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Meredith Metcalf

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Manic Pixie Dream Girls

by

Meredith Metcalf

Eddy von Mueller
Adviser

Film Studies

Eddy von Mueller
Adviser

Michele Schreiber
Committee Member

Molly Epstein
Committee Member

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By

Meredith Metcalf

Eddy von Mueller

Adviser

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Abstract

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The "Manic Pixie Dream Girl," a term coined in 2007 to describe a character type 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," has been criticized for being used to chastise unconventional female supporting characters. I argue that the term itself, when clearly defined, may be useful in critical discourse about the role of women in films. The Manic Pixie Dream Girl is a character type whose personality and narrative function remain largely constant over time, even though the films in which she change to reflect the sociocultural context and aesthetic trends of the era in which they are created. I take a closer look at six films from the past decade - *Garden State*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Elizabethtown*, *(500) Days of Summer*, *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, and *Ruby Sparks* - that belong to different genres but are united by their use of Manic Pixie Dream Girls in a way that reflects the current sociocultural phenomenon of prolonged adolescence and the aesthetic trend toward self-reflexivity. When clearly defined and considered a neutral descriptor, this term can serve a useful function in critical discourse about how films from different eras and genres may promote the same gender roles.

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Table of Contents

Introduction: The Manic Pixie Dream Girl and the Discourse Surrounding Her - page 1
Manic Pixie Dream Girls Through the Ages - page 5
Early 1930s: <i>Design for Living</i> - page 6
Screwball Comedy: <i>Bringing Up Baby</i> - page 7
Comedies of Seduction: <i>Some Like It Hot</i> - page 10
The Nervous Romance: <i>Annie Hall</i> - page 11
Genre Hybrids: <i>Weird Science</i> - page 13
Slackers and Self-reflexivity: <i>There's Something About Mary</i> - page 15
Recent Films with Manic Pixie Dream Girls - page 19
Character Types - page 20
Formal Innovations and Fantasy - page 28
Music - page 33
Conclusion - page 37
Filmography - page 39
Endnotes - page 39

The Manic Pixie Dream Girl and the Discourse Surrounding Her

The term “Manic Pixie Dream Girl” was coined in 2007 by A.V. Club writer Nathan Rabin in a review of Cameron Crowe’s *Elizabethtown* (2005). Rabin identifies the Manic Pixie Dream Girl as a character type 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.”¹ Like the Magical Negro, the Manic Pixie Dream Girl is “largely defined by secondary status and lack of an inner life.”²

Rabin cites two examples of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl: Claire (Kirsten Dunst) in *Elizabethtown* and Sam (Natalie Portman) in Zach Braff’s *Garden State* (2004). Readers latched onto the term and suggested other Manic Pixie Dream Girls in the comments section, ranging from contemporary characters like Clementine (Kate Winslet) in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*³ to historical examples, such as Susan (Katharine Hepburn) in *Bringing Up Baby*.⁴ Rabin’s second article about Manic Pixie Dream Girls claimed to trace the lineage of Manic Pixie Dream Girls from the “nutty dames” of screwball comedy, through the “spacey hippie chicks” of the seventies, to contemporary incarnations.⁵ Commenters⁶ and other bloggers⁷ disagreed with several of Rabin’s picks, particularly his selections of iconic female leads like *Bringing Up Baby*’s Susan (Katharine Hepburn)⁸ and *Annie Hall* (Diane Keaton).⁹

As Rabin continued to discuss Manic Pixie Dream Girls, he increasingly distanced the term from its negative connotations. When introducing the Manic Pixie Dream Girl in 2007, he said audiences “either want to marry her instantly... or they want to commit grievous bodily harm against [her] and [her] immediate family” because of her “psychotically chipper” personality.¹⁰ His list of sixteen Manic Pixie Dream Girls, published in 2008, avoided such negative language and changed its tune toward *Garden State*’s Sam, describing her as “lovably

eccentric.”¹¹ In a 2010 interview with Filmspotting, Rabin provided an affectionate list of his five favorite Manic Pixie Dream Girls throughout film history.¹²

Rather than cementing the term’s validity, Rabin’s application of the term to describe a wide range of female characters led critics and bloggers to speculate the term was being used so indiscriminately as to lose its meaning. In April 2013, *The Week*¹³ posited that the term worked so well in 2007 because a rash of films with Manic Pixie Dream Girls – *Garden State*, *Elizabethtown*, and *Eternal Sunshine* – had just been released, and Zooey Deschanel, perpetual¹⁴ player of Manic Pixie Dream Girls, was just breaking into mainstream stardom. In July, *New York Magazine*¹⁵ pronounced the Manic Pixie Dream Girl “dead,” while *XoJane*¹⁶ argued that the trope would live on even though it was no longer “cool.” That same month, a *New Statesman*¹⁷ article written by a “former Manic Pixie Dream Girl” went viral. *The New York Times*¹⁸ and *The Atlantic*¹⁹ followed it with first-person stories from men warning against the dangers of believing this character type holds true in real life – proving the term remains in the zeitgeist.

The Week characterized the term as “more damaging than it is helpful” because it is often used to chastise unconventional female supporting characters.²⁰ While I agree that the term is often used in a derogatory way, I would like to argue that the term itself, when clearly defined, may be useful in critical discourse about the role of women in films. Rather than completely ceasing use of the term, I propose that this term should be more clearly defined, and it should not be considered an inherently bad quality.

I think the term’s popularity in spite of its vague definition is caused by the fact that the Manic Pixie Dream Girl is not a radical new idea; it’s a catchy name for an old character type. Although the term is often²¹ associated with female characters from the past decade, I will apply the term, as Rabin does, as a character type that may be found throughout film history. I will

define a Manic Pixie Dream Girl as a secondary female character whose personality has male fantasy wish fulfillment elements, which are in some way girlish or impish, and whose function within the plot is to aid in the male protagonist's development, with her own growth and back story largely removed from the plot. This definition is based on Rabin's descriptions of Manic Pixie Dream Girls in his first two A.V. Club pieces, but it omits some of his more artistic descriptions,²² his descriptions of the audience's reaction,²³ and his statement that the character lacks inner life.²⁴ I omit the two former descriptions because they are too subjective to be useful in classifying a character, and they would require extensive justification for each example. I omit the latter because it is also subjective and because I believe Rabin's seminal examples, *Elizabethtown*'s Claire and *Garden State*'s Sam, have inner lives.²⁵

I will argue that the Manic Pixie Dream Girl is a character type whose personality and narrative function remain largely constant over time, even though the films she appears in change to reflect the sociocultural context and aesthetic trends of the era in which they are created. In my first section, I will examine Hollywood romantic comedies from different eras that feature Manic Pixie Dream Girls to show how her personality and role in the narrative remain very similar despite variations in the values espoused by texts from different eras. In my second section, I will take a closer look at six films from the past decade – *Garden State*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Elizabethtown*, *(500) Days of Summer*, *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, and *Ruby Sparks* – that belong to different genres but are united by their use of Manic Pixie Dream Girls in a way that reflects the current sociocultural phenomenon of prolonged adolescence and the aesthetic trend toward self-reflexivity. I will conclude by elaborating on why this term, when clearly defined and considered a neutral descriptor, can serve a useful

function in critical discourse about how films from different eras and genres may promote the same gender roles.

Manic Pixie Dream Girls Through the Ages

In this section, I will examine films from six cycles of Hollywood romantic comedy, focusing on how each exemplifies a characteristic common amongst Manic Pixie Dream Girls in the films I choose to analyze. Although these characteristics are not required in my definition of a Manic Pixie Dream Girl, they are additional aspects of the character that are often but not always present. I will also look at the ways the Manic Pixie Dream Girl, while maintaining the personality traits and narrative function required by my definition, functions in films that reflect the sociocultural forces and aesthetic trends of the era in which they were created.

Beginning with romantic comedies of the thirties, I will examine the ways Manic Pixie Dream Girls are allowed a great deal of agency, particularly sexual agency, and are allowed to perform socially deviant behavior that makes them equals to their male counterparts. Films of the fifties through seventies displayed an increasing interest in representations of character psychology and the ways both Manic Pixie Dream Girls and their male protagonists may help each other grow. In the eighties and nineties, the Manic romantic comedies incorporated elements of other genres or self-reflexive references to romantic comedy conventions to emphasize the fantastical, wish-fulfillment elements of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl.

I will look at films from six of the nine cycles and clusters Leger Grindon identifies in his history of the romantic comedy in Hollywood sound film.²⁶ He defines a cycle as “a series of similar films produced during a limited period of time, often sparked by a benchmark hit that is imitated, refined, or resisted by those that follow.” Films in a cluster, on the other hand, “fail to generate a coherent model or common motifs among productions from the same period.”²⁷

While this is by no means a comprehensive list, I have chosen a few cycles and characters that illustrate how, although sociocultural and aesthetic values change over time, the

Manic Pixie Dream Girl's personality and function within the narrative remain constant over time. Although the films she appears in reflect larger shifts in Hollywood films toward representations of character subjectivity and self-reflexivity, the Manic Pixie Dream Girl is a character type that may be used in stories from any era.

Early 1930s: *Design for Living*

Films in Grindon's first cluster, from 1930-1933, express skepticism about love, especially with regards to marriage, a view that grew out of and reinforced the notion that there was a 'marriage crisis' in the twenties and thirties.²⁸ From the end of the Civil War until 1929, "the population of the United States increased 300 percent, the number of marriages 400 percent, and the divorce rate 2,000 percent."²⁹ By the end of the twenties, more than one in six marriages ended in divorce every year.³⁰

From 1930 to 1934, the Hays Code was in place but not strongly enforced. During these years, filmmakers such as Ernst Lubitsch and Mae West explored ways to pattern dialogue and get sexual innuendos past censors – and thanks to weak enforcement of the Code, they were largely successful.³¹ Though they had different styles, both Lubitsch and West were known for portraying strong female leads that were not afraid to express their sexual desires. West's women verbalized their desires, while Lubitsch used visual innuendos.

Lubitsch's *Design for Living* (1933) centers on Gilda (Miriam Hopkins), a self-described "mother of the arts" who tries to help friends George (Gary Cooper) and Tom (Fredric March) achieve artistic success as a painter and a playwright, respectively, rather than focus on her own career as a commercial artist. Though she is in love with both George and Tom, Gilda foregoes having sex with them to avoid complications in their living arrangement – or at least, she holds

out as long as she can. At first, George and Tom's jealousy of each other ruins their relationships with Gilda. When Gilda leaves them and marries her straight-laced boss, Max Plunkett (Edward Everett Horton), she refuses to be mere entertainment for Max's dull business connections. In the end, George and Tom return for Gilda. She runs away with them, vowing to make them create even better art – and jokingly stating that there will be “no sex.”

While Gilda's nonchalant non-monogamy reflects her era's skepticism toward marriage,³² it is also an example of how the Manic Pixie Dream Girl is allowed to demonstrate sexual agency and a certain degree of sexual deviancy without being punished. Rather than conforming to society's mores, the Manic Pixie Dream Girl's sexuality caters to male desires. Many Marilyn Monroe characters, such as The Girl in *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), are allowed to have extramarital affairs without facing any consequences, a feat uncommon for female characters of the fifties. More recently, Summer in *(500) Days of Summer* and Ramona in *Scott Pilgrim* have each had one experimental relationship with a girl in college, which their boyfriends find titillating. *Ruby Sparks* parodies the wish-fulfillment aspects of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl's sexual preferences when Calvin states that Ruby, the woman he wrote into existence, loves giving blow jobs. Like Gilda, all these Manic Pixie Dream Girls push the boundaries of acceptable sexual behavior in ways the male protagonists do not find threatening.

Screwball Comedy: *Bringing Up Baby*

The cynicism of the early thirties gave way to optimism with the start of the New Deal in 1933. Romantic comedies reflected the nation's mood by incorporating social problems into films with a more upbeat tone.³³ Since Americans valued hard work and self-sufficiency, the ideal romantic heroine became a woman who could take care of herself.³⁴ Modern life was

accelerating, so romantic comedies kept up with the times in terms of speed and slang.³⁵ At this time, couples began to conceptualize marriage as a partnership between equals. Colorado juvenile court judge Ben Lindsey coined the term “companionate marriage” to describe “legal marriage, with legalized Birth Control, and with the right to divorce by mutual consent for childless couples, usually without payment of alimony.”³⁶

The film industry met the public’s desire for companionate marriages with the screwball cycle, which portrayed marriage as a fun-filled partnership between equals. The screwball couple expresses their attraction through barbed wit and physical aggression. These lighthearted battles show that the bickering couple shares a sense of fun that brings them together.³⁷ These films’ unobtrusive visual style favors the wide shot and the two-shot, which emphasize the equality of the couple.³⁸ The courtship process reeducates both man and woman, leading to a marriage that is a partnership between equals.³⁹

Stanley Cavell says an essential feature of these films is ambiguity surrounding whether the male or female is active or passive, or if it is even useful to make these distinctions between genders.⁴⁰ For many screwball comedies, a better distinction may be between the zany and the more straight-laced. The zany one is often, but not always, the woman. A common character is the madcap heiress who values “spontaneity over security” in a partner.⁴¹

Bringing Up Baby’s Susan is the quintessential zany heiress and a Manic Pixie Dream Girl.⁴² Since Susan is easily able to support herself financially, she acts purely for her own amusement when trying to get stuffy scientist David Huxley (Cary Grant) to express his “love impulse.” Susan tries to get David to stay with her and her new pet leopard, Baby, at her country home. David just wants to retrieve his intercostal clavicle so he can return to his brontosaurus and his uptight fiancée Alice (Virginia Walker). Susan’s antics impede David’s stated goal of

retrieving his intercostal clavicle, but she helps him grow as a character by giving him “the best day [he’s] ever had in [his] entire life.”

David and Susan are both reeducated over the course of the film. Susan teaches David to stop focusing on bones and embrace life, making him a fit partner. David also learns that he prefers Susan to Alice. Susan is reeducated in that she comes to recognize her love for David. Aside from that, the film suggests that she does not need to grow or change. Although Susan is rather one-dimensional, she is a caricature in a caricatured world. She may be the most daffy character in the film, but she’s not much more realistic than David’s “gently cartooned intellectual”⁴³ or Major Applegate (Charles Ruggles), a big game hunter who demonstrates leopard mating calls at dinner. The unidimensionality of all *Bringing Up Baby*’s characters is an exception that proves the rule that most Manic Pixie Dream Girls are less developed than the male protagonists of their films. In *Garden State* and *Elizabethtown*, we are privy to the back stories of and private moments with the male protagonist, but we only see the Manic Pixie Dream Girl when she interacts with the protagonist. *Annie Hall*, *Eternal Sunshine*, and *(500) Days of Summer* take this a step further by structuring the film around the logic of the protagonist’s memories, as I will discuss later. Even in this structure, these three films show glimpses of their Manic Pixie Dream Girls’ goals and neuroses, but the plots do not develop them as thoroughly as those of the protagonist. *Ruby Sparks* lampoons other films’ failure to develop their Manic Pixie Dream Girl characters by showing how Calvin writes Ruby as having no parents, friends, or family, and no accomplishments aside from sleeping with older men. While some⁴⁴ argue that *Bringing Up Baby*’s equal development of Susan and its other characters disqualifies her as a Manic Pixie Dream Girl, with my definition, I argue that this film provides an example of how Manic Pixie Dream Girls need not be underdeveloped.

Comedies of Seduction: *Some Like It Hot*

When America entered World War II, tastes shifted from screwball comedies to home front romances between a soldier and a civilian that reinforced traditional gender roles and assumed a darker tone of melancholy and loss.⁴⁵ Grindon hails 1953 as a turning point in both the film industry and the nation's mood. That year, Cold War tensions relaxed, Alfred Kinsey published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, and Marilyn Monroe exhibited rather sexual behavior in three films.⁴⁶ Instead of representing a return to the desirous females of the screwball era and earlier films, however, these more frank discussions of sex allowed women to express sexual agency chiefly through saving themselves for marriage.

Sex comedies of the fifties and sixties “portrayed a cynical view of courtship as seduction in which sex was a commodity to be exchanged.”⁴⁷ The man pursued sex, while the woman used it as a bargaining chip in her quest for financial security through marriage. These comedies of seduction almost always end with tradition triumphing and the couple getting married. This battle of the sexes was primarily fought by two screen icons: Marilyn Monroe and Doris Day. Day played respectable working women who wanted to start a family with a devoted husband.⁴⁸

Monroe, on the other hand, exhibited a naïve, natural sexuality. Her characters were “playful” and “spontaneous” but “generally lacked a significant job, a defining history, or other distinguishing personality traits” – all of which are characteristics of Manic Pixie Dream Girls.⁴⁹ Grindon describes Monroe's characters as “closer to a male fantasy than the credible life of a woman.”⁵⁰ While Billy Wilder parodies this character type in *The Seven Year Itch*, he delves into the more melancholic side of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl in *Some Like It Hot* (1959). While disguising themselves as members of an all-girls band, Joe (Tony Curtis) and Jerry (Jack

Lemmon) meet Sugar (Monroe), a singer who is determined to marry a millionaire. Sugar explains that usually falls for saxophone players who borrow money from her, spend it on other women, and leave her with nothing but an empty tube of toothpaste. Joe begins the film as one such saxophone player. His relationship with Sugar teaches him to see her as a friend and partner, rather than just an object for his own pleasure. Joe's masquerade as millionaire Shell Oil heir Junior teaches Sugar to take a more active role in sexual relations.

Sugar reveals the downsides of being a male fantasy when she explains that her partners always leave her with “the fuzzy end of the lollipop.” Many recent films also delve into the apparently inherent sadness of being a Manic Pixie Dream Girl. *Elizabethtown*'s Claire is tired of being a “substitute person” who is always available when her lover, Ben, wants her but has no such reciprocity from him. *Ruby Sparks* paints an especially dark portrait of the life of a Manic Pixie Dream Girl, as Calvin's manipulation of Ruby via his magic typewriter leaves her confused and overwhelmed by his desire to have her as his only friend and companion. *Garden State*'s Sam, *Eternal Sunshine*'s Clem, and *(500) Days of Summer*'s Summer all have scenes where they reveal their emotions and insecurities. Although I do not include it in my definition of a Manic Pixie Dream Girl, the *New York Times*'s Matteson Perry says “a Manic Pixie Dream Girl must be messed up enough to need saving, so the powerless guy can do something heroic in the third act.” *Some Like It Hot* features a structure common in films with Manic Pixie Dream Girls: the Manic Pixie Dream Girl inspires the male protagonist to grow and change, bestowing him with the power to solve her problems through his love.

The Nervous Romance: *Annie Hall*

The universality of marriage was questioned more explicitly in the late sixties and early seventies, reflecting the increasingly popular view of sex as an end in itself. With the end of the Production Code in 1967 and the institution of the ratings system in 1968, Hollywood films were allowed to be much more explicit about sex.⁵¹

With social barriers to sexual intercourse tumbling down, the romantic comedy of the 1970s had to search elsewhere to find obstacles to romance. It turned to a frontier rarely explored in prior romantic comedies: the psyche. Internalized obstacles to romance were a hallmark of the “nervous romance,” films that portray “the uncertainty surrounding courtship in the wake of changing attitudes about gender roles, sex, and marriage” and focus on relationships rather than courtship.⁵² Although these films had a comic climate,⁵³ happy endings were no longer guaranteed. Sex became a source of tension and a means of self-exploration, where men value the stability of a relationship while women cling to their independence. Some of the era’s most iconic couples appear in films that are more like coming of age stories than romantic comedies, since the primary plotline is the way the romance facilitates the male protagonist’s growth, rather than the question of couple formation.⁵⁴ The morose young heroes of *The Graduate* (1967) and *Harold and Maude* (1971) deserve mention because they are a major influence on the later films⁵⁵ I will examine.

The relationship between a death-obsessed man and a free-spirited female, already featured in *The Graduate* and *Harold and Maude*, was famously portrayed in *Annie Hall* (1977), the film whose tagline coined the term “nervous romance.”⁵⁶ Alvy (Woody Allen) and Annie are a young couple struggling to make a relationship in spite of their neuroses regarding sex, death, social engagements, and other things. The film portrays Alvy’s subjective experience of the relationship using a variety of formal techniques not often seen in romantic comedies, such as an

achronological narrative bookended by Alvy's direct address to the audience. Scenes convey Alvy and Annie's thoughts through subtitles, animation, split-screen, and numerous fantasy sequences. One critic called the film "a catalog of virtually every technique that could be done on film at the time."⁵⁷ Ultimately, Alvy and Annie break up and move on to new relationships, though both have grown and changed from their time together.

Annie is a somewhat uncomfortable fit⁵⁸ with my Manic Pixie Dream Girl definition, since the plot shows her coming out of her shell and outgrowing her relationship with Alvy, but this growth is still filtered through Alvy's limited ability to comprehend it. *Annie Hall's* formal playfulness precludes the formal innovations of more recent films with Manic Pixie Dream Girls. Later, I will discuss the ways *(500) Days of Summer* heavily borrows from *Annie Hall's* structure and techniques. I will also discuss the ways *Eternal Sunshine* uses an achronological narrative to juxtapose various points in a relationship, while *Ruby Sparks* visually references past films, and *Scott Pilgrim* borrows videogame and comic book aesthetics. It is almost as though, beginning with *Annie Hall*, the Manic Pixie Dream Girl frees the filmmaker to use unconventional formal techniques to tell this familiar love story using character types audiences are already well acquainted with.

Genre Hybrids: *Weird Science*

The eighties were an era of political conservatism, marked by the popularity of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher and the fall of the Soviet Union. The AIDS epidemic led to a reevaluation of what constitutes "safe" sex, and monogamy appeared to be on the rise, as the divorce rate leveled off and began to decline. These trends toward political and social conservatism informed a more conservative portrayal of intimate relationship in film.⁵⁹

Romantic comedies shifted their focus back to courtship plots in which women keep the professional gains they made in previous cycles, but they long for a romance with traditional gender roles.⁶⁰ Although the happy ending regained its popularity, most of these films express an ambivalence that mediates the cynicism of the nervous romance and the sincerity of earlier cycles. At this time, the romantic comedy also began to crossbreed with other genres, such as crime thrillers and sports movies, in an attempt to appeal to male and female audiences.⁶¹ Romantic comedies also began to incorporate aspects of high-concept situation comedy, including fantasy conceits such as ghosts, aliens, and time travel.⁶² These fantasy conceits were conducive to *Manic Pixie Dream Girls* and boys.⁶³

John Hughes combines the teen romantic comedy with a fantasy conceit in 1985's *Weird Science*. Two nerdy teenage boys connect their computer to a Barbie doll and create Lisa (Kelly LeBrock), a beautiful woman who fulfills their every wish, albeit in unexpected ways. She is "Mary Poppins as a centerfold model," "a figure of wild anarchic magic that scares as much as its delights" the boys.⁶⁴ Lisa teaches the boys to live it up by taking them to a blues club, throwing a wild party, and conjuring up a mutant biker gang to make the boys stand up for themselves. Lisa helps the boys get girlfriends their own age, then moves on to help another group of teens. This fusion of romantic comedy, teen film, and science fiction precludes the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl*'s appearance in multi-genre films such as the fantasy-action-romantic comedy *Scott Pilgrim* and the fantasy-romantic drama *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

Lisa demonstrates the impish ways the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* forces the protagonist out of his shell and places him in uncomfortable situations where he must bold. Lisa uses her powers to make mutant bikers crash the party and humiliate Gary and Wyatt, spurring them to defend themselves and the girls they're interested in. While not all *Manic Pixie Dream Girls* place their

love interests in such uncomfortable situations, most recent films with Manic Pixie Dream Girls feature at least one scene in which the Manic Pixie Dream Girl forces the protagonist to face his fears, be they fear for his safety or public embarrassment. In order to date Ramona, Scott Pilgrim must defeat her seven evil exes in battle – not so different from standing up to mutant bikers. Summer helps Tom let loose by playing a game in which they take turns saying “penis” in a public park. Although Tom initially resists the game, sitting with a girl who is screaming “penis” proves rather liberating, and he soon joins in. In *Eternal Sunshine*, the first time Joel meets Clem, she breaks into an unoccupied beach house with Joel and invites him to role-play as the homeowners. *Garden State*’s Sam shows Largeman her technique of making a movement and sound no one has ever done before when she feels “completely original,” then makes Largeman give it a try. These techniques are also present in *Bringing Up Baby*, where Susan’s seemingly effortless attempts to make David stay with her elicit sudden outbursts from the usually reserved David, showing that there have been male characters throughout history who need a Manic Pixie Dream Girl to draw them out of their shells.

Slackers and Self-Reflexivity: *There’s Something About Mary*

The rise of American “independent” cinema in the nineties marked the rise of the slacker hero, a descendant of the depressed, neurotic, or socially awkward heroes of past decades. The success of Richard Linklater’s *Slacker* (1991) and Kevin Smith’s *Clerks* (1994) paved the way for slacker heroes of the next two decades. Such slackers may be potheads, underachievers, or socially stunted, but all breeds of slacker share a “Peter Pan-inspired, man-boy approach to life.”⁶⁵ This approach to life fits the recent phenomenon of prolonged adolescence, in which

young adults take more time to reach milestones such as finishing school, leaving their parents' home, becoming financially independent, getting married, and having children.⁶⁶

A few films from this era, such as *Say Anything...* (1989) and *Reality Bites* (1994), created romances between slacker guys and driven girls. This pairing of a successful woman with a directionless male became more common over the next decade in the “slacker-striver romance.”⁶⁷ In such films, the primary obstacle to romance is the slacker's desire to stay in a state of prolonged adolescence. The striver helps the slacker grow up and assimilate into the mainstream society he spent his formative years rebelling against. This subgenre truly found its footing with the ascendancy of Judd Apatow, most famous for pairing the slovenly Seth Rogen with the gorgeous Katherine Heigl in *Knocked Up* (2007).

The striver and the Manic Pixie Dream Girl have opposite personalities but serve similar narrative functions. Each primarily exists in the story to facilitate the male protagonist's growth. These two different character types address different deficiencies in their partners: the striver forces the slacker to abandon the man-child lifestyle he enjoys, while the Manic Pixie Dream Girl lifts her love interest out of an undesirable mental state.

Romantic comedies from the late eighties through today use self-reflexivity and intertextual references to express an ambivalence toward romance and distance the film's happy ending from the viewer's lived experience. Such films attempt to “reconcile old-fashioned romance with the erotic openness” of a post-sexual revolution society through the “ardent yet ironic embrace of romantic possibility.”⁶⁸ Frank Krutnik describes the way these films negotiate the ‘already said’ through quoting a scenario devised by Umberto Eco: A man wants to tell a woman he loves her madly, but he knows that Barbara Cartland has already expressed this

sentiment, so he must say “As Barbara Cartland would put it, ‘I love you madly.’” In doing so, the man expresses his love while acknowledging that he knows his sentiment is not unique.⁶⁹

Romantic comedies negotiate the ‘already said’ by invoking genre conventions and well-known works from the past.⁷⁰ *There’s Something About Mary* (1998) acknowledges its own constructedness and pokes fun at the romantic comedy genre by killing off its troubadour narrator, taking the trope of pets as matchmakers to the extreme, and making its female love interest an impossibly perfect male fantasy.⁷¹ Mary (Cameron Diaz) is a gorgeous blonde, a successful surgeon, a caring sister, and an avid sports fan. Ted (Ben Stiller) falls in love with Mary in high school, but an accident involving his zipper forces him to go to the hospital instead of the prom. Ted tries to reconnect with Mary as an adult. Ted is a modestly successful writer, yet he is a man-child in that he “appears as eternally infantilized because he is eternally fixated on the originating moment when he caught his genitalia in a zipper.”⁷² Three other men also compete for Mary’s affection, using various disguises to enter her good graces. The film ends with Ted and Mary getting together, “with the promise that romance can work by her taking care of him.”⁷³ The film’s self-reflexivity undercuts the sincerity of its message that love triumphs in the end, expressing an ambivalence toward romance.

The following section will take a closer look at the ways recent films use self-reflexivity to tell the story of a Manic Pixie Dream Girl while acknowledging her artificial nature as a character type who cannot exist in real life. Earlier films with Manic Pixie Dream Girls also used self-reflexivity to highlight the constructedness of their characters. In *The Seven Year Itch*, Marilyn Monroe plays “The Girl,” a parody of her naturally sexual character type, who gets to know her married neighbor Richard (Tom Ewell). When Richard’s acquaintance Tom (Sonny Tufts) asks who the Girl is, Richard retorts, “Maybe it’s Marilyn Monroe!” As described earlier,

Annie Hall uses various formal techniques to take us inside Alvy's "hyperactive imagination," which has been shaped by films that influenced him. For instance, an animated sequence illustrates the ways his childhood love for the wicked queen in *Snow White* has carried over into his masochistic tendency to prefer difficult women, rather than the kind Snow White every other viewer loved.

Recent Films with Manic Pixie Dream Girls

I will now shift my focus to one manifestation of these trends of prolonged adolescence and self-reflexivity: a cross-generic subset of films – *Garden State*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Elizabethtown*, *(500) Days of Summer*, *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, and *Ruby Sparks* – that use formal innovations to tell stories that explore the ways the male expectation of a Manic Pixie Dream Girl affects modern heterosexual romantic relationships. These films are marketed to different audiences as being in different genres, from cerebral drama⁷⁴ to comic book action movie,⁷⁵ and they range from low-budget indie films⁷⁶ to mid-budget studio pictures.⁷⁷ All of them, however, use certain characterizations of their male protagonist and his primary love interest, as well as formal innovations and music, to comment on the ways modern heterosexual romantic relationships may be affected by male expectations of a Manic Pixie Dream Girl-like fantasy.

Over the past decade, these filmmakers have expanded the lexicon used to articulate the problems presented by the male perception of women as Manic Pixie Dream Girls. Although *Eternal Sunshine* was made before the term “Manic Pixie Dream Girl” was coined, Clem articulates these problems well when she tells Joel “Too many guys think I’m a concept, or I complete them, or I’m gonna make them alive. But I’m just a fucked-up girl who’s looking for my own peace of mind; don’t assign me yours.” In response to a question about Manic Pixie Dream Girls, *(500) Days of Summer* director Marc Webb says one of the codes of the film is that Tom “falls in love not with [Summer] but the idea of her,” and the film shows the reality of a situation where a man expects a woman to solve all his problems.⁷⁸ The mise en scene of *Ruby Sparks* references other films with Manic Pixie Dream Girls, including the iconic motorcycle

from *Garden State* and a party outfit from *(500) Days of Summer*, and incorporates language from Rabin's posts into its dialogue.

First, I will use *Garden State* as a case study to analyze the roles played by the male protagonist and his female love interest, the latter of whom may be characterized as a Manic Pixie Dream Girl. After that, I will examine the many ways these films may use formal techniques to convey the protagonist's subjectivity. Finally, I will look at the use of music in these films.

Character Types

Implicit in Rabin's definition of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl is a description of the type of male protagonist whose life she enters: He is significantly better developed and less quirky than she is. In the six films I analyze, he is a white, upper-middle class, heterosexual, cisgender male in his twenties. These traits are also shared by the protagonists of almost all the films Rabin cites, age being the most variable trait in his examples.⁷⁹

Although the slacker emerged as a popular cinematic figure in the nineties, the discourse surrounding prolonged adolescence has grown in the past two decades, as developmental psychologists debate whether or not "emerging adulthood" is a unique developmental state⁸⁰ and as economic recessions have forced young people, particularly males, out of the workforce and back into their parents' basements.⁸¹ The protagonists of these films are stuck in a state of prolonged adolescence. Scott Pilgrim (Michael Cera) grows up by leaving his girlfriend Knives (Ellen Wong), who is a high school student, for Ramona (Mary Elizabeth Winstead), who is an adult in age, if not appearance. If the film shows the protagonist's job, he is almost always underemployed and unsatisfied with his career. *(500) Days of Summer*'s Tom (Joseph Gordon-

Levitt) is a trained architect, working at a greeting card company. *Ruby Sparks*' Calvin (Paul Dano) is a writer struggling to recreate the success of his breakout novel. *Elizabethtown*'s Drew (Orlando Bloom) is a shoe designer whose career is in jeopardy after the spectacularly faulty shoe he designed lost his company almost a billion dollars. *Garden State*'s Andrew Largeman (Zach Braff) is an actor working at a trendy Vietnamese restaurant with rude customers and a boss who threatens to fire him. Thanks to his medications, the only acting roles in which Largeman has been cast are mentally retarded characters.

These protagonists are, at best, filled with ennui, and at worst, undergoing an existential crisis. On the more innocuous end of the angst spectrum, Calvin struggles with writer's block and clutches a teddy bear while visiting his psychiatrist. On the more severe end, Drew attempts suicide after his shoe design proves to be a "fiasco." Drew and Largeman both experience the death of a parent near the beginning of their respective films. *Ruby Sparks* acknowledges this trope by having Calvin still resent the girlfriend who dumped him shortly after his father's death. When he's not busy trying to stop Lacuna's erasure process, *Eternal Sunshine*'s Joel (Jim Carrey) either feels empty and lost because Clem broke up with him, or lost and empty because he just had a large chunk of his recent memories erased.

Each of these films traces the protagonist's quest for meaning and happiness. Since Largeman and Sam have much in common with the primary couples of these other films, I will use *Garden State* as a case study to examine the interplay between these protagonists and the Manic Pixie Dream Girls they love.

Garden State opens with a plane crash. All the passengers panic except one: Largeman appears perfectly calm. A ringing phone starts to play over the plane crash. We soon see that Largeman is actually lying in his all-white bed in his all-white bedroom, ignoring his ringing

telephone. The plane crash illustrates Largeman's inability to experience emotions in times of crisis – or any time, really. His father, who is also his psychiatrist, has him on so many medications hasn't cried since he was a child. Even when Largeman is living across the country, refusing to return his father's phone calls, his father controls his life through his medications.

Largeman's slow drift through life is interrupted by his mother's suicide. To attend her funeral, he returns to his childhood home in New Jersey for the first time since his parents sent him to boarding school at age sixteen. His former classmates all seem to remember him – and they don't seem to have grown up much. Two are gravediggers. One is a cokehead-turned-cop. (He couldn't think of anything better to do with his life.) One is living off the fortune he made by inventing silent Velcro. The gravediggers invite Largeman to a party, which doesn't look so different from high school. The guys still do hard drugs and play Spin the Bottle with girls who look barely legal.

Largeman's friends' arrested development is most visible the morning after the party, when Largeman eats breakfast with his gravedigger friend Mark (Peter Sarsgaard), Mark's mother Carol (Jean Smart), and her knight in somewhat rusty armor: a young *Medieval Times* employee named Tim (Jim Parsons). The scene opens with Carol lamenting how she always tries to save a few marshmallows for the end of her cereal, but she never makes it. Mark and Tim have words about their unimpressive careers and the time Tim “got the shit kicked out of him” in high school. Largeman watches this domestic scene play out with “BALLS” written on his face in marker – courtesy of Carol.

In these films, friends and family often serve as foils who help the protagonist realize he needs to grow up. Whereas the slacker heroes of Apatow films struggle to break free of their buddies' man-child lifestyle, the protagonist of these films breaks away from his friends

voluntarily when he recognizes how stunted they are. In *Elizabethtown*, Drew earns his family's respect by being better at disciplining children than his cousin Jesse (Paul Schneider), an "untraditional" parent stuck on his adolescent dream of being a rock star. In *(500) Days of Summer*, Tom rejects his friends' advice about love because they're as stunted as he is. One hasn't had a girlfriend since the seventh grade. The other has dated the same girl since 1997, twelve years before the film's release. In other cases, friends and family encourage the protagonist to grow up. Scott Pilgrim's sneering sister (Anna Kendrick) and roommate (Kieran Culkin) tease him about dating a high schooler. Calvin's brother Harry (Chris Messina) tries to teach him about women, based on what he's learned in his marriage.

But friends, family, and willpower aren't enough to make our hero grow up and learn to embrace life. He needs a girl to guide him through his journey to a better life. Largeman meets such a girl in Sam. Their 'meet cute' takes place in a psychiatrist's waiting room almost thirty minutes into the film, at the end of Act I – the same point in the narrative when Drew meets manic pixie flight attendant Claire. Sam seems to be the only young adult in town who doesn't know Largeman from high school. Even amongst the film's quirky cast of characters, Sam is one of the most distinctive. The childlike Sam is a compulsive liar. She only agrees to visit Largeman's friend's mansion if they can have code names. She's too scatter-brained to keep her pet hamsters alive. To top things off, she shows Largeman Tickle, the last remnant of her baby blanket. Although romantic comedies often invoke the importance of play in courtship, it's ironic that Largeman grows by dating a girl who's so much more childlike than his friends.

In all these films, the protagonist's dream girl is spontaneous and vivacious in an acceptably hip, nonconformist way. As mentioned earlier, she is allowed a certain amount of sexual deviance, and she has no qualms violating social norms to help bring her love interest out

of his shell. She also positions herself as going against the dominant culture through her taste and appearance, which are nonconformist in a nonthreatening way. Summer (Zooey Deschanel) professes to love Ringo Starr simply to be contrarian. *Eternal Sunshine's* Clem and *Scott Pilgrim's* Ramona dye their hair multiple colors over the course of their respective films. Like the protagonist, the dream girl is white, cisgender, and heterosexual – except, in the cases of Summer and Ramona, for an experimental fling in college. Her class background is less important than the protagonist's, especially since in most cases, little is known about her past. She may be new in town, like Summer and Ramona, or spend most of her time traveling, like Claire. *Ruby Sparks* parodies this trope by having Ruby (Zoe Kazan) explain that her parents died when she was a baby, and she's lived in nine cities in the past six years.

Although Largeman comes to love Sam's refreshing innocence, at first, he isn't so enamored with her. When Largeman first meets Sam in the psychiatrist's waiting room, she doesn't recognize his cues that he wants to fill out his forms and stop talking about how great he is at playing retarded characters. (Similarly, Claire strikes up a conversation with Drew on his flight to Louisville even though he clearly wants to sleep.) Largeman begins to see Sam in a different light when she lets him listen to "New Slang" by The Shins. She says it will change his life. In a way, it does.

After Largeman and Sam visit their respective psychiatrists, Largeman offers Sam a ride home on his motorcycle. After a quick detour to play catch-the-flaming-arrow at Largeman's friend's mansion, Sam and Largeman go to Sam's house. Sam's mother tells Sam that her hamster, Jelly, died because Sam forgot to take the wheel out of his cage. Sam and Largeman hold a funeral for Jelly. This warm, intimate scene contrasts with Largeman's mother's funeral. The scene of his mother's funeral begins with an overhead view of the mourners, sweeping down

in a crane shot. Jelly's funeral scene ends with the camera sweeping back up to an overhead shot of the two mourners in Sam's backyard, providing closure Largeman didn't receive at his mother's funeral.

As descendants of the nervous romance, these films require their protagonists to come to terms with their past before embracing their future. This often involves revisiting childhood trauma. *Eternal Sunshine*'s Joel and Clem help each other overcome insecurities from their childhoods: she tells him about the "ugly" doll she identified with as a child; he hides her in shameful memories of killing a bird and being caught masturbating. Summer's cynical view of marriage was shaped by her parents' divorce and her childhood vow to only love two things: her long, dark hair and "how easily she could cut it off and not feel a thing."

Other films don't delve so deep into their characters' pasts. Instead, the key to these protagonists' behavior may be found in the more recent past. Scott Pilgrim earns the power of self-respect when he realizes his callousness toward his exes, Knives and Kim, was just as cruel as the way Ramona treated her evil exes. Drew and Claire help each other stop being "substitute people" who use their busy lives as an excuse to avoid emotional attachment. The underlying reasons for these characters' recent behavior must lie in their formative experiences, but the films address only the behavior, not its causes.

At the end of Act II, Largeman reveals the reason his parents sent him away to boarding school and the reason he has been so heavily medicated: he was responsible for the freak accident that put his mother in a wheelchair. When he was nine years old, frustrated by his inability to cure his mother's depression, Largeman pushed his mother. She fell on the open dishwasher, hit her neck, and became paralyzed from the waist down. His father, wanting to make everyone happy, started medicating Largeman and never stopped.

Sam reveals that she has her own problems: her childhood figure skating dreams were cut short by her epilepsy. Unlike Largeman, Sam knows how to deal with her emotions. She copes with her troubles by laughing, but she still looks forward to a good cry. Sam teaches Largeman to experience and express his emotions. In the film's climax, Largeman climbs atop a pile of construction equipment and lets out a cathartic scream into the "infinite abyss." Sam and Mark join him, and Largeman and Sam share their first kiss.

Such moments of catharsis are a key way these female characters help the male protagonists learn to embrace life. As mentioned earlier, Summer helps Tom let loose by playing a game in which they take turns saying "penis" in a public park. Clem chastises Joel for using the word "nice" until he exclaims "I had the best fucking night of my entire fucking life!" Claire pushes Drew to explore his emotions in a quieter way: by following her road trip itinerary, with accompanying playlist, to "get into the deep beautiful melancholy of everything that's happened." The protagonist must learn to get in touch with his emotions before he can truly get in touch with his feelings for his love interest – and lucky for him, she's the right person to help him do so. Unlike in previous romances I have looked at, the male protagonist's journey to happiness does not go through society's ideals of manhood such as getting married or becoming more masculine; rather, it involves an emotional transformation.

Largeman's journey to embracing his emotions and experiencing his life requires that he break free from his father's control. When he finally has a talk with his father, Largeman asks his father to stop trying to drug him back into some happy state that never existed and "just allow ourselves to be whatever it is we are." Largeman tells his father that this is his life, and he's ready to experience it fully.

Largeman no longer feels at home in the place he grew up, but he realizes he can build a new home and life with Sam. Yet he plans to return to Los Angeles to find himself (and a new psychiatrist). Sam doesn't hide her disappointment, saying that in the four days she's known him, he's changed her life. (She doesn't sound changed, especially since she still lies about lying, but sure.) In classic romantic comedy style, Largeman runs to catch his plane. As it's boarding, he realizes he doesn't want to be on it. He finds Sam crying in a phone booth and tells her his plan to figure things out on his own was dumb. His love for her is the only thing he's ever been sure of.

Largeman is more confident in his declaration of love than in his thoughts on their future. He tells Sam "I think I can do this. I mean, I want to. I have to, right?" He ends his speech by asking, "What do we do?" Sam has no answer, but they kiss, and we track back, uncertain but optimistic about their future. At the very least, Largeman has found someone to explore the infinite abyss with him.

These films all have ambiguous but optimistic endings, reflecting the ambivalence present in recent romantic comedies. *Elizabethtown* ends with the optimistic but vague proposition that, rather than return to his job, Drew will follow Claire and her "alternate plan." *Scott Pilgrim* has a similarly unclear but upbeat ending, with Scott and Ramona venturing off into her subspace tunnel as we sweep up to text reading "Continue?" like in the end of an arcade game. At the end of *Eternal Sunshine* , Joel and Clem decide to give their relationship a try, despite the knowledge that their past problems are likely to resurface. *(500) Days of Summer* ends with Tom setting aside his newfound cynicism and making a date with a new girl, Autumn. *Ruby Sparks* ends with Ruby meeting Calvin, having no memory of him, and starting over. Although the protagonist ends up with a woman he loves, these films beg the question: now that

our protagonist is armed with more knowledge of life and love, will he make the same mistakes he made in the past?

Formal Innovation and Fantasy

In these films, the Manic Pixie Dream Girl not only frees the protagonist to embrace his emotions; she also frees the filmmaker to use innovative formal techniques in his storytelling. Most of these films use fantasy sequences or fantastical story worlds to express universal truths about romantic relationships. They may use visual style within scenes, unconventional plot structures, or both to convey character subjectivity and augment the film's message.

Elizabethtown does not make extensive use of fantasy, so I will largely omit it from this discussion. The next section will examine its use of music to express character subjectivity and create a romantic mood.

(500) Days of Summer owes a great debt to *Annie Hall*, which paved the way for nonlinear relationship stories filled with a hodgepodge of visual devices. Like *Annie Hall*, *(500) Days of Summer* has an achronological narrative whose plot is structured around a logic of association. This logic of association helps the audience experience the protagonist's relationship as it exists in his mind, allowing the filmmaker to express a great deal of the character's mental subjectivity. *Summer* has two framing devices: a calendar that counts which day of "Summer"⁸² we are on and displays a season that reflects Tom's mental state; and an omniscient narrator (voiced by Richard McGonagle) who never appears in the story world. These omniscient framing devices take us on a journey through Tom's mind. When Tom thinks back on an experience with Summer, we see it as he does – fondly, angrily, or accurately. The narrator provides objectivity in his ironic detachment, most notably at the end of the film. When

Tom meets Autumn, the narrator says, “Tom had finally learned... nothing is meant to be. He knew, he was sure of it now. Tom was—” The narrator gets cut off as Tom decides to go back and make a date with Autumn. The narrator resumes with “He was pretty sure.” The sun sets on day 500, and the calendar resets to day 1. Autumn’s name, the resetting calendar, and the final shot of Tom looking knowingly into the camera all make audiences question whether Tom’s new relationship will succeed where his relationship with Summer failed.

Within scenes, *Summer* uses a wide variety of formal devices to convey Tom’s thoughts and emotions. The morning after Tom first sleeps with Summer, a musical number set to Hall & Oates’ “You Make My Dreams Come True” reflects his joy. Passersby smile and congratulate Tom, back-up dancers dance behind him, and an animated bluebird flies in for the big finish. In a less upbeat sequence, Regina Spektor’s “Hero” plays as we see a split-screen portrayal of the party Summer invites Tom to after their breakup. The left panel shows Tom’s expectations of an intimate gathering where he can reconnect with Summer, with more close-ups and inviting mise en scene. The right panel shows the reality: a party scene that is awkward in setting and performance, where Tom tipsily tries to amuse Summer’s friends with his cynicism.

(500) *Days of Summer* highlights the way Tom’s view of relationships has been shaped by popular culture by referencing a number of past films. During the musical number, Tom looks at his reflection in a window and sees Harrison Ford as Han Solo from *Star Wars* smiling back at him. The narrator cites “early exposure to sad British pop music and a total misreading of *The Graduate*” as key in forming Tom’s views on love. Shortly before they break up, Tom and Summer watch *The Graduate* together. Summer cries. After they break up, Tom goes to the movies and sees himself in reenactments of iconic scenes from *The Seventh Seal* and *Children of Paradise*. The *Seventh Seal* segment pits Tom in a chess game against Cupid rather than Death.

Since *Annie Hall* comparisons spring to mind, this segment implies that Tom's obsession with love dooms his relationship with Summer in the same way Alvy's obsession with death dooms his relationship with Annie. These intertextual references show the ways Tom's self-image and worldview are shaped by pop culture, inviting the audience to think about the ways portrayals of women, particularly as Manic Pixie Dream Girls, have shaped Tom's view of Summer.

Like *(500) Days of Summer*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* has a nonlinear narrative. The film may be divided into three major sections: the first, told in objective depth, follows Joel the morning after he undergoes the memory erasure procedure; the second, told in both subjective and objective depth, follows Joel as he experiences the erasure procedure; and the third, told in objective depth again, is an expanded version of the first section that takes place the morning after. The second section cross-cuts between objective scenes following the Lacuna staff on the night they erase Joel's memory, and subjective scenes taking place inside Joel's mind as he experiences the erasure procedure. The procedure works backwards, making Joel re-experience his most recent memories first, as they are erased. The tone and general timeline of Joel's memories may be inferred from the changing color of Clem's hair.

This combination of the objective first and third section with the subjective second section draws parallels between Joel and Clem's pre-erasure relationship and their budding romance when they meet again after the procedure. The similarities between these two iterations of their relationship may be read as fate, failure to learn from their mistakes, or a combination of both. Since romances are often linked to fate, the film may be read as promoting the idea of eternal recurrence: Joel and Clem's doomed relationship is destined to happen again and again. Alternatively, the similarities may be attributed to the fact that by erasing their memories of each other, Joel and Clem have erased all the ways they grew and changed over the course of their

relationship, forcing them to make the same mistakes again. After Lacuna's receptionist Mary (Kirsten Dunst) gives Joel and Clem tapes of their pre-procedure interviews, they agree to give their relationship another chance. The film has an ambiguous ending, where we see Joel and Clem playing on a beach, exactly as they did in one of Joel's erased memories. Although the ending may be interpreted optimistically, the film's ambiguity casts doubt on Joel and Clem's ability to grow enough to have a successful relationship.

Eternal Sunshine's nonlinear structure would not be possible without the fantastical plot device of Lacuna's memory erasure procedure – a sci-fi element that is not so far from the realm of current possibility. *Ruby Sparks* also uses a single fantastical device in an otherwise realistic story world. Calvin is a perfectly ordinary writer living in Los Angeles. As he writes about his dream girl, Ruby, articles of women's clothing begin appearing around his house. Eventually, Ruby herself appears. The film never explains how Ruby came to life, but it implies that Calvin's passion for Ruby made her real.

Ruby Sparks uses mise en scene and dialogue to reference other films that feature Manic Pixie Dream Girls. As Calvin writes about Ruby's past, we see a montage of flashbacks reminiscent of the sequence about Summer's past. One image in the montage is of Ruby riding the back of a motorcycle that looks like Largeman's motorcycle. In the middle of a nighttime conversation by Calvin's pool, Ruby jumps into the pool, resembling the pool scene in *Garden State*. When Calvin brings Ruby to his publicist's party, Ruby wears a dress and hairstyle that look like Summer's outfit from the expectations vs. reality sequence in *(500) Days of Summer*. The dialogue borrows phrases from discussions of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl, such as when Calvin complains that women who like his books want to sleep with "some idea of" him or his brother tells him "You haven't written a person. You've written a girl."

Scott Pilgrim makes the most elaborate use of fantasy and multimedia intertextual references. The plot is structured like a videogame in which Scott must defeat Ramona's seven evil exes, each of whom functions as a boss the player must defeat before advancing to the next level. These battles feature videogame sound effects and visuals such as hit counters and text reading "K.O.!" for a knockout. Characters usually don't acknowledge these effects, and the film plays up the comedic incongruity of its characters' under-reactions.

Most of the videogame effects seem to occur because of Ramona and her evil exes. These initially surprise Scott, but as he spends more time with Ramona, he becomes confident operating in her world. For instance, Scott expresses mild surprise when Ramona's first ex explodes into a flurry of coins ("Sweet, coins!") but later appears totally confident when he tells his friends he's "getting a life" and grabs a 1-Up icon hovering in the air. Scott's battles with Ramona's exes are "presented as an inevitability on his path to being in a relationship" and serve as a metaphor for "overcoming the emotional baggage and obstacles our significant other sets up for us."⁸³

Scott Pilgrim is based on a series of comic books. The film references the comics' aesthetic through visual effects, such as split screen shots reminiscent of comic panels. Many shots are composed exactly like panels from the comics, sometimes even with superimposed text introducing characters or highlighting important lines.⁸⁴ Sound effects are often accompanied by superimposed text that visualizes the sharp "Pow!" of a well-placed punch, the thin "thunk" of Scott banging his head against a telephone pole or Knives' insidiously fragrant sigh of "love."⁸⁵

Although *Garden State* uses no fantastical plot devices, it uses conspicuous camerawork, expressionist mise en scene, and fast-motion editing to express Largeman's mental state. The final shot of Largeman's plane crash fantasy is a close-up of him from the shoulders up, perfectly

centered in the frame. This shot composition recurs throughout the film's first act to convey Largeman's lack of emotion. This shot is often paired with mise en scene in which Largeman's clothing matches the background. We transition from the plane crash fantasy to Largeman's bedroom using a match on the telephone that appears in both spaces. Next, we see the same central close-up of Largeman, now lying in his white bed in a white t-shirt. To transition to the next scene, we cut to a shot with the same composition of Largeman in his white shirt standing in his white bathroom staring into the mirror of his medicine cabinet. Later, in a wider but similarly central composition, we see Largeman try on a shirt his aunt made from remnants of the fabric his mother used to redecorate the bathroom. Largeman tries it on in the bathroom, making him look like a part of the bathroom wall. This recurring shot composition and the coordination of costumes and sets illustrate the ways Largeman is a wallflower, blending into the background of his life rather than living it.

Garden State sometimes combines its central shot compositions with fast-motion editing to show how Largeman is out of sync with the rest of the world. Largeman takes ecstasy at his friend's party. The film then uses shots from Largeman's point of view, sped up and slowed down, to convey his experience of the drug. As the party wears on, Largeman grows bored. Braff switches to longer static shots, sped up to create a time lapse of Largeman sitting on the couch as the party goes on around him. At the end of the film, Braff uses a similar time lapse shot of Largeman sitting on the plane to Los Angeles as other passengers flit around him. These time lapse shots show Largeman's disconnect from the world. On the airplane, Largeman decides to make a change by going back to Sam, the only person he feels connected to.

Music

These films use music in various ways to show that the primary couple is meant to be together. Many use diegetic music as a point of connection between the protagonist and his love interest, who enjoy the same songs. Others use non-diegetic music with lyrics that reference the film's themes.

Elizabethtown 's soundtrack is heavy on Americana and alt-country, which is befitting this cinematic ode to finding oneself in America's heartland. Music is used not only to underscore the film's nostalgic portrayal of small-town America, but also in character development. Drew's cousin Jesse continues to act more like an amicable teen than a responsible father in part because he still dreams that his band, Ruckus, will make it big. The film's climax, at the memorial service for Drew's father, involves Ruckus performing "Free Bird" as a giant bird decoration catches fire. The ensuing chaos demonstrates how Claire has taught Drew to let go and enjoy life's absurdity, as the giant flaming bird swings about over their heads.

The most significant use of music in *Elizabethtown* is in the road trip playlist Claire makes for Drew. Before Drew can be with Claire, she wants him to take the road trip he and his father never got around to taking. He does so, scattering his father's ashes as he goes. Claire travels with him in spirit by making probably the most impressive itinerary in film history: a route complete with maps, detailed instructions on where to stop and what to do, photos of Claire holding maps in front of her face, and 42 hours 11 minutes of accompanying music. The playlist consists of "classic mixtape songs about her... and the rich flurry of our almost romance." Drew narrates his road trip in voiceover during a montage of highways, landmarks big and small, and shots of the binder Claire made with Drew's itinerary. Claire reads her instructions for Drew in voiceover, as clips from several songs play. The instructions end with a scavenger hunt in the world's largest farmer's market, where Claire lets Drew choose to follow the itinerary home or

look for her in the farmer's market. The road trip and accompanying music cement Drew's feelings for Claire. He finds her, and they embark on her "alternate plan."

Music often brings the primary couple together in these films, though it usually does so near the start of the film. Largeman sees Sam in a new light after she shares the magic of The Shins with him, asserting that "it'll change your life, I swear." Tom is willing to write Summer off as a "bitch" until she reveals that she loves The Smiths, one of the "sad British" pop bands Tom has loved since childhood. *Scott Pilgrim's* use of music makes it unclear which couple is meant to be. Even though Scott's initial girlfriend, Knives, loves his band, Scott continues to chase the indifferent Ramona. Scott and Ramona end up together, challenging the convention that shared taste in music means a couple is meant to be.

Music is also used to highlight the themes of these films. *Eternal Sunshine's* soundtrack features two songs about sunshine by The Polyphonic Spree. Beck's dreary cover of The Korgis' "Everybody's Got to Learn Sometime" advises the listener to "change your heart" because "everybody's got to learn sometime" and "I need your lovin' like the sunshine." This song appears in the final scenes of the film, beginning in the scene when Joel and Clem decide to give their relationship a second chance. It continues through the scene in which they play in the snow, then goes on into the credits. The lyrics contribute to the ambiguity of the film's ending, in which it is unclear if Joel and Clem's post-erasure relationship will succeed or if they are doomed to repeat the mistakes of their past.

Ruby Sparks primarily uses original music by Nick Urata, with a splash of retro European pop songs. Most of the soundtrack was composed by Urata, who collaborated with directors Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris on their previous film *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006).⁸⁶ Urata's songs echo the film's sense of wonder, but the European pop songs better underscore the film's

themes. These songs draw parallels between Ruby and girls from French New Wave films, who are sometimes thought to be influences on American Manic Pixie Dream Girls.⁸⁷ Plastic Bertrand's "Ça Plane Pour Moi" plays during the montage of Ruby and Calvin's first fun-filled dates. Sylvie Vartan's "Quand Tu Es Là" plays as Calvin and Ruby drive to Calvin's mother's house in a sequence resembling Godard's *Pierrot le Fou* (1965).

Conclusion

The “Manic Pixie Dream Girl,” as I define it, is a new name for an old character type whose personality and narrative function remain largely constant over time, even as the films she in which she appears change to reflect the sociocultural values and aesthetic trends of their era. Hollywood romantic comedies have incorporated Manic Pixie Dream Girls in films from every era, though films from different eras play up different aspects of this character type. Several films from the past decade follow emotionally stunted characters in a state of prolonged adolescence, reflecting the continuing interest in character psychology augmented by the trend toward young adults taking longer and longer to reach major milestones of adulthood. These films also participate in the popular technique of using self-reflexivity to maintain an ironic distance between the story world and the audience’s lived experience.

Although the Manic Pixie Dream Girl has coalesced into a very specific character type, I believe it’s important to define this term clearly to better understand the films and characters it refers to. While critics such as *The Week’s* Bartyzel and writers like Kazan (*Ruby Sparks*),⁸⁸ rightfully argue that the term has been used to diminish strong female characters who defy gender stereotypes, I would like to argue that this is the fault of the term’s negative connotations, and this character type is not inherently bad. As Rabin, the term’s creator, has tried to distance the term from its initial negative connotations,⁸⁹ I believe it is valid to reposition the term as a neutral descriptor.

As I have demonstrated, the Manic Pixie Dream Girl character type may be observed throughout the history of romantic comedies, appearing in some of the genre’s most acclaimed films. More recently, she has appeared in a diverse set of films hailing from different genres and

modes of production. The term is useful in describing the character relationships these six films have in common.

These recent films also demonstrate that the Manic Pixie Dream Girl need not be the product of misogyny or lazy screenwriting. *Bringing Up Baby*'s Susan is a one-dimensional character in a one-dimensional world, so her lack of depth is not considered a bad thing. More recently, *(500) Days of Summer* and *Ruby Sparks* use Manic Pixie Dream Girls to comment on the dangers of young men expecting their girlfriends to be Manic Pixie Dream Girls whose actual lives revolve around supporting their boyfriend. While it is harmful for people to expect this character type to hold true in real life, the same may be said of any supporting character.

All the films I mention use Manic Pixie Dream Girls to draw insights into the period in which they were created, and all deftly use dominant aesthetic conventions of their time. Instead of seeing the Manic Pixie Dream Girl as the hallmark of bad filmmaking or lazy screenwriting, we should instead see her a neutral tool filmmakers may use to promote messages that may be misogynist or feminist.

Filmography

- *Design for Living* (1933)
- *Bringing Up Baby* (1938)
- *The Seven Year Itch* (1955)
- *Some Like It Hot* (1959)
- *Annie Hall* (1977)
- *Weird Science* (1985)
- *There's Something About Mary* (1998)
- *Garden State* (2004)
- *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004)
- *Elizabethtown* (2005)
- *(500) Days of Summer* (2009)
- *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (2010)
- *Ruby Sparks* (2012)

¹ Rabin, Nathan. "The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: Elizabethtown." *A.V. Club*. Onion, 25 Jan. 2007. Web. 07 Apr. 2014.

² Rabin, Nathan, Noel Murray, Amelie Gillette, Donna Bowman, Steven Hyden, and Leonard Pierce. "Wild Things: 16 Films Featuring Manic Pixie Dream Girls." *A.V. Club*. Onion, 4 Aug. 2008. Web. 07 Apr. 2014.

³ Juketea1. "Re: The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: Elizabethtown." Weblog comment. *A.V. Club*. Onion, 25 Jan. 2007. Web. 7 Apr. 2014.

⁴ Kathryn. "Re: The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: Elizabethtown." Weblog comment. *A.V. Club*. Onion, 25 Jan. 2007. Web. 7 Apr. 2014.

⁵ Rabin, "Wild Things."

⁶ Frantikgirl, Perfect Hannah, and roadrunnerroadrunner. "Re: Wild Things: 16 Films Featuring Manic Pixie Dream Girls." Weblog comment. *A.V. Club*. Onion, 4 Aug. 2008. Web. 7 Apr. 2014.

⁷ Pasley, Virginia. "Zooey Deschanel: What, Exactly, Is a 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl'?" *Slate Magazine*. The Slate Group, 16 Mar. 2012. Web. 12 Apr. 2014.

⁸ Greco, Patti. "Zoe Kazan on Writing Ruby Sparks and Why You Should Never Call Her a 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl'" *Vulture*. New York Media, 23 July 2012. Web. 07 Apr. 2014.

⁹ Moore, Tracy. "'Manic Pixie Dream Girl' Has Lost All Meaning." *Jezebel*. Gawker Media, 29 Apr. 2013. Web. 12 Apr. 2014.

¹⁰ Rabin, "Bataan Death March."

¹¹ Rabin, "Wild Things."

¹² Rabin's top five, in descending order, are Nancy (Lee Taylor Young) in *I Love You, Alice B. Toklas*, Penny Lane (Kate Hudson) in *Almost Famous*, various characters played by Meg Ryan in *Joe Versus the Volcano*, Gerry (Claudette Colbert) in *The Palm Beach Story*, and Jean (Barbara Stanwyck) in *The Lady Eve*. See Rabin, Nathan. "Top Five Manic Pixie Dream Girls." Interview by Adam Kempenaar and Matty Robinson. Audio blog post. *Filmspotting*. Telegraph Road Productions, 19 Nov. 2010. Web. 7 Apr. 2014.

¹³ Bartyzel, Monika. "Why It's Time to Retire the Term 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl'" *The Week*. The Week Publications, 26 Apr. 2013. Web. 07 Apr. 2014.

¹⁴ Glazer, Eliot. "Take a Trip to 'the Home for [Cinema's] Manic Pixie Dream Girls'" *Vulture*. New York Media, 19 Apr. 2012. Web. 12 Apr. 2014.

¹⁵ Stoeffel, Kat. "The 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl' Has Died." *New York Magazine*. New York Media, 29 July 2013. Web. 12 Apr. 2014.

¹⁶ Barcella, Laura. "Is the 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl' Really Dead?" *XoJane*. Say Media, 31 July 2013. Web. 12 Apr. 2014.

¹⁷ Penny, Laurie. "I Was a Manic Pixie Dream Girl." *New Statesman*. New Statesman, 30 June 2013. Web. 15 Apr. 2014.

¹⁸ Perry, Matteson. "Uh, Honey, That's Not Your Line." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 27 July 2013. Web. 12 Apr. 2014.

¹⁹ Schwyzer, Hugo. "The Real-World Consequences of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl Cliché." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 09 July 2013. Web. 07 Apr. 2014.

²⁰ Bartyzel.

²¹ Perry provides one of the most comprehensive definitions of the modern iteration of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl in his *New York Times* piece, where he says: "The Manic Pixie Dream Girl is now an indie-film cliché, more a collection of quirks than a person, who exists to be the perfect love interest for the male protagonist. These weird (but beautiful) girls appreciate shy, sad, creative boys and teach them to enjoy life again though sex, love and various activities done in the rain. Though often perky, the Manic Pixie Dream Girl will be troubled as well. She straddles the narrow line between quirky and crazy, mysterious and strange, sexy and slutty; she is perfectly imperfect. And that imperfection is the key, because a Manic Pixie Dream Girl must be messed up enough to need saving, so the powerless guy can do something heroic in the third act."

²² For instance, I don't know how to examine whether or not a given character "exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures," as Rabin states in "Bataan Death March."

²³ Similarly, studies of whether audiences "want to commit grievous bodily harm against [a character] and [her] immediate family" are beyond the scope of this analysis. See Rabin, "Bataan Death March."

²⁴ Rabin, "Wild Things."

²⁵ When Sam confides in Largeman about her epilepsy and Claire tells Drew about the pain of being a "substitute person," we see that both these seminal Manic Pixie Dream Girls have emotions and problems unrelated to the protagonist.

²⁶ Grindon, Leger. *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy: Conventions, History, Controversies*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. 25. Print.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. 30.

²⁹ Shumway, David R. *Modern Love: Romance, Intimacy, and the Marriage Crisis*. New York: New York UP, 2003. 23. Print.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Grindon. 27.

³² This was a view that could only be expressed during these years before Breen began enforcing the Production Code. Paramount attempted to rerelease *Design for Living* three times after Breen took office and was denied a seal each time.

³³ Grindon 32.

³⁴ DiBattista, Maria. *Fast-talking Dames*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2001. 39. Print.

³⁵ Ibid. 40.

³⁶ Shumway 67.

³⁷ Grindon. 33.

³⁸ Ibid. 35-6.

³⁹ DiBattista 33. Stanley Cavell and Kathleen Rowe illustrate the ways men educate women, and vice versa, in their respective analyses of *It Happened One Night*. See Cavell, Stanley. *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981. 84-90. Print. See also Karlyn, Kathleen Rowe. *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*. Austin, TX: University of Texas, 1995. 131-2. Print.

⁴⁰ Cavell 82.

⁴¹ Denby, David. "A Fine Romance." *The New Yorker*. Conde Nast, 23 July 2007. Web. 7 Apr. 2014.

⁴² Susan fits my description of a Manic Pixie Dream Girl, but she was a controversial selection on Rabin's list (see "Wild Things"). See Greco and Pasley for arguments against her classification as a Manic Pixie Dream Girl.

⁴³ Denby.

⁴⁴ See Greco and Pasley.

⁴⁵ Grindon 39-40.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 46.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 47.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 49-50.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 48.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 49.

⁵¹ Ibid. 51.

⁵² Ibid. 55.

⁵³ Mast, Gerald. *The Comic Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979. Print.

⁵⁴ Further analysis of genre, however, is beyond the scope of this paper, especially as genre becomes a bit of a moot point in my second section, which examines a cross-generic group of films.

⁵⁵ I will go into detail about the influence of *The Graduate* on *(500) Days of Summer*.

⁵⁶ Kimmel, Daniel M. "Annie Hall." *I'll Have What She's Having: Behind the Scenes of the Great Romantic Comedies*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2008. 170. Print.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 166.

⁵⁸ See Rabin, "Wild Things" for a brief argument why Annie should be considered a Manic Pixie Dream Girl. For more detailed arguments against this classification, see Worsdale, James. "Annie Hall, Misunderstood Heroine." *Jezebel*. Gawker Media, 21 Nov. 2011. Web. 12 Apr. 2014. See also Kelly, Dominic. "Clip Joint: Manic Pixie Dream Girls." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 09 Jan. 2013. Web. 12 Apr. 2014.

⁵⁹ Grindon 58.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Krutnik, Frank. "Conforming Passions?" *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*. Ed. Steven Neale. London: British Film Institute, 2002. 134. Print.

⁶² Ibid. 135.

⁶³ See *Splash* (1984) for an example of one such female character and *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) for an example of one such male character.

⁶⁴ Kaveney, Roz. *Teen Dreams: Reading Teen Film from Heathers to Veronica Mars*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2006. 27. Print.

⁶⁵ Spicuzza, Mary. "Slacker Guys and Striver Girls." *SF Weekly*. SF Weekly, 14 Nov. 2007. Web. 12 Apr. 2014.

⁶⁶ Henig, Robin M. "What Is It About 20-Somethings?" *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 21 Aug. 2010. Web. 10 Apr. 2014.

⁶⁷ Denby.

⁶⁸ Krutnik 138-9.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 139.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Grindon 171-80.

⁷² Paul 127.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

⁷⁵ *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*

⁷⁶ *Garden State* was made on a \$2.5 million budget (the lowest of the six films) and distributed by Fox Searchlight. See "Garden State (2004)." *Box Office Mojo*. IMDb, n.d. Web. 12 Apr. 2014.

⁷⁷ *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* had a \$60 million budget (the largest of these six films) and was produced and distributed by Universal. See "Scott Pilgrim vs. the World (2010)." *Box Office Mojo*. IMDb, n.d. Web. 12 Apr. 2014.

⁷⁸ Zitzelman, Brian. "Q&A with (500) Days of Summer Director Marc Webb." *Examiner.com*. AXS Digital Group, 13 July 2009. Web. 12 Apr. 2014.

⁷⁹ Rabin, "Wild Things."

⁸⁰ Henig.

⁸¹ Spicuzza.

⁸² These 500 days begin the day Tom first meets Summer and end not on the day he and Summer break up, but on the day he meets Autumn.

⁸³ *Why 'Scott Pilgrim vs. The World' Is One of the Deepest Comic Book Films Ever*. Dir. David Chen. /Film. /Film, 16 Dec. 2013. Web. 12 Apr. 2014.

⁸⁴ O'Malley, Bryan L. *Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life*. Portland, Or.: Oni, 2004. Print.

⁸⁵ *Why 'Scott Pilgrim vs. The World.'*

⁸⁶ Cherrie, Chrysta. Rev. of *Ruby Sparks Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*. *AllMusic* n.d.: n. pag. *AllMusic*. All Media Network, 24 July 2012. Web. 12 Apr. 2014.

⁸⁷ Although this analysis focuses on Manic Pixie Dream Girls in Hollywood films, characters in French New Wave films, particularly those by Godard, are sometimes credited as a major influence on today's Manic Pixie Dream Girl in Hollywood films. See Kelly.

⁸⁸ Greco.

⁸⁹ Rabin, "Top Five Manic Pixie Dream Girls."