

The Manic Pixie Dream Girl and the Male Gaze

Film critic Nathan Rabin coined the term Manic Pixie Dream Girl in [his review](#) of the movie *Elizabethtown* for the AV Club. He uses it to describe the character of Claire, a perky flight attendant who helps the suicidal protagonist to appreciate life again. Rabin defines the MPDG as someone who “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.” As soon as she enters the film, the hero becomes so enraptured by her that he nears the point of obsession.

The MPDG is attractive, quirky, and seemingly without a life of her own. Her only purpose in the movie is to help the hero through whatever problems he is facing, and the viewer never learns much about her. Because of this, she remains utterly two-dimensional and unrealistic. What’s important to note is that the MPDG is usually found in movies that are being told from the point-of view of the male protagonist. The character of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl does not exist in real life, because she is only possible through the male gaze.

The film *(500) Days of Summer* perfectly exemplifies Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze. The movie is shown entirely from the perspective of Tom Hansen. Because of this narrative frame, the viewer sees the character of Summer Finn as Tom sees her. Tom is immediately fascinated by Summer and convinced that she’s the only girl for him, despite the fact that she’s told him that she’s not interested in a relationship. Summer displays many traits that are typical of the MPDG. Example 1 shows how Summer gets Tom to lighten up and have some fun as they run through Ikea.

Ex. 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNEkwcY7OI0>

In Example 2, Tom tells his friend some of the reasons why he's in love with Summer. Notice how all of the reasons he lists are physical features, not personality traits. His voiceover is accompanied by close-up shots of Summer. These images are not overtly sexual, but there is a sensuality to them. She's lying down on a bed, and there's a focus on her knees, neck, and lips. One can assume that she's looking at Tom, but Tom can't be seen while he's describing her. Therefore, it's as though Summer is looking directly at the viewer, smiling at them. In this sequence, Tom's look, the look of the camera, and the look of the audience are all the same.

Ex. 2: (0:00 – 0:40) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BhF3BDmyLs>

Mulvey states that in cinema, the act of looking is divided between the active male and the passive female (11). In this scene, Summer is definitely there “to be looked at.” Mulvey says the presence of a woman in a film can “freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (11). That is exactly what is happening here. Tom literally stops in the middle of the sidewalk, turns to his friend and announces that he's in love with Summer. Then he starts to think about her, and it's hard to tell whether this image of her lying on the bed is a memory or a fantasy. Either way, these thoughts of Summer bring the action of the movie to a sudden halt.

The problem here is that Tom is not in love with the real Summer, just an illusion. He's in love with the idea of her, with that perfect vision of her that he sees lying on the bed, and not who she actually is. He even says “I love how she makes me feel, like anything is possible or like life is worth it.” He's in love with this feeling, but the audience never knows how Summer truly feels about Tom. Tom is using Summer to feel better about himself, but what is Summer getting in return?

In his discussion of social realism, Galloway says that realism in the cinema represents “real life in all its dirty details, hopeful desires, and abysmal defeats” (74). When a male sees a

female as his MPDG, he projects his fantasies onto her and ignores all the characteristics that make her a real person. Is she ever sad? What are her flaws? What are her goals and dreams? These are things the viewer never finds out, because the story only focuses on the male's problems. In this way, the MPDG is not reflective of realism.

The character of Clementine in the movie *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* can be seen as the opposite of the MPDG. She has flaws, but the male character Joel has trouble seeing them. When he wants to stay with her, as shown in Example 3, she tells him "I'm not a concept. I'm just a f*cked up girl who's looking for her own peace of mind. I'm not perfect." Joel replies, "I can't see anything that I don't like about you." Using Matheson's intertextual analysis, this is a reference to the MPDG (36). When the viewer is aware of the MPDG trope, they can understand that this scene is contradicting the idea that the girl is going to solve all the hero's problems. Clementine is trying to get Joel to realize that she's just as messed up as he is, and she's not going to fix his life. But Joel, still so blinded by his fantasies, can't understand this.

Ex. 3: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qpux-Drk6EY>

The MPDG is a character that could not possibly exist in real life. Real people are more complex than a cute name and eclectic taste in music. A guy could think that someone is his MPDG, but that's only because he's objectifying and idealizing her. Of course, many characters in films are unrealistic. However, the MPDG is dangerous because it gives males the expectation that a girl will fix all their problems, therefore giving females impossible standards to live up to. The Manic Pixie Dream Girl is just that, a dream.

Works Cited

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