

## from *Branded: the Buying and Selling of Teenagers*

by Alissa Quart

### Cruel Story of Youth

...The reliance on brands has shifted: brands have infiltrated preteens and adolescents' inner lives. . .The language of teen marketing is now so refined that it resembles youth sociology and psychology. . .marketing guru Elissa Moses breaks "teen orientation" and teen spending down into "me-directed," "other-directed," nonconformist," and "conformist." Each category is further broken down into types of teen spending. These include "thrills & chills," "resigned," "bootstrappers," "world-savers," "upholders," and "quiet achievers." . . World savers like "piggyback promotions," Moses writes, in which a product is marketed for a worthwhile cause.

...Teen Research Unlimited (TRU) peddles . . .a monthly survey of six hundred teens and a bonus segment of 250 tweens, all culled from 847 focus groups. TRU company also provides a "Coolest Brand Meter" (Sony, Nike, Abercrombie & Fitch, and Old Navy) were tops recently. These youth marketers aim to sell their products. And they do it even if it means playing on kids' fears of being social outcasts or physically unappealing. . .

### Scenes from a Mall

...In the teen-angst films of 1980s, the characters were capable of vulnerability, and vulnerability's flip side, defiance, which found its best expression in *The Breakfast Club*. A letter from the film's nerd that amounted to a Bill of Rights for white upper-middle-class adolescents reads:

Dear Mr. Vernon,  
We accept the fact that we had to sacrifice a whole Saturday in detention for whatever it was we did wrong. . .You see us as you want to see us: in the simplest terms and the most convenient definitions. You see us as a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess, and a criminal. Correct? That's the way we saw each other at 7 o'clock this morning. We were brainwashed.

...Despite a penchant for too-obvious poignancies, the best 1980s teen films regularly depicted kids who rejected the established order.

The teen angst genre lives on today only in its most diminished form, in a take off of the very worst scene in *the Breakfast Club*. In that episode, the princess (Molly Ringwald) transforms kohl-rim-eyed Ally Sheedy. Using a normal amount of eyeliner, a headband, and a white blouse, the princess turns the freak from an androgynous ball of drama into a dull but pretty girl. That moment gave birth to one of the biggest teen film genres of our period, the make-over movie.

...*Clueless*. . .draws on *the Breakfast Club's* makeover scene for its major subplot. *Clueless* was the first and best film of the new branded teen wave. The film set in place not only the genre's exaltation of high-end goods and opulence but also the genre's dependence on sharp-edged satire camouflaging an ardor for consumption.

*Clueless's* heroine Cher Horowitz is a Beverly Hills shopaholic: babelicious, surfacey, and affluent, played with good humor by the sunflower-like then-teen Alicia Silverstone. . .Cher is so fashion-mad that she uses a computer to tell her when her clothes match. Her nonvirtual fashion "project" is making over the new kid, a working-class stoner named Tai, played by Brittany Murphy. Cher is like one of the TRU channelers, introducing labels and cell phones to the conformers and the losers in her class. Most of her "work" with Tai occurs at the mall.

...in *Clueless*. . .the mall is the film's safe place, homier than Cher's own home, a huge and remote white manse. Malls are "a way of homecoming to a self that has been lost," as one theorist wrote. . .

The instant transformations promised by the makeover films seem [*She's All That, Pretty Woman*] seem very much a Generation Y phenomenon, an obvious way to speak to kids who have been taught to believe that respect and a new self are merely a new slip dress or new lip gloss away. . . .

### Consumers without a Cause

On screen, fairy tale transformations don't happen by magic. They're possible thanks to such

supporting players as Clairol, Clinique, Dr. Pepper, and Budweiser. Product placement in the movie surprises exactly no one at this point—look, Spider-Man is swinging past a Budweiser billboard in Manhattan—but the extent of it can still astonish. *Varsity Blues* is full of loving images of Coca-Cola and Guiltless Gourmet. *Legally Blonde* opens with a shot of blonde hair being combed by a hand wearing a Tiffany bracelet; the camera then moves down to caress a neck bearing a silver Tiffany necklace. The blonde's college bedroom is full of other brands: issues of *Cosmopolitan*, bottles of nail polish clearly marked Clinique, a notebook from the teen shopping Web site Alloy.com, a Clairol Herbal Essences shampoo box (blonde, of course), a green case of face powder, also by Clinique. Outside her room, here's a sorority littered with brands: a Red Bull here, a prada bag there.

But the placement of products is not just visual. The films celebrate brands in their dialogue. Moments are branded: When Cher frolics in the sun in *Clueless*, she asks in voiceover, "Is this a Noxzema commercial or what?" In *She's All That*, Taylor, the film's self-proclaimed "prom queen legacy," walks through the streets carrying shopping bags clearly marked Clinique and Benetton and screeching that she could be wearing TJ Maxx, a low-rent brand, and still get elected. . . Brand

knowledge is a major form of conversation, meaning, and whimsy in teen films; it is a symptom, and potentially a cause, of teen culture's growing obsession with acquisition.

. . .for some kids [the films] are oddly real. One New York City teen I spoke with, now seventeen, was in sixth grade at a fancy private school when *Clueless* was first released. For her and the kids she knew, the film's ironies didn't register; she and her friends simply wanted to be Cher Horowitz. At twelve, she says, that meant talking on a cellular phone and buying things displaying bold-faced brand names. School was like *Clueless*, she says. "If you didn't have Kate Spade they made fun of you, especially if you were new."

. . . While fashion, self-adornment and material culture are often fantastic, expressive outlets in themselves, when they are excessively costly, hard-sold and so totalizing that they occlude minors' other forms of self-hood, they emerge as problems. . . merely teaching tweens how to "read" advertisements isn't enough anymore. Today, we all read articles that are advertisements and advertisements that resemble articles and, as surveys show, kids have trouble keeping the two separate. It's not clear that that difference is always obvious to adults either.