

Fantasy and Fallacy: Unraveling the Manic Pixie Dream Girl Trope in the 'Daisy Trio' by

Marc Jacobs Audio Visual Advert

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‘Daisy Trio,’ a 2015 perfume commercial by Marc Jacobs, seems empowering and feminist on the surface, but through using the Manic Pixie Dream Girl Trope (MPDG) as a lens, it is evident how the advert perpetuates the objectification and commodification of women. To use the trope as an effective tool, a general understanding of the MPDG’s cultural context and evolution is required. I will examine the academic conversation around the trope and Laura Mulvey’s writing on the male gaze, which is canonical to understanding the MPDG. Finally I will transition into my own investigation of the advertisement using the trope and Mulvey’s work as a site for analysis.

The MPDG is classically a white, heterosexual, conventionally attractive teenage girl or young woman that is typically care-free and rebellious. She completely exists to serve the male’s development. Once she has served her narrative purpose, she will then disappear into the background of the male protagonist’s story, never to be seen or heard from again. Classic MPDG movies include *Elizabethtown*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, and *500 Days of Summer*. The MPDG has no tangible dimension, and is always seen firstly as an object of desire for the man, with emphasis on her beauty. The typical MPDG fashion enforces this idea as it calls back to the 1950s housewife aesthetic, a time where women were still largely in the domestic sphere.¹ The trope was popularized by film critic Nathan Rabin in 2007 after seeing the 2005 film *Elizabethtown*. He stated in his review that the MPDG "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."² The phrase’s official establishment by Rabin in 2007

¹ Lucía Gloria Vázquez Rodríguez, "(500) Days of Postfeminism: A Multidisciplinary Analysis of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl Stereotype in Its Contexts," *Prisma Social*, suppl. no. especial 2: Investigación en Comunicación Audiovisual y Estudios de Género (September 2017): 169.

² Nathan Rabin, "The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: *Elizabethtown*," *The A.V. Club*, January 25, 2007, <https://www.avclub.com/the-bataan-death-march-of-whimsy-case-file-1-elizabet-1798210595>.

prompted a public and diverse discourse on its influence and persistence in literature, cinema, and social media.

Cultural theorists like Lucía Gloria Vázquez Rodríguez and academics like Jennifer Gouck contribute to the discourse by exploring how the MPDG persists and evolves across young adult fiction and independent films. Jennifer Gouck, who examines how the MPDG characters impact development in youth culture through YA literature, like John Green's *Looking for Alaska*. She emphasizes that the trope "is a descendant of reductive imaginings of femininity that have plagued popular thinking for hundreds of years," highlighting its deep roots in cultural stereotypes.³ Lucía Gloria Vázquez Rodríguez extends Gouck's analysis to the realm of postfeminism through independent films like *500 Days of Summer* and follows the trope into contemporary culture like TikTok. She observes that the MPDG "tends to dye her hair in eccentric colors, wear vintage dresses, listen to indie music and engage in spontaneous carpe diem behavior." Although this may seem empowering, it ultimately confines female characters to superficial qualities rather than fully developed personalities.⁴

Spanish professor, Claire T. Solomon, analyzed the trope in *Anarcho-Feminist Melodrama and the Manic Pixie Dream Girl*, extending Gouck's and Rodríguez's analysis further by examining how the MPDG trope repurposes and simplifies the complex feminist characters found in early 20th-century experimental works, using Salvadora Medina Onrubia's

³ Jennifer Gouck, "The Problematic (Im)Persistence of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl in Popular Culture and YA Fiction," *Women's Studies* 52, no. 5 (2023): 3, doi:10.1080/00497878.2023.2216933.

⁴ Lucía Gloria Vázquez Rodríguez, "(500) Days of Postfeminism: A Multidisciplinary Analysis of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl Stereotype in Its Contexts," *Prisma Social*, suppl. no. especial 2: Investigación en Comunicación Audiovisual y Estudios de Género (September 2017): 169, <https://login.proxy048.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/500-days-postfeminism-multidisciplinary-analysis/docview/1968339746/se-2>.

play "Las Descentradas" from 1929 as a key example. Solomon argues that this trope acts like a "time machine," removing characters from their original, politically charged contexts—where they might have been written to challenge societal norms or to express radical feminist views. Instead they are seen as merely two dimensional.⁵ These scholarly perspectives create a more well rounded understanding of the MPDG trope not just as a narrative device but as a dynamic part of an ongoing debate about gender representation. In this essay I will extend the conversation around the MPDG beyond cinema, plays, and literature into the realm of visual advertisements, specifically 'Daisy Trio' by Marc Jacobs. I will use Laura Mulvey's seminal writing on the male gaze to show how the MPDG trope is key to understanding the objectification of young women in seemingly empowering media.

Before the MPDG trope was conceived by Rabin, there was feminist scholar Laura Mulvey's canonical work, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" published in 1975. Mulvey was the first to coin the term 'male gaze,' which significantly informs the analysis of the MPDG trope. She defines the male gaze as a way of looking that empowers the male viewer and objectifies the female subject within the text, stating that "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly."⁶ Mulvey explains how the gaze consists of three perspectives: the camera as the male gaze, the male character's gaze, and the spectators gaze, which refers to the assumption that the audience, irrespective of their actual gender, is invited to adopt a masculine viewpoint.⁷

⁵ Solomon, Claire T. "Anarcho-Feminist Melodrama and the Manic Pixie Dream Girl." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 19.1 (2017): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2896>>

⁶ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 19.

⁷ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 21.

Freudian theory is also essential to understanding her argument, particularly looking at scopophilia (the pleasure in looking) as part of the process of objectification. Videography and cinema satisfy “scopophilic instincts” by allowing viewers to take other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling gaze. She says that “in particular the constitution of the ego, it continues to exist as the erotic basis for pleasure in looking at another person as an object.”⁸ This shows how the pleasure in using others as objects is amplified because of the way films structure women as the object of male gaze and fantasy. This provides a critical framework for understanding how the MPDG upholds patriarchal views by limiting female characters to objects and facilitation for a male protagonist’s storyline. I would argue that Mulvey’s points on the male gaze extends to ‘Daisy Trio,’ making her work crucial for untangling how feminist advertisements are undercut by the objectification of the models being filmed.

The choice to analyze ‘Daisy Trio’ by Marc Jacobs is motivated by several factors that elevate its relevance beyond that of a random perfume commercial. Marc Jacobs is a globally recognized brand known for its significant impact on fashion and culture, which ensures the advertisement reaches and influences a wide demographic. Moreover, the commercial was directed by Sofia Coppola, an Academy Award-winning director whose distinctive style and thematic focus often explore the nuances of female identity—*Priscilla*, *The Virgin Suicides*, and *Lost in Translation*. Coppola’s general messaging and work heavily aligns with the characteristics of the MPDG, making the use of the trope an informative lens to view this commercial through. These elements combined—the prestige of the brand, the high profile of the director, and the commercial's widespread visibility and potential cultural impact—make it a significant example for examining how contemporary media perpetuates traditional gender roles.

⁸ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Screen 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 17.

‘Daisy Trio’ is a thirty second commercial released in 2015 and targeted at teens and young women. The advert has over a million views on YouTube, while the print advertisements were put in lifestyle publications such as Cosmopolitan. It stars models Malaika Firth, Ondria Hardin, Antonia Wesseloh and Sophia Ahrens. Marc Jacobs’s ‘Daisy’ brand launched in 2007 and was an immediate success and followed up by many other variations of the perfume. The Marc Jacobs Fragrances official website states that “the effortless charm and youthful elegance of Marc Jacobs Daisy transports you to a place that is optimistic, beautiful and pure.”⁹ The advert opens with a close-up shot of petals being pulled from a daisy. The camera then cuts to a wide shot of the characters whose body language resembles young children as they ‘play’ in a meadow setting. Coppola also uses a lens flare and bright, warm lighting. The narrative cuts between long shots of the girls doing leisurely activities, such as reading by a stream, lying in a hammock and making daisy chains.¹⁰ They are consistently smiling and glowing with joy in each other's presence. These qualities communicate a carefree, simple and light atmosphere to viewers.

The advert heavily reinforces the MPDG trope. The youthful, ethereal aesthetics like the meadow, the ethereal lens flare, and the stereotypically feminine activities convey a sense of carefree innocence and whimsical charm. These are hallmark traits of the MPDG, who often exist in a seemingly timeless and idealized world. Innocent Imagery is also used when the girls pull petals from a daisy, a nostalgic activity associated with young love, aligns with the MPDG’s role in evoking a sense of lost innocence and wonder. It taps into a pure and child-like aspect of the characters portrayed. The portrayal of the models emphasizes simplicity and a light-hearted

⁹ Marc Jacobs. "Daisy." Marc Jacobs Fragrances. Accessed [4/8/24].
<https://www.marcjacobsfragrances.com/en-us/fragrance/perfume/daisy>.

¹⁰ "Daisy Trio by Marc Jacobs" YouTube video, 0:14, published on Nov. 25, 2014, accessed on April 8, 2024,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaesB-labIA>.

demeanor. Their body language and activities suggest a detachment from typical adult responsibilities and concerns, which is a trait often seen in MPDG characters who are unburdened by life's complexities. The advert also reinforces the idealized image of beauty since all the models are slim and flawless, but also barefaced.

The fact that the perfume is marketed to women complicates the traditional roles of viewer and subject in the context of Mulvey's male gaze. While Mulvey's original theory posits men as the viewers and women as the subjects, in this scenario, women are positioned as both. They are encouraged to view themselves as objects of desire (through the lens of the male gaze) and to consume products that enhance their ability to perform that role. In Mulvey's scholarship, this aligns with the first perspective of her male gaze theory—the camera as the male gaze. This dual positioning reinforces self-objectification, where women take active roles in objectifying themselves based on standards that are not self-defined but are inherited from a male-dominated culture. This taps into a concept called the internalized male gaze—where women begin to view themselves through the lens traditionally meant to appeal to men. This internalization encourages women to aspire to be the MPDG not for their own enjoyment or empowerment but as a way to fulfill societal expectations of desirability that are dictated by patriarchal standards. Women, therefore, are not just the target audience and viewers but also the consumers who are buying into and perpetuating a fantasy that aligns with a male-centric narrative of what women should be: carefree, supportive, and ultimately focused on enhancing the lives of others (particularly men) rather than pursuing their own autonomy.

The advert is unique in the fact that it adapts the elements of the MPDG into a marketing context where the aim is to evoke an emotional response rather than tell a personal or narrative story. This blurs the lines between character and product marketing, and it becomes unclear

whether the perfume or the girls portrayed are being sold. This advertising highlights the commodification of female desires. It sells more than just a fragrance; it sells an identity and a lifestyle, particularly the MPDG lifestyle, that is deemed attractive, and more importantly deemed possible through the purchase of the Daisy perfume. The trope, which was previously used for only a narrative purpose in cinema, literature, and plays, is now wielded as a tool for profit in the advertising industry.

This also subverts Coppola's typical role as a director, as she now has to assume the role of a saleswoman along with a storyteller. Her direction of the commercial can be seen as both a continuation of her exploration of feminine aesthetics and a contradiction of her usually more complex portrayal of female characters that are celebrated in *The Virgin Suicides* and *Priscilla*. This shows how even filmmakers who are celebrated for their thoughtful depiction of women can inadvertently contribute to perpetuating stereotypes when adapting their style to commercial ends. Even if this was not Coppola's intention, it becomes increasingly difficult to paint fleshed out characters when the ultimate goal of the advertisement is to sell a product. In this context, characters are less individuals with their own stories and more vehicles to enhance the product's appeal in a thirty second time frame.

The sociological impact of using such stereotypes in mass media, especially in advertising, extends beyond the immediate consumerist context. Advertisements like 'Daisy Trio' contribute to a cultural narrative that shapes societal expectations about gender roles, identity, and autonomy. They influence how young women perceive themselves and their place in the world, often encouraging them to internalize a male-gaze-driven perspective of their worth being tied to their desirability. This internalization can hinder personal and professional growth

by prioritizing external validation over self-driven aspirations.¹¹ The portrayal of femininity in such a constrained and stereotypical manner can affect both men and women's understanding of gender dynamics. It reinforces the notion that women's complexities can be adequately captured through surface-level characteristics, which can stymie efforts towards achieving true gender equality by perpetuating a shallow understanding of what empowerment looks like.¹²

This kind of media portrayal can impede the feminist movement's goals by selling an attractive but ultimately hollow version of empowerment. This not only misleads potential allies who might think superficial changes are sufficient but also discourages deeper engagement with feminist issues among those who see through the veneer of such campaigns. By critically examining how the MPDG trope is employed in media like the 'Daisy Trio' commercial, we can better understand the mechanisms through which sexism and consumerism interlock. Analyzing this trope in advertising helps critique broader media practices. It illustrates how media creators, including advertisers, recycle and perpetuate outdated gender roles and dynamics because they are easily consumable and widely accepted. This can stifle more innovative and diverse representations of women in media, perpetuating a cycle where only the most simplistic and stereotypical portrayals receive visibility and commercial success.

Recognizing and challenging these portrayals in popular culture is crucial for moving towards a society where media and advertisements reflect and promote a more authentic, nuanced, and authentically empowering depiction of women. This endeavor is not just about improving representation but is also about fostering a culture that values women as complete individuals with their own stories, ambitions, and rights.

¹¹ Rosalind Coward, *Female Desires: How They Are Sought, Bought, and Packaged* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 80.

¹² Hazel G. Warlaumont, "Visual Grammars of Gender: The Gaze and Psychoanalytic Theory in Advertisements," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (January 1993): 37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/019685999301700102>

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