

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Clelia (in Antonioni's *Le Amiche, Girlfriends*) lively

Overview *Le Amiche*, released 1955, precedes Antonioni's ripest work on the follies of bourgeois society—the trilogy ending in *L'eclisse* (1962)—but already digs deeply into the pathos of that society in Post-War II Italy. An ambitious and elegant young career woman returns from Rome to her native Torino, to set up a new fashion salon, which she is eager to have completed as quickly as possible. While in Torino she finds herself engaged not only by the excitement of her salon, and the pressure to complete it in time for the opening, but by the group of fashionable, but idle and largely unhappy, upscale ladies with whom she becomes involved. Her final revulsion at the group, plus the impossibility of a love affair she herself happens into, with a lower class worker, suffices to drive her home to Rome.

Character Clelia is the type of the new Italian businesswoman, from the birth of a new Italy after the travesty of Mussolini. She is elegant, chic, has a sharp head for business and style, and knows how to fall on her feet. But while she is going to Torino to wrap up the opening of a new fashion salon, she finds herself sexually attracted to a young interior decorator who is working for the architect of her new salon. She falls head over heels, while at the same time letting herself get caught up in a gaggle of society and fashion women, who air, before her, the laundry of their private (and basically unhappy) love or marital lives. Lively she is, this Clelia, but in the end she must seek retreat in the familiar, the Rome she knows.

Parallels Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782) crystallizes the evils of an idle upper class, in which sexual indulgence becomes a trademark of daily life; a daily life which Antonioni in *Girlfriends*, working the commercial world rather than the aristocratic, nails to perfection. Charles Dickens, in both *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *Great Expectations* (1861), delights in poisoning the individual (young guys in this case) on the brink of a new social and competitive world, as Clelia is, when she arrives in Torino to set up her salon. The world lies ahead of her, to be materialized, reformulated, and challenging, as she plunges vigorously into it, for as long as she can. For that period of challenge-taking she is as doughty, in her way, as Balzac's Rastignac (in *Pere Goriot*, 1835), as he throws himself vigorously into the life of Paris.

Illustrative moments

Arrival When first we meet Clelia she is settling into her comfortable hotel room in Torino, arriving for the preparation for the opening of her new fashion salon. She is a bit breathless from the trip, but stylishly dressed, and just settling down to relax. Her alertness and cool are clear in the flexibility with which she responds to the maid's intrusion, to ask permission to enter the adjoining room—which has been locked from the inside, and in which, knocked out by a sleeping-pill, lies a good looking young lady, Rosetta. Clelia smartly checks the woman's pulse, calls management, and revs up the events of the film.

Socialized Through her effective intervention in the case of Rosetta, whose unhappy love had led her to overdose, Clelia becomes adopted into a threesome of Rosetta's friends, and together the group of upscale women become briefly inseparable. Lively Clelia seems the best put together of the group—one talented artist friend is unhappy because her husband (the lover of Rosetta) envies her; another survives her husband by playing him off against a series of lovers. Clelia quickly becomes a group member, but just as quickly begins to feel alienated from the sick and clubbish atmosphere of these women.

Attracted From her arrival, Clelia has been supervising the progress of plastering and window framing at her salon, which will soon, too soon, open, and in hunting for her architect she has

several times found the young artist-decorator, who is in charge of plastering, working late and alone in the building when she arrives. She finds this young guy attractive—younger than her, handsome—but intuitively feels his class difference from her—he is an ‘artisan’—and is not up for an affair which will lead nowhere. She puts herself in his arms, but will not take him into her heart, and will in painfully short time have to release him, as she loses her post with the salon in Torino, and has to head back to Rome.

Resigned Lively, engaged, intense, Clelia gets angry too, and at a major opening of her salon, with ballroom gowns on all sides, and a fashionable clientele, Clelia bursts out in anger at her otiose friends, who are making fun of the Rosetta (who overdosed.) Clelia breaks with this group, offends her salon customers, and is abruptly sent back to Rome to work there, leaving as she does the young guy she has come to love—across class borders. Sobered, but lively of step, and lively for all her interventions into provincial Torino society, Clelia disappears on the midnight express for Rome.

Discussion questions

What leads Clelia to defend Rosetta so intensely? Or *is* Clelia’s outburst against her clique—which gets her sacked in Torino—an expression of her concern for Rosetta’s death?

Girlfriends is social critique, but it is also film-innovation. How does Antonioni handle spaces and the passage of time in this movie? Does he share Bergman’s sense that the human face is ‘everything’?

What is the class-line that separates Clelia from her worker boyfriend in Torino? Are there classes in contemporary European commercial society? American society?