

“I’m the Main Character of My Life”:

How the Manic Pixie Dream Girl Lives as Support of the Male Story

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Abstract

Film critic Nathan Rabin coined the term Manic Pixie Dream Girl (MPDG) to describe the trope of a quirky female character who exists solely to help an emotionally repressed man appreciate life. Although Rabin intended the term to call out cultural sexism, it has been increasingly used in a sexist manner. The key difference between the MPDG and realistic, quirky female characters is the MPDG's lack of pursuit of personal goals and failure of the Bechdel Test. There have been some attempts to challenge the MPDG trope, namely through subversive MPDG storylines, the creation of a MPDBoy, or the addition of a female protagonist. Examples of these attempts and the lack of females in power in Hollywood is discussed.

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A giggly female, sitting in a bathtub on the phone, challenges her male friend to think critically about life. A bubbly girl forces a boy in a waiting room to listen to a life-changing song on her disc-man. A mysterious woman teaches an awkward man how to live in the moment by running through IKEA. Although these are scenes from different films – *Elizabethtown*, *Garden State*, and *(500) Days of Summer* respectively – they almost could all be from the same storyline because they share an identical female trope: they feature the Manic Pixie Dream Girl.

Hollywood now allows men to have a deeper existence than behaving as stoic, hyper-masculine creatures, but its solution to opening up these emotionally repressed men is to create a quirky, fun, adventurous female to assist them on their journey. That female is the Manic Pixie Dream Girl (MPDG), a term coined in 2007 by film critic Nathan Rabin to describe this female trope that “exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures” (Rabin, 2007). As with many gendered tropes in the media, the MPDG is deeply problematic in the messages it sends to audiences. The problem stems from the fact that it objectifies women as quirky tools that exist for men and paints men to be emotionally-stunted creatures in need of a fun female. However, there need not be a total removal of all quirky women that aid in a journey of self-discovery; in order to subvert the MPDG narrative, films could reverse the gender of the trope, change how the MPDG is defined, or, ideally, create complicated female characters with depth.

The MPDG trope may have been termed in 2007 after Rabin watched *Elizabethtown*, but the stereotype has existed in films for decades, from *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) to *Scott Pilgrim*

vs. *The World* (2010) (Bowman, Gillette, Hyden, Murray, Pierce, & Rabin, 2008). The MPDG is a character that incites passionate emotion in viewers, be it adoration of her personality or hatred of her unconventional habits (Ulaby, 2008). The divisive quality of the MPDG possibly stems from her two-dimensional nature; she cannot be viewed as a complete person. Because she only exists to help the protagonist in his journey of self-discovery, she has no career and no life beyond frolicking, fun, and meeting people to reveal to them the infinite possibilities the world has to offer. She may have some inner conflicts, but none of her troubles are developed enough to be addressed (Ulaby, 2008). For those that do love the MPDG, she often becomes a fetishized object, an “appealing prop”, that audiences pine for as they wait for their eye-opening muse to appear in their mundane lives (Rabin, 2014).

In recent years, there has been some debate surrounding the definition of the MPDG and what characters fall under this trope. When Rabin coined the term MPDG, he had no idea as to the future power of the term and how commonplace a description it would become (Rabin, 2014). Although the trope is a “fundamentally sexist one,” and Rabin coined the phrase “to call out cultural sexism and make it harder for male writers to posit reductive, condescending male fantasies of ideal women as realistic characters”, the term increasingly began to be accused of being sexist itself (2014). It became a tool to belittle characters and actresses by asserting they were nothing more than a man’s fantasy of personal transformation through love and quirkiness (Piasky, 2016). Academics and critics applied the MPDG trope to almost any film in which there was an unconventional female character, even if that character was more complex than a fantasy, such as Diane Keaton’s *Annie Hall*. Zoe Kazan, writer of the film *Ruby Sparks*, spoke out against this saying, “I think that to lump together all individual, original quirky women under that rubric

is to erase all difference” (Kelly, 2013). The MPDG trope can be a powerful term, but must be used with caution so as to not diminish its criticism of misogyny.

Some research has been done concerning the MPDG trope to understand it fully in order to properly apply the term and not use it as a blanket term for all eccentric women. There are some indications that a character may be a MPDG and not a real woman. For example, because the MPDG exists solely to inspire men, the female character often fails the Bechdel Test (Pasola, 2014). In order for a film to pass the Bechdel Test it must (a) have at least two women in it, (b) who talk each other, (c) about something other than a man. This test can often be a useful means of determining if a female character is operating in pursuit of her own goals. The pursuit of personal goals is a key differentiation between a MPDG and a realistic, quirky female.

However, Pasola notes that it may be possible for a character to “deliberately represent the archetypal MPDG trope, yet subvert it within her own independent narrative” (2014). An example of such a character is the controversial character of Summer, played by Zooey Deschanel, in *(500) Days of Summer*. Many viewers dismiss Summer as the classic MPDG stereotype, but overlook the fact that she pursues her own goals in the end and devastates her male protagonist; she can be viewed as a representation of the unfair fantasy some men place on females to turn them into mythical creatures that must fulfill their journey of identity. Luna Lovegood in the *Harry Potter* series is another example of the simultaneous embodiment of the MPDG trope and of narrative subversion. Luna is an unconventional and cute character, yet it is clear throughout the series that her uniqueness stems from her own personal choice and taste, rather than to fulfill the journey of a man (Pasola 2014). Summer and Luna both illustrate that it is possible for a character to possess the quirkiness of a MPDG without necessarily wholly

reinforcing the trope. Nevertheless, there is significant work to be done in the realm of this gendered stereotype.

One suggested means of challenging the MPDG stereotype is to reverse the gender roles and create a Manic Pixie Dream Boy (MPDBoy). Although stereotypes exist for both males and females, the gender stereotypes differ in order to reflect societal power structure (Medden, 2017). The MPDG furthers inequality between men and women because it elevates men to a higher status by focusing on the male emotional journey. Creation of a MPDBoy may assist in countering this power structure because it elevates women to more powerful societal positions by focusing on the female journey. The creation, or focus, of a MPDBoy may be problematic in that it still relies on stereotypes, which reduces complex individual identities to a group with some exaggerated characteristics (Medden, 2017). However, emphasis on a MPDBoy trope in the media would take away from the narrative of the female stereotype and, overall, make the stereotype seem less gender oriented.

The question that arises with a MPDBoy stereotype is *how* he would embody a fantasy, mythical man and help the female protagonist on her journey. There have been some MPDBoy tropes forming in the media, such as Ben in *Parks and Recreation* or many of Ryan Gosling's characters, but they behave somewhat differently than their female counterparts (Lambert, 2012). Media's current MPDBoy trope exists to build up the confidence of the female protagonist, provide comfort, and nurture her without demanding something in return (Lambert, 2012). Through his patience, care, responsibility, and selflessness he helps her discover her best possible identity. Yet, whereas the MPDG is instrumental in a male's self-discovery as she teaches him a new perspective on the world, the current MPDBoy does not push the female's self-discovery in

any particular direction and simply encourages her as she makes that journey. Additionally, he may do so with fewer spontaneous songs and without the childlike wonder of the MPDG; instead, he may sit and listen to the female protagonist complain and he will play a board game with some friends. Pure childlike freedom is reserved for the MPDG. Aside from fetishization of a specific male character, the current MPDBoys in the media are problematic because they continue to reinforce gender roles in terms of how a “perfect” man or woman behaves. MPDGs are unconventional and cute, MPDBoys are supportive and understanding. In order to serve as a counter-narrative to the female trope, there must be a MPDBoy who is a free-spirit that helps a woman unlock her stifled emotions.

Another possible means of subverting the MPDG stereotype - without removing it completely - is to change her purpose in the narrative by incorporating another female. The traditional MPDG is defined from the perspective of an angsty male but a subversive version could be defined in female eyes. There are some MPDGs currently in the media that are defined in relation to females. One example would be Rebel Wilson’s character Robin in *How to Be Single* (2016) because she exists solely to support the central female protagonist, Alice. Robin is fun-loving, free-spirited, loud, and helps Alice discover her identity, but she is granted no journey of her own. A real world, female-oriented MPDG would be the actress Jennifer Lawrence. Lawrence is beautiful and talented but also loves food and swears in interviews. She inspires cultural obsession and articles such as “11 Times Jennifer Lawrence Voiced Her Junk Food Obsession & Gave Us So Much Life” (McGahan, 2015). Men want to be with her and women want to be her. Yet, overall, there are few clear examples of this stereotype in the media. Arguably this may be due to the lack of female leads in films, meaning that there is no female for

the MPDG to assist. Just as there are problems with the creation of a MPDBoy, it is not an ideal solution to simply create a woman-oriented MPDG. Creation of a woman-oriented MPDG continues to fetishize woman as objects that exist to inspire others, not independent and autonomous people.

The most clearly ideal solution to the MPDG trope is to create complex, realistic female characters. As obvious a solution as this may seem, it is more easily said than done. Stereotypes are shortcuts the media uses in order to expedite storytelling (Medden, 2017). Some writers want to focus on elements in a story other than character building and rely on stereotypes to make their job easier. A larger problem is the lack of representation of females in power in Hollywood; approximately only 20.5% work behind the scenes as directors, writers, and producers (Smith, Choueiti, Pieper, Gillig, Lee, & DeLuca, 2014). In a study of 700 films, researchers found that females make up less than a third of speaking characters, less than a quarter of the films depict a female in a lead or co-lead role, and only 10% have a gender-balanced cast (Smith, Choueiti, Pieper, Gillig, Lee, & DeLuca, 2014). Until women are granted the opportunity to be at the center of the story, it is inevitable there will be many characters that exist solely to support the male protagonist. But there is some hope for more complex characters in the future; there has been a notable increase recently in the number of complex, realistic female characters instead of MPDGs (Donahue, 2015). The MPDG will never die completely (Piasky, 2016), but she will hopefully fade away from prominence in the media as multi-dimensional women take over.

The MPDG stereotype has existed for decades in the media and serves as a representation of gender inequality, even if her character does not follow societal norms. She is most distinctly problematic for females through fetishization of her as a muse, but her existence is also

problematic for males because she implies that men are so emotionally-repressed that their only savior will be a quirky female tool. The role of men is often ignored in criticisms of the MPDG, preventing true critique of the trope. Rather than tearing down the characters or actresses who embody MPDG, we must examine the societal narrative of her and why she exists. It is unlikely the MPDG will ever disappear completely from the media, but perhaps she can both exist and subvert the narrative. Creation of a MPDBoy or a female-oriented MPDG could potentially subvert the narrative of what a MPDG is, but they simultaneously continue to reinforce fetishization. Obviously, replacing stereotypes with realistic women is the most ideal solution but if that was an easy path to follow then there would have hopefully been a solution long ago. Perhaps we should listen to the infinite wisdom of Manic Pixie Dream Girl and see how much more the world has to offer. Maybe then we will finally realize females can offer more than inspiration for males.

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