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## UNDERSTANDING THE “MANIC PIXIE DREAM GIRL” TROPE A FEMINIST AND POST-FEMINIST APPROACH

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to broadly touch and discuss a popular trope used in modern cinema -the “manic pixie dream girl”. Often a device personified by a female character that is attractive in her quality of “otherness”, this character serves as a freeing agent for the male protagonist. We discuss what exactly qualifies as a “manic pixie dream girl” - what her essential qualities are, the term’s origins, and how (and if) it perpetuates negative female stereotypes. Using the frame-work from authors like Julianna Joyce, Angela McRobbie, and Simone De Beauvoir, we question how this trope fits into the post-feminist theoretical structure and whether it constitutes a thing of the past or if its values are still present in today’s movie industry.

**Keywords:** philosophy of film, manic pixie dream girl, post-feminism, film tropes.

## ÎNȚELEGEREA FIGURII DE STIL „MANIC PIXIE DREAM GIRL”. O ABORDARE FEMINISTĂ ȘI POST-FEMINISTĂ

**Rezumat:** Această lucrare își propune să discute pe larg o figură populară de stil folosită în cinematografia modernă - „manic pixie dream girl”. Fiind adesea un dispozitiv personificat de un personaj feminin care este atractivă în calitatea ei de „alteritate”, acest personaj servește ca agent de eliberare pentru protagonistul masculin. Discutăm ce anume este această „manic pixie dream girl” - care sunt calitățile ei esențiale, care sunt originile termenului și cum (și dacă) perpetuează stereotipurile feminine negative. Folosind perspectiva oferită de autoare precum

Julianna Joyce, Angela McRobbie și Simone De Beauvoir, ne întrebăm cum se încadrează această figură de stil în structura teoretică post-feministă și dacă ea reprezintă un lucru aparținând trecutului sau dacă valorile sale sunt încă prezente în industria cinematografică de astăzi.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** filosofia filmului, “manic pixie dream girl”, post-feminism, figuri de stil.

## 1. Introduction

The “Manic Pixie Dream Girl” trope has been heavily utilised and has gained deep roots in the collective minds of pop culture in the recent years - to some, as just another cinematographic trope, a tool used by screenwriters to advance a narrative or enrichen the film, but to others, especially to feminist critics and philosophers, it has become an apparatus for the criticizing of female representation in media.

We will begin our inquiry by looking at the origins of the term as well as broad definition for it. Our attempt to understand the complexity and consequences of the term will be made through the theoretical corpus of post-feminism, and through answering the questions that arise with it: Is the Manic Pixie Dream Girl trope harmful? How does it shape female representation in cinema? And lastly, has society and popular culture grown past the need for it?

The ironic juxtaposition behind it lays precisely in the term’s origins, coined by a movie critic, Nathan Rabin, in the late 2010’s, in regards to a movie called *Elizabethtown*. Behind the peculiar, almost whimsical storybook character it brings to mind, the term was created to criticize a type of movie character that has only gained more popularity since then, reinforced by the identity it gained alongside its name.

Some example of movies that have been known to use such characters are: *500 days of Summer*, *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World*, *Ruby Sparks*”, but also old Hollywood classics, prior to the emergence of the original term, such as *Bringing up Baby* and *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. There is also the case of *Eternal Sunshine of the spotless mind*- a part of this article will argue in defence of the self-awareness of the character of Clementine and how this aspect diminishes the manic-pixie dimension of her role.

## 2. Defining characteristics

The manic pixie dream girl is the female character that appears in modern cinema as a plot device designed to cater to the male protagonist, breaking him out of the confines of his own dull world and into a colorful, adventurous existence, which resembles her own shallow characterization: she is often “quirky”, a type of peculiarity that enchants the protagonist and makes her stand out against all other potential female partners.

However, their character-building process is only a superficiality, because they “exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors”<sup>1</sup> - their sole purpose is caring for the male protagonist, catering to their need for progress and excitement, while also appearing vulnerable at times and childish. If the film offers a somber backdrop in order to make the audience empathize with its leading character, the manic pixie dream girl is subsequently placed there to offer a colorful, eye-catching distraction that leads the hero into a world previously inaccessible to him.

For the film industry, it has become a convenient device that lacks complications because it requires no life or progress of its own; however, for the rest of the world, it is a symbol of worrying regress and the perpetuation of negative female stereotypes, lacking an anchor in reality and coated in a sugary, patriarchal coating.

Patricia R. Boyd reiterates the core values that make up the post-feminist framework in which we place our analysis of the manic pixie dream girl. Among others such as discipline and femininity being reclaimed by women, the element that slots into the manic pixie dream girl narrative more easily is the emphasis on individualism and choice<sup>2</sup>.

Boyd discusses how in today’s media products (she offers and analyses the *Fifty Shades of Grey* phenomenon, more specifically) the free-will of the woman in regards to her own body and agency is pushed forward as an important and valuable new norm, where having the privilege of making their own choices should be celebrated as the merit of a (relatively) newly reformed society.

In post-feminist circles, this individuality and freedom of choice is linked to neo-liberalism and a perpetuation of stereotypes<sup>3</sup>. One could argue such a stereotype in the media would precisely be the MPDG - her apparent free will is at the core of what makes her appealing both to the male protagonist and the audience alike. In this way, she manages to both break free of traditional female character norms while also remaining stuck in a different type of stereotype, weighed down by the superficiality of her own empowerment.

### 3. MPDG and freedom

In *Contemporary Depictions Of Alternative Femininity*<sup>4</sup>, Julianna Joyce argues that this trope belongs as a philosophical concept within the theoretical feminist universe, seeing how “at its essence it perpetuates post-feminist rhetoric”. The subtle way in which the MPDG<sup>5</sup> trope participates in a sort of feminist regression can be argued to be, at best, a stretch.

However, on a closer look, the return to traditional gendered social roles is evident in the lack of independent thought these characters present, in the lack of personal aspirations and desire to grow. It could be argued that it is also evident in the lack of authenticity, a lacuna that makes itself known inside the female character’s most important role: the relationship they share with the true protagonist.

The lack of an authentic love, as Beauvoir would call it, translates into a lack of character substance - in *Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir describes this type of relationship as one between two entities that not only perceive and recognise each other, but also experience their own selves. In movies such as *500 days of Summer*, the protagonist, Tom, projects this idea of authentic love on a female he believes to be his salvation from an ultimately dull life - however, Summer is never pictured “experiencing herself” - we only get to watch her in relation to Tom’s self discovery, as a satellite, a testament to his own freedom. He perceives her as a personification of authentic love, disregarding her very vocal opinions about romantic relationships and monogamy.

In movies where the MPDG is present, the inevitable connection between the male protagonist and the girl only shines a light on the sexist nature of the trope, precisely because theirs is not a “love (that) would be the revelation of self through the gift of self”<sup>6</sup>. The “self” of the female character is an empty facade. Beauvoir discussed how oppression, as well as gender roles, limit a woman’s freedom.

In modern cinema women often appear free - in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, Audrey Hepburn’s Holly makes a point out of underlining how people cannot be put into cages and controlled, equating a relationship to a sort of damnation of Beauvoir’s freedom: „Holly: I’ll never let anyone put me in a cage! Paul: I don’t want to put you in a cage, I wanna love you. Holly: It’s the same thing!”<sup>7</sup>.

And yet, this freedom stretches only as far as the screenwriter allows it to stretch - freedom too, is hollowed of any real substance, and given only to add to the mystery and whimsicality of the MPDG. The traditional narrative of a woman destined to become a wife, a mother, passive in her role as caregiver to men<sup>8</sup>, has subtly shifted to, as Joyce put it, a world in which the basic battles of feminism have been won, where a woman can aspire to be perceived as equal by her male peers, and in which fighting for further liberation is unnecessary because women have been given “enough freedom”, a lie that helps to perpetuate the same system that once caused the need for progress.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. Post-feminism

In *The Aftermath of Feminism*, Angela McRobbie discusses the concept of the “Post-feminist masquerade” a rather sententious term assigned to a phenomenon that is specific to the era of post third wave feminism and the women’s liberation movement. The “masquerade” aspect comes from the masks women wear in order to continue to fit and be accepted into society.<sup>10</sup>

Appealing to gender norms like these has been a perpetual issue all throughout the length of the women’s liberation movement. The difference this time is that women are “making a point that this is a freely chosen look”. A distance needs to be reprimanded from the

alienating values and aesthetics of the feminism that were responsible for the inclusive, progressive status of today’s modern woman (no longer seen as just a wife or just a mother) and what is appealing to the male gaze. McRobbie calls it “the reinstating of the spectacle of excessive femininity”<sup>11</sup>.

Cinema has often been a telling source of how the fairly new acquired status of women in society has had its repercussions. Old classics such as *Working girl*, and even more recent works like *The Devil wears Prada* showcast how women carry themselves in public and in the workplace both assuming and owning the balanced power dynamics between them and their male co-workers, while also participating as if of their own accord to a culture that expects a certain type of appearance and manner of acting that enables them to not lose their desirability as women, that keeps them interesting and feminine while also giving the allure of an independent woman that chooses her identity in its entirety: “the displaying of a kind of conventional feminine vulnerability will ensure she remains desirable to men”<sup>12</sup>.

The self-assurance and confidence that has been won is silently agreed to be kept below surface, and to be presented instead there should be a soft, attractive persona that blazes their own trails and yet isn’t disturbing to the careful balance of patriarchal societal norms. How does the MPDG fit into this new narrative? We could argue it does so by defining itself through a liberty that is manufactured to be traditionally appealing.

In *Looking for Alaska*, a John Green novel that was later adapted for screens, the character of Miles finds himself in a new school where he begins to fixate all of his attention on Alaska - a girl he finds fascinating in all aspects, but especially in her complete freedom of mind and expression.

The romanticization of her blunt demeanor and cigarette addiction is brought along with the sexualization of her appearance and an infatuation with a beautiful presence that breaks the patterns of the traditional feminine while also adhering to it. In the wake of her untimely death, he discovers that he hadn’t really truly known her at all, and finds peace within the idea of her death.

Even so, she remains an eternal feminine that becomes a tool in his own journey of self-discovery. Her particularities and ultimately her freedom are limited by existing solely within the confines of the male protagonist’s world, with no real agency of her own.

Postfeminism has been regarded in both modern academic culture as well as popular culture as a portrayal of society’s advancement past the need for traditional feminism. At the crux of it lays a constructive attitude that goes further than typical anti-feminist attitudes - post feminism is woven into all aspects of modern culture and is highly publicized by all types of media, and its forms can and most often include a positive acknowledgment of feminist achievements.

It celebrates female power and agency and normalizes these values as now natural to our culture, but it also discusses “possible consequences of female independence”<sup>13</sup>. The freedom that is typically romanticized in movies featuring the MPDG is made possible by partially rendering feminism as obsolete, and by keeping it separate from our public opinions and appearances to preserve femininity.<sup>14</sup>

## 5. The MPDG trope today

It is unfeasible however to try and perceive today’s film industry without viewing it through a gendered approach. The previous sexist representations of women in film are now mostly forgotten in favor of more progressive, inclusive roles that often serve as commentary on the state of modern society: the live action superhero *Wonder woman*, movies and series which depict women in positions of power (*Madam Secretary*, *The Iron Lady*), action heroines that impress by fighting alongside male counterparts: *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, *Lara Croft* or criminal masterminds that forego the need for the typical masculine Bond villain stereotype, in series such as *Killing Eve*.

However, tropes such as the MPDG are a telling sign of the dangers that a post-feminist approach in cinema (and in popular culture) poses, such as negative representation that is modern enough

not to draw too much attention to itself or become self-evident.<sup>15</sup>

In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, the character of Clementine depicts a sort of anti-MPDG, or at least a different version of it; while she is still written as having certain characteristics of the trope, such as a spontaneity that breathes new life into the male protagonist, Joel, she is also presented as a flawed human being, who confesses to being tired of men seeking her out as their salvation, when in fact, she is actually concentrated on looking for her own peace of mind. Joel is attracted to the adventure and excitement she represents, however the audience also experiences Clementine as more than the idealised version Joel presents to us at first -in giving her flaws and dimensions, the writers also succeed in making her human.

## 6. Conclusions

The creator of the term, Nathan Rabin, has since come out with an article in which he apologises for bringing it in the eye of the public, where he concludes that it is time to bring an end to its use. However, the term Manic Pixie Dream Girl has grown into a life of its own, separate from Rabin’s initial definition, and the character itself has been written into film multiple times, weaving itself into the fabric of pop culture.

Rabin deems it a “fundamentally sexist”<sup>16</sup> trope, which was useful at first but has now gained too much power and shifted from signaling sexist practices (as the author intended it) into being a sexist term, as much idealised as the female characters that portray it. The MPDG has gained a life of its own since its creation – after the popularization of it and the subsequent criticism that followed it, the movie industry has slowly faded out this trope, but not entirely, as movies continue to occasionally use it.

The traditional narrative of a woman as a wife or a mother shifting into a cinematographic trope that is defined by its freedom and spontaneity might seem like a progressive step. However, we must ask ourselves how cultural phenomena like these can affect,

subtly or overtly, the progress that has been made so far when it comes to breaking out of the confines of gender stereotypes – does it merely signal a problem? Or is the trope itself contributing to said problem?

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Nathan Rabin, 2007, “The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: Elizabethtown”, *The A.V. Club*, <https://film.avclub.com/the-bataan-death-march-of-whimsy-case-file-1-elizabet-1798210595>

<sup>2</sup> Patricia R. Boyd, 2019, “Paradoxes of Postfeminism: Coercion and Consent in Fifty-Shades of Grey”. In Adrienne Trier-Bienek (ed), 2019, *Feminist Theory and Pop Culture* (Leiden: Brill | Sense), 106.

<sup>3</sup> Patricia R. Boyd, 2019, “Paradoxes of Postfeminism: Coercion and Consent in Fifty-Shades of Grey”. In Adrienne Trier-Bienek (ed), 2019, *Feminist Theory and Pop Culture* (Leiden: Brill | Sense), 104.

<sup>4</sup> Julianna Joyce, 2014, “Contemporary Depictions Of Alternative Femininity”, *Appollon Undergraduate Journal*, September 4.

<sup>5</sup> Manic pixie dream girl.

<sup>6</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, 2011, *The Second Sex* (New York: Alfred Knopf).

<sup>7</sup> *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, 1961, directed by Blake Edwards.

<sup>8</sup> Skye C. Cleary, 2017, “Simone de Beauvoir on Love” in Christopher Grau and Aaron Smuts (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Love* (Oxford: Oxford Handbooks Online), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Julianna Joyce, 2014, “Contemporary Depictions Of Alternative Femininity”, *Appollon Undergraduate Journal*, September 4.

<sup>10</sup> Angela McRobbie, 2009, *The Aftermath of Feminism Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage), 59.

<sup>11</sup> Angela McRobbie, 2007, “Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime” in Yvonne Tasker, Diane Negra (eds.), *Interrogating Postfeminism* (Duke University Press), 67.

<sup>12</sup> Angela McRobbie, 2007, “Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime” in Yvonne Tasker, Diane Negra (eds.), *Interrogating Postfeminism* (Duke University Press), 78

<sup>13</sup> Yvonne Tasker, Diane Negra, 2007, “Introduction” in Yvonne Tasker, Diane Negra (eds.), *Interrogating post-feminism* (Duke University Press).

<sup>14</sup> Yvonne Tasker, Diane Negra, 2007, "Introduction" in Yvonne Tasker, Diane Negra (eds.), *Interrogating post-feminism* (Duke University Press), 28.

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Gamble (Ed.), 2006, *The Routledge Companion To Feminism And Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge), 93

<sup>16</sup> Nathan Rabin, 2014, "I'm sorry for coining the phrase "Manic Pixie Dream Girl", *Salon*, July 15,

[https://www.salon.com/2014/07/15/im\\_sorry\\_for\\_coining\\_the\\_phrase\\_manic\\_pixie\\_dream\\_girl/](https://www.salon.com/2014/07/15/im_sorry_for_coining_the_phrase_manic_pixie_dream_girl/)

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