

QUIRKY CINEMA: WES ANDERSON (AND BEYOND)

Session Four

Manic Pixie Dream Girls

Department of Film & Audiovisual Culture,

Masaryk University

Dr. Richard Nowell

Today's Targeted Learning Outcomes

To develop a demonstrable understanding of:

- I. The characterization of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl.
- II. The socio-political phenomena this character-type mediates.
- III. The ways this character-type is used to address audiences of quirky films.

Quirky, Reception, and Controversy

As with most prominent trends, Quirky Cinema provoked considerable attention, initially from popular writers and later from academics

Because condemnation and hyperbole tend to generate greater interest and sales for the popular press, journalists often criticized the films

As is often the case, the academic criticism of the films largely echoed the key points of the popular condemnation, albeit with more theory

The main topics comprised a) sexist depictions of female love interests, b) obsession with bad dads, and c) a lack of sociopolitical engagement

However, as we will see, Quirky Cinema's gender politics, generational politics, and supposed apoliticality are far from being this clear cut

The Politics of Film Cultural-Politics

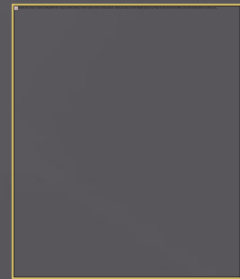
The most prominent criticism levelled at Quirky Cinema concerned its supposedly inadequate depiction of female leads

The capacity meta-critically to engage with the reception of representation in entertainment media is a high-risk endeavor

The leftist bent of both Anglophone humanities and elite film culture renders countervailing voices silent or reactionary

Some representational practices certainly are as dubious as the criticism designating them so, but this is not always the case

Popular and academic film writing is littered with examples of critical groupthink or misrepresentation that distorts film history



The Dynamics of Misrepresentation (of Representation)

Politically, it represents culture war shots, derived from the ideology, politics, and commercial opportunism of stakeholders

Practically, it involves fellow-traveler academics echoing the eloquent, prominent, yet critically naive positions of journalists

Rhetorically, it tends to involve four conceptual shortcomings that derive from genre criticism's tendency to erase difference

1. It tends to homogenize the content of films of a given type
2. It tends to claim these films advance similar positions thereon
3. It tends to assume a single coherent audience for this content
4. It tends to assume this audience processes content uniformly



Lucia Gloria Vazquez Rodriguez and The Manic Pixie Dream Girl

Vazquez-Rodriguez's is a rare academic paper to conceptualize and historicize the figure of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl in Quirky Cinema

Her work provides us with an opportunity to ask whether this vision of the character actually reflects depictions of MPDGs in individual films

1. What are the defining traits of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl?
2. How do such characters embody ideas about “Neoliberal/Postfeminist” femininity?
3. Why does this particular author find the Manic Pixie Dream Girl so troubling?

Free-Spirit. Available. Inspiring. Hip. Sexist.

Vazquez Rodriguez suggests the MPDG represents Quirky Cinema's most high-profile engagement with female indie-hipster identity

She argues the MPDG is sexist as it lacks narrative agency, existing only to enable the male lead to address his insecurities and desires

She also suggests that her characterization represents a sexist cultural phenomenon wherein feminism is coopted to serve male interests

The MPDG represents the postfeminist/neoliberal woman, encouraged to chose to internalize and self-regulate sexualized gender performance

Performative girlish-cuteness, sexual availability, and traditionally feminine interests cast her as an unthreatening sex toy for the male lead

Or Something a bit like this...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uIXdWK0pHmg>



But Does this Actually Reflect the Films?

V-R's conclusions are persuasive if we accept that such characterization is a) accurate, b) promoted by the films, c) aimed at male audiences

But *500 Days of Summer* condemns Summer as sociopathic, and Tom for idealizing, devaluing, and exploiting her gendered performance

This film therefore does not mobilize the character in the way V-R describes, and it certainly does not promote her as a figure of desire

Rather, the film ultimately articulates the very criticisms V-R aims at the MPDG, for the benefit of both male and female audiences

500 Days of Summer, and other Quirky films we have seen, suggests V-R's position encapsulates critical fantasy rather than cinematic reality

Screening I: *Ruby Sparks* (2012)

1. To what extent does this film mobilize the Manic Pixie Dream Girl character-type?
2. Do you feel this film uses the character to speak to male viewers?
3. Does this film have something critical to say about the Manic Pixie Dream Girl?



“Quirky, Messy Women Whose Problems Only Make Them Endearing Are Not Real”.

Instead of including V-R's vision of the MPDG, this film allegorizes the condemnation of this type of characterization

It satirizes the MPDG as a product of the quiet misogyny of male creative talent seeking a sexual fantasy they can control

This implicates male viewers in the disempowerment of the MPGD scenario, as she is intended for their consumption

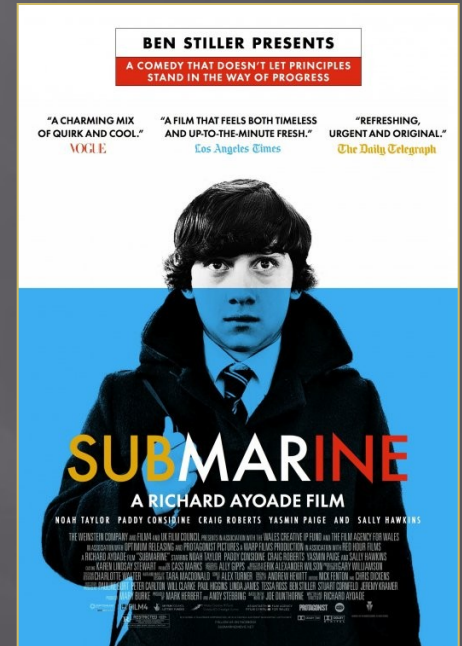
They are invited to confront this perspective though, as Calvin turns overtly domineering, controlling, and coercive

To undermine sympathy, Calvin is depicted in increasingly unappealing fashion; as neurotic, psychotic, and awkward



Screening II: *Submarine* (2011)

1. To what extent does this film mobilize the Manic Pixie Dream Girl character-type?
2. Do you feel this film use the character to speak to male viewers?
3. Does this film have something critical to say about the Manic Pixie Dream Girl?



“Sometimes I Wish There Was A Film Crew Following My Every Move”.

This film critiques the misogyny and selfishness said to characterize Quirky Cinema’s characterization of the MPDG

It initially presents Jordana as a “typical MPDG”; as a cute, girlish, playful, impulsive, sexually confident “indie chick”

She is presented as a catalyst enabling Oliver to overcome his insecurities, and homosocial/psychosexual rites of passage

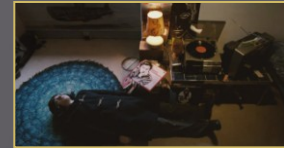
Yet, it suggests this view derives from the naïve, narcissistic perspective of an emotionally immature neurotic adolescent

This romantic cinephile misreads Jordana as a MPDG; this is really her coping mechanism against profound stress and pain



“Why Are You Such A Dick ... You Were Horrible to Me.”

The film’s “revisionist” perspective on the MPDG insulates the film from criticism for incorporating this character-type



It addresses audiences with concerns about the MPDG that this film shares their perspective, and that it was thus made for them



It also invites audiences who have adopted the “sexist” perspective on the MPDG they can learn from their mistakes



But the film does not fully implicate Oliver in this sexism: it portrays him as a sensitive young man working hard to cope



This portrayal is contrasted to other male characters, who are depicted as manipulative, weak, unsupportive, or misogynistic



Gender, Class, and the Imagined Audience

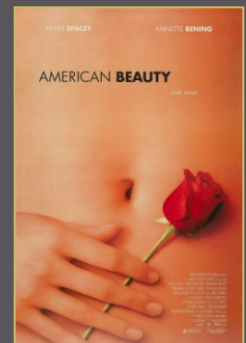
The assumption that, unless branded otherwise, formats are intended for males has distorted film criticism and film history

This spectator is often imagined in uncomplimentary terms; as an unsophisticated, insecure, resentful, misogynistic misfit

Dripping in elitism and sexism of its own, this caricature is summoned to support critical readings and render them urgent

This indie bro figure underwrote concerns of the moral decay caused by the hyper-ironic, amoral Smart Cinema of Tarantino

It partially “deIndiefizes” the films and their spectators, casting them as middlebrow intruders into sacred left-liberal territory



Quirky and Niche Audience Limitations

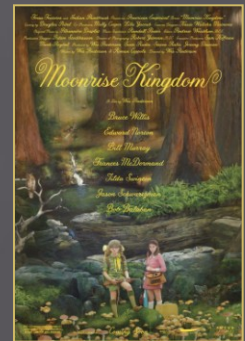
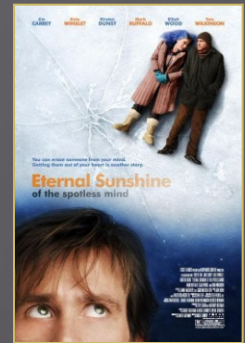
But formats are usually envisaged for a mixed-sex audience, or don't make it to the screen due to commercial limitations

This is particularly true of formats with limited appeal due to being built around material that alienates some audiences

Quirky Cinema is one such case given it comprises elite-branded products aimed at the youth and indie markets

Borrowings from art cinema, and elitist indie-branding, risk alienating the populist tastes of most casual movie-watchers

Similarly, its youth-orientation risks alienating children and older audiences, and therefore the lucrative family audience



Quirky and Female Audiences

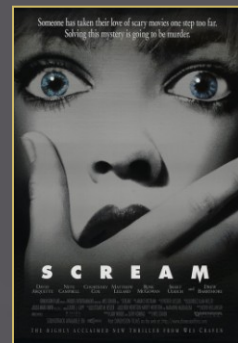
As a youth-leaning indie product, Quirky films unsurprisingly respond to developments and traditions in these market niches

To maximize returns, Hollywood has generally handled youth-market films that are appealing and marketable to both sexes

Quirky coincided with a period when youth-oriented filmed media was assembled and branded as heavily female-leaning

Indie was a historically mixed-sex enterprise, albeit one whose mid-90s iterations were criticized for overlooking females

So, for commercial and public relations reasons, indie-branded fare including Quirky was typically made for both sexes



Female Audiences and Quirky Gender Politics

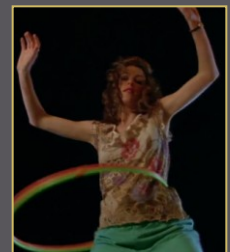
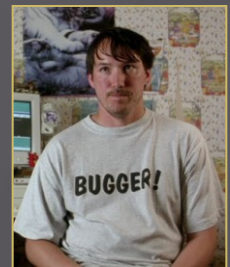
Recognizing its address to female as well as male viewers casts a different light on Quirky Cinema's gender politics

This reminds us that the films' economic prospects also hinge on their securing and maintaining the support of female consumers

We should recall that the films often somewhat ironically depict juvenile male characters embarking on absurd or doomed quests

We should also recall that the films usually picture women and girls better; as more grounded, smarter, and emotionally mature

And they often depict female leads in ways that counter charges of idealization, subordination, and sexism aimed at the MPDG



In Sum

The supposed presence of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl character remains one of Quirky Cinema's most enduring and controversial tropes

Several stakeholders condemned this character-type as misogynistic claiming she exists narratively to serve the needs of the male lead

V-R develops this critique, arguing the MPDG exemplifies cultural tendencies of wrapping female disempowerment in feminist rhetoric

Such positions tend to homogenize representational practices, assume sincere depictions, and that such material is pitched to insecure men

In reality, Quirky films rarely featured such characters, usually critiquing the MPDG, ironizing gender relations, and addressing both sexes

Next Time...

The MPDG is not the only character-type said to dominate Quirky, a second all together different figure is said to loom large over the format

Topic: Father Figures

Readings: Robe, 101–120.

Home Screenings: *Big Fish* (2003)
A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood (2019)

[Preparatory Questions on MS TEAMS and in the Syllabus]

Meeting: Thursday 24 November