condon. Summit Entertainment. 2012. DVD.

Vamps. Dir. Amy Heckerling. Metrodome Distribution Ltd., 2012. DVD.

Whelehan, Imelda. "Ageing Appropriately: Postfeminist Discourses of Ageing in Contemporary Hollywood." *Postfeminism and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema.* Ed. Joel Gwynne and Nadine Muller. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 78–95. Print.

Wood, Robin. *Hollywood: From Vietnam to Reagan… and Beyond.* New York: Columbia UP, 2003. Print.

Suggested Citation

Smith, Frances. "Femininity, Ageing and Performativity in the Work of Amy Heckerling." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 10 (Winter 2015). Web. ISSN: 2009-4078.

Frances Smith completed a PhD in Film and Television Studies at the University of Warwick, where her research explored the construction of gender and class in the Hollywood Teen Movie. She is currently writing a monograph that draws from and expands on this work, titled *Rethinking the Teen Movie* (Edinburgh UP, 2017). Elsewhere, she has published articles and delivered conference papers on issues of genre, stardom and identity in Hollywood

cinema. She is currently a Teaching Fellow at University College London, where she is the Convener of the Writing Lab, and leads a course on British Masculinity at Syracuse University's London Programme.