

The Rom-Com Trope That Just Won't Quit — and Why We're Finally Done With the Manic Pixie Dream Girl

By: Lily Moorhead

There's a moment in almost every early-2000s rom-com where the male protagonist is sitting alone, melancholy in an aggressively quirky bedroom with twinkle lights and vinyl records he probably bought for the aesthetic, when suddenly, she appears. She has neon streaks in her hair, a disposable film camera dangling from her wrist and an encyclopedic knowledge of indie bands that sound like they record exclusively in abandoned laundromats. She drags him to late-night convenience stores, rooftops and obscure bookstores, and somehow, through the power of whimsical chaos, she cures all of his existential angst.

This, in all its glittery cinematic charm, is the Manic Pixie Dream Girl. (Worthen, Eryca. "The Manic Pixie Dream Girl: Who She Is and Everything She Represents | the Women's Network.") The rom-com's most persistent, most adored and most culturally complicated figure. She is bubbly, eccentric and unforgettable. She is also deeply underwritten. In an era when rom-coms are expected to say something meaningful about romance, identity or society, the Manic Pixie Dream Girl has become more than just a trope. She is social commentary dressed in Converse sneakers and colorful tights, whether filmmakers intended her that way or not.

The concept was formally named in 2007, but the character existed long before that, drifting through classics like "Bringing Up Baby," touring with musicians in "Almost Famous" and, of course, sparking endless discourse in "(500) Days of Summer." Her defining traits are familiar. A quirky wardrobe, a dramatic hair-dye arc, a personality built entirely around spontaneity and a complete absence of personal goals. She is all charm and no backstory, all whimsy and no interiority. Her only function is to inspire, soften or emotionally rehabilitate a man so bland he could be played by a decorative houseplant.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in "(500) Days of Summer." (Ng, Dimitri. "500 Days of Summer." *Medium*, 11 May 2020) Summer Finn, played by Zooey Deschanel, became the poster child of the trope, adored and dissected in equal measure. She is magnetic, mysterious and adored by the film's protagonist, Tom, who narrates their entire relationship through a haze of nostalgia and self-pity. We know Summer loves The Smiths. We know she is disarmingly good at pretending to live inside IKEA showrooms. We know she changes Tom's life. But we never learn what she wants for herself. The film gives us her personality but not her humanity, her aesthetics but not her aspirations. (McCormick, Colin, and Liv Montgomery. "(500) Days of Summer: 18 Important Lessons about Love That This Unconventional Rom-Com Taught Us." *ScreenRant*, 16 Mar. 2020) She exists only through Tom's imagination, becoming a projection rather than a

person. His emotional muse rather than an autonomous character. That design is not incidental, it is the architecture of the trope itself.

And because rom-coms function as emotional instruction manuals, the trope has social consequences. (Banach, Ali. “What We Can Learn Watching “(500) Days of Summer” Ten Years Later.” *Observer*, Observer, 15 July 2019) These films teach young viewers, especially girls, that being desirable means being quirky but not complicated, fun but not needy, spontaneous but not messy. Uniqueness becomes a performance meant to uplift someone else. Romance becomes a stage where women are applauded only when they inspire male transformation. Without even trying, the trope trains audiences to expect women to serve a man’s journey, not write their own.

The trope becomes even more troubling when you recognize how closely the MPDG’s traits overlap with those associated with neurodivergence . (Maio, Alyssa. “The Manic Pixie Dream Girl Is Dead.” *StudioBinder*, 13 Dec. 2019) Impulsivity, sensory seeking, distractibility, emotional intensity and nonconformity. Many women with ADHD, autism or BPD see pieces of their lived experience reflected in these characters, but reflected as something whimsical rather than real. The trope turns neurodivergent traits into an aesthetic, a quirky accessory to a man’s self-discovery. In doing so, it romanticizes mental illness, trivializes neurodivergence and reinforces the harmful idea that these traits are cute when they entertain others but undesirable when they require understanding or support. It creates a stereotype of women who are “too much in real life but just enough for a movie montage,” which is more damaging than endearing.

Critics sometimes assign the MPDG label too quickly, flattening any colorful or unpredictable woman into the stereotype, even when the character clearly pushes against it. Clementine from “Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind” is a perfect example. With her ever-changing hair colors and chaotic energy, she appears to be the trope incarnate, until she speaks for herself. “Too many guys think I’m a concept,” she says. “I’m just a girl who’s looking for my own peace of mind.” Clementine refuses to be an accessory. She reminds audiences that women can be eccentric, flawed, loud or complicated without existing solely for someone else’s emotional development. When films allow their female characters to hold this kind of complexity, rom-coms sparkle in ways far more meaningful than any whimsy the trope can offer.

So if the MPDG is so shallow, reductive and easily criticized, why does she keep returning? The answer is simple: she’s easy. She makes movies feel magical without requiring writers to craft real emotional depth. She enlivens scenes without needing her own arc. She adds glitter to a plot without adding narrative weight. But that ease is the very problem. Flattened characters create flattened expectations. (*She’s Just a Girl, Not a Manic Pixie Dream* -. 27 Sept. 2023,) The more we consume stories where women exist only to inspire men, the more normalized those expectations become in real life.

Fortunately, rom-coms are evolving. The genre is in the middle of what can only be described as a renaissance; a pink, chaotic, delightful one. Films like “Set It Up,” “Rye Lane,” “Someone

Great” and “The Broken Hearts Gallery” give women full lives, full emotions and full storylines. They’re messy and ambitious and hilarious and complicated. They still find love, but they don’t have to sacrifice their identities to do it. Even their quirks are rooted in character rather than convenience. These films suggest something important and that is that rom-com magic doesn’t disappear when women are written as real people. If anything, it becomes richer.

The Manic Pixie Dream Girl had her cultural moment, and to be fair, she gave us some iconic fashion and unforgettable soundtracks. She gave us the Tumblr-era aesthetics, but she also gave us unrealistic romantic expectations, unhealthy gender dynamics and a generation of women who believed they had to be magical instead of real. It’s time to let her go.

She can keep her colorful tights and her vinyl collection. She can keep her bangs and her spontaneity. She can even keep her love of late-night grocery store adventures. But she can no longer be the blueprint. Rom-coms are moving forward, and in this new era, the girl with the magic finally gets to use it for herself, not to brighten the life of a sad boy who mistakes her personality as a fun adventure for himself.

That’s the rom-com glow-up we’ve been waiting for.