

Keyword Essay: Cultural Capital and Clueless

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Keyword Essay: Cultural Capital and *Clueless*

Cultural capital is Pierre Bourdieu's theory of knowledge that one has about society, specifically the tastes of society, and their ability to use it. Bourdieu suggested that taste is not just a result of what we can afford to buy; our tastes are largely shaped by our upbringing, and an upbringing within a higher class can bestow upon us inherited cultural capital. Those from lower classes can acquire cultural capital through education, where their tastes would somewhat change to match those of the ruling class. The concept of cultural capital helps us to understand how taste is formed, and also why those with a higher level of cultural capital are more likely to progress within society. Cultural capital helps us to understand the film *Clueless*, which depicts a teenage girl with inherited cultural capital, Cher, attempting to teach another, Tai, how to be fashionable and popular, thereby helping her gain acquired cultural capital. We see the effects of inherited cultural capital making life and education easier for Cher, and we see Tai's status at school rise, as a result of the lessons Cher has taught her.

Clueless, released in 1995, is a romantic comedy set in Beverly Hills, that follows the teenage protagonist, Cher, in her life as a popular high school student¹. Inspired by Jane Austen's novel *Emma*, we see Cher, and her best friend Dionne, turn Tai, the new girl at their school, into a popular and desirable girl. *Clueless* depicts cultural capital in two ways. First, we see a classic 'Hollywood makeover' scene, where Cher turns Tai into a popular high school girl, by helping her to acquire cultural capital. We also see how Cher's inherited cultural capital arguably helps her to not have to work as hard as her peers in school.

When Cher first sees Tai, she exclaims to Dionne, 'Would you look at that girl, she is so adorably clueless'. What Tai is 'clueless' about is what is cool and tasteful, which Cher appears to know far more about. While Cher is from a family that is nouveau riche, her cultural capital appears to be inherited, as she is shown to have a natural fashion sense and refined manners, tastes we assume her to have been raised with. These tastes that cause Cher to call Tai 'clueless' conform to Bourdieu's analysis, as he writes, 'The social relations objectified in familiar objects, in their luxury or poverty, ... their 'beauty' or 'ugliness', impress themselves through bodily experiences which may be as profoundly unconscious as ... the harsh smell of bleach or perfumes as imperceptible as a negative scent'³. While Cher's contempt for Tai's tastes may be pronounced, it is also quite possibly the fruit of unconscious instincts honed by dint of her social position. For while she is

¹ *Clueless*, dir. by Amy Heckerling (Paramount Pictures, 1995)

² *Clueless*, dir. by Amy Heckerling (Paramount Pictures, 1995)

³ P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, New edition (London: Routledge, 2010), p 70.

adamant that Tai is 'clueless', the judgment reflects an unexamined confidence in the superiority of her own taste, rather than a deep understanding of aesthetics .

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Cher then decides to give Tai a makeover, and here we see Tai acquire cultural capital. Not only does Cher wash out her hair dye, give her more natural makeup and change her clothes to fashionable ones that she wears, but she tells Tai that she needs to work on her 'accent and vocabulary', and read one non-school book a week⁴. While Bourdieu argues that acquired cultural capital can often come as a result of school or university, through educational capital, the teacher of this cultural capital appears to be Cher, not their actual teachers. Bourdieu writes that the school will 'reinforce what is acceptable, discourage what is not, condemning valueless dispositions to extinction', which is shown not only through Cher's makeover of Tai, but also her condemnation of Tai's penchant for drugs⁵. When Tai returns to school the next day, we are shown that Tai appears to have acquired cultural capital, being accepted into Cher's friend group, and having people view her as popular. Throughout the film, Tai's style becomes more similar to that of Cher, and we see her choice of words, her accent, and even her taste in boys change. As Bourdieu would argue, Tai has developed a new habitus, dispositions that are formed as a result of the life she is living⁶. By following the lessons that Cher has taught her, and hanging out with Cher's group of friends, Tai's habitus now appears to be forming her tastes and interests, but really was formed by the lifestyle that Cher urged her to follow. However, Bourdieu argues that habitus is deeply ingrained within us, and the depiction of Tai's swift changes arguably underestimate the strength of habitus.

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At one point in the film, Tai becomes more popular than Cher, with everyone wanting to sit with her at lunch, hang out after school, and ask her for advice. The film suggests that Tai's acquired cultural capital has managed to outweigh Cher's inherited cultural capital, yet Bourdieu argues that inherited cultural capital is valued more highly than acquired cultural capital, as cultural capital that is inherited in unconscious, and therefore is more deeply a part of someone. This is shown when Elton, the boy who Cher encourages Tai to date, refuses to date Tai, stating, 'Don't you know who my father is? Me and Tai, we don't make any sense', reinforcing Bourdieu's theory that inherited cultural capital will be valued more than acquired cultural capital, as Elton believes that Tai is not of a high enough status for him to date, but Cher is, owing to her inherited cultural capital⁷.

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⁴ *Clueless*, dir. by Amy Heckerling

⁵ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p 78

⁶ P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), p 53

⁷ *Clueless*, dir. by Amy Heckerling

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Cher's relationship with her teachers, and her education, is also an important theme throughout the film, as she does not work hard, and yet still expects high grades. Bourdieu explains how schools and universities help turn inherited cultural capital into educational capital, by turning 'an examination intended to verify and measure competence into a variant of high-society conversation'⁸. Cher does exactly this, when asked to debate the topic of oppressed people being allowed refuge in America, instead telling a story of people who did not RSVP turning up to her father's 50th birthday party, and making a very loose link between this event and the Haitian refugee crisis. As expected, her teacher gives Cher a low grade as a result of this, suggesting that Cher's 'high-society conversation' did not work to replace doing the actual research for the examination. However, it can be argued that Cher's inherited cultural capital does cause her to eventually receive higher grades. Cher's father is a lawyer, and has taught her how to argue for what she wants, and we see her argue with her teachers, eventually resulting in her report card showing far higher grades. Bourdieu claims that the 'accomplished socialite chooses his terrain, sidesteps difficulties, turns questions of knowledge into questions of preference, ignorance into disdainful refusal'⁹. This process is exemplified in Cher's ability to overcome problems through talking her way out of them, showing her to be the 'accomplished socialite' and leading her to end up with higher grades, arguably as a result of her inherited cultural capital.

Clueless, however, argues against the idea that inherited culture capital is ingrained and cannot be unlearned. The cultural capital that Cher and her friends have includes the view that there are only certain boys who are acceptable to date, and one of the boys who isn't acceptable is Travis, who Cher refers to as a 'loadie', as he is a avid user of recreational drugs and appears to be a slacker in school¹⁰. However, when Cher goes with Tai to see him compete at a skateboard competition, she states that she 'had no idea he was so motivated', emphasising that Cher's outlook on life appears to have changed¹¹. This seems to have come as a result of Cher deciding to do a 'makeover for her soul', realising that 'all (her) friends were really good in different ways'¹². The 'soul makeover' can arguably be viewed as Cher attempting to rid herself of her inherited cultural capital.

Bourdieu argues that it is unconscious and a part of us, *Clueless* appears to make the argument that not only can prejudices of taste be unlearned, but it also should be. When Cher stops viewing everyone through the lens of whether they fit into her ideas of taste, she ends up being a far better friend, and even finding love. She is rewarded for actively going against what her cultural capital would usually encourage her to do, and she is shown to be a better person by the end of the film.

⁸ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p 81

⁹ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p 82

¹⁰ *Clueless*, dir. by Amy Heckerling

¹¹ *Clueless*, dir. by Amy Heckerling

¹² *Clueless*, dir. by Amy Heckerling

Viewing *Clueless* through the theory of cultural capital helps us to understand why Cher's life seems to be far easier than Tai's. When Elton wants to date Cher over Tai, and when Cher is able to have her grades raised, we realise that inherited cultural capital gives unearned privileges to those who possess it. Although Tai manages to acquire cultural capital, we see that she is not truly viewed as gaining social mobility, as snobs such as Elton exist, who appear to see past acquired cultural capital. *Clueless* shows cultural capital to be something that should not be acquired, but instead eliminated, as it shows that while it may help with social mobility and status, it comes at the price of a person's happiness, and only when one reevaluates what they view as cultural capital, will they then be fulfilled.



Words: 1564

Bibliography:

Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, New edition (London: Routledge, 2010)

Bourdieu, Pierre, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990)

Clueless, dir. by Amy Heckerling (Paramount Pictures, 1995)

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GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

GENERAL COMMENTS

74/100

Instructor

Candidate no. [REDACTED]

Clueless is a fantastic object choice, which helps you explore the nuance of Bourdieu's argument. There are some wonderful moments of analysis in this essay. Especially strong and pertinent was your analysis of Cher's ability to argue for an increase to her grades. Some great attention to the detail of both the theory and the film.

You could have perhaps pushed your argument further by refining your thesis. You accurately point out that *Clueless* is different from Bourdieu because by its end it moralizes the issue of cultural capital, suggesting that we would be better off deciding to relinquish it. You could have teased out the implications of this, making it a central part of your thesis. Is this a limitation to the theory or a limitation of the film? Is *Clueless* ideological, in its suggestion that we might relinquish capital so easily? We might also question whether Cher's interest in educating Tai is realistic, in light of the ways in which cultural capital separates people without them realising that this is happening (think 'Whites Flock Together').

Nevertheless, this is a thoughtful, well-crafted essay which was a pleasure to read. Well done.

Structure and focus	72
Argument and expression	72
Range of knowledge	78
Final mark	74
minor notes	

- Footnotes *after* punctuation
- Try not to end sentences on a preposition
- You often use 'arguably' to soften your claims. In most cases, it is better to state your claim firmly and then your reader can decide for themselves whether or not they are convinced (I was convinced!).



Comment 1

people's? missing referent



Comment 2

great summary



Awk.

Awkward:

The expression or construction is cumbersome or difficult to read. Consider rewriting.



Comment 3

focus on the link between these sentences. You could use this space to present a thesis about the film and its relationship to the theory.



Comment 4

no need for the uncertainty here. go for the argument that it does, and see whether you can convince your reader (they can always disagree)!



Comment 5

it is so interesting to think about the way that the term clueless is used in this film, and what it means in relation to Bourdieu's terms for capital



Comment 6

could push with a close reading. there are some really funny moments from the film which would support the connection you are making here.



Comment 7

excellent



Comment 8

great point



Comment 9

fantastic, though a little compressed



Comment 10

wonderful analysis



Comment 11

this is fantastic



Comment 12

really interesting!



Comment 13

is this ideological? how are we to interpret the difference between film and theory?

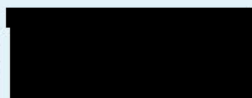


Comment 14

this conclusion seems to be missing something. How are we to understand the differences you draw out? What is your argument here?

GRADING FORM: AMERICAN STUDIES FINAL 19/20

CANDIDATE NO :



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STRUCTURE AND FOCUS

Engagement with question, clear structure of argument; appropriate use and close attention to/reading of evidence and/or primary material or primary texts.

ARGUMENT AND EXPRESSION

Clarity of writing/presentation; command of relevant scholarship and secondary criticism in the field; independence of thought.

RANGE OF KNOWLEDGE

Relevance, breadth and depth of knowledge; contextualisation of topic within broader field – e.g. historical, historiographic, literary, intellectual; balance of general and particular, where relevant; awareness of change over time, where relevant; critical evaluation of available information.

IMPROVEMENT

One point that can help you to improve for future assessment.