Spring 2016

The Birth of the MPDG 2.0: The Potential for the Manic Pixie Dream Girl Trope in Independent Film

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THE BIRTH OF THE MPDG 2.0: THE POTENTIAL FOR THE MANIC PIXIE DREAM GIRL TROPE IN INDEPENDENT FILM

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Brenna Sherrill

May 2016
THE BIRTH OF THE MPDG 2.0: THE POTENTIAL FOR THE MANIC PIXIE DREAM GIRL TROPE IN INDEPENDENT FILM

Date Recommended 03/24/2016

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To the people who made it possible for me to attend the Sundance Film Festival—

thank you for the adventure that has forever changed me.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Absolutely none of this could have been possible without the immense support of Dr. Ted Hovet, my advisor and mentor for this project. I’m so incredibly thankful for the guidance you’ve given me during this process. Thanks to you and Dr. Hall for fearlessly leading a group of 24 excited students on an unforgettable journey to the Sundance Film Festival for the first time in 2014, and for asking me to join you again as a TA in 2016. I am entirely indebted to you for these experiences that have changed my life.

Thank you to my entire thesis committee—Drs. Hovet, Hall, and Hollyfield—for the supportive criticism that has made this project what it is. Your discerning voices have been unbelievably helpful during this journey.

Thank you to WKU, the Study Away staff, and the Department of English for allowing me to experience the journey of a lifetime. My six years at WKU have been a treasure, and I’ve loved every moment of it.

Thank you also to my family and friends—Mom, Dad, Paula, and Ryan in particular—who have been the best support system during my time as a graduate student. Thank you for not killing me when I talk about Sundance incessantly. Your love was the perfect force when I felt overwhelmed and under-motivated.

Finally, thank you to Lena Dunham and Zoe Kazan for writing great criticism about the MPDG and voicing your support of my thesis project (and for making me look cool by being able to thank famous people).
PREFACE

On January 19, 2014, I sat in a crowded makeshift movie theater in Park City, Utah, watching the screen as a young woman crawled out a hospital window and broke into song. Though I didn't know it at the time, this film would become one of the central points of my thesis project and change how I think about female characters in popular media. Thanks to *God Help the Girl*, I had a little spark of an idea that took me a year to vocalize, but now I can't imagine myself ever pursuing a different project.

During the year that I've worked on this project, the Manic Pixie Dream Girl has become a part of me. These films and the experiences I've had watching them have been unbelievably powerful, sometimes thrilling, sometimes terribly annoying. Though I wrote my undergraduate honors thesis on a subject that is incredibly near to my heart, I've had a much harder time letting this project go. My career as a graduate student at WKU has gone by in the blink of an eye and the Manic Pixie Dream Girl is inextricably linked with that experience.

Though writing this thesis has been a long and sometimes difficult journey, I don't imagine I'll ever stray too far from it. I'm completely fascinated by this character trope and how it continues to change in its representation. This project has made me a more critical and thoughtful viewer, and I couldn't be more thankful for it.
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THE BIRTH OF THE MPDG 2.0: THE POTENTIAL FOR THE MANIC PIXIE DREAM GIRL TROPE IN INDEPENDENT FILM

Brenna Sherrill

Directed by: Ted Hovet, Dawn Hall, and Jerod Hollyfield

This project chronicles an in-depth character study on the Manic Pixie Dream Girl trope in film. The term was coined in 2007 by a film critic about a very specific kind of female character—one 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.” The MPDG has often been written off as nothing more than a stereotype or sexist characterization of a woman, but I argue that the MPDG can be much more than a flat character, as evidenced by the increasingly complex characterization of the MPDG in independent film. Based on case studies of several films, I discuss how the MPDG has grown from a supporting archetype into a well-rounded and multi-dimensional character. Based on a history of female depiction in film, a discussion of the critical interpretations of the MPDG, and these case studies, I argue that the MPDG has the potential to exist as a complex and realistic character rather than just an archetype.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Gender representation in popular culture has long been a heated discussion topic, particularly in a society that continues to feel the aftershocks of third-wave feminism that began in the 1990s (Snyder 175). In recent films we have seen female characters ranging from the hyper-sexualized Mikaela Banes (Megan Fox) in *Transformers* (Bay, 2007) to relatable comedienne like the women of *Bridesmaids* (Feig, 2011) to the quirky-cool Summer of *500 Days of Summer* (Webb, 2009) to strong and bold heroines such as Katniss Everdeen of *The Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012) and Imperator Furiosa of *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller, 2015). Current popular culture outlets reflect our ever-changing and more inclusive attempts at representing people of all genders, races, ethnicities, sexualities, and classes, but there are still glaringly obvious gaps and misrepresentations, particularly in film. What stories are being told about women and other underrepresented groups through the characters on the screen and the characters who never appear? In 2016, when the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences failed—for the second year in a row—to nominate a single person of color in the acting categories or a single woman in the cinematography or directing categories at the Oscars, the question of representation becomes ever more important. The problem with privileged representation occurring in the media means the argument about creating authentic and diverse characters and stories can no longer be ignored.

While these statistics about the lack of diversity in Hollywood films and at the Oscars is certainly troubling, not every area of film has such a bleak outlook—independent films, particularly those that premiere at the Sundance Film Festival,
are more consistently diverse. Sundance was founded in 1981 by actor and director Robert Redford as a venue to premiere indie films from around the world; Sundance selections “[represent] the year’s fresh crop of American indie talent,” where you can “[expect] to find outstanding or ‘breakout’ artists and films” (Newman 54). At the 2016 Sundance Film Festival, more than 40 percent of the films screened were directed by women, a number that is vastly different from the male-dominated Hollywood studio system (Berger). In addition, The Birth of a Nation, which won the top two honors at the festival, was directed and written by Nate Parker, a black man. Though it would be ridiculous to say the gender and racial gaps in the United States have closed, independent film is one area of the cinematic world that sees regular progress. Independent film—which can be defined as films that are generally character-driven and experimental in narrative and form—creates a space for statistically underrepresented populations and often serves as a haven for the creation and production of stories that are not typically told by bigger Hollywood studios (Newman 29). As space for female directors, writers, and actors grows in independent film, so do the opportunities for equal and diverse gender representations in Hollywood that are more representative of contemporary society.

Even though the opportunities for women both in front of and behind the camera continue to increase in numbers, the fact is that the women who are represented on screen are rarely fully formed or realistic—for every one Imperator Furiosa, there are countless Mikaela Banices. To a certain extent, feminist film criticism exists because of the shocking lack of women in film, particularly when
trying to identify women who are more than just supporting characters or romantic interests. Audiences have grown accustomed to a variety of female character tropes, including anything from the Girl Next Door to the Damsel in Distress to the Evil Matriarch to the School Slut to our trope in question: the Manic Pixie Dream Girl.

As a character trope, the Manic Pixie Dream Girl (MPDG) has lived a short life; the term was coined in 2007 by Nathan Rabin, who was a film critic for the A.V. Club at the time. Rabin first mentioned the MPDG in an essay on Cameron Crowe's 2005 film, Elizabethtown, while referring to the characterization of the film’s heroine, Claire, played by Kirsten Dunst. The following is the definition as set out by Rabin in “The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: Elizabethtown”:

Dunst embodies a character type I like to call The Manic Pixie Dream Girl (see Natalie Portman in Garden State for another prime example). The Manic Pixie Dream Girl 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. The Manic Pixie Dream Girl is an all-or-nothing-proposition. Audiences either want to marry her instantly (despite the Manic Pixie Dream Girl being, you know, a fictional character) or they want to commit grievous bodily harm against them and their immediate family. (Rabin, “Bataan”)

In truth, this passage is only a small part of Rabin’s discussion of the failures of Elizabethtown, but it sparked a trend in the analysis of a certain type of female character in film. MPDGs, as Rabin says, are whimsical, quirky, and mysterious. They are not vixens or bombshells, but are more in line with the “girl next door”
archetype. MPDGs are attainable and charming, and just distant enough to remain intriguing and mysterious to their male counterparts. For obvious reasons, Rabin and his fellow critics see these characteristics as problematic; essentially, the MPDG, by his definition, is just another two-dimensional, unrealistic representation of women in popular media. Other critics have discussed the “reductive placement” of women that the MPDG represents—these female characters only exist in supporting roles rather than in a leading position (Worsdale). Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the MPDG is the fact that she is never a stand-alone character, since her only purpose in a film is to serve as a launching point for the male hero's character development. The MPDG’s backstory is irrelevant, since we only need to see her as an extension of the hero’s character.

Though the MPDG has only become a named character trope in recent years, film history shows a long precedent for the archetype. In fact, in the wake of the MPDG’s naming, many critics took a retrospective approach to analyzing female characters that have existed throughout film history and exhibited characteristics of what would eventually become the MPDG. In fact, though the MPDG feels like a very current character, her roots go back much further—one critic even argued, “As contemporary a trope as it feels, it’s as old as Dante with his vision of being guided through paradise by his saintly Beatrice” (Schwyzer). Film history may not date back to the early fourteenth century, but analysis of films throughout the twentieth century clearly proves that the MPDG is more than just a recent phenomenon. The MPDG carries on many of the problematic traditions of the female characters that precede her; she’s secondary, passive, and disproportionately romanticized and
sexualized. Apart from this, the MPDG also offers some possibilities for improvement in female representation on film, which is why many critics have been fascinated by the trope. Because the MPDG is a more contemporary and well-rounded female character, at least in potential, she seems capable of being a character without some of the worst baggage of females of the past and with a strong sense of independence and agency.

While the MPDG offered a new way to look at films of the past and present, it also quickly became a way to potentially write off female characters as nothing more than a two-dimensional stereotype, and therefore to abruptly end the opportunity for critical conversation. For this reason, many film critics have become jaded about the effectiveness of the MPDG as an avenue of feminist film criticism. Critics like Jezebel's Tracy Moore, in her essay, “‘Manic Pixie Dream Girl’ Has Lost All Meaning,” call out the overuse of the term, saying it “now apparently represents every female character ever written...who was whimsical, offbeat, ‘not like other girls,’ ethereally sexy, bookish, different, unique, fucked up, bipolar, flirty, you name it.” Moore is correct in this complaint; calling characters a MPDG has become an easy way out of true character analysis—a way to avoid the grey areas of characterization in favor of the black and white.

However unproductive it may be to apply the MPDG label too generously, it seems equally inappropriate to write the term off completely. Though there are certainly examples of critics misusing the term, the trope does point to a specific type of female character that had never really been named before Rabin called it a MPDG. In the past decade, the term has been especially useful because of the
growing pool of MPDGs in film, and as these female characters have grown and changed, so has the definition of the MPDG itself. In a response to Monica Bartyzel’s “Girls on Film: Why it’s Time to Retire the Term ‘Manic Pixie Dream Girl’,” Alexandra Petri argues, “Just because certain characters do not exist in the wild does not mean we should stop writing about them...You don’t need to make up women. Real ones are far more interesting.” This argument treats the MPDG like any other imaginary trope—filmmakers do not write scripts about zombies or vampires or wizards because they are true to life, but because they are entertaining and can serve as commentary on the real world, and Petri sees the MPDG functioning in the same way. In fact, her solution to the potential MPDG problem—“the answer to bad portrayals is more portrayals and better ones: more roles for women that are not defined by their relationship to men”—essentially asks filmmakers to continue creating MPDGs in the hopes that the more often they are represented on screen, the more diversified they become.

Petri’s proposed solution is maybe more prescient than she realized when writing this piece in 2013; since then, the representations of MPDGs in film have become more complex, offering a version of the MPDG that was rarely seen in earlier films. The MPDG is no longer a solely supporting character who enters the male protagonist’s life and promptly exits once he has achieved some sense of personal development; she is often the leading character in her own story, complex, and functions separately from the men in her life. This more recent incarnation of the MPDG is one I like to call the MPDG 2.0, as opposed the MPDG 1.0 that represents the unrealistic archetype for which the trope was named. While Rabin
was correct in his original assessment of the character trope that offered a name for this specific type of female character, I disagree with his assessment that this is an inherently sexist trope, representative of nothing more than male fantasy. The MPDG, in her original form, certainly fit this definition, but as time has progressed, her existence has become decidedly more complicated, as viewers can see upon closer inspection of the lead female characters in films such as *Ex Machina*, *God Help the Girl*, and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, discussed at length in the following case studies.

In 2014, when Rabin issued an apology for coining the term “Manic Pixie Dream Girl,” he wrote what is essentially a cop-out for what once was a progressive and useful term for film criticism (Rabin, “I’m Sorry”). Sure, assigning the MPDG label too liberally meant that many female characters, regardless of their nuance and complexity, were written off as nothing more than stereotypes. But this is more evidence of lazy criticism rather than the truth of these characters. For this reason, I will examine the potential of the MPDG character trope, how it has evolved and continues to change, and consider how this character can exist within and outside the confines of male-dominated Hollywood studio films. Whether Ava in *Ex Machina* or Eve in *God Help the Girl*, the MPDG has come to represent and embody a much different idea than Rabin’s original conception. In light of the diversity issues plaguing Hollywood today, the conversation about complex and diverse representation in film is especially prevalent, and the MPDG illustrates the potential for realistic female characters. Like any trope, the MPDG begins as an archetype, but,
when executed in the appropriate way, can exist as a complex and three-dimensional female character.
CHAPTER TWO
ORIGINS OF THE MANIC PIXIE DREAM GIRL

While Nathan Rabin may have coined the term “Manic Pixie Dream Girl” in 2007, this certainly does not mean that the archetype never existed prior to Rabin’s definition. In fact, a study of how women have historically been represented in film can illuminate certain character traits that have clearly informed the MPDG trope. Much research has been done analyzing the changing role of women throughout the history of film, particularly in the discussion of how female characters function in relation to their male counterparts. While it would be outrageous to say that all female characters in the history of film have informed the MPDG, there are certain character types whose influence is clear and important to understand. The relationship between the MPDG and her male counterpart shows a continuation—and, eventually, extension of—a trend in female characters in film history. To see how the MPDG emerged as a character trope in the early twenty-first century, we must first examine her roots in the female characters that precede her.

The Independent Woman

I imagine many people envision the Roaring Twenties the same way I do—as Cinderella’s hours of bliss at the ball before the strike of midnight, when all the glitz would come to a crashing halt. In my mind, the years preceding Black Tuesday in October 1929 shine with all the frivolity of a Gatsby soiree. The characteristic decadence of this era is perhaps best exemplified by one of the most recognizable personas of the decade: the flapper. With shorter hemlines and hairstyles, the flapper represented a new generation of women who were content to stay single
and beautiful for as long as possible (Rosen 76). As Marjorie Rosen says in her book *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream*, Hollywood was quick to acknowledge the changing nature of femininity in the 1920s. Rosen writes, “Films had become more than a hatch for escapist fantasies; they were reflecting the challenging new situations of females, reinforcing the new chic and bravado of the times, and evolving into the last word in style setting and moral dictating” (77). In this way, then, films became a medium through which filmmakers could depict the latest societal trends, so the flapper’s emergence indicted a move toward a bolder and more independent female lifestyle. Despite the rise of the flapper as an independent woman, the key element of the character’s depiction was how she attracted men, a trait that essentially undercuts any sense of agency she may possess, which is what makes the MPDG 1.0 so problematic.

The film industry of the 1920s was quick to represent the changing female values of the period. Hollywood produced such popular films as *Jazzmania* (Leonard, 1923), *The Flapper* (Crosland, 1920), and *Wine of Youth* (Vidor, 1924) during the decade to reflect the new feminine ideal present in the flapper. This new style of film also created a new style of film star, as evidenced by the popularity of Colleen Moore.

According to Rosen, Moore differed from other wholesome female stars of the era because she represented the new American girl: “Newly bobbed
in a glistening Dutch boy ‘cut with a bang on the forehead, whose eyes are full of mischief and whose arms are long and slender,’ she played the beguiling twenties’ innocent, captivating with her clothing, her dancing, and her flirtations” (77). Even today we look back on the image of the flapper as scintillating—it is no wonder, then, that the flapper was such a revolutionary feature of the decade.

Moore starred in *Flaming Youth* (Dillon, 1923), a film that significantly influenced both the industry’s representation of diversified women and American females as a whole. Moore was not a bombshell, but a more realistic beauty, one who connected with women across America. *Flaming Youth* established a new popular aesthetic for American women, one consisting of bobbed hair and skimpy dresses (Rosen 77-8). The flapper image reflected the surging independence of the woman in society; she made it acceptable for women to be more than just demure, silent companions. In this way, the flapper archetype begins to establish the foundation upon which the MPDG was built. Much like the flapper, the MPDG 1.0 is flirtatious and fun, mysterious and aloof, a combination that is apparently irresistible to men (as evidenced by their many suitors in films). The flapper, like the MPDG, is the portrait of a *girl*, not a *woman*, a person young enough to possess a sparkling outlook on the world and desire for adventure that make her so alluring. Even the physical similarities between the flapper and MPDG are striking: the flapper wears a fashion-forward haircut and wardrobe, and we expect nothing less of the modern MPDG.

The flapper, while still young and naïve, offered a spunky new female personality type on screen, one that individualized her and made her a bigger
challenge to male costars. This sense of individualism became a new standard for “strong women” in film, but none epitomized it quite like Greta Garbo. The flirty and flippant flapper paved the way for Garbo’s roles as a mysterious woman, one who feels no need to throw herself at a man. This indifference toward men was perhaps what made her so intriguing—a new stereotype that man wants “to conquer, subjugate, and destroy” (Rosen 169). Garbo portrayed women who were mostly uninterested in romantic life; as Rosen says, “[her] allure lay in their denial of that humdrum destiny reserved for woman” (169). Garbo built a reputation as a femme fatale, establishing herself as such a major star that audiences were far more interested in seeing her on screen than any man with whom she might be sharing scenes (170). Despite Garbo’s strong image, though, she did not play into all of the same characteristics of the stereotypical “vamp” figure in silent film. As Rosen writes, “she drew [men] like magnets in spite of herself. She said no; they said yes—and ultimately they changed her mind” (170-1). Even if Garbo was known for her aloof and cold nature, she was still subject to romantic pursuits, and eventually her independence was conquered by the men bent on wooing her.

Garbo in no way represents the standard of American cinema during the time period, though. In fact, as film critic Molly Haskell writes in From Reverence to Rape:
Garbo, like any other star, was neither wholly unique nor wholly representative. She was like the solitary and self-derived creation of the writer” (Haskell 106-7). Her mysterious persona intrigued both male and female audiences, a fact that garnered her both popularity and stardom. It was Garbo’s “aloofness” that attracted men, while women appreciated her “toughness” and “willingness to acknowledge her sensuality” (Rosen 172). Other critics refer to Garbo’s face as a “mask” that conceals any “vulnerabilities” or “desires,” inherently making Garbo both “untouched and untouchable” (Arbuthnot and Seneca 114). The duality of Garbo’s persona is essential to her wide appeal and paves a clear path for the depiction of the MPDG as mysteriously alluring without being too intimidating, though this second characteristic may have been a bit less relevant in Garbo’s case. The MPDG represents a woman who is both sexually appealing and charismatic enough to attract men and women, which is an essential aspect of why the trope has continued to grow in popularity for wider audiences.

Garbo’s doubly appealing charm was echoed in a handful of other actresses in the following decades, but none is more representative than Katharine Hepburn. Hepburn stands alone as an actress who epitomized the changing nature of the times; she simultaneously oozed “humanity, humor and intelligence, giving added dimension to the image of woman in film and in life” (Rosen 209). Hepburn, a four-time Academy Award winner, built her reputation starring in comedies opposite Spencer Tracy, a tradition that established her as a force to be reckoned with. As an acting duo, Hepburn and Tracy proved that men and women “can iron out male/female conflicts while remaining true to themselves” (Rosen 209). Hepburn
represented another dimension of the independent American woman, one with
depth and agency that was both new to the
screen and indicative of the changing times.
This trait is what endears Hepburn to us: her
rapport with Tracy made it possible to “[resist]
objectification...as the erotic object of the male
viewer’s fantasy” (Arbuthnot and Seneca 114).

Just because Hepburn avoids sexual
objectification does not mean that she always
played fully developed characters, though. In
many ways, Hepburn’s characters often lack a
sense of depth, making it appear as though a
film could not represent “both a woman’s professional life and her emotional life”
with equal fervor (Arbuthnot and Seneca 114). The inadequacy of an equally
rounded character harkens back to the idea of Rabin’s MPDG, a girl who is only
developed enough to serve the needs of her male counterpart. Though we might
look back on Hepburn as a confident and sophisticated woman, her penchant for
professional success outweighed her ability for emotional depth, much like the
oftentimes hollow MPDG 1.0.

The lack of consistently complex female roles for actresses like Hepburn
points to a much larger problem in the film industry: the startlingly low number of
female characters who exist for themselves, not just as a supporting figure in a male
character’s life. The MPDG has, in its most recent incarnations, expanded its
representation to something that is much more than a supporting figure, but the absence of fully developed female characters is a problem that has plagued cinema since the birth of the film industry. Only when tropes develop into three-dimensional characters do we see the potential for the MPDG and her predecessors to exist as more than archetypal representations of women.

As an archetype, the Independent Woman can be seen across decades of film, even in contemporary media. The notion of a self-sufficient female certainly brings to mind titles like *Annie Hall* (Allen, 1977), *Norma Rae* (Ritt, 1979) and *Erin Brockovich* (Soderbergh, 2000), all films that present women with agency who operate independently of the men in their lives. In an indirect way, the Independent Woman archetype also influenced the MPDG, or at least part of her. The MPDG is, in distinct parts, flirtatious, captivating, quirky, and independent. She does not possess the cool strength of Garbo, but she exemplifies the vulnerability of a woman like Hepburn, whose roles often present a hard exterior with a soft core. In this way, women like Colleen Moore, Greta Garbo, and Katharine Hepburn all represent an influential force on the creation of the MPDG, even though the character type did not technically exist until decades after these actresses were first on screen. The fact that we can recognize pieces of what would eventually make up the foundation for the MPDG in early film proves that this character type and the characteristics that define her did not appear out of thin air, though. In reality, the MPDG was born of decades of influential female characters and the male-oriented approach to creating women in film.
The Ideal Woman

The trope of the Independent Woman has been repeated again and again in film throughout the twentieth century, but this represents only one personality facet that we see recur in popular media. Essentially, the descriptor “Independent Woman” defines only a dominant personality rather than a fully inclusive character portrait. There are a few exceptions to this, though, when we consider women who apparently offered the “complete package,” an archetype I call the Ideal Woman. While the Independent Woman appears repeatedly in the history of pop culture, there are few characters I would really identify under this title apart from two of the biggest stars of the 1950s and 1960s: Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn. Even today Monroe and Hepburn’s faces are found on posters and pop art as commonly as the visages of Elvis Presley or the Beatles. So why is it that these two women, in image at least, have become immortal?

In the aesthetic of the 1950s, Monroe and Hepburn present two ends on the spectrum of what the perfect woman should be. Both are impossibly beautiful, though in very different ways. Rosen calls Monroe a “natural wonder” and “the biggest business boon” of 1950s cinema (286). As a celebrity, Monroe captivated audiences both on screen and off. She was the physical embodiment of a
fantasy; how could any man resist her buxom body or luscious blonde curls?

Hepburn’s beauty was more understated, but equally charming. Rosen calls
Hepburn a “snub-nosed beauty…[who] perfectly reflected the faceless, powerless
women in postwar society” (301). Audiences of the time period saw female
characters who were equal parts chipper, charming, and vacuous, women in stark
contrast with the strong, bawdy heroines of the 1930s and 1940s. Where Monroe
epitomized the male fantasy, she existed in that role only; Hepburn depicted women
who seemed wholesome and family-oriented. This dichotomy, of course, implies the
veritable flaw in the Ideal Woman—this characterization is a subjective one and
likely contradicts itself depending on who designs it. The difference in opinion over
what constitutes the Ideal Woman explains why tropes, MPDG included, are often
inconsistent across different films. While the core of the character may be similar,
the notion of taste or attraction from one filmmaker or viewer to another will
undoubtedly differ.

The notion that Monroe is the physical embodiment of the male ideal
contributed hugely to her success as an actress. Some would say that Monroe’s
persona was a product of the male-dominated film industry, a society intent on
exploiting Monroe’s immense appeal for every penny she could bring to the box
office. This assumption, though, takes for granted Monroe’s own agency in creating
her image. Monroe certainly played into the male fantasy role time and time again—
as a gold-digging seductress in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (Hanks, 1953), as a sweetly
tempting upstairs neighbor in The Seven Year Itch (Wilder, 1955), or as the perfectly
naïve Sugar in the comedy classic Some Like It Hot (Wilder, 1959)—but that
certainly does not mean she was forced into the position as an unknowing woman without agency. Regardless of Monroe's involvement in perpetuating this image, the foundation Monroe laid for the establishment of the MPDG is clear. In fact, I would call Monroe one of Hollywood's truest MPDGs, even in contemporary society. Both in character and as a real person, Monroe represents the Ideal Woman—beautiful, but not conceited; innocent, but experienced; independent, but eager to please. She presents audiences with this version of the Ideal Woman, someone men could hope to be with and women could hope to become. As Rosen writes, Monroe's persona leads audiences to "fantasies which created a legend. Everywoman: beautiful, vulnerable, available. And vacuous enough so that on-screen we, and off-screen her men, would read the enigma to suit our egos" (291). While it is difficult to look at Monroe's physique and imagine calling her girlish, this bubbly, wide-eyed persona Rosen describes perfectly plays into the archetype of what we recognize as the MPDG today. Even though Monroe exemplifies many of the qualities of the MPDG, we cannot fully understand the trope without also adding the very different—but equally important—influence of Audrey Hepburn.

If Monroe represents the personality type we associate with the MPDG, Hepburn offers the answer to her physique. Though both Monroe and Hepburn are iconic faces of the 1950s, Hepburn's petite frame is standard while Monroe's curves are the exception. In attempting to answer the question of Hepburn's immense popularity, Rosen writes:

Perhaps it was the unusual combination of a narrow, bony body which she carried like a queen and an elfin face whose doe eyes contradicted by the
strength of intelligence in the look, the irregular nose and wide mouth whose smile was at once sensuous, mischievous, and absolutely sincere. Then there was her vocal quality, a softened British cadence. Hepburn’s presence could elevate the most mundane role because everything about her worked toward a female dignity. Intense and curious, she could span life cycles, leap across different worlds like one truly hungry to experience life. (302)

Based on this description, we can easily identify how Hepburn’s elfin qualities provide the foundation for the pixie physicality of the MPDG. The MPDG is much more similar to Hepburn’s “girl next door” type than Monroe. Hepburn’s roles like the adventurous princess in *Roman Holiday* (Wyler, 1953), the sophisticated chef in *Sabrina* (Wilder, 1954), or as the eccentric socialite in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (Edwards, 1961) illustrate the idealized feminine aesthetic audiences associate with Hepburn and illustrate her role as a precursor to the MPDG.

If we hold true to Rosen’s definition of Everywoman as “beautiful, vulnerable, and available,” we can easily see how Monroe and Hepburn’s roles cast them in this stereotype again and again. In combination, we can see how Monroe’s willing and excitable personality paired with Hepburn’s sweet and nonthreatening stature serve as a MPDG prototype of sorts. Without a doubt, Monroe and Hepburn are two of the
clearest influences on the MPDG archetype, both on screen and off. Monroe and Hepburn's relatable charms are perhaps the clearest foundation in film history for the MPDG archetype—women who are both ethereal and accessible. Physically, though, the MPDG is much more akin to Hepburn's petite and boyish frame rather than Monroe's voluptuousness. Individually, Monroe and Hepburn represent two sides of the Ideal Woman: sweet, beautiful, and flirtatious, but never independent or ambitious enough to be threatening to a man. In combination, Monroe and Hepburn form a fairly perfect example of the contemporary MPDG. With the right physique, personality, and male-serving purpose, these two actresses perfectly fit the definition as set forth by Nathan Rabin in 2007. Though Rabin is a contemporary critic, the trope he named exists, even if just in part, throughout the historic representation of women in film. The MPDG is by no means a character type that appeared out of thin air when Rabin first used the term, but is rather a culmination of countless preceding female characters in cinema.

The Male Gaze

Bearing this idea in mind, then, a few questions become clear. Why do female characters tend to fall into rather distinct stereotypes, and how have we as audience members been influenced in our interpretation of them? As a psychoanalytic study might be an appropriate way to answer these questions, it seems essential to present one highly regarded theory on the depiction of women in film: Laura Mulvey’s notion of the Male Gaze, first introduced in her 1975 essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In its most stripped-down definition, the Male Gaze
says that audiences view female characters through the eyes of men, and are then likely to fantasize about these women in the same way that a man would. Mulvey tells us that identifying with the male viewer allows audiences to “participate in his power,” and therefore “indirectly possess” female characters (205). Essentially, any interpretation of female characters is boiled down to a visual action, because the man looks, while the woman is looked at. The concept of the Male Gaze is universal in its application to all female characters—not just MPDGs—which helps viewers to understand how women on screen have been characterized and interpreted throughout film history. To understand the capabilities of female characters, we must recognize that the lens through which we view them is not simply a camera, but also a cultural and patriarchal one.

It seems likely that the notion of the Male Gaze is one that greatly informs Rabin's own definition of the MPDG, especially upon a detailed inspection of his words. The MPDG “exists solely in the fevered imagination of sensitive writer-directors,” and one can only assume that these writer-directors Rabin refers to are male (Rabin, “The Bataan”). The MPDG also, according to Rabin, exists “to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures” (Rabin, “The Bataan”). Once this task is complete, the MPDG’s work is done, and she often disappears, having served her male companion successfully. Like the men in these movies, we as audience members see the MPDG as a fantasy, one that flits into lives to serve her purpose, and leaves quickly enough that we wish she could have stayed just a bit longer. In contrast to the female character in Mulvey’s theories, it seems that MPDGs cannot be fully possessed since they leave of
their own free will, but this fact only enhances the fantastic quality of the MPDG. The MPDG, by Rabin's definition, at least, is not a real human being, but a male-derived concept, and is therefore inherently illustrative of the Male Gaze. Though the Male Gaze is in no way the exhaustive tool with which to conduct feminist film analysis, it does provide a solid foundation for Rabin's description of the MPDG trope, as well as demonstrating a way for viewers to understand the character types that have been repeated time and again in the historical representation of women in film. The concept of the Male Gaze alerts us to the need for feminist film analysis and helps us recognize problems and stereotypes and the very mechanisms of cinema—male directors and writers—that make it a patriarchal industry. This history, though brief, is essential to understanding how the MPDG came to be in contemporary film theory.
CHAPTER THREE
CRITICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE MANIC PIXIE DREAM GIRL

Rabin’s naming of the MPDG in 2007 sparked a fairly immediate reaction in film circles, as it gave an identity to a character trope that had existed, albeit only in bits and pieces, for years before Rabin’s review of *Elizabethtown*. Because his term gave a name to this archetype, many other film and cultural critics latched onto the term after Rabin named the MPDG. Though less than a decade has passed since Rabin gave a name to the MPDG, Rabin and his term have gone from heralded for identifying this sexist and unrealistic female character trope to scorned for eliminating the opportunity for quirky women to exist on screen without being written off as an archetype. In the MPDG’s early stages, Rabin’s fellow critics lauded him for identifying the character type and contributed to the discussion by writing articles that identify further examples of the MPDG (Bowman, et al.) discussing the problematic representation of women in other films (Berman), and even satirizing the trope with MPDG dating tips (Davies) and an imagined retrospective MPDG tribute for the Academy Awards (B.arry). Critics used Rabin’s creation as a launching pad, expanding on his arguments by identifying other apparent MPDGs and “problematic” female representations in pop culture. This sense of agreement with the problem Rabin identified only lasted for a time, though. Eventually, Rabin made many enemies in the pop culture world such as actress and screenwriter Zoe Kazan and young adult author John Green who see Rabin’s term as sexist. In 2014, Rabin apologized for his creation of the term in an essay titled “I’m Sorry for Coining the Phrase ‘Manic Pixie Dream Girl’.”
Rabin’s case is hardly unique; media and technology create a space for digital roundtable discussions in which contributors from around the world can engage in critical discourse. For Rabin, this meant that many people – from actors to bloggers to cultural reporters – have taken to the Internet to examine Rabin’s original definition and argument, often in an effort to tear it apart.

From my standpoint, this pushback is what makes contemporary media technology and pop culture so interesting, and sometimes incredibly taxing. We live in an age in which expert opinions are no longer so authoritative; the collaborative environment of technology allows a multitude of contributors to come together in discussion rather than blindly accepting one opinion on a given topic. This is exactly how the trajectory of the MPDG progressed, moving from Rabin’s rather unassuming original definition to a multidimensional argument and discussion of the archetype to Rabin’s eventual admission that his term wasn’t quite sufficient.

While some have called for the metaphoric death of the MPDG character and Rabin himself seems more than willing to see the term’s demise, I see the problems with the term more in its limiting definition than in its overall essence. In its most infantile stage, calling a character a MPDG was meant to criticize the male-dominated Hollywood that presents women as flighty, flat characters who are shiny on the surface but possess no real substance. This, in my mind, is a valid purpose for the term, but I don’t see the MPDG as an exclusively insufficient characterization. Like any archetype, the MPDG provides a foundation upon which a filmmaker could build a fully-formed character, one who could still fit the basic parameters of a MPDG while also being something more substantial. We might call her the MPDG
2.0, a woman both archetypal and distinct in her quirky-coolness. The MPDG 2.0 is a character I believe already exists in recent films like *Ex Machina* (Garland, 2015) and *God Help the Girl* (Murdoch, 2014), which present female characters who are incredibly complex and heroes in their own stories rather than just in those of their male companions. The difference between the MPDG 1.0 and 2.0 points to the larger issue of gender analysis in cinema—there may be no shortage of overly simply female characters, but the existence of more nuanced character representations shows a paradigmatic shift in the types of stories being told on screen. Before working toward my own expanded definition of the MPDG, though, we must examine the foundations of the problem as seen through the eyes of the term’s critics since its inception eight years ago.

**Hollywood’s Most Famous MPDGs**

Because the birth of the MPDG as a term was so recent, the progress and development of the term can be traced fairly clearly across various media platforms. In fact, after the term’s inception in 2007, the first time it seemingly became a vernacular term was with the release of Marc Webb’s film *500 Days of Summer* in 2009. The film stars Zooey Deschanel as the MPDG in question, though her role as a MPDG is argued by audiences who see her as either a vehicle used purely for her boyfriend’s personal development or as a strong-willed female who outgrows her partner (Shafrir). Deschanel’s role in this movie led other viewers to consider the scope of her career as a whole, characterizing her as “Hollywood’s MPDG” since she
often falls into similar supporting roles, like the ones in *Elf* (Favreau, 2003) and *Yes Man* (Reed, 2008).

Deschanel’s appearance also contributes to audiences’ perceptions of her as an eternal MDPG: her doe-eyed, vintage-dress-wearing, quirky style is a major part of her personal appeal and only seems to situate her more precisely in what we’ve come to see as the MDPG aesthetic. Deschanel’s twee image was even spoofed in 2012 in a recurring *Saturday Night Live* sketch called “Bein’ Quirky with Zooey Deschanel” (“Watch”). When asked directly about her image as an MDPG, Deschanel said to *Glamour* magazine, “I want to be a fucking feminist and wear a fucking Peter Pan collar. So fucking what?” (Hess). In this sentiment, I have to side with Deschanel; her decision to dress and act how she does is a choice, and one she should be free to make. There has been some debate whether Deschanel’s current television role as the lead on FOX’s “New Girl” perpetuates the role of women as a male fantasy or is a true representation of a developed MDPG, and one therefore more in line with the MDPG 2.0 (Poniewozik). Deschanel’s character is still “unapologetically girly, hopelessly romantic, and frequently framed in a headband a baby doll dress. But as the show develops, she becomes many other things: sexually adventurous, professionally aggressive, and owner of a low, maniacal laugh that cuts straight through her happy-go-lucky exterior every time she releases it” (Hess). As Jess Day, Deschanel exemplifies the type of character that a MDPG can be, something more than just a hollow vessel of charm. In my mind, this distinction is an important one to note—just like any archetypal character, the MDPG offers a chance to build from the foundation of a stereotype into a more complex character.
This same “real-life MPDG” reputation has also followed actresses like Natalie Portman and Zoe Kazan, both known for playing dreamy female companions. Portman stars in the only film besides Elizabethtown that Rabin mentions in his original article naming the MPDG: Zach Braff’s 2004 directorial debut, Garden State. In a response to The A.V. Club’s list of “16 Films Featuring Manic Pixie Dream Girls,” Salon writer Judy Berman penned a short essay called “The Natalie Portman Problem” to discuss the representation of such unrealistic female characters. Berman calls Garden State a “horrifyingly self-indulgent” film and says that the depiction of MPDGs is “an exercise in wish fulfillment” on the part of male screenwriters (Berman). Essentially, Berman’s criticism is pointed at Braff for creating a character based in male fantasy rather than reality, a fact that ties her argument to Rabin’s original definition and criticism of representations of the MPDG and also brings us back to the representation of women throughout film history.

Kazan’s case is a bit more difficult to understand, largely because she has had an active voice in speaking against the naming of the MPDG trope. In a 2012 interview, Kazan expressed disgust with the MPDG characterization, saying, “It’s a way of describing female characters that’s reductive and diminutive, and I think basically misogynist” (Greco). Kazan goes on to say that this view of female characters is not representative of their own perspectives, but a “[reflection] of the man who is looking at them, and the way that they think about that girl” (Greco). Kazan’s criticism of the term is certainly valid, but it also conveys almost exactly the same meaning Rabin’s intended definition did when he coined the term in 2007. As Rabin stated, the MPDG “exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-
directors” who tend to be almost exclusively male. In this way, Kazan might be correct in calling the representation of MPDGs misogynistic, but the fact that she sees herself at odds with Rabin—whom she refers to as “a blogger”—when they in fact have similar arguments is quite interesting. What has led to the contrasting interpretations of this term? Differences in meaning might be an organic product of a reader-response approach to texts written about the MPDG, but it also shows us how the collaborative nature of critical discussion in the twenty-first century allows for very different interpretations of the same text. In these diversified opinions lies the perfect foundation for discussion of the MPDG archetype, both in its potential to belittle female characters or to allow them to become more complex than just a stereotype. The existence of the disagreement about the MPDG’s usefulness as a term illustrates the importance of gender analysis in film, particularly when the discussion of complex female characters is brought up. Tropes like the MPDG and its varying level of complexity illustrate the ongoing push for gender equality, particularly in the film industry and in the discourse about it.

**Deconstructing the MPDG Trope**

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of studying such a recent phenomenon in popular culture is the discovery of all that has been written about the MPDG in popular sources. There is very little “academic” writing published on the topic of the MPDG, but “popular” sources on the subject are regularly produced. The MPDG is not a character trope owned solely by Rabin, the man responsible for its name. The reality of our immensely interactive digital media makes it possible for countless
writers to engage in the discussion of this character. In all likelihood, this is a contributing factor in Rabin's decision to publish his 2014 apology for coining the term; while Rabin was originally hailed for giving an appropriate name to an archetype that has long been in existence, over time more and more people criticized Rabin for creating what was seen as a sexist term in and of itself. The strong presence of popular sources on the matter of the MPDG clearly influenced this decision. While more and more popular writers, be it for publication or just in personal blogging, called for an end to the MPDG, rarely have any writers offered solutions of how this could be done, or even if there are characters that are both MDPGs and complex. The long history of gender analysis in film from academic sources sets the precedent for understanding the MPDG as more than just a popular issue, specifically in the way this character trope represents yet another potential source of misogynistically-written characters in film or a potential way to add complexity to female characters. This dichotomy of how the MPDG is interpreted is really what makes the character so complicated. For this reason, understanding the critical history of the MPDG is key to understanding the character trope itself.

As previously mentioned, one of the earliest responses to Rabin's 2007 definition of the MPDG was a list of sixteen other MPDGs in film created by a variety of film critics including Rabin himself. This list contains such wide-ranging titles as *Almost Famous* (Crowe, 2000), *Bringing Up Baby* (Hawks, 1938), *Joe Versus the Volcano* (Shanley, 1990), and *The Apartment* (Wilder, 1960) as examples of the many MPDG-featuring films. This expansion of the term caused plenty of disagreement from others in the entertainment industry, such as *Slate*'s Virginia
Pasley. In her article “What, Exactly, is a ‘Manic Pixie Dream Girl’?” Pasley says the title of the MPDG is “useful, but increasingly overextended.” Pasley also argues that the inclusion of such films as *Bringing Up Baby* and *The Apartment* unjustly combines “screwball comedy ditzes together with MPDGs” (Pasley).

This list, published in 2008, marks a trend toward perhaps undeservedly lumping all quirky female characters into one category under the heading of MPDG. For this reason, Pasley and other critics have also engaged in developing the definition of the MPDG to help understand what it is that makes this character trope distinct. Pasley, in her attempt to define the MPDG, characterizes the MPDG as “childlike,” “ethereal,” and someone “with all the answers” (Pasley). In many ways, the MPDG reads as a figment of the imagination because it’s difficult to believe someone so perfect could really exist. Actress and screenwriter Mindy Kaling has her own version of the MPDG she refers to as “The Ethereal Weirdo” in a 2011 essay she penned for *The New Yorker*. After mentioning Rabin’s definition of the MPDG, Kaling characterizes The Ethereal Weirdo as follows:

This girl can’t be pinned down and may or may not show up when you make concrete plans with her. She wears gauzy blouses and braids. She likes to dance in the rain and she weeps uncontrollably if she sees signs for a missing dog or cat. She might spin a globe, place her finger on a random spot, and decide to move there. The Ethereal Weirdo appears a lot in movies, but nowhere else. If she were from real life, people would think she was a homeless woman and would cross the street to avoid her. But she is essential to the male fantasy that even if a guy is boring he deserves a woman who will
find him fascinating and perk up his dreary life by forcing him to go skinny-dipping in a stranger's pool. (Kaling)

The most important bit of Kaling's definition to note is her mentioning that this character type "exists a lot in movies, but nowhere else." Essentially, this tells us that the MPDG or Ethereal Weirdo are unrealistic characters; they exist only in movies because they could not possibly exist as real human beings. The MPDG, at least in its original incarnation, is nothing more than a two-dimensional fantasy. As Rabin points out, this is an archetype born from the minds of "sensitive writer-directors" because she is some idealized version of a realistic woman (Rabin, "Bataan").

Monicka Bartyzel expands upon this notion of the unrealistic nature of the MPDG, saying that the MPDG lives life "differently’ than the average girl" (Bartyzel). Bartyzel characterizes the MPDG as a character full of spontaneity; "she loves indie music, whimsy, and any number of idiosyncratic hobbies, from barefoot tap dancing to driving on 'gloriously confusing' roads" (Bartyzel). In this assessment, we again see an interpretation of the flaky, two-dimensionality of the MPDG. Though all these definitions of the MPDG point toward a character whose charm essentially outweighs any faults she may possess, Pasley still sees the MPDG as an inherently flawed character. Pasley says, "what really separates the MPDG from a female-character-with-distinct-personality-traits is the sense that something is wrong with the MPDG. Hence the 'Manic’” (Pasley). Other critics rarely touch on this point, though the inclusion of the word “manic” in the character’s name certainly points audiences to assume the MPDG is ultimately flawed. Her manic nature, though, is
also a major aspect of what makes her so appealing. The idea that the MPDG is somehow both perfect and slightly flawed again pushes us to look to the (presumably) male screenwriter who created her, since she is a construct of male fantasy rather than a semblance of a realistic person. Maybe the MPDG is meant to be just flawed enough (i.e. manic and flaky) so audiences don’t feel compelled to identify more with her than with the male protagonist. Though there is no reason why all film characters must be realistic or relatable, the fact that it is so much more common for women to be placed in this type of supporting position as a character with minimal backstory identifies a gendered problem in film. The existence of the MPDG illustrates the disparity between underdeveloped female characters in comparison with their male counterparts and challenges filmmakers to address this issue with more complex female characters.

The general cultural discussion of the MPDG has also come to reflect a frustration with the term itself, not just this type of characterization in film. Many critics have accused Rabin of misogyny with his naming of the MPDG, though Rabin’s original definition was in fact a criticism of a sexist representation of femininity in film. Though she contributed to defining some of the characteristics that define the MPDG, Monicka Bartyzel also says this process of characterization has always been a “fluid construct.” She goes on to say that “Rabin’s oft-quoted definition doesn’t actually describe the girl; it describes the audience’s experience of watching her” (Bartyzel). This description is fairly accurate; when looking back to Rabin’s original definition of the MPDG, he spends more time discussing its creator’s intentions and the audience’s perceptions than he does the character type itself. In
fact, it seems that the general consensus of what the MPDG really is has been
defined through a combination of identifying past MPDGs in film and the words of
other writers who contribute to the discussion. Rabin himself never set forth a
specific rubric for what defines a MPDG. However, as the conversation about the
character trope became more collaborative, it also became easier and easier for
critics to simply write off every quirky female character as a MPDG, a fact that made
said character apparently unworthy of further discussion.

Herein lies the problem with how we have audiences have come to know the
MPDG. Any discussion of a character trope is only useful as long as it remains a
means for analysis, rather than an excuse to minimize a character by slapping an all-
encompassing title on it and moving on. This is why some critics have called for an
end to the MPDG, saying that the term is no longer useful in film discussion. As
Bartyzel says:

“Manic Pixie Dream Girl” was useful when it commented on the superficiality
of female characterizations in male-dominated journeys, but it has devolved
into a pejorative way to deride unique women in fiction and reality. It’s no
longer a call to arms for more well-rounded female characters in fiction, but a
way to chastise difference from the norm. MPDG is now the catch-all term for
unusual interests and style – a film-related offshoot of the Hipster
designation evolving from people who wear/use things ironically to anyone
with retro interests. (Bartyzel)

The overuse of MPDG may have caused the term to lose its impact, especially as an
analytical tool. Critic Kat Stoeffel writes that calling a character a MPDG was
originally “shorthand for a feminist critique of a certain kind of female character,” but the more often the term was used, the less meaning it had (Stoeffel). Rather than making an effort to truly dissect a character, people became far too comfortable labeling said character as a MPDG, so many began to see the term as belittling and sexist in its own way. Bartyzel writes that calling a character a MPDG became an easy way to “chastise” whatever it was that made a supporting female character special, distracting us from “the real problems of superficial female characters” (Bartyzel).

It is difficult to deny the validity of the arguments of Bartyzel and Stoeffel. The overuse of MPDG as a critical term and the uninformed discussion of it demean the value of the trope as a critical term. This fact makes it difficult to understand why other critics still see the term as useful, especially with the knowledge of Rabin's 2014 apology for coining the term (Rabin, “I’m Sorry”). In 2013, Laurie Penny published a New Statesman essay entitled, “I was a Manic Pixie Dream Girl” in which she discusses how she exemplified the character trope in her real life. Penny's writing cuts to the heart of the problem with the MPDG as defined by Rabin. She says, “men grow up expecting to be the hero of their own story. Women grow up expecting to be the supporting actress in somebody else’s” (Penny). Penny sees her past self as an example of this – she claims that her physicality and personality were already aligned with the stereotypical MPDG, and other traits were “honed by that learned girlish desire to please” (Penny). Though Penny is clearly critical of these learned behaviors that she personified, she does not think it necessary to dismiss the MPDG trope altogether. Rather, Penny calls for further analysis of the character
type, saying, "the MPDG trope isn’t properly explored, in any of the genres I read and watch and enjoy. She’s never a point-of-view character, and she isn’t understood from the inside. She’s one of those female tropes who is permitted precisely no interiority. Instead of a personality, she has eccentricities, a vaguely-offbeat favorite band, a funky fringe” (Penny).

This frustration Penny expresses is one which I identify with most, and a large factor in my own study of the character trope. When Rabin identified the MPDG trope, he did it as an act of feminist analysis, discussing the problems with the ways females are represented on screen. Penny also takes issue with this problem, though I disagree with her assertion that the audience never sees the MPDG’s perspective (much more discussion will be devoted to this topic later). It is too simple to dismiss Rabin’s term as sexist in and of itself because that terminates any possible discussion of the character. After Rabin issued his MPDG apology in 2014, writer Lisa Knisely penned a response that perfectly encapsulates why we still need the MPDG for the purposes of film criticism. Knisely mentions how awareness of the trope gained ground over time, and eventually became so popular that "MPDGs suddenly seemed to appear in every other film." But, as Knisely also points out Rabin’s identification of the MPDG only served as a way to name a specific kind of character. Knisely writes:

When Rabin coined the term, he wasn’t commenting on a new trend in popular culture—female characters have served as foils for the growth of male protagonists in a plethora of different cultural narratives over the years. Still, by putting a name to the “Manic Pixie Dream Girl,” Rabin was describing
a particular, contemporary iteration of the old patriarchal storytelling trope of woman as muse, supporter, and helpmate repackaged for a new generation. (Knisely)

Knisely cuts to the core of the problematic MPDG. Though she may be wrapped up in a new disguise of quirky coolness, the MPDG is just the latest incarnation of a male protagonist's feminine sidekick.

Calling a character a MPDG should signify the identification of a certain type of female depiction. Again, modern technology provides the perfect launching point for discourse on the MPDG. The fact that Internet users across the globe can engage in a dialogue about MPDGs certainly makes the discussion more dynamic, but it also means that the understanding of what a MPDG really is can quickly become distorted. As Knisely writes, “whereas the MPDG was supposed to describe the vapid, unrealistic women characters in films, the more the term got used the easier it became to describe seemingly any female film character as an MPDG in order to misogynistically dismiss her.” When it becomes the norm for audiences to write off any female character as a MPDG, the term loses its power. We must remember that, like any critical term, the MPDG label signifies something specific, and should not be used as a blanket identifier in film analysis. Knisely goes on to say that “by lumping all the quirky, supporting female characters in contemporary films into the category of MPDGs, we crucially ignore their differences and lose important nuance in our criticisms of film.”

Though the term has, at times, lost its critical power due to overuse, it seems too easy to a solution for Rabin to have issued an apology in the hopes of killing off
the MPDG. As Knisely writes, while the term is not always used effectively, in the right hands it remains “intensely useful and important” when applied in the correct context. Though it is clear that the MPDG has deep roots in female representation in film history, the MPDG reads as an intensely millennial character trope. It isn’t surprising that we see MPDGs more and more often on-screen; her quirky, fun, likeable aesthetic aligns perfectly with the hipster, “nerdy is cool” mentality of popular media in the early-21st century. Knisely, who identifies herself as “a woman old enough to just barely still be considered a millennial,” also notes that the MPDG seems specifically representative of this generation. Though the term has often been misused in film analysis, the fact that it can so accurately serve as a critique of the most current incarnations of women in film makes it incredibly important. In addressing Rabin’s apology essay, Knisely says that she “really wishes he hadn’t written it” because “the ability to shorthand what seemed to be a pervasive and powerful cultural ideal of white femininity embodied by the on-screen MPDG has been invaluable.” In this way, Knisely sees the MPDG as “a powerful tool for feminists” because analysis of MPDG representations in film helps make sense of gender dynamics in real life. So even if some people use the term too liberally and oftentimes verge into misogyny by labeling characters as MPDGs, Knisely sees the term as inherently more useful than it is harmful in terms of feminist analysis.

Knisely concludes her essay by saying that the MPDG is a cultural construct more than anything else, but her fictitious nature is no reason to write the trope off entirely. Knisely says that even though the MPDG is a figment of the imagination, “pretending she isn’t in our heads, that she’s lost all her power because she has
become a Frankenstein-ish caricature and a cliché, doesn’t mean the MPDG no longer operates as a cultural ideal that shapes the way men and women interact—both onscreen and off.” The fact that the MPDG trope continues to pervade the American film industry undoubtedly signifies that it would be irresponsible to call for an end to all discussion of the character. Despite the discussion of the MPDG as being sexist in its own way, the trope exists as a critical term because it is still reflective of women as they are depicted in contemporary popular culture. We as critics cannot simply dismiss the term’s usefulness just because it isn’t always applied correctly. In order for the MPDG to become irrelevant as a critical term, we must first see a transformation to the representation of these types of female characters in film.
CHAPTER FOUR
THE ORIGINAL MANIC PIXIE DREAM GIRL

In looking to the films that best encapsulate the MPDG 1.0, we must first turn our attention to Cameron Crowe’s 2005 film, *Elizabethtown*, as this is the film to which Rabin first applied the term. *Elizabethtown* tells the story of Drew Baylor (Orlando Bloom), a man on the verge of suicide after losing nearly a billion dollars for his company, when he gets a call that his father has died in Kentucky while visiting family. On his cross-country flight to the funeral, Drew meets flight attendant Claire Colburn (Kirsten Dunst), the woman who helps him work through the traumas of his catastrophic business decisions and his father’s death. Claire, of course, is the “original” MPDG, the character whom Rabin describes as “an all-or-nothing proposition” (Rabin, “The Bataan”).

The scene of Drew and Claire’s meeting is, by most definitions, a meet-cute of sorts: Drew’s flight is a nearly empty red-eye, and though he is determined to sleep, Claire refuses to let him keep to himself. Claire is infallibly cheery, asking Drew his reasons for travel and where he is going, and finally seats herself beside him to draw him a map of the area. Based on this scene alone, viewers would have difficulty arguing with Rabin’s assessment of Claire’s character—the contrast of sullen and introverted Drew with chipper and effervescent Claire begs us to root for their relationship and, in a larger context,
aligns Claire with female characters throughout film history who are meant to inspire change and hope in a leading man. We can see Drew start to come out of his shell just in the moments of conversation they share, hinting at the possibility of what Drew could be under Claire’s optimistic tutelage.

Though this scene perfectly sets up what is to come for the pair, I would argue that we do see one tiny hint of Claire as something more than Drew’s muse—when she finally leaves him to let him get some rest, she realizes Drew is traveling to his father’s funeral, a fact he had kept hidden while they talked. For just a moment, we see Drew through Claire’s eyes and the sympathy on her face is palpable. This is one of the only shots in the film that separates us from Drew’s perspective, so though it is a fleeting moment, it is also one worth considering. Perhaps Claire is not just a girl meant to help this guy grow in some way, but also to cope with the loss of his parent. Crowe’s choice to include such a simple shot makes Claire’s characterization just a bit more complex, and even if this facet of her character does not last, we can see the potential of what her character could be with a bit more development.

As the film goes on, we start to see why Rabin would take issue with Claire’s representation—though their interactions should be temporary and contained, Drew and Claire continue to pop up in each other’s lives, and each time they separate, Claire offers Drew some bit of lofty advice as though she may be able to impart some wisdom he can carry and hopefully learn from later. As Drew exits the plane, Claire grabs his hands and says, “Look, I know I may never see you again. We are intrepid. We carry on” (Elizabethtown). Claire is a determined force of goodwill,
and she takes Drew on as her special project. Again, at this moment, Claire is just a bit more complicated than Rabin gives her credit for because she seems disassociated from Drew to a certain extent. We could easily imagine her as the type of woman who does this all the time: she finds some sad sack, forlorn passenger on her flight and takes advantage of his plight, offering some pearls of wisdom before they part. If Claire’s role in the film ended there, we might be able to see her as just an ethereal presence along Drew’s journey whose impact cannot be fully understood until the conclusion. However, the progression of the movie shows us Claire’s uncanny ability to pop up in Drew’s life, hinting at the necessity for her to guide him along in his personal development, and this is where Claire’s “fairy godmother” characterization becomes a bit less flattering. In this way, Claire again echoes her predecessors throughout film history as she becomes a supporting character in the most literal sense, helping Drew along as he moves through life.

As Drew meets his family in Kentucky, he is surrounded by people who want to know him and help him, but we see that the only person he feels comfortable talking to is Claire. Drew and Claire spend all night on the phone at one point, which seems like the perfect opportunity for us to get to know something deeper about Claire, but we still lack any significant insight into her personal life. In this way, Claire epitomizes her role as a descendant of the long history of underdeveloped
female characters in film—like many of the characters played by Marilyn Monroe or Audrey Hepburn, Claire is a secondary (and essential) presence in this film, existing so she can push her male protagonist on to some sense of personal achievement or growth. Claire’s presence is even distracting to other male characters in the film; when she accompanies Drew on his mission to choose an urn for his father’s ashes, the young male worker in the funeral parlor is clearly intrigued by Claire, despite her being there with another man. Scenes like this are undeniably similar to some in a Monroe film like *The Seven Year Itch*, where she often seems unaware of her power over men, even though they continue to fawn over her. Physically, Claire is more like Hepburn since she is nowhere near as sexualized as Monroe so often was, but the fact that her aura is such a distraction to the men in her world points to some strange representation of women as physically overpowering to the men they attract.

Considering Claire was the character who inspired the naming of the MPDG, her ability to attract and confound men is no surprise. Rabin describes Claire—and the MPDG in general—as a character used to “teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures” (Rabin, “The Bataan”). Viewers may be hard-pressed to argue with this assessment of the movie, considering Claire tries so blatantly to impart wisdom on Drew at every chance. Rabin also mentions the polarizing effect of the MPDG, saying, “audiences either want to marry her instantly...or they want to commit grievous bodily harm against
[her]” (Rabin, “The Bataan”). Again, we can see why Rabin would assess Claire’s character in such a way. Her unwavering optimism and proclivity for sneaking into places she does not belong can be both endearing and irritating, depending on your take on the character. Claire’s confidence is evident in her bright and stylish clothing, her effervescent smile, and her no-nonsense approach to pushing Drew into admitting his failures and moving on. Even though Drew is quiet and dresses to blend in, Claire’s brilliance makes him shine just a bit brighter, too. The MPDG is undeniably bold, and viewers are likely to either love her for her self-assuredness or be annoyed by her penchant for attention. This potential contradiction in the MPDG’s characterization—bold but quirky, loveable but irritating—points to similar gender contradictions in female characters of the past. We are often confronted with images of hyper-sexualized female characters that are most commonly also either dumb or tough (think back to Mikaela Banes of Transformers), so the MPDG’s ability to be more than just sexy does feel like a step in the right direction. In Claire’s ability to be Drew's guiding light and not just the object of his sexual fantasies, she is again a more complex character than many other women represented in popular culture and proves that the MPDG can be more than just a simple stereotype.

Films throughout the twentieth century illustrate the various ways women have been sexualized and secondary, whether it be as the doting secretary in a film like The Maltese Falcon (Huston, 1941) or the chipper young sidekick in Singin’ in the Rain (Donan and Kelly, 1952). Though the historical precedent for the MPDG is clear based on various characteristics seen in actresses like Katharine Hepburn, Marilyn Monroe, and Audrey Hepburn, we did not see MPDGs in their truest form
until the twenty-first century, and Crowe’s preceding films are clearly indicative of the trope’s earlier presence. Crowe’s Academy Award-nominated Almost Famous (2000) took on an MPDG in the form of Penny Lane (Kate Hudson), a charming and beautiful groupie who follows the band Stillwater on their rise to fame. Our protagonist is teenager William Miller (Patrick Fugit) who is far too young and innocent to ever really attract Penny. In most ways, Penny Lane is more complicated than the typical MPDG 1.0—she is troubled and clearly depressed, and, though she certainly inspires something in William, their age difference prevents viewers from ever really seeing their relationship as anything more than platonic. In the end, William and Penny are friends and confidants, and it is much more important for their characters to grow simultaneously and separately than it is to see a romantic end to the story.

Another of Crowe’s most iconic films, 1989’s Say Anything..., puts a more complicated spin on the MPDG’s characterization—one might even argue that the male protagonist checks off more of the MPDG boxes than does his love interest. As critic Sam Adams writes in an essay for Slate, Crowe’s male leads are “Manic Visionary Dream Boys,” often loners of sorts, but driven by an intense determination to fight through personal struggles. In Say Anything..., these qualities exist in Lloyd Dobler (John Cusack), a lost young man graduating from high school who becomes interested in beautiful valedictorian Diane Court (Ione Skye). Where most MPDGs are presented as flighty, Diane is decidedly grounded—she has plans for her future that cannot be completely disturbed by a romantic interest. Though the film and its characters play into many of the stereotypes of the MPDG—Lloyd is lost and
confused, but Diane’s entrance into his life prompts character development—the fact that Diane is so self-assured makes this film feel a bit different. In the end, Lloyd and Diane make the journey into the next phases of their lives together, and we get the sense that they are equally reliant on one another for the companionship necessary to take this step. Like William and Penny in Almost Famous, Lloyd and Diane both develop individually and together, which separates this film from many others that present the MPDG 1.0.

Apart from Crowe’s own filmography, Zach Braff’s 2004 film, Garden State, is one of the best examples of how the MPDG came to be, especially since this is the only other film Rabin names in his essay that coined the term. In many ways, Elizabethtown and Garden State are quite similar, and we could easily imagine Braff modeling his directorial debut on Crowe’s works. The biggest difference between the two may be their release strategies; while Crowe’s long-lasting career has earned him a place among Hollywood’s elite and national distribution for his films, Braff filmed Garden State on a small budget and premiered the film at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival in the hopes of selling it to a distributor (“Garden”). While independent films are historically more likely to depict complex and developed female characters, this genre has also provided a fertile ground for the MPDG 1.0, even if we do think of indie films as more progressive than Hollywood in other ways.

Despite their production and distribution differences, Elizabethtown and Garden State present surprisingly similar characters and storylines. Garden State follows the life of Andrew Largeman (Zach Braff), an introverted young man living in New Jersey, whose life is shaken up by the entrance of Sam (Natalie Portman), the
MPDG in question, whose existence is made all the more mysterious by her lack of last name. Viewers may find the scene of Andrew and Sam’s meeting shockingly similar to Drew and Claire’s in *Elizabethtown*: as Andrew waits in the lobby of a doctor’s office, he is quickly approached by Sam, who is determined to engage him in conversation. Before we hear Sam speak, we hear her infectious giggle. She is a beam of light in Andrew’s melancholy world, and we once again find ourselves watching a cheerful young woman slowly force a disengaged young man into conversation. When Sam realizes she is distracting Andrew from filling out his forms and tries to keep to herself, Andrew stops her and continues their interaction, signaling to audiences that this is more than just a short conversation to pass the time.

Much like Claire, Sam gives Andrew direct orders in their conversations. When they meet outside the doctor’s office while she waits for a ride, she tells Andrew, “So this is the point in the conversation where you ask me if I’d like a ride home”—on his motorcycle with a sidecar, no less—and her directness fosters a sense of confidence in him that we have yet to see (*Garden*). While the parallels between *Elizabethtown* and *Garden State* are surprisingly obvious, Crowe achieves a sense of joy and kindness that is absent from *Garden State*, where Braff begs his audience to laugh at the hipster-irony of it all. *Garden State* does give us much more
background into Sam as a person, including a home life and family that make her more three-dimensional, but the lack of inversion in storytelling perspectives like we glimpse in *Elizabethtown* makes it hard to see Sam as anything more than supporting.

Though I doubt Crowe took any direct inspiration from *Garden State* when making *Elizabethtown*, the similarities in characterization and storytelling ask viewers to think about the precedent for male-female romances in film and larger cultural influences at work during this time. In the retrospective essay “In Defense of Zach Braff’s *Garden State,*” critic Jesse David Fox writes, “*Garden State* came out in a time of peak male sadness,” a concept that is undeniably illustrated in the film. Braff’s Andrew is neither entirely masculine nor gawky, stereotypes we have come to expect from male characters. Instead, he falls somewhere in between, a young man who has potential and is not exactly physically inept—he is just too overcome by his melancholia to be an active participant in his own life, at least until Sam comes along.

Fox’s writing of this essay points to one of the more distinct characteristics of *Garden State* itself: though the film was released more than a decade ago, it is one that continues to come up in conversation, and its reputation has gone from cool-quirky indie to love-to-hate-it. Natalie Portman herself commented on this
phenomenon at the 2015 Toronto International Film Festival when asked to reflect on the film. Portman said she enjoyed making the film but had “been insecure about it” because of a scene from the Comedy Central television show *Broad City*. As Portman described it, “On the show there’s this really dorky character…and he’s the worst. And he’s like, ‘Oh my God, I love *Garden State!*’...So now, because the people I think are the coolest think it’s really lame I’m kind of insecure about it” (Yuan “Broad”). In Fox’s defense of the film, he argues that the perception of it may have changed because our cultural perspective of masculinity has changed since the film was made. Fox writes, “Just because Zach Braff doesn’t look and act like Chris Hemsworth does not mean he didn’t write a good movie” (Fox). Personally, I think Fox identifies a little too closely with Braff’s character in the film, as he seems to be defending not only the character but also himself. I would argue that Fox’s assessment of the shift in perception of the film is not entirely unfounded. I disagree that the audiences of 2016 only want to see hyper-masculine men in films—for every Chris Hemsworth, there is also a Michael Cera or Domhnall Gleeson making a successful career—and the annoyance with *Garden State* is probably more representative of a desire for female-centric films. The recent success of films like *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (Heller, 2015), *Brooklyn* (Crowley, 2015), and *Carol* (Haynes, 2015) shows a shift in the kinds of stories that are being told in the film industry. The introverted, sad sack male character is not dead, but we *are* seeing a surge of complex and diverse female characters on the big screen.

Though Rabin correctly identifies many of the problematic characteristics of the MPDG in his original naming of the term, I do not think he fully appreciates the
potential for nuance that we see in a character like Claire, even if this nuance is fleeting and ultimately underdeveloped. Claire and Sam, in their respective films, provide us the exact qualities upon which we have built the MPDG’s identity: she should be confident, but not overbearing: compassionate, but not clingy: beautiful, but not overtly sexual; quirky, but not strange. Following the characteristics, the MPDG 1.0 exists in a confusing space—though she is not the demure or overtly sexualized female we have so often seen in the past, she perpetuates the stereotypes that women should be passive and secondary, only serving to help the male lead along. We see the potential in her to develop into a rich character in her own right, but upon closer inspection, the MPDG 1.0 makes us wonder if we are really as far beyond the limiting gender roles of the early twentieth century as we think.
CHAPTER FIVE
THE MANIC PIXIE DREAM GIRL DEVELOPS

After the naming of the MPDG in 2007, the term grew in popularity and in the analysis of female film characters. By naming the MPDG, Rabin created a new tool in the arsenal of feminist film rhetoric, allowing critics to give a name to similarly underdeveloped or two-dimensional female characters like Allison (Zooey Deschanel) in *Yes Man* (Reed, 2008) and Tracy (Mariel Hemingway) in *Manhattan* (Allen, 1979). In the wake of Rabin’s coining of the term, however, the backlash against Rabin himself also grew, particularly when some audiences began to apply the term too generously to female characters without doing proper study. The popularized use of MPDG as a term also provided an interesting point of conversation as filmmakers themselves began to comment on the representation of MPDGs in their films. In the summer of 2012, two such examples of this occurred with the releases of the films *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* (Scafaria, 2012) and *Ruby Sparks* (Dayton and Faris, 2012).

Zoe Kazan, the screenwriter and star of *Ruby Sparks*, has long been one of the most outspoken critics of the MPDG as a term for film analysis, often arguing that use of the term demeans quirky or unique female characters. After the origin of the MPDG as a term, *Ruby Sparks* is one of the most complicated and

Image 11: Ruby (Zoe Kazan) appears in Calvin's kitchen (*Ruby*)
intriguing films to analyze for its representation of the trope. *Ruby Sparks* centers on the life of Calvin (Paul Dano), a young writer who has hit a slump after releasing a successful first novel as a teenager. When Calvin begins writing about a girl named Ruby Sparks, he is shocked to wake up and find Ruby in his real life, wearing his shirt, and making breakfast in his kitchen.

From the outset, *Ruby Sparks* looks like a prime example of the MPDG at work: Calvin is able to make Ruby do whatever he pleases because he has invented her and can continue to manipulate her actions simply by typing them into his manuscript. Though Calvin is originally ecstatic at Ruby’s presence in his life, as she spends time in the real world, she starts to become an individualized person and no longer bends so easily to Calvin’s will—until he rewrites his manuscript, that is. In this way, Ruby is literally the embodiment of a male fantasy, since she is just the physical manifestation of Calvin’s fiction.

Knowing that Kazan both wrote the script and stars as Ruby makes viewing this film all the more perplexing. As a screenwriter, Kazan takes a few opportunities to make pointed remarks about the MPDG and characters like her that clearly identify Kazan’s position on creating unrealistic female characters. When Calvin asks his brother (Chris Messina) to read his manuscript, his brother urges that Ruby’s character will not sit well with female readers because “quirky, messy women whose problems only make them endearing are not real” (*Ruby*). Though Kazan’s character does not speak these words, they feel like her direct message about created MPDGs—quirky women that only serve a man’s interest are not true to life and demean the potential for a realistic female character. In some ways,
Calvin himself expresses the problems that critics find with the MPDG. When Calvin discusses his lack of romantic prospects, he tells his therapist that girls “aren’t interested in me, they’re interested in some idea of me” (*Ruby*). Again, Calvin’s complaint is almost an exact expression of the problematic nature of the MPDG. These are characters made only to serve someone else’s purposes, so the MPDG’s own life and problems are less significant than other people’s perceptions of her.

As the film progresses, we see how Calvin’s ability to manipulate Ruby into his dream girl is more of a burden than he realizes. When Ruby becomes more independent, Calvin writes that “she was miserable” without him, so Ruby becomes excessively clingy. Even when Calvin has the power to mold Ruby however he chooses, he finds her lacking, and when he finally reveals to Ruby that she is nothing more than his creation, we see a disturbing scene that paints Calvin as a mad scientist and Ruby as his caged test subject. Calvin ultimately realizes he cannot keep Ruby in this way and allows her to leave him, despite the devastation it causes him.

Though Ruby’s characterization becomes more complex over the course of the film, she certainly fits many of the qualities of the MPDG. In the end, Calvin is still changed by his relationship with Ruby and writes his next successful novel based on their
relationship. Calvin could not have achieved this development on his own, but his growth is not just in his literary success, but also in his newfound recognition that he cannot hope to mold a woman to his whims. Though Ruby begins as Calvin’s creation, he cannot keep her from growing independently from him and ultimately must face the truth that Ruby is more than a figment of his imagination who will always bend to his will.

In taking a step back from this film, audiences might have a hard time trying to figure out the film’s messages. Kazan wrote Ruby Sparks knowing that she and her real-life boyfriend would play the lead roles, which likely complicates viewers’ perceptions of the characters if they are aware of this relationship. While Ruby originally appears as the physical embodiment of the MPDG, her character’s complexity grows far past the capacity of the MPDG 1.0. Kazan herself has said that audiences are “misunderstanding the movie” if they consider Ruby a MPDG (Greco). In an interview with The New York Times, Kazan says that her writing of the film was a “‘reaction to a lot of fictional female characters that have been on screen the last few years...just feeling like there’s a diminutive ideal of a girl that’s just one shade away from being true’” (Petrusich). Though Kazan might not like the term, her commentary on other female characters at the time indicates that she recognized the presence of the MPDG 1.0 and sought to remedy it in her own work. Kazan’s characterization of Ruby truly speaks to this idea—while Ruby starts as a fairly flat character, she quickly becomes something much more complex, and her desire to live her own life surpasses her desire to fulfill Calvin’s needs. The film addresses “the universal pain of having to reconcile your dreams about someone with an
actual person,” and in the end, Ruby can no longer live up to Calvin’s ideal because she exists as something more than a figment of his imagination.

Lorene Scafaria’s *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* offers a slightly less complex take on the MPDG trope, though the MPDG in this film also does not fit the exact qualifications Rabin outlined when he coined the term. In the film, leading man Dodge (Steve Carell) unexpectedly befriends Penny (Keira Knightley), a much younger woman, as they prepare to face the impending apocalypse. On the outside, Penny is clearly a MPDG—she wears flowery dresses with military jackets and Converse sneakers, has a bubbly and positive personality, travels with her favorite records, and moves in a way that is just awkward enough to be endearing. Much like *Elizabethtown* and *Garden State*, the scene in which the two lead characters meet presents us with a slightly reluctant man who is too kind or passive to stop the woman from pouring her heart out to him. Though this film mimics the introduction scenes of movies with problematic MPDGs, we first meet Penny in a state of tears when she perches herself on Dodge’s fire escape. In an interaction that seems a bit more “damsel in distress” than MPDG, Dodge opens the window to check on Penny, and she urgently pulls him into a hug when he asks if she is okay. Whereas Claire’s and Sam’s introductions in *Elizabethtown* and *Garden State*
State show these characters to be effervescent, Penny, in this moment at least, is the one in need of Dodge’s assistance, rather than the other way around. Even a scene as brief as this one shows that Penny’s character pushes the boundaries of the MPDG 1.0 in favor of something slightly more complex.

Scafaria furthers Penny’s complexity in the development of Dodge and Penny’s relationship; despite the meet-cute nature of their introduction, we do not immediately feel a romantic connection between these two. Their friendship is solidified by their desires to find people—Dodge hopes to find a long-lost love and Penny her family—before the apocalypse, and their friendship feels like one of convenience more than anything else. As the story progresses, we get more insight into Penny’s personal life and see their relationship start to become something more than platonic. Ultimately, the film tells a story of letting go of the past, a hardship Dodge and Penny choose to face together. The film’s concluding scene presents an image similar to the conclusion of Say Anything..., as Dodge and Penny wait together for what appears to be the end of the world.

Though Dodge, as the leading man, does achieve a sense of personal growth because of Penny’s short presence in his life, this film also feels a bit more complex in its setup when compared to many others that feature a MPDG. While Rabin mentions that the MPDG is usually present in the protagonist’s
life for a limited time so he can grow as a person, *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* presents a more complicated take on this aspect of the trope as every character in the film is facing the same limited future. We do not see Penny depart Dodge once his change has occurred—they remain together, mutually changed, and prepare to face death or whatever the future holds with one another. The companionship in this film is more than fleeting, and while we may not know if these characters would stay together in a different scenario, the story presented to us allows us to see Penny as slightly more complex than the average MPDG 1.0.

In the wake of Rabin giving a name to the MPDG, *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* sparked discussion of the trope itself and broader conversations about the romantic comedy genre; the film even inspired a satirical (though accurate) article about the formula necessary to create a film in the genre called “Sad-Sack Comedians + Manic Pixie Dream Girls: A Rom-com Template” (Buchanan). Much like Kazan in discussing *Ruby Sparks*, director and screenwriter Lorene Scafaria responded directly to the discussion of Penny’s characterization, though she does not see calling Penny a MPDG as problematic as Kazan does. Scafaria herself identifies with Penny as a “free-spirited” woman, and goes on to say:

> I didn’t want her to be so quirky that she became unrelatable, but *quirky* isn’t something I shy away from. To me, in the same way he’s an Everyman, she’s an Everygirl. She’s been living her life to the fullest, but she also has regrets…The idea was that she could be a real young woman and not too manic pixie. I’m glad she didn’t fall into that trap. She’s such a luminary sort of person. (Vineyard)
Perhaps Scafaria is correct in calling Penny an “Everygirl,” since that seems to be what many filmmakers are trying to achieve when creating a character that gets labeled a MPDG. The MPDG represents a type of woman who is decidedly not the overtly sexualized character we so often see on screen. Though the MDPG may not always exist as the most realistic character, she is intended to serve as a response to the common stereotypes of women we see all the time, and may be a more relatable character for general audiences.
CHAPTER SIX
THE BIRTH OF THE MPDG 2.0

Perhaps the most telling incarnation of the MPDG is the most recent one, especially with regard to where the MPDG is going, rather than where she’s been. In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift toward the more complex and nuanced MPDG 2.0 rather than female characters adhering to Rabin’s definition, especially within the world of indie film. While there may not be a clear reason why indie directors and screenwriters are more inclined to develop the MPDG character into something more realistic rather than just a stereotype, it likely has plenty to do with the fact that indie films are historically more likely to depict underrepresented populations rather than the mainstream. For this reason, the Sundance Film Festival, founded in 1981 by actor and director Robert Redford to “foster independence, risk-taking, and new voices in American film,” provides a perfect launching point to find up-and-coming indie films that break traditional molds in film (“About Us”). One of the most significant groundbreaking Sundance premieres is Steven Soderbergh’s 1989 film, sex, lies, and videotape, which epitomizes what indie film is meant to be—it was a thought-provoking film made by a young director for $1.8 million that went on the win both the first Audience Award at Sundance and the top prize at the Cannes Film Festival (Ebert).

Sundance is a festival that fosters and supports creative content for up-and-coming independent filmmakers rather than an environment that perpetuates the Hollywood machine, so it makes sense that many of the movies that have premiered there in recent years would represent female characters more aligned with the MPDG 2.0 than the 1.0. So as we look to the most recent and upcoming incarnations
of the MPDG, particularly to examine how the MPDG is becoming a more fully
developed and complex character, Sundance premieres are likely the best source of
films that break the mold of traditional—and often sexist—representations of
women in film.

**God Help the Girl**

Stuart Murdoch's 2014 musical *God Help the Girl* is one of the best examples
of the narrative and stylistic construction of the MPDG in recent years. Aesthetically,
the film has MPDG written all over it: the characters dress in vintage clothing and
oversized glasses as they welcome the viewer into their twee version of Scotland.
But like many recent films that apparently depict a MPDG, *God Help the Girl* is a bit
more complicated than it seems from the outset. While the film has all the elements
of a rom-com musical—a “meet cute,” boy-chases-girl storyline, and charming
musical numbers—the underlying messages of *God Help the Girl* challenge
traditional film tropes and archetypes, especially where the MPDG is concerned.

The most typical representation in the film, at least as far as the MPDG trope,
is in the male lead, James (Olly Alexander). James is awkward, kind, and
immediately drawn to Eve, the MPDG in question (Emily Browning). The romantic
conflict between James and Eve is established as soon as the characters meet, so
viewers can almost certainly expect a “happily ever after” by the film's conclusion.
We watch as James pines for Eve, opening his home to her when she has nowhere
else to stay, lending her his clothes, and generally staring wistfully in her direction
any time they share the screen. When Eve has a flirtation with bad boy Anton
(Pierre Boulanger), James practically begs to rescue her. James desperately wants to be Eve's knight in shining armor, even if she never asks to be rescued. James's affections are shared by other young men in the film, including two of Anton’s fellow band members who, upon seeing Eve for the first time, stare at her awestruck and call her “amazing” while acknowledging that they stand no chance with her as long as Anton is around. *God Help the Girl* is overflowing with the kind of male character essential to creating the MPDG trope, but Eve is too independent to fall for any of their tricks. So though James is the male lead of the film, he is in no way the film's protagonist—Eve is unquestionably our heroine.

Eve’s centrality to the story is established from the moment the film begins. Beginning with the film’s opening scene, we see the world from Eve’s perspective and therefore identify more with her character than any other in the film. The film’s opening shots place viewers in the hospital with Eve as she makes her escape to the outside world, and we quickly realize that every scene operates with Eve at its center. We see the world just as Eve does, and in this world, Eve is always the most important person. To emphasize this, Eve usually takes up the most space in every shot in which she appears. The fact that Murdoch sets out to establish immediately that this is Eve's story and all other characters are secondary certainly complicates the traditional version of the MPDG. Eve is by no
means a flat character: we also learn from the opening scene that Eve has been living in a medical institution while combating depression and anorexia, and one of the film's driving conflicts centers around the number of pills Eve has left after fleeing the hospital on a whim early in the movie.

So though Eve is our hero, she is certainly not without flaws, especially as we come to see how self-centered she is, albeit charmingly so. Eve wants to have a career as a singer and tries every tactic she can think of to get her music heard by someone in the industry. The film opens with a black screen over which the voices of two radio personalities talk, establishing a world in which Eve's desire to be a musician is key. Eve's story is not one of a wandering girl looking for a boy to rescue her; she's a driven heroine with the goal of a successful music career in mind, which inherently gives her more agency than the MPDG 1.0 ever has.

In fact, Emily Browning herself discussed the MPDG characteristics in an interview just after the film's premiere at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival. When discussing the quirkiness of her character, Browning said:

The idea of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl is essentially a prop who is used as a tool for the male lead to help him find himself, but she's not... I feel like that term has been overused a lot to describe any quirky girl in a movie, but Eve, she has her own inner life and she's incredibly self-absorbed; that's one of the things I loved about the character. [James] wants her to be his muse and she's like, "No, I'm not having that. I'm gonna go do my own shit." And I think it's cool to flip that idea. (Yuan "Sundance")
In this interview, Browning clearly demonstrates her understanding of both the MPDG 1.0 trope—and the potential danger and belittlement that comes from overusing the term—and Eve’s placement outside the realm of the stereotype. Browning even referred to Eve as the “anti-manic pixie dream girl” in an interview discussing the film with *Lucky* magazine, again discussing how the film subverts the MPDG 1.0 trope by telling the story from Eve’s perspective, not James’s (“Emily Browning”). By commenting on how her character in this film is a more developed and flawed figure that the MPDG 1.0, Browning aligns herself with other actresses such as Zoe Kazan who see the term and trope itself as an unacceptable way to present women in film. The desire for a more rounded character that still represents the quirkiness of the MPDG perfectly establishes the foundation for the MPDG 2.0, especially as recent films appear to move further and further from the two-dimensionality of a stereotypical MPDG.

To fully understand the extent of *God Help the Girl’s* difference from the traditional MPDG trope, viewers must look to the film’s most glaring diversion: Eve and James’s romantic fate. While audiences might expect a romantic build up between James and Eve, Eve is always most concerned with her musical career and rarely falls victim to any passing distraction. Though we see her as a vulnerable and flawed character, she is actually quite driven by her dreams, and everything else is, in her mind at least, a momentary distraction on her path to success. This fact is especially evident when James finally makes a move and kisses Eve, to which she only responds, “The time for that was ages ago” (*God Help*). In this moment, it is perhaps most interesting to note that James is the one who behaves more like a
stereotype as the hapless young man looking for a damsel in distress to rescue.
From the outside, *God Help the Girl* may look like a stereotypical romantic comedy, but it continually inverts audience expectations with scenes like these that break the mold of typical gender tropes as depicted in film.

**Listen Up Philip**

Though many of the most recent representations of MPDGs tend to be more inclusive and developed, that certainly does not mean that *all* representations are so praiseworthy. One such example is Alex Ross Perry's 2014 film, *Listen Up Philip*. The film stars Jason Schwartzman as Philip Lewis Friedman, an “angry, impatient, verbally abusive” writer who is “able to conjure up conflict where none should exist” (Edelstein “Listen”). While some might see the film as a satirical representation of writers—*New York Times* film critic Manohla Dargis calls the film “hilarious” and “gaspingly funny”—the film verges too close to glorifying Philip as a self-absorbed, womanizing pseudo-intellectual to really make any poignant commentary on the subject. Philip’s narcissism is really what sets him apart from other male characters that play into conventions surrounding the MPDG trope. While James of *God Help the Girl* is desperate to make Eve love him, Philip is too self-involved to care how his female companions regard him. Audiences have come to expect a certain kind of male character to fall for the MPDG—he’s usually gawky, insecure, and a bit lost—which might make the male figure just as much a stereotype as the MPDG 1.0.

Based on this description, Philip is decidedly unconventional, at least by the standards of male characters that yearn for a MPDG. Philip is a semi-successful
writer, and the film follows his stagnant career and the many women in his life.

Though Philip has a live-in girlfriend, he has flirtations with at least three other women over the course of the film, as well as a confrontation with an ex-girlfriend that at least gives audiences hope that someone is smart enough to dump him. The only relationship Philip fosters with any real effort is one with his writing mentor, Ike Zimmermann (Jonathan Pryce), though the fact that Ike is nearly as narcissistic as Philip means their bond never truly solidifies. Philip is an undeniably unlikeable character; as critic David Edelstein said in a review for Vulture, Perry asks audiences, “Can [you] identify with an asshole so flaming that nearly every word out of his mouth burns yet another bridge to the human race? More important: can we even watch him for longer than a few minutes?” (Edelstein “Listen”). Philip’s appalling attitude is what makes it so surprising that he somehow has so many women seeking his love. These women even point out Philip’s flaws to him—listing his short temper, narcissism, and cold-heartedness as weaknesses—but they still seem unable to let him go. So while Philip is not a character made in the same image as many of the men who normally attract or are attracted to a MPDG, the dichotomy between Philip and the women in his life is troublesome to say the least.
Ashley (Elisabeth Moss), Philip’s long-term girlfriend, is the only female in the film with significant character development; in fact, Ashley is the only female we see with a life apart from her relationship with Philip. Ashley struggles to recover from their harsh breakup when he decides to leave for a nine-month book tour without explanation, but we still see Philip as the central force in her life. While we are more likely to see female-centric films in the indie world, this undeniably male-centric film does not create a space for its female characters to exist in groundbreaking or innovative ways. So though the women in Philip’s life are not typical MPDGs, many of their characteristics are the same, showing audiences that these women largely exist only in relation to their male counterparts.

**Ex Machina**

In the archetypal sense, the MPDG 1.0 generally functions as a flat, idealized male fantasy in the world of pop culture and film. As is evident in the many films mentioned previously, MPDGs are typically found in romantic comedies as the love interest of the film’s male protagonist. Though this notion of the MPDG as a supporting rom-com figure seems to be the most common one, this is not the only incarnation of the character trope, and the diversions from this stereotype are some of the most exciting and necessary to examine in order to understand how the MPDG can break away from its two-dimensional mold. One perfect example of a MPDG who goes against the grain is found in Alex Garland’s 2015 sci-fi thriller *Ex Machina*. On the surface, *Ex Machina* appears to be anything but a romantic comedy; the film is a stark, modern portrayal of a not-so-distant future in which the
integration of artificial intelligence in society is a distinct possibility. The film follows the journey of Caleb (Domnhall Gleeson), a young man chosen in true Willy Wonka style to spend the week at the home of Nathan (Oscar Isaac), the CEO of Bluebook, the world’s largest Internet search engine. Upon arrival, Caleb learns that his true mission while visiting Nathan is to test the humanity of Ava (Alicia Vikander), an artificially intelligent prototype Nathan has created.

When we first meet Ava, she looks nothing like the stereotypical image of a MPDG; beyond her human face, hands, and feet, Ava is a true machine, meant to challenge Caleb’s and viewers’ abilities to see Ava as human. As a creation of what is essentially Nathan’s ideal woman, Ava exemplifies extreme poise and elegance; film critic David Edelstein even refers to her as “one of the most creepily alluring creations in the annals of sci-fi” (Edelstein “Ex Machina”). Ava holds herself with dignity and the curiosity of a person who has never left the room where she resides. Ava’s physical and emotional attractiveness perfectly align her with her female predecessors through film history—one critic even examines Ava as the latest in a long line of female robots in film—and draws Caleb to her, especially when he becomes suspicious of Nathan’s treatment of her (Anders). Though all of Caleb and
Ava’s interactions are monitored by Nathan, Ava often purposefully causes power surges that disrupt Nathan’s surveillance and makes quick pleas to Caleb to help her escape.

In Caleb’s view, Ava is his naïve damsel in distress, and the time is near when he must rush in to save the day. Because we as audience members see Ava through Caleb’s gaze, we regard her just as he does, and come to imagine a future in which Caleb and Ava run away together, blissfully in love—but thankfully, Garland’s narrative is much more complicated. Though Caleb can see that Ava is clearly man-made, he begins to fall for her. Ava is sweetly flirtatious in their sessions together, even asking Caleb where he would take her if they went on a date. This establishes the groundwork for Ava’s status as a MPDG in the film and taps into the larger historical expectations of how female characters are supposed to interact with male characters in film. Though Ex Machina oozes sleek modernity, Ava appears to be just as secondary as the roles played by actresses like Audrey Hepburn and Marilyn Monroe in the 1950s.

Ava’s peak MPDG moment in the film comes when a vulnerable Ava steps away from Caleb to “show him something,” and returns in what she would wear on their hypothetical date. Ava returns in full MPDG Image 18: Ava as a Manic Pixie Dream Girl in Ex Machina
garb, from her flowery dress to her oversized cardigan to her pixie hair cut. It would appear that Ava's—and maybe Nathan's—ideal woman is in fact a MPDG.

From this perspective, Ava's representation feels a bit problematic; we are once again presented with a humdrum male lead waiting for the right love interest to enter his life and spark his own development. But Garland's creation of Ava is decidedly more complicated. Caleb begins devising plans of how to save Ava from Nathan's prison, but as the moment arrive when we expect Caleb and Ava to ride blissfully into the sunset together, Garland delivers us a shock: Ava abandons Caleb in a locked room of his own so she can escape alone, and we see that Ava's flirtations were all acts of manipulation to secure her freedom. After finding the remains of Nathan's previous A.I. prototypes, Ava outfits herself in a decidedly un-MPDG way—featuring a sleek and fitted dress and stiletto heels—and leaves Nathan's home with no concern for the mess she leaves behind.

What begins as a seemingly simple story of unrequited love becomes drastically different by Ex Machina's conclusion. In fact, it seems that the end of the movie rewrites the entire story because of how many questions come to mind at the film's conclusion. Was Ava manipulating Caleb the entire time? Did she know he was her ticket to freedom? Who is the film's true protagonist? How are we as audience members supposed to feel about Ava? Throughout the film, we see Caleb as the hero bent on freeing Ava from imprisonment, and this identification with the male lead is critical to the development of the audience's perception of Ava. Her agency is essentially nonexistent: she is truly incapable of escaping on her own. But knowing how the end of the film hints that Ava never had any real interest in Caleb—apart
from using him as a means of escape—changes our perspective. If we still see Caleb as the film’s protagonist, Ava has become a villain of sorts, only using Caleb until the moment she has enough power to escape on her own, and any humanity Ava exhibited was only a ruse to cover her mechanical, unfeeling nature. Ava continuously occupies a liminal space between human and robot, and this duality of her character is Garland’s way of challenging the audience’s feelings about her. Though Ava’s dual roles as woman and robot feel quite modern, they mirror the duality seen in roles played by someone like Marilyn Monroe, whose combined girlish and womanly qualities blur the line between “good girl” and “bad girl.” Ava operates at different times in both her human and robotic modes; in her moments of humanity and vulnerability, she evokes a sympathetic response from viewers, but the moments when she appears more mechanistic than human causes hesitation in how we perceive her.

From a larger perspective, the notion of blurring humanity and machinery leads to the question of Garland’s representation of gender as a machine in this film. As is evidenced by the stereotypical and formulaic notions of MPDGs in film, audiences have come to expect certain things of women in film. Though there are undoubtedly exceptions to the rule, for decades audiences have generally expected women to occupy a passive and secondary role in film. We expect women to be feminine, beautiful, demure, and naïve, submitting to the wills of their male counterparts. But Garland, like other directors and screenwriters who tell their stories through a feminist lens, challenges this tired standard of gender in film. He asks his audience to follow this expected formula and then significantly disrupts the
pattern. Ava is no longer the supporting character we knew for the majority of the film—this has been her triumphant journey all along.

By the film’s conclusion, Ava is the story’s heroine, though the term “antiheroine” might be more appropriate considering her less-than-ethical means of achieving her goals. Rather than a formulaic romance told under the guise of a sci-fi thriller, *Ex Machina* tells the story of a complicated heroine that bends all established gender tropes. Sure, Ava is objectified and sexualized—Nathan even makes a point to tell Caleb that Ava has a robotic vagina—but it is far too simple to say that she is treated as nothing more than an object in the film. But this notion is not accepted by all critics of the movie. In his article “Does *Ex Machina* Have a Woman Problem, or Is Its Take on Gender Truly Futuristic?,” Kyle Buchanan quotes two critics from *Wired* and the *Daily Beast* who both saw Ava as a “sexualized ‘fembot’” (Buchanan “Does”). As Buchanan writes, Nathan and Caleb both have sexist attitudes, but this characterization choice certainly does not mean Garland as a filmmaker shares this perspective with them. Garland’s decision to introduce his audience to these dominant men who control the females in the film is deliberately deceptive. From the beginning, we see the film as potentially formulaic and standard, but Garland turns the expected on its head. In Buchanan’s interview, Garland suggests that, in a movie-viewing experience, the narrative’s provider and recipient are equally responsible for the narrative’s interpretation, so the movie director or screenwriter is really only responsible for half of how a viewer interprets his or her work. Garland asks his audience to bring their own
perspectives to *Ex Machina*, so opinions of how gender is portrayed in the movie are bound to differ.

At this assertion, Buchanan takes the opportunity to express his own feelings about gender in *Ex Machina*, and his ideas perfectly align with how I feel about the film. Buchanan writes, “I found the movie’s portrayal of gender to be bracingly modern and even poignant. To me, Ava read as post-gender, her circuits whirring underneath a body she’s been placed into but feels skeptical of” (Buchanan “Does”). *New York Times* film critic Manohla Dargis echoes Buchanan’s characterization of Ava when she calls her an example of “the new [heroine]: totally hot, bracingly cold, powerfully sovereign—and posthuman” (Dargis “Review”). In keeping with the futuristic tones of the film, Garland presents us with a heroine who defies both gender and humanity.

Perhaps the reason that critical opinions of Ava differ so widely is because the application of feminist theory is more complicated in this futuristic film. We can usually talk about gender as a cultural construct more easily since our understanding of what distinguishes the masculine from the feminine is so heavily influenced by the world around us. But we also have to take into account the fact that Ava’s gender is a literal construct in this film. Ava is female because Nathan made her that way—her ideas of femininity are built from the images he chooses to show her since she has never been outside the room where she lives, and, from a meta perspective, Nathan is just a channel through which the male director and writer of the film creates his versions of femininity that Ava exemplifies. Ava’s perception of herself and her role in the world is one of the most ambiguous aspects
of the film; as Buchanan says, “Ava is born into a literally patriarchal system that measures her worth based on how men respond to her, and it’s up to her to either exploit that system or learn how to circumvent it” (Buchanan “Does”). It would appear that Ava chooses the first of these two options since she abandons all flirtation with Caleb—and really any concern for him at all—as soon as she is freed.

Ava’s time as a MPDG was nothing more than a ruse, an identity she could exploit until it earned her freedom. The last incarnation of Ava we see makes clear she is a MPDG no more; when she dresses herself from the remains of Nathan’s previous prototypes, Ava chooses a sleek and feminine dress that truly asserts her womanhood—or, perhaps, just another culturally constructed version of it.

Though Ex Machina falls outside the normal parameters for the standard MPDG movie, its depictions of gender and femininity are essential to discussion of the status of women in contemporary film. The fact that we know Ava to be a man-made creation might make analysis of her gender seem beside the point, but I think Garland uses his deceptively simple narrative to force his viewers to think about these complicated issues. Garland presents us with what appears to be a formulaic story of boy-meets-girl, boy-saves-girl, boy-gets-girl, but he inverts this storyline in favor of a conclusion that feels totally fresh and new. Ex Machina shows us that representations of women in film are in fact changing, as slow as that transition may be. As viewers, we can come to expect fully developed, well-rounded female characters more often, not just women in secondary roles who wait for a male hero to save the day. While Ava is not a MPDG in the traditional sense, the fact that she so purposefully plays into the stereotype to manipulate Caleb speaks volumes about
the expectations audiences have of women in film. Some viewers may be shocked or angered that Ava ditches Caleb as soon as he has fulfilled her purposes, but this choice on Garland’s part challenges us to see Ava as something other than Caleb’s female sidekick. She may not make the most humane decision in the end, but she is the heroine of her own story.
CHAPTER SEVEN
THE FUTURE OF THE MANIC PIXIE DREAM GIRL

Considering her status as a fairly recent fixture in the world of pop culture, the MPDG’s future prospects are difficult to predict. As we have seen in an overview of how female characters have been represented historically, the MPDG has deep roots in the depiction of female characters in films made throughout the twentieth century. The MPDG has grown to encapsulate a wider variety of female characters than just the two-dimensional motivational force of Rabin’s definition—she can also be something more fully formed, as evident in films like Ex Machina and God Help the Girl. In a review of the 2015 film Love & Mercy, film critic Alyssa Rosenberg discusses the possibilities for a potential MPDG who exceeds the constraints of the trope—Rosenberg argues that, in this film’s case, the MPDG’s desire to save her male counterpart is a “genuine act of heroism” rather than using a female character for someone else’s personal development (Rosenberg). Many other films of 2015 presented audiences with a decidedly more complex and developed version of the MPDG; much like God Help the Girl’s Eve, Minnie Goetze (played by Bel Powley) of Marielle Heller’s The Diary of a Teenage Girl has many of the physical and personality traits of the MPDG while also being the film’s heroine. The Diary of a Teenage Girl has been praised as a “terrifically sensitive, startlingly honest coming-of-age story” because of its representation of young female sexuality that does not revolve around a man, but around her personal feelings as she approaches adulthood (Buchanan “Alexander”).

Margo Roth Spiegelman (Cara Delevingne), the female lead in the adaptation of John Green’s young adult novel Paper Towns (Schreier, 2015), is, according to
Green himself, an embodiment of the falseness of the MPDG trope—Green jokingly wrote that the book could have alternately been titled *The Patriarchal Lie of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl Must be Stabbed in the Heart and Killed* (Green). When Margo suddenly disappears and leaves Quentin (Nat Wolff), the film’s hero, clues that hint at her desire to be found, Quentin is immediately motivated to rescue the girl he’s pined for since childhood. Upon finding Margo, though, Quentin learns the clues weren’t left for him to follow her—they were left so he would know she was okay. As Sam Adams wrote in an essay on the film for *Indiewire*, “Her journey wasn’t just a means for Quentin to figure out who he was, and it damn sure wasn’t her way of telling a boy she’d barely spoken to in nine years that she’d been secretly in love with him, too.” Both in Green’s novel and Jake Schreier’s film adaptation, Quentin does achieve some sense of character development at the prodding of his MPDG, but in a way that pushes him to stop seeing her as a product of his fantasy rather than the complex human being she is.

Even a film like the Academy Award-nominated *Brooklyn* (Crowley, 2015) proves a divergence from the traditional MPDG story: Eilis Lacey’s (Saoirse Ronan) journey into adulthood is the movie’s center, and her two male romantic interests are far more “manic pixie” than she ever is. *Brooklyn* helps audiences see the elements of the MPDG that transcend gender: youth, a sense of being “on the outside,” a quirky and endearing spirit. When Eilis is shy and timid, her New York beau, Tony (Emory Cohen), pulls her out of herself and into the world, like any stereotypical MPDG does. This quality of Tony’s is evident from his first appearance on the screen—when Eilis is a wallflower at a church dance, Tony boldly approaches
her; after the two start dating, Tony convinces Eilis to get outside her comfort zone and go swimming while on Coney Island. Tony is just the latest of the rising trend of Manic Pixie Dream Boys, a counterpart to the MPDG that has arisen recently across films such as The Fault in Our Stars and Bridesmaids and television shows such as Parks and Recreation and 30 Rock. In a description of the MPDG’s male equivalent, Molly Lambert writes:

[The Manic Pixie Dream Boy exhibits] many of the same characteristics as their female counterparts, minus the cute dresses. The Manic Pixie Dream Boy builds up the heroine’s self-confidence, providing comfort, inspiration, and nurturing vibes without demanding anything in return. He patiently tamps down her stubbornness and temper while appreciating her quirks, helping her to become her best possible self. He’s a nerd, but not an angry or vindictive one. He’s handsome, but he has no idea that he is. His taste in media and hobbies might be immature and run toward the teenage, but it doesn’t extend to his emotions or interfere with him getting shit done. He’s a selfless, responsible Peter Pan. (Lambert)

In some ways, the Manic Pixie Dream Boy as Lambert defines it could be just as problematic a gender representation as the MPDG. In their 2012 article “Whither the Manic Pixie Dream Guy?”—a question that might have been answered by 2016—authors Sonia Saraiya and Gabrielle Moss discuss the lack of the male equivalent of the MPDG, a trope they do not see as “inherently sexist or evil.” They also argue that it is possible for a fairly two-dimensional or underdeveloped
character to be important—the problem here really occurs when all these characters are female (Saraiya and Moss). So perhaps, in this very small way, the tables are turning as the Manic Pixie becomes a more gender-neutral archetype, and women might sometimes be more accurately represented than their male counterparts. Sure, it’s never ideal for any character to be underdeveloped, but I can’t really argue with someone like Lambert when she says, “It’s payback for tolerating 900 eons of...average-looking angry guys with hot-ass wives.”

The changing dynamic of MPDGs in recent pop culture has led some critics to identify other answers to the trope, as we see in Heather Havrilesky’s *Salon* article, “‘Louie’s’ Manic Bossy Nightmare Girls: How Louis C.K. Destroyed This Male Wishful Thinking Fantasy.” Havrilesky discusses how *Louie* inverts the MPDG’s charm with a character that is almost entirely flawed, apart from a single attribute—which is most often “that she’ll relent and sleep with Louie despite her reservations” (Havrilesky). *Louie* also is not the only television show that presents a version of the Manic Bossy Nightmare Girl; Havrilesky also cites HBO’s *Girls* and Comedy Central’s *Broad City* as programs that present hypocritical, flawed, ridiculous characters that are both endearing and frustrating to viewers. None of these shows or characters presents an ideal version of femininity or what a woman should be, but more nuanced, diverse, and sometimes ridiculous women. Both the Manic Pixie Dream Boy and Manic Bossy Nightmare Girl present different interpretations of what the MPDG could become through more depictions of the character trope. The changing nature of how the MPDG is represented shows that this is not just a stagnant or
exhausted archetype, but one that has potential for growth, particularly if the MPDG continues to be represented in popular culture.

In looking to the most recent incarnations of the MPDG in film, the films of the 2016 Sundance Film Festival present an even more significant departure from the standards of the MPDG 1.0. While the indie world has always been more generous with realistic representations of often-underrepresented characters, the most recent crop of American indies is filled with fully developed, complex, emotional female characters rather than anything that really resembles the MPDG. While arguments could be made that films like Rebecca Miller’s Maggie’s Plan, Todd Solondz’s Wiener-Dog, or Joshua Marston’s Complete Unknown have MPDGs of sorts, none of them is clearly indicative of the trope, either in its archetypal or developed forms. In both Maggie’s Plan and Wiener-Dog, Greta Gerwig plays the potential MPDG in question, living lives in both movies that are pushed forward by her male love interest. In Complete Unknown, Rachel Weisz plays Alice, a woman who, in many ways, perfectly fits the MPDG 1.0 trope. Alice is prone to changing her identity, completely reinventing her style and career time and again. When the time feels right, she sheds her former self and leaves, and the men in her life are left alone, whether or not they have achieved any sense of character development due to her temporary presence.

Apart from these examples, many of Sundance’s latest premieres feature stories of female companionship, often in a way that a love interest (or, at least, a male love interest) is an unessential aspect of the narrative. Like the MPDG, many of these characters are somewhat mysterious and inhabit a space somewhat outside
standard or mainstream society—as one might expect of the more experimental indie film world—but they are not entirely representative of the “manic pixie” qualities essential to the MPDG. One could argue that many of these characters are indicative of an entirely different kind of cinematic woman—while most female roles in the past, no matter how independent, still existed in a world centered around a male figure, the newest crop of female characters live in a world that is not so obviously male-driven. In fact, many of 2016’s Sundance films are decidedly female-centric: Whit Stillman’s Love & Friendship is first and foremost a story of female friendship; Kelly Reichardt’s Certain Women is a slow-burning story of three individual women; Kerem Sanga’s First Girl I Loved is an authentic portrait of a girl’s first recognition of her homosexual attraction; and So Yong Kim’s Lovesong is a look at the friendship between two young women as it becomes something more than platonic. Of these examples, First Girl I Loved offers the most interesting take on the MPDG trope—when Anne (Dylan Gelula) quickly becomes enamored of Sasha (Brianna Hildebrand), viewers might expect Sasha to be presented as the ideal “cool girl.” In reality, Anne and Sasha form a quick and real bond, engaging in endless conversations via text messages that develop both characters as real people, rather than an ideal. These female-centric films are balanced by others like Goat (Neel, 2016) and Manchester by the Sea (Lonergan, 2016), both of which explore issues of masculinity that are rarely represented in film.

The apparent absence of MPDG 1.0-driven films in 2016 make the question of the trope’s future all the more complicated: does this signify the death of the MPDG, or just a shift in her depiction? While it is difficult to imagine the character
disappearing completely from pop culture, the MPDG 1.0 could certainly become a thing of the past. The MPDG may be just another option in the arsenal of character tropes available to screenwriters, but one that has the ability to exist as more than just an archetype. If films of the past few years offer any concrete indication, the MPDG 2.0 has clearly surpassed her predecessor, and the representation of developed, well-rounded, and flawed female characters is becoming more of a standard in the film industry. As we have seen, the MPDG’s male equivalent also seems to be rising to a more prominent position in film characterization, which could even indicate that the MPDG could exist in a capacity that is not so inherently driven by gender. The MPDG will likely always have a place as an alternative to hyper-sexualized female characters, particularly as films about young people will always be a staple in film markets—the MPDG usually offers something more relatable for young audiences than a sexualized vixen character ever will. Perhaps, as the quirky nature of the MPDG seems to fit more with the types of films made in indie markets, indie films such as God Help the Girl, Ex Machina, and The Diary of a Teenage Girl have set a precedent that allows the MPDG trope to become a more realistic character. Because of films like these, we can easily see how the MPDG has the potential to surpass other outdated or stereotypical character tropes, existing in a world where realistic and complex characterization is not an impossible feat.
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APPENDIX A
SUGGESTED VIEWING LIST

TWENTIETH CENTURY ORIGINS OF THE MANIC PIXIE DREAM GIRL:

• Flaming Youth (John Francis Dillon, 1923)
• Bringing Up Baby (Howard Hawks, 1938)
• The Seven Year Itch (Billy Wilder, 1955)
• The Apartment (Billy Wilder, 1960)
• Breakfast at Tiffany’s (Blake Edwards, 1961)
• Love Story (Arthur Hiller, 1970)
• Annie Hall (Woody Allen, 1977)
• Say Anything... (Cameron Crowe, 1989)

THE ORIGINAL MANIC PIXIE DREAM GIRL:

• Almost Famous (Cameron Crowe, 2000)
• Amélie (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001)
• Lost in Translation (Sofia Coppola, 2003)
• Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (Michel Gondry, 2004)
• Garden State (Zach Braff, 2004)
• Elizabethtown (Cameron Crowe, 2005)
• Juno (Jason Reitman, 2007)
• Lars and the Real Girl (Craig Gillespie, 2007)
• Vicky Cristina Barcelona (Woody Allen, 2008)
• Yes Man (Peyton Reed, 2008)
• (500) Days of Summer (Marc Webb, 2009)
• Scott Pilgrim vs. the World (Edgar Wright, 2010)
• Love & Other Drugs (Edward Zwick, 2010)

THE MANIC PIXIE DREAM GIRL DEVELOPS:

• Midnight in Paris (Woody Allen, 2011)
• The Amazing Spider-Man (Marc Webb, 2012)
• Frances Ha (Noah Baumbach, 2012)
• Ruby Sparks (Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, 2012)
• Seeking a Friend for the End of the World (Lorene Scafaria, 2012)
• Wetlands (David Wnendt, 2013)
• Drinking Buddies (Joe Swanberg, 2013)
• What If (Michael Dowse, 2013)
• Her (Spike Jonze, 2013)

THE BIRTH OF THE MPDG 2.0:

• Obvious Child (Gillian Robespierre, 2014)
• Song One (Kate Barker-Froyland, 2014)
• God Help the Girl (Stuart Murdoch, 2014)
• *Happy Christmas* (Joe Swanberg, 2014)
• *Laggies* (Lynn Shelton, 2014)
• *Listen Up Philip* (Alex Ross Perry, 2014)
• *The Fault in Our Stars* (Josh Boone, 2014)
• *Gone Girl* (David Fincher, 2014)
• *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* (Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, 2015)
• *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (Marielle Heller, 2015)
• *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2015)
• *Paper Towns* (Jake Schreier, 2015)
• *Mistress America* (Noah Baumbach, 2015)
• *Maggie’s Plan* (Rebecca Miller, 2015)
• *Yoga Hosers* (Kevin Smith, 2016)
• *Love & Friendship* (Walt Stillman, 2016)
• *Wiener-Dog* (Todd Solondz, 2016)
• *Complete Unknown* (Joshua Marston, 2016)
• *First Girl I Loved* (Karem Sanga, 2016)
• *Lovesong* (So Yong Kim, 2016)
• *Me Before You* (Thea Sharrock, 2016)
APPENDIX B
IMAGES

Films Pictured (L to R): Grand Hotel, Happiness Ahead, His Girl Friday, The Seven Year Itch, Roman Holiday, Woman of the Year
Films Pictured (L to R): *Almost Famous, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, Amélie, Lost in Translation*
Films Pictured: Elizabethtown and Garden State
Films Pictured (L to R): Yes Man, Lars and the Real Girl, (500) Days of Summer, Juno, Scott Pilgrim vs. the World, Love & Other Drugs
Films Pictured: *Ruby Sparks* and *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World*
Films Pictured (L to R): *Her, The Amazing Spider-Man, Drinking Buddies, Frances Ha, Midnight in Paris, What If*
Films Pictured: Ex Machina and God Help the Girl
Films Pictured (L to R): *Wetlands*, *Listen Up Philip*, *Obvious Child*, *Begin Again*, *The Fault in Our Stars*, *Happy Christmas*, *Song One*, *Laggies*
Films Pictured (L to R): Me and Earl and the Dying Girl, Paper Towns, Mistress America, The Diary of a Teenage Girl
Films Pictured (L to R): Me Before You, Yoga Hosers, Wiener-Dog, First Girl I Loved, Maggie’s Plan, Love & Friendship, Lovesong, Complete Unknown
Works Cited


*Me and Earl and the Dying Girl.* Dir. Alfonso Gomez-Rejon. Perf. Thomas Mann and
Olivia Cooke. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2015. HBOGO.


Amazon.


Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2012. DVD.


_Song One_. Dir. Kate Barker-Froyland. Perf. Anne Hathaway and Johnny Flynn.

Cinedigm, 2014. Amazon.


Columbia Pictures, 2012. DVD.


Brenna Sherrill

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Education

M.A. Western Kentucky University
English with a concentration in literature
Expected May 2016

B.A. Western Kentucky University
Majors in Popular Culture Studies and French
Minor in Performing Arts Administration
Summa Cum Laude
Honors College Graduate
May 2014

Professional Experience

Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of English, WKU
August 2015 – present

Ø Tutor undergraduate students in The Writing Center and teach two sections of Introduction to College Writing

Teaching Assistant, Sundance Film Festival Study Away course, WKU
January 2016

Ø Assist in coordination and planning of study away course to Sundance Film Festival

Graduate Assistant, Honors College, WKU
August 2014 – May 2015

Ø Supported Assistant Director of Research in overseeing undergraduate thesis projects

Tutor, The Learning Center, WKU
August 2011 – May 2014

Ø Provided tutoring to peers in over 30 subject areas

Intern, Segal Centre for Performing Arts, Montreal, Quebec, Canada
June 2012

Ø Worked with assistant to theatre’s CEO on administrative activities in preparation for opening of season’s biggest production

Presentations

• “The Manic Pixie Dream Girl Trope in Independent Film,” WKU 46th Annual Student Research Conference, April 2016
• “WKU at the Sundance Film Festival” 2016 Kentucky Study Abroad Symposium, April 2016
• “The Manic Pixie Dream Girl Trope in Independent Film,” Elizabethtown Community and Technical College Women History Month Series, March 2016
Panelist on “Recent Alumni Panel”
WKU Career Linkages Conference       February 2015

“#BelieveinSherlock: BBC’s Sherlock and the Importance of Fandom in Contemporary Popular Culture,”
Pop Culture Capstone Student Symposium   May 2014

Popular Culture Association National Conference  April 2014

WKU 44th Annual Student Research Conference    March 2014

“‘What’s the Buzz?; Jesus Christ Superstar and American Religion in the 1970s,”
WKU 43rd Annual Student Research Conference    March 2013

Research Experience

The Birth of the MPDG 2.0: The Potential for the Manic Pixie Dream Girl Trope in Independent Film
(Master’s thesis project)  May 2016

The Wizarding Words of J.K. Rowling: Literary Merit in the Harry Potter Series
(Undergraduate thesis project)  May 2014

#BelieveinSherlock: BBC’s Sherlock and the Importance of Fandom in Contemporary Popular Culture
(Undergraduate capstone project)  May 2014

Professional Development

WKU Talisman web team writer  January 2016 – present

Lipstickparty Magazine contributing essayist  July 2015

ATX Television Festival       June 2015

Undergraduate Conference on Literature, Language, and Culture co-coordinator  2014

Sundance Film Festival study away course  2014

Broadway Across America season ticket holder  2012 – present

“England as Text” cultural study abroad course  June 2011

Live professional entertainment  2008 - present
(7 Broadway shows; The Late Show with David Letterman;
Upright Citizens Brigade; CMA Music Festival; numerous concerts, operas, plays)
Honors

- Wood Graduate Award winner 2016
- Potter College of Arts and Letters Dean’s Council of Students 2012 – 2015
- Honors College graduate 2014
- Outstanding Graduate in Pop Culture Studies Award 2014
- President’s Scholar (3.8 GPA or above) 2010 – 2014
- Regents Tuition Scholarship 2010 – 2014
- Governor’s Scholar 2009