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(500) DAYS OF POSTFEMINISM: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS OF THE *MANIC PIXIE DREAM GIRL* STEREOTYPE IN ITS CONTEXTS

(500) DÍAS DE POSTFEMINISMO: UN
ANÁLISIS MULTIDISCIPLINAR DEL
ESTEREOTIPO DE LA *MANIC PIXIE DREAM
GIRL* EN SUS CONTEXTOS

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RESUMEN

En 2007, tras haber visto el film *Elizabethtown* (2005), el crítico cinematográfico Nathan Rabin acuñó el término *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* para describir el nacimiento de un tipo de protagonistas femeninas caracterizadas por su joie de vivre y superficialidad, criaturas solamente existentes en la imaginación febril de sensibles guionistas-directores, cuyo único cometido es enseñar a estos hombres solitarios a abrazar la vida en sus infinitos misterios y aventuras (2007). Desde entonces, a pesar de que este tipo de protagonistas se han multiplicado, y el término ha sido absorbido por la cultura popular, no se ha realizado un solo análisis académico de dicho estereotipo y su ideología de género, quizás debido a la pátina de credibilidad ideológica otorgada por el cine independiente (indie) en el que se enmarca. Sin embargo, la *Manic Pixie Dream Girl*, con su representación nostálgica de femineidad añorada y «mona» (Ngai, 2012), su vulnerabilidad, su libertad sexual neoliberal, y, sobre todo, su ser-para-el-Otro, quizás constituya la más potente encarnación de las ideologías postfeministas dentro del cine independiente. Asimismo, su filosofía *carpe diem* y su estética *hipster* hablan de la idiosincrasia específica de nuestra era, caracterizada, según Slavoj Žižek (1994), por un mandato social hacia el disfrute hedonista.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Postfeminismo; *Manic Pixie Dream Girl*; (500) *Días Juntos*; Zooey Deschanel; cine indie; femineidad.

ABSTRACT

In 2007, after watching *Elizabethtown* (2005), film critic Nathan Rabin coined the term *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* in order to describe a nascent filmic female trope as «that bubbly, shallow cinematic creature that 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» (2007). Since then, the concept acquired enormous widespread cultural currency, and the type of female characters responding to the stereotype multiplied, although not a single thorough scrutiny of its gender values has been undertaken from the Academia, perhaps due to the fact that independent («indie») productions – where most of these characters are found – provide their films with a certain patina of ideological credibility. However, with her performance of traditional cute (Ngai, 2012), girlish femininity, her vulnerability, her neoliberal sexual freedom, and, above all, her being-for-the-Other, the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* perhaps constitutes the most powerful embodiment of postfeminist ideologies within independent cinema. In addition, her *carpe diem* philosophy and her «hipster» aesthetics speak directly to the idiosyncrasy of our time, characterized, as Slavoj Žižek (1994) explains, by a social injunction to «Enjoy!».

KEYWORDS

Postfeminism; *Manic Pixie Dream Girl*; (500) *Days of Summer*; Zooey Deschanel; indie cinema; femininity.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2005, after watching Kirsten Dunst's performance in *Elizabethtown* (2005), film critic Nathan Rabin coined the term *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* in order to describe a nascent filmic female trope as «that bubbly, shallow cinematic creature that 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» (2007). Since then, the concept of the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* acquired enormous widespread cultural currency, getting incorporated in the discourse of film criticism, specialized magazines, and even popular culture. Surprisingly enough, although more and more female characters conformed to the stereotype named by Rabin, not a single thorough scrutiny of this cinematic trope and its conflicting relationship with postfeminist ideologies has been undertaken from the Academy, nor a comprehensive analysis of gender stereotyping in independent cinema has been published. Such lack of interest can only be explained by the fact that independent films provide their gender, racial or class values with a certain patina of alternative credibility, rendering their hidden ideological messages less suspicious in the eyes of scholars than the more obviously sexist, racist or classist messages of Hollywood productions.

The *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* (MPDG from now on) became increasingly popular during the early 2000s, specifically within the context of American independent productions tailored for audiences who were looking for cultural products slightly less formulaic than the average Hollywood production. Film critics such as Rabin include in the list of *Manic Pixie Dream Girls* memorable characters such as Natalie Portman's Sam in *Garden State* (2004), Kate Winslet's Clementine in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), Kate Hudson's Penny Lane in *Almost Famous* (2000), Zoe Kazam's *Ruby Sparks* (2012), and generally speaking any role played by the MPDG par excellence, Zooey Deschanel, but, particularly, her performance in Marc Webber's *(500) Days of Summer* (2009). They are characterized as free-spirited, spontaneous and full of life, and their sole dramatic and narrative purpose in the films is to inspire the creativity and passion of the fragile, insecure male protagonists, thus perpetuating the myth of women as muses and caregivers rather than independent entities with a life, dreams and ambitions of their own. In order for the male protagonist to regain a sense of masculinity and reassert their ego, they must also be imperfect and «messed up enough to need saving, so the powerless guy can do something heroic in the third act» (Matteson, 2013).

From an iconographic perspective, the MPDG tends to dye her hair on eccentric colors, wear vintage dresses, listen to indie music and engage on spontaneous *carpe diem* behavior that can range from socially inappropriate – such as jumping into a swimming pool in the midst of a formal party (*Ruby Sparks*) – to outright dangerous (Clementine's casual alcoholism in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*). Furthermore, the MPDG often lacks any depth and aspirations of her own, acting more as a plot device rather than a fully fles-

hed character, and being defined in terms of these superficial personality markers such as music taste or thrift-shop clothing; she is therefore «largely defined by secondary status and lack of an inner life» (Bowman et al., 2008). As Claire Johnston explains (1975, p. 23), Hollywood – and, in this case, Indiewood – utilizes basic iconography to build its mythical female stereotypes both through visual and stylistic motifs attached to genre conventions (think of polka dot dresses and indie soundtracks), so it is not a struggle to deconstruct the ideological values attached to these characters. By immediately marking the female characters from Indiewood rom-coms as MPDG through clothing and superficial behavior, film directors are already predisposing the viewer to make sense of these characters through a set of generalities and typifications, telling them what to expect not only from the characters themselves, but also from the film as a whole in terms of its narrative and stylistic conventions.

Although subjecting the MPDG trope to thorough scholarly scrutiny is indeed relevant in terms of unpacking the gender ideology it perpetuates, it is also important to acknowledge the fact that the MPDG label has become an easy catch-all for unusual, quirky women in film, reducing very different female characters down to a type and homogenizing any notion of difference, as Zoe Kazan, writer and actress in *Ruby Sparks* points out (Patti Greco, 2012). When characters like Katharine Hepburn's in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) and Diane Keaton's in *Annie Hall* (1977) were included on a list of famous MPDG it became quite clear that the concept had been stretched a bit too far. Indeed, the term has been contested by many film critics, including Rabin himself (2014), who almost ten years after coining the term MPDG apologized for it, contending that the trope «is a fundamentally sexist one, since it makes women seem less like autonomous, independent entities than appealing props to help mopey, sad white men self-actualize.» However, the importance of analyzing the MPDG can hardly be contested, for there is indeed an underlying common pattern in the construction of the female protagonist of many indie rom-coms produced during the 2000s insofar as their quirky liveliness is only exploited in order to help develop their male counterparts.

Before taking the analysis of the MPDG any further, it is important to pay attention to the specific connotations associated with each of the terms that conform the label. Surprisingly, the Oxford Dictionary includes a definition of a MPDG as «a type of female character depicted as vivacious and appealingly quirky, whose main purpose within the narrative is to inspire a greater appreciation for life in a male protagonist» (2016). The inclusion of the rather vague adjective «quirky» on the definition of a MPDG will have important consequences for my analysis, since the quirky sensibility was identified in 2010 by James MacDowell as a particularly fruitful aesthetic trend in independent (indie) cinema, an aesthetic trend that

shares some of its defining features with the construction of manic-pixie-like characters, as will be shown in epigraph 4.1.

On its turn, *Manic* is broadly defined in psychiatry as "affected with mania;" as well as «showing wild, apparently deranged, excitement and energy,»¹⁰ both definitions quite relevant for the description of the MPDG and her particular brand of liveliness – which in many cases hides deeper psychological troubles, such as Clementine's lack of self-esteem or Sam's epilepsy in *Garden State*. However, characterizing them as "manic" seems to imply a certain level of mental illness, an association which recalls historical connections between femininity and mental illnesses like that of hysteria. *Pixie* is defined as «a supernatural being in folklore and children's stories, typically portrayed as small and human-like in form, with pointed ears and a pointed hat.» The word carries associations with magic, cuteness – a word whose implications with vulnerability and domination will be analyzed in due course – and fantasy. Of the various definitions that the Oxford dictionary offers of *dream*, three are particularly relevant to the discussion the MPDG as an unrealistic idealization of the perfect woman: «A cherished aspiration, ambition, or ideal;» «an unrealistic or self-deluding fantasy;» and «a person or thing perceived as wonderful or perfect.» This dreamlike quality of the MPDG as something coming from the mind of a lonely man (or rather, scriptwriter) instead of an actual human being is further exemplified by *Ruby Sparks*, who is literally dreamed – and then written – into life by novelist Calvin Weir-Fields on a modern remake of the Pygmalion Myth. Last but not least, *girl* is defined as: «a female child from birth to adulthood;» «a young or relatively young woman;» and «a person's girlfriend.» The associations of the world girl with femininity, vulnerability and childishness are most important when considering that said values are specifically celebrated by postfeminist culture, as I will argue.

In several ways, the MPDG acts as a contemporary adaptation of a prevalent trope that has been termed «the nurturing woman» or «the muse» (even *Ruby Sparks'* surname suggests the idea of divine inspiration), a stereotype that devised women as mere tools whose goal was to make men's lives better that has had many variations throughout History, such as the *madcap heiresses* of the screwball comedies of the thirties, or the *girl next door* that played the counterpart of the *femme fatale* in film noir. The madcap heiress shared some of the attributes of the 1920s flapper, her cinematic predecessors; namely, as Tina Olsin Lent explains, «her personality and behavior, her participation in the paid labor force, and her more egalitarian relationship with men,» (1995, p.314) although, unlike the flapper, her sexuality is less overt, «cute, rather than fast,» (Mitchell, 1995, p. 183) characteristics that can all be easily applied to the unthreatening sex-appeal of the MPDG as well. Therefore, the MPDG comes from a historical lineage of quirky, lively cinematic women that coax their brooding male partners into enjoying life at its fullest, including unforgettable characters such as Katherine Hepburn's in *Bringing up baby* (1938), or Audrey Hepburn's Holly

Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961). However, the MPDG differs from her predecessors insofar as her personality is never fully developed – for example, although *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is indeed told from the perspective of the male writer, it is Holly's life, her dreams and her insecurities what are privileged in the narrative. Although in some ways the madcap heiress is configured as a sort of caricature, the world of screwball comedies she occupies is on itself a simplified, superficial universe inhabited by parodic characters, so her lack of depth does not become as apparent as that of the MPDG.

In addition, the early 2000s witnessed an explosion of this type of intense female characters unprecedented before, which was propitiated by some contextual factors that speak directly to the idiosyncrasy of our specific time – namely, the intersection of postfeminist discourses with a certain postmodern ethos of intensity that celebrates hedonism as a lifestyle, along with the popularization of *hipsterism* and indie films, factors that will be explained in depth throughout this article. Subjecting this widespread stereotype to thorough scrutiny is crucial for a simple reason: because films are bearers of ideology, the way they construct gender and produce role models will have straight consequences on how young women negotiate their place in society and perform their femininity, directly influencing the ways they dress, speak, behave and even dye their hair – after all, it is not in vain that polka dot dresses and blue hair became popular at the same time these films were released. Although films, as representational systems portray a «way of seeing» the social reality that may appear to be natural, they are indeed the product of the specific power structures of patriarchy, which is why we should always adopt a certain hermeneutics of suspicion when decoding the (always already gendered) meanings they carry (Thornham, 1999, p. 10).

Films both reflect and misrepresent the social structure of reality, mostly according to the fantasies and fears of predominantly male scriptwriters and directors, creating stereotypes that excite the imagination of the male spectator while limiting the social aspirations of women and sanctioning particular forms of behavior, not necessarily encouraging independence, intelligence or ambition. Crucially, as Simone de Beauvoir (1949) pointed out more than fifty years ago, Woman is always determined and differentiated in relation to man, and not for what she is for herself (p. 29), an ideology that is indeed perpetuated through the MPDG myth – for, of course, it is absolutely fine to be whimsical, play the ukulele, and dance in the rain, as long as you do it for yourself and not in order to enchant a man. As Laurie Penny writes for *The Newstestman* (2013), this magical girl stereotype encourages women «to be the supporting actress in somebody else's story,» to help men change and discover wonders rather than constructing a life of their own – because, among other things, the MPDG has eccentricities instead of a personality, being permitted no interiority. However, the problem of adopting this prefabricated personality in the real world is that women can never live up to this fantasy men have created, since they are real humans with

problems, insecurities, and nine-to-five jobs, not dreamlike creatures existing solely in order to add sparkle to lonely, geeky men's lives – nor should they aspire to be.

2. RESEARCH GOALS

While there has been a significant amount of scholarship on the topic of postfeminism within Hollywood films, very few academic works have dealt with the ways independent productions adapt the defining features of postfeminism to create stories that appeal to their specific audiences, by disguising its already familiar values with «an otherwise appealing individual, product, or narrative» (Schreiber, 2014, p. 3). That is the blind spot this article will endeavor to fill by paying particular attention at the ways the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* as a specific form of contemporary femininity embodies some of the contradictions of postfeminism, in a manner that has been tailored to cater for the less mainstream tastes of indie film audiences, disguising, as it were, an old familiar message with a new, more appealing costume. Which contextual factors propitiate the proliferation of this specific stereotype during the early 2000s? In which ways – style, music, costume – do indie films render the values of postfeminist ideologies attractive to their specific (*hipster*) audiences? How does the MPDG negotiate the double entanglement (McRobbie, 2007) of postfeminism with feminist discourses? What psychoanalytical demands on the part of the male does the MPDG respond to? These are the main questions that my article will answer.

3. METHODOLOGY

The variety of sociological and cultural factors surrounding the construction and circulation of the MPDG has prompted me to incorporate a range of different perspectives into its analysis, including contextual approaches – both in terms of industry (indie films) and audiences; stylistic approaches, which pay particular attention to elements of quirky sensibility (MacDowell, 2010); a gender studies perspective, which focuses on the particular construction of (post)femininity the MPDG embodies and the kind of values it perpetuates with particular emphasis on textual analysis and semiotics; and last but not least, a psychoanalytical approach that hopefully will bring some light into the kind of lacks and desires the MPDG is supposed to fill with regards to the subjectivity of the male protagonist. Textual analysis will also be essential, as I will be constantly quoting examples from three main films – *(500) Days of Summer*, *Ruby Sparks*, and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, – along with references to other MPDG productions such as *Garden State* or *Elizabethtown*. Such multidisciplinary approach, although perhaps unusual – particularly in the combination of psychoanalysis with more sociocultural tools – will help me decode the specific ideology

at play in the construction of what has become the most popular female stereotype in indie cinema: the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl*.

In addressing my three main research questions, I have divided my article in three different epigraphs. The first one will look at the specific contextual sociocultural factors that explain the popularity of the MPDG in the past ten years – the rise of independent filmmaking, the popularization of the figure of the *hipster*, issues of genre and style (paying particular attention to MacDowell's "quirky" sensibility), and the contemporary revalorization of intensity and experience-seeking as opposed to normalcy and monotony. My second epigraph will then answer the question of how the MPDG embodies postfeminist ideologies in their double entanglement with feminism (McRobbie 2007), focusing specifically on the kinds of femininity this stereotype sanctions – a young, cute, uberfeminine sort of femininity that is on its turn allowed a certain degree of sexual freedom and individual agency. The last epigraph will then analyze the psychoanalytical demands this kind of idealization of Woman comes to fill for the alienated, anxious and insecure postfeminist, postmodern Man.

4. CONTENT

4.1. The Contexts of the MPDG: Industry, Audiences, Genre, and Style

Before undertaking a further exploration of the MPDG stereotype it is important to explain the cinematic context in which these characters tend to appear, partly because the industrial characteristics of a film determine its implied audience (and vice versa). In this sense, most MPDG narratives appear in the context of Indiewood or indie productions, in films that operate at a certain «distance from the mainstream in all three respects (economic, aesthetic and ideological),» and whose relationship with Hollywood is somehow symbiotic since they offer «a distinctive touch within more conventional frameworks» (King, 2005, p. 2). These films are designed for audiences that seek to (culturally) distinguish themselves from the despised mainstream, exploiting a love for the «hip» and the «cool» in line with a certain commodification of cultural products that has occurred within late capitalism – this of course explains the cultural appeal indie and Indiewood productions have within the subcultural group that has come to be known as the «*hipsters*.»

Although there are almost as many definitions and methodological approaches to indie cinema as there are authors writing about it, it is perhaps the spirit/aesthetic approach which has become most prevalent nowadays, partly due to the fact that the economic/industrial perspective ceased to make sense since after the 1990s most indie films are produced by the specialty divisions of the major studios, such as Fox Searchlight (producer of both *(500) Days of Summer* and *Ruby Sparks*) or Focus Features (producer of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*), and their audiences, budgets and marketing costs have risen exponentially (Tzioumakis, 2011, p. 34). This approach looks at issues of style, narrative and generic

conventions and cinematography in order to determine whether a film qualifies for the label «indie,» rather than focusing solely on whether it was produced outside the studio system. An emphasis on certain modes of realism, some formal experimentation in line with European art cinema, a stronger authorial voice, and a rejection of mainstream culture are some of the features often associated with indie cinema, a category that brings to mind titles like *sex, lies, and videotape* (Steven Soderbergh, 1989) – one of the first indies to become commercially successful, – *Pulp Fiction* (1994), or any film by Todd Solondz or Richard Linklater.

However, it is within the more specific context of Indiewood that we find most of the films featuring MPDGs. In 2010, Geoff King advanced a definition of Indiewood as «an area in which Hollywood and the independent sector merge or overlap,» including films that «offer an attractive blend of creativity and commerce» (p. 87-88) by combining more mainstream features (emotional engagement, narrative plots, use of stars and happy endings) with elements coming from more radical indie or art productions (narrative shifts, intertextual play, quirky characters or a distinctive visual style such as Wes Anderson's). Think, for instance, of the temporal distortions and narrative interplay of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, the intertextual film references of *(500) Days of Summer*, or the quirky protagonists of *Ruby Sparks*. While the notion of being «off-beat» is essential for the marketing of Indiewood productions – for example, *Little Miss Sunshine's* commercial slogan was «Everybody just pretend to be normal», – Indiewood productions still fall under the safe realm of dominant ideology, being closer in form and content to the Hollywood mainstream than to more radical avant-garde productions. In this sense, the idea of Indiewood as wholly distinct to Hollywood is illusory, becoming instead a sort of brand which assists in the identification of niche markets and «in the classification of consumers . . . so that no one can escape» (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944, p. 97), acting as a taste culture which offers its implied audience (the *hipsters*) a sense of distinction: as Michael Z. Newman contends (2009), indie «asserts its privilege by opposing itself to the mainstream» (p. 24)...however illusory that opposition may be.

Indie films are particularly tailored for a certain portion of the audience, a growing subculture that has come to be known as the *hipsters* (Zeynep & Thompson, 2011, p. 795), whose fashion style, music taste and ethos largely determine the iconographic attributes of the MPDG (and viceversa). The Urban Dictionary (2013) defines the *hipsters* as «a subculture of men and women typically in their 20's and 30's that value independent thinking, counterculture, progressive politics, an appreciation of art and indie-rock, creativity, intelligence, and witty banter.» Another defining feature of the *hipster*, very much in line with the values of indie cinema, consists on the rejection of mainstream values and culture, so the term has come to be synonym of a form of fashionable counterculture, helping to solidify the cultural practices associated with indie music and cinema – *hipster* and indie have become in a

way interchangeable labels, since «to be a *hipster* is to invest one's identity in the aesthetic legitimacy of indie» (Newman, 2013, p. 71).

Although in its 1950s origins the word «*hipster*» alluded to certain white middle-class individuals drawn to black culture and jazz music in order to escape the conformity of the American Dream (such as the authors of the Beat Generation), since the 1990s the word has lost any connotations of social protest, becoming associated with consumerism and cultural difference instead (Mailer, 1957). The *hipsters'* lack of political commitment, their emphasis on individualism and differentiation, and their utilization of consumerism as means to acquire identity – values all associated with postfeminism as well – make this particular subculture a great exponent of late postmodern capitalism's tendency to fagocitate its antagonizing movements. The *hipsters'* identity and individuality are constructed through what they consume, using their personal style to make a statement about who they are; being individualistic is key, although this may seem ironic since there is a strong tendency for *hipsters* to resemble each other (Kinzey, 2012, p. 2). Nostalgia, and the fetishization of anything retro are seen as means to escape cultural homogenization (vinyl records, typewriters, old-fashioned bicycles...), an aesthetic trend adopted by several MPDGs – most prominently, by Zooey Deschanel, with her polka dot dresses, high-waisted 1950s skirts and hair bows. Interestingly, while this nostalgia is exemplified on the male *hipster* via androgynous outfits in the style of mods – in a way that could be said to challenge heteronormative masculinity (Rothman, 2014, p. 27), – female *hipsters*, with their hyper-feminine vintage clothing and their penchant for traditional home crafts like knitting or baking cupcakes can be understood as an example of the postfeminist longing for a pre-feminist era of more stable gender roles that advocates for the intimacies and advantages of home life, perhaps a manifestation of the backlash against feminism some authors have detected (Negra, 2007, p. 14). Both Zooey Deschanel and her manic-pixie-dream-girlish character in the sitcom *New Girl* love knitting, and *Ruby Sparks* enjoys crafting and is portrayed cooking for the male characters in the eponymous film.

A shared cultural knowledge is also an attribute of the *hipster* community as well as a means to create identity; for example, Tom's initial attraction for Summer is diegetically justified through their shared indie music tastes when he discovers she likes *The Smiths* although that probably does not say much about Summer's personality. The spectators are thus invited to share a taste culture with the characters in a way that utilizes a specific aesthetic outlook as means of securing a place in the hierarchy – this is done, for example, by constant allusions to indie rock music, like Summer quoting Belle and Sebastian in her yearbook, or Sam telling Andrew that an obscure British band he has never heard of – *The Shins* – will change his life. In this sense, the *hipster's* anthem may well be «nothing is any good if anybody else likes it;» exclusivity is embraced as the confirmation of the majority's lack of taste. As Pierre Bourdieu (1993) neatly explains, cultural capital is a form of knowledge

which endows the social agent with competence in deciphering cultural relations, allowing him/her to appreciate what is to be thought as «better.» Such knowledge masquerades as taste, and is utilized in order to acquire and maintain social distinction which presumes the inferiority of others, which is why the field of cultural consumption is predisposed to «fulfill a social function or legitimating social differences» (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 7). The importance *hipsters* – and, by extension, their cinematic role models, such as the MPDG – attribute to cultural capital is exemplified when Tom takes Summer not recognizing one of his favorite bands (*The Spearmints*) as a sign that their relationship is failing.

While *hipsters* share some attributes with earlier subcultures – the thrift clothes, novels and leftist ideology of the beatniks or the androgynous style of the mods – they do it as postmodern pastiche, fueled by a sense of irony that sets them apart from their predecessors (Wouters, 2014, p. 64); pastiche, intertextuality, irony and appropriation are also some of the features commonly associated with the quirky sensibility that impregnates most MPDG productions. Pastiche was defined by Fredric Jameson (1991) as «the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language,» but, unlike parody, it is a neutral practice with no satiric impulse,» (p. 18) which produces a certain effacement of the older distinction between high art and low art. Indie *hipsters*, in this sense, «must be masters of authentic inauthenticity, embracing gestures of faux naïveté» that in reality are thoroughly ironic (Newman 2013, p. 75). The appropriation of products of popular culture is always done in quotation marks; for example, the recuperation of the 1980s pop music of Hall and Oates, or the inclusion of the cheesy Patrick Swayze's ballad «She's Like the Wind» in *(500) Days of Summer* are both utilized to convey nostalgia and to mock Tom's naïveté with regards to his romance with Summer.

Whereas style and taste are quintessential attributes of the *hipster*, they are also defined by a certain ethos of intensity that strives to find authentic, «real» experience and to break up outdated conventions and ways of living (what Alain Badiou called «the passion of the Real»). Authenticity, according to him, «requires destroy every density, every claim to substantiality, and every assertion of reality. The century attempts to react against depth. It carries out a fierce critique of foundations and of the beyond, it promotes the immediate and the surface of sensation» (Badiou 2008). While emphasis on surface and depthlessness are quintessential aesthetic attributes of indie filmmaking, such destruction of substantiality also has the consequence of gearing humanity towards hedonism and sensation, reinforcing the personality type that Marvin Zuckerman (1979) has named the «experience-seeker,» defined by «the need for varied, novel and complex sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experiences» (p. 10). The rejection of a nine-to-five job, the popularization of extreme sports and exotic travels, and the social sanctioning of non-normative sexual practices are just consequences of the expansion of this striving for authenticity that Badiou detects as pertaining to our era, and

the MPDG, with her *carpe diem* philosophy and her passion for life is nothing but an extreme incarnation of how these values are negotiated in popular culture through a gendered fantasy-lens. Another slightly more feminist understanding is also possible; the MPDG's live-in-the-moment philosophy and willingness to take risks (almost in a self-destructing manner) exemplify what Colette Soler (2006) describes as «a wish for the abyss, a vertigo for the absolute, for which love and death are only the most common names, and for which 'jouissance' would not be inappropriate» (p. 18). This emphasis on the MPDG's feminine *jouissance* certainly endows her with more agency than understanding her as the materialization of the fantasies of a male that seeks «authenticity,» although the textual reality of the films seems to indicate otherwise.

According to Slavoj Žižek (2009), even at the level of consumption, we «buy commodities... to get the experience provided by them, we consume them in order to render our lives pleasurable and meaningful» (p. 52). Late cultural capitalism has then integrated the legacy of 1968, the idea that authentic experience matters, partly because social repression, rather than materializing itself as a prohibition or an appeal to self-control, nowadays takes the form of an injunction to «Enjoy yourself!» that manifests itself in many ways, the idealization of free spirited women being just an example (Žižek, 1994, p. 16). Since we are commanded to «Enjoy!» even at a social level, there is nothing wrong with jumping to a swimming pool in the midst of a formal party, or with screaming the word «penis» out loud in a public park; quite the opposite, this sort of behaviour is positively portrayed as authentic, a lifestyle the depressed male protagonist should embrace in order to fully experience life.

While it is true that most MPDG narratives appear on the context of Indiewood, issues of genre – in this case, the rom-com – are also important for the construction of the stereotype. Claire Mortimer (2010) defines romantic comedy as «a hybrid of the romance and comedy genres, featuring a narrative that centres on the progress of a relationship, and, being a comedy, resulting in a happy ending» (p. 5). The fact that the rom-com culminates with the validation of the heterosexual union makes it an essentially conservative genre, so it follows that the forms of masculinity, femininity and love it portrays cannot be altogether transgressive (Deleyto, 2009, p. 18). According to Mark Rubinfield (2001), rom-coms are "essentially stories of masculinity and femininity with roles and rules that ensure femininity is subordinated to masculinity" (p. xv). This is particularly true when analyzing the way most rom-coms – including, for example, *(500) Days of Summer*, which ends with Summer's marriage to another man – reconcile neoliberal sexual freedom with traditional sex role models via romantic closure, reaffirming the idea that no matter how "cool" or "quirky" or

"independent" a woman is, the most fundamental decision she can make has to do with the choice of a romantic (male) partner.

However, MPDG narratives do not necessarily follow the exact same pattern as most rom-coms; in 2013, Betty Kaklamanidou defined the indie rom-com as a variation on the popular formula «boy meets girl-loses girl-gets her back,» a 21st Century adaptation of a highly formulaic genre and its discourses on family, marriage and love that are made to fit «an era of individualism, neoliberalism and economic recession; an age of doubt, yet a time of inherent belief and optimism about the future» (p. 136). Such contemporary emphasis on the value of individualism and differentiation often implies that, although millennial indie rom-coms may follow similar narrative conventions to their predecessors, the kinds of protagonists they favor will often be more offbeat, eccentric, or, put simply, less flat than their Hollywood counterparts, the MPDG being a fantastic example of said need to come up with characters that seem less standardized. A certain ironic knowingness of genre conventions is also found in most indie rom-coms; for instance, at the beginning of *(500) Days of Summer*, an extra-diegetic narration states that «this is a story of boy meets girl, but you should know upfront, this is not a love story.» While these indie rom-coms certainly acknowledge the heritage of the past both in terms of narrative structure and through nostalgic intertextual references – for example, *(500) Days of Summer* pays homage to *The Graduate* (1968) – they «do not simply repeat a well-known myth, but they rework, self-reflect and adjust the generic conventions, allowing for the possibility of love's power while simultaneously admitting heartache is part of the equation» (Kaklamanidou 2013, p. 136). The endings of the three main films addressed in this article - *(500) Days of Summer*, *Ruby Sparks* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* – are, at the very least, ambiguous on whether their protagonist will find love and happiness; Tom meets and goes on to probably date another girl ironically named Autumn, Calvin bumps into Ruby in a park, although she does not remember their past together, and Joel and Clementine decide to give their relationship one last chance even though they know it will most likely fail (again). After all, in the postmodern era of irony, skepticism and disenchantment, the naïve happily-ever-after formula of earlier rom-coms would not necessarily appeal to audiences, such subversion of the formulaic happy ending being another example on how Indiewood productions slightly tweak Hollywood conventions.

In addition, it is also important to note that most MPDG films, by being told from the perspective of the male rather than the female protagonist fit more neatly into the category of the «homme-com,» a subgenre of rom-coms that is centered on male characters, emphasizes aspects related to the bodily and the sexual, and that often focuses on gender role reversals (McDonald, 2009, p. 147), – for example, in *(500) Days of Summer*, Tom is positioned as a «feminized» character in his search of true love while Summer can unapologetically enjoy casual sex without romantic attachments. These comedies shift «the emphasis in the narra-

tive from the woman to the man,» by rehearsing «all the generic basics – dating rituals, feigned indifference, heartfelt passion – but making them new by considering them from a male point of view» (McDonald 2009, p. 147). Such emphasis on the males' perspective – for example, Webb's film consists almost entirely on a retelling of Tom's biased memories of his relationship with Summer – will have important consequences on the construction of the MPDG, the enforcement of the Male Gaze as defined by Laura Mulvey (1975), and on the way female characters are perceived by audiences; neither Summer, or Ruby are necessarily as superficial and bubbly as their male counterparts – and therefore the films – present them, but in the films they are rarely allowed to speak for themselves.

As mentioned before, the word «quirky» appears more often than not beside the definition of the MPDG, and it also features consistently on descriptions of indie comedies such as those directed by Jim Jarmusch, Wes Anderson, Spike Jonze or Michel Gondry, growing into a popular buzzword utilized by both critics and audiences whose meaning (offbeat? whimsical? anti-Hollywood?) has become quite unclear. In trying to provide a consistent scholarly definition of the quirky cinematic sensibility – in this case, applied to films and not so much to character types, –James MacDowell (2010) published an article where he analyzes the defining features of the quirky, and, interestingly, most of them coincide with the characteristics of the MPDG. This cultural sensibility is characterized by the attempt to restore a childlike naivety and optimism as opposed to the postmodern “smart” cinema of the 1990s, which was typified by cynicism, irony and emotional detachment, a kind of cinema that «sees everything with quotation marks» and looks with contempt at any form of affect, sincerity or optimism (Sconce, 2002, p. 358). In this sense, the main tonal difference between these two types of alternative filmmaking relies on the fact that quirky dramas and comedies are characterised by a balance «between 'ironic' distance from and 'sincere' engagements with protagonists» (MacDowell, 2013, p. 54) which leaves a certain room for hope, a sensibility more aligned with the millennial audiences these films are tailored for, who are understood as more conservative and less cynical than their Generation X predecessors (Perren, 2008). While smart films look at moral absolutes (including love) with scorn, advocating a form of irresponsible resignation instead, quirky films portray good actions with sympathy rather than an ironic smirk, even when said actions fall on the realm of the ridiculous, often depicting dysfunctional characters under a very sympathetic (perhaps slightly condescending) light. The kind of emotional engagement that the MPDG demands from the audience also oscillates from sincere infatuation to outright scepticism, or, as Rabin (2007) puts it, the viewer either wants «to marry her instantly» or «to commit grievous bodily harm against them and their immediate family.»

MacDowell (2010) also cites the employment of well-known figures from the world of comedy as one of the strategies utilized to convey a quirky sensibility; in this sense, both Jim Carrey and Zach Braff (protagonist of the comic TV show *Scrubs*) feature in MPDG

productions. Odd, comical departures from the mainstream such as surreal dialogues or the employment of unusual characters are also quintessentially quirky, although, as Michael Hirschsorn (2007) points out, they do not take audiences to the unsafe realm of the weird, where «someone might get hurt.» Such transgressive glimpses are also mirrored by the MPDG's ambivalent relationship with feminism and sexual freedom, insofar as she is allowed a certain level of 21st Century promiscuity as long as it does not alienate the male. Indeed, MacDowell himself states at the end of his «Notes on Quirky» that further study should be conducted with regards to the «sexual, racial and class politics of quirky films» (2010, p. 16), and it is at the intersection of the aesthetic values of the quirky sensibility with issues of gender and postfeminist representations that my exploration of the MPDG falls.

The quirky visual and musical style courts on the pointedly simple, almost cartoonish, featuring a preference for animation (i.e. the blue bird featuring in the musical scene where Tom dances to Hall and Oates), drawings, and instantly pretty simple melodies (like the musical leitmotif in Webb's film, a variation on the popular theme «Moon River»), or even children's songs, such as «Row, Row, Row Your Boat» (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*), revalorizing a form of naïve beauty underlined by themes of innocence and childhood. Interestingly, indie music, which features consistently in MPDG productions, is not only defined by this minimalism and simplicity, but also described as «fey,» «twee,» «wimpy» or «effeminate» (Fonarow, 2006, p. 40). This is also exemplified through the characters' tendency to engage in childlike behaviour, particularly in their romantic interactions – such as the «husband-wife» role playing Summer and Tom engage on during a visit to Ikea, their record-store courtship, or Joel and Clementine's playing together as children in Joel's mind in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. The questioning and challenging of adulthood and the sentimentalizing of childhood happening in quirky films are also themes of *hipster* culture, where the unsentimental preservation of childhood's style and ethos «is a way of perpetuating the consumer identities of youth into adulthood, and of rescuing the worthwhile consumption of the past from the becoming forgotten» (Newman, 2013, p. 76) - hence the recuperation of «old-fashioned» songs and films in many of these movies, such as the inclusion of Simon and Garfunkel's «The Only Living Boy in New York» in *Garden State*. Such emphasis on childlike innocence is also present in the MPDG both through her uncontained glee, her vulnerability («Don't ever leave me, Joey,» pleads Clementine), her utter spontaneity, and through her physical appearance, featuring naïve feminine dresses and a very youthful, innocent demeanour, a strategy utilized to render their sexuality and independence unthreatening which also aligns with postfeminism's exaltation of youth and girliness.

4.2. The MPDG as an embodiment of Postfeminism's Double Entanglement

During the past fifteen years we have witnessed an unprecedented academic interest on the representations of femininity and feminism in popular culture: the publications of scholars including Angela McRobbie, Rosalind Gill, Hilary Radner, Imelda Whehlan, Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra among others have shaped the field of postfeminist studies within Hollywood cinema, while there has been a virtual lack of interest on the ways postfeminist discourses are reproduced outside mainstream film. To some extent, this is due to the circular logic of the mainstream; as Tasker and Negra (2007) argue, the films and TV shows most often analyzed in critical and journalistic writings «are selected as significant on the basis of factors such as widespread commercial appeal, top box-office performances and so on» (p. 20). However, while the significance of Hollywood in shaping societal values is undeniable, it is also true that we live in a culture defined by niche markets and subcultural power dynamics, which implies that the ideological messages written on less commercial texts (for example, the indie productions where we find most MPDGs) are indeed worth of analysis due to the influence they may have on relatively sizeable portions of the audience. Given that postfeminism as such is an essential component of this essay it is mandatory to examine the often contradictory definitions the term invokes, along with the academic discussions concerning its relationship with feminism. The reason why there is so much controversy surrounding postfeminism's exact meaning lies on the fact that, as Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon point out (2009), it is not tied to a specific epistemological framework, but it «emerges in the intersections and hybridization of modern media, consumer culture, neoliberal politics, postmodern theory and, significantly, feminism» (p. 5). How do all of these factors influence the construction of the MPDG stereotype?

The word postfeminism has its origins in popular media around the 1980s, although it was not until the 1990s that the term acquired currency both in critical studies and in US and UK journalism. By that time, the overall claims of Second Wave feminism had come to be interrogated by postcolonial authors such as Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty or Trinh Thi Minh-ha, and poststructural theorists such as Judith Butler and Donna Haraway had inaugurated a new field of academic research by denaturalizing concepts as ingrained as «gender» or «sex». The universal identity that was often promoted by feminists – the category «Woman» – was being put into question, and postfeminism became attractive by pleading that every woman must recognize her own personal mix of identities, an idea that fits nicely within a neoliberal individualistic frame: instead of the political «we» of Second Wave, postfeminism invokes a self-absorbed, narcissistic «I.» In this context, as Sarah Gamble (1998) astutely notes, postfeminism's undeniable appeal lies on its flexibility, since it is an ideology that «can be adapted to suit individuals needs and desires» as opposed to the perceived rigidity of Second Wave feminism, although this implies that much of its collective and political dimension are also lost (p. 44). In addition, through the capitalization

of beauty as a desirable commodity pertaining to late capitalism, any political project that tries to separate femininity and womanhood tends to be dismissed as desexualizing, so the widespread image of the 1970s humorless, bra-burning, manhating feminist has been rejected by contemporary women due to its supposed annihilation of beauty, glamour and femininity.

Starting with a purely grammatical analysis of the word, Angela McRobbie (2007) contends that the prefix "post" seems to point at the pastness of second wave feminism, positively drawing feminism as something that we can take into account to then emphasize the idea that it is no longer needed (p. 28). Although invoking feminism's pastness indeed responds to a clear ideological purpose – this is, to suggest that equality has been achieved and that we no longer need to call for political actions since women already have access to everything they want, – it is also true that postfeminism's relationship with feminism is more complex than what the familiar concept of backlash formulated by Susan Faludi (1992) allows us to conceive; this is, the idea spread by the media that women's unhappiness stems from the feminist pressure to «have it all,» that «all the battles have been won» and that now it is white men who are the real victims. Such conception of postfeminism as anti-feminist is also defended by Imelda Whelehan (2000), who has coined the term «retrosexism» to allude to the nostalgic quality of much contemporary media (think *Mad Men*), filled with representations of «real» women that are being defensively reinvented against cultural changes in women's lives, representations ranging «from the banal to the outright offensive» (p. 11). Because I do not believe that a linear movement of subsequent gains and losses can illuminate the strategies of negotiation postfeminism entails with regards to past feminism's achievements, Angela McRobbie's double entanglement approach appears to be more productive, particularly with regards to the analysis of the MPDG's politics. Instead of understanding postfeminism as a mere patriarchal «backlash» against the sociopolitical gains of Second Wave feminism, McRobbie (2007) considers how several feminist gains – namely, those related with the neoliberal idea of individual choice and sexual freedom – are incorporated in today's cultural discourses. According to her, «this comprises the coexistence of neoconservative values in relation to gender, sexuality, and family life... with processes of liberalization in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations» (2007, p. 28). Nowhere are those neoconservative values more clear than through postfeminism's celebration of traditional femininity – repackaged as a woman's choice, – and through a constant sense of nostalgia for a simpler past, both strategies present in the construction of the MPDG through attire and behaviour.

On the other hand, by being inextricably impregnated by the rhetoric of neoliberalism, postfeminism's emphasis on free choice, self-entrepreneurship and the celebration of extreme individualism consistently erases "the social constraints placed upon contemporary girls and women" (Gwynne & Muller, 2013, p. 2), emphasizing the idea that if a woman

wants to wear a push up bra or be a housewife it is only a matter of personal choice. The neoliberalism I am alluding to does not only refer to our prevalent, post-Reagan economic system, which is characterized by privatization, deregulation, free market, strong private property rights and a virtual disappearance of the state from many areas, but also to a certain «calculated technology for governing subjects who are constituted as self-managing, autonomous and enterprising» (Gill & Scharff, 2011, p. 5). This powerful resonance between neoliberalism and postfeminism is expressed at various levels: first of all, they are both structured around a rhetoric of «individualism that has almost entirely replaced notions of the social or political, or any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves» (Gill & Scharff, 2011, p. 7); for example, postfeminism's celebration of white femininity does not bear in mind the patriarchal and hierarchical dynamics of power and oppression that intervene in its construction. In addition, as Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff note (2011), «the autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism» (p. 7). Although the notion of an active, freely choosing and self-reinventing woman is indeed empowering, it must be noted how these ideas consistently erase the kinds of pressures women are subject to in our patriarchal society – the pressure to be thin and beautiful, the pressure to marry, the pressure to be sexually appealing but not «too easy.»

In popular discourses it is women who are called on to self-manage, to self-discipline; to a much greater extent than men, women have become the victims of «a new unprecedented discipline against the body» designed to produce «docile bodies» – and presented as their personal choice – while, at the same time, the social pressures shaping this particular construction of the feminine body are virtually overlooked (Bartky, 1990, p. 63). Femininity, as Judith Butler (1985) has claimed, becomes nothing but an artifice, a «mode of enacting and reenacting received gender norms that surface as so many styles of the flesh» (p. 11). Woman must make herself a beautiful object for the man, in many cases accomplished through consumerism; according to Sandra Bartky (1990), in our patriarchal society, «a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other» (p. 71). In spite of this social commandment to be pretty for men, all the processes involved in the construction of a beautiful feminine body – waxing, dying your hair, applying makeup, choosing the right type of clothing – are presented as aesthetic activities through which women can express their individuality, an idea again tied up with neoliberal discourses. Individuality, on its turn, is presented as the quintessential attribute of the MPDG; her hair color may be unusual (Clementine), her clothing, appealing in its nostalgic vintage quality (Summer, and, by extension, Zooey Deschanel), or her fashion accessories and general makeover particularly eccentric (Penny Lane in *Almost Famous*). Along these lines, consumerism is perceived as a means for constructing identity, the same

way it happens with the *hipster*. The irony cannot be lost insofar as this different performances of femininity, presented as individual expression, have become serialized and imitated by thousands of young women for whom the MPDG has become a role model, particularly in the case of Deschanel's public persona, who has even inspired the launching of a blog called «What Would Zoëy Deschanel Wear.»

Central to Second Wave thought is the idea that femininity and feminism are oppositional, which is one of the reasons why contemporary women reject this type of militant feminism as desexualizing and anti-beauty. In addition, as Stéphanie Genz (2006) explains, Second Wave's «body politics» also implicates a rejection of «practices that draw attention to differences between male and female bodies» such as shaving, cosmetics and form-fitting clothing, considered a creation of patriarchy (p. 334). Within postfeminism, however, femininity comes to be defined as a natural bodily property instead of a social construct, and the possession of a sexy, feminine body is conflated with women's identity and success in a way that astutely rebrands traditional models of femininity as postfeminist choices. In this case, femininity not only refers to bodily appearance but also to the exaltation of traditional gender roles, exemplified by the proliferation of «culture material devoted to the celebration of cooking, cleaning, childcare, and other activities that take place largely in the home» (Negra, 2008, p. 118). In the films, said celebration of a past femininity is exemplified through nostalgia, and is particularly obvious in the scene where Summer and Tom pretend to be a 1950s couple in IKEA. This performance of the feminine masquerade, albeit knowingly ironic, can be read as a strategy for re-securing patriarchal hegemony, relocating women back inside the terms of traditional gender hierarchies, although now wearing mini-skirts and baking cupcakes are presented as personal choices rather than social impositions. According to McRobbie (2007b), the young woman adopts this new masquerade in order to make herself appealing for men, assuming for example the air of being «foolish and bewildered» that is so typical of the MPDG (p. 725). Is the supposedly ironic adoption of the masquerade defined by Joan Riviere (1929) a means by which young women are encouraged to comply with the current re-stabilization of gender norms?

Furthermore, postfeminism re-evaluates the former tension that existed between feminism and femininity, allowing women to be feminine and feminist at the same time without losing their political integrity or being deemed slaves to the patriarchy, a discourse which is almost literally reproduced by Deschanel herself, who in an interview famously claimed: «We can't be feminine and be feminists and be successful? I want to be a f-king feminist and wear a f-king Peter Pan collar. So f-king what?» (Kat Stoeffel, 2013). However, as Anthony P. McIntyre (2014) has argued, the peculiar brand of cuteness Deschanel and her characters perform (including Summer) not only neutralizes political energies amongst its millennial public, who feels an instant emotional connection with her, but also serves as a means to harness commercial imperatives. According to Sianne Ngai (2012), cuteness

is a powerful affective register that has become one of the prevailing aesthetic categories of our time, exemplified in the proliferation of YouTube kitten videos, cupcakes, or manic-pixiesque female characters in contemporary film. Although this «modern enchantment with small things,» as Hannah Arendt defined it (1958, p. 52), may seem neutral in principle, it entails a certain eroticization of powerlessness that ranges from tenderness towards these small, cute commodities to (sometimes), «a desire to belittle or diminish them further» (Ngai, 2012, p. 3). When something is judged cute, there is always a presumption of inferiority; we love the cute object/person because it is vulnerable, because it submits to us, because it needs our protection. As Daniel Harris (2000) points out, cuteness often implies the lack of a quality, «a certain neediness and inability to stand alone» (p. 4) reflected in this case by *Ruby Sparks* inability to support herself economically, or by Clementine pleading «Don't ever leave me, Joey.» The ideology underlining this type of aesthetic judgment is simple; for the postfeminist, postmodern, fragile male subject, being in a relationship with a woman deemed cute, who is vulnerable and needs his protection, is undeniably attractive. Men can again be the heroes and providers of the story, re-establishing the gender dynamics that had been threatened by the 1980s powerful career woman.

In addition, as Ngai (2012) explains, «since soft contours suggest pliancy or reponsiveness to the will of others, the less formally articulated the commodity, the cuter» (p. 64). This is particularly relevant when analyzing the personality of the MPDG, who acts as a white board for the male fantasies – quite literally in the case of *Ruby Sparks* – and is never defined for what she is for herself, but through weak taste markers that generally coincide with the male protagonist's own tastes. As Tom's sister astutely points out, the MPDG's interiority is never explored any further than what the man likes to see: «Just because she likes the same bizarro crap as you do, that doesn't make her your soul mate!,» she says. The revaluation of the cute that has happened in our contemporary society not only has consequences for the way men see (or want) women (vulnerable, needy, soft); it often implies that the admirer of the cute – be it a puppy, a baby, or Zooey Deschanel – will unconsciously adopt its infectious charm, emulating its infantile properties: in this case, cuteness reflects a saying no to political power, because by emulating the cute and girlish, women are deemed less serious, less adult (Ngai, 2012, p. 69). Then again, this powerfully resonates with postfeminism's de-politicized discourses on girlhood and femininity.

If the commodity aesthetic of cuteness is warm and vulnerable, the epistemological aesthetic of the interesting (another prevailing mode in our era) is cool, based on eclectic difference and novelty. The MPDG, with her extreme performance of both cool *hipsterism* and cuteness thus embodies two of the main aesthetic categories detected by Ngai; interestingly, many of the stereotypes surrounding idealized (white) femininity share trait with coolness, such as ethereality, nihilism and detachment from normality (Yunuen Lewis 2011, p. 191). The MPDG, who oscillates from unavailability and aloofness (for example, Summer is initia-

lly unapproachable, being called «the bitch of the office» for her lack of interest in men) to cuteness, is a creature of hedonism, constructed around countercultural sensibilities and a rejection to the mainstream, traits all associated with the epistemology of the cool. Through constructions like the MPDG, cool postfeminism thus «functions to broaden concepts of womanhood; yet s it is so commercially viable it is ultimately absorbed by the status quo, serving rather than resisting the needs of a capitalist value system» (Yunuen Lewis, 2011, p. 193).

One of the feminist gains McRobbie (2007) mentions as an example of the ways postfeminism positively takes feminism into account is the social decriminalization of recreational sexuality for women. Along these lines, third-wave feminism, often conflated with postfeminism, has advocated for the pleasures of (heterosexual) sex, opposing the Second Wave's perceived prohibitive sexual politics with the notions of «do-me,» «pro-sex» or «power» feminism. While 1970s feminism stood for a pessimistic vision on sexuality, emphasizing its disadvantages for women such as sexual objectification and abuse, postfeminism rejects this victimizing standpoint promoting instead sexual pleasure, freedom and fun as a form of critical resistance. (Heterosexual) sex is therefore seen as stylish, a means of creating identities, a form of physical work and self-expression, essential for women's individual fulfillment. In this sense, in our post-*Cosmopolitan* Western society, cinematic «heroines must no longer embody virginity but are required to be skilled in a variety of sexual behaviours and practices; and the performance of confident sexual agency is central to this technology of the self» (Harvey & Gill, 2011, p. 56). However, for women it is not so much about knowing the right techniques for good intercourse as it is about being desirable in the terms dictated by the heteropatriarchy; as Gill explains (2007), «sex is constructed as something requiring constant attention, discipline, self-surveillance and emotional labour» whereby women are constantly required to survey every aspect of their sexuality (p. 147). She argues that there has been a shift from sexual objectification to an empowering form of sexual subjectification, and that women no longer are the objects of a powerful male gaze, but the subjects of a self-regulating narcissistic gaze, voluntarily performing a form of sexuality that has been constructed in the terms of the male (passive, available, sexy, and straight). Therefore, it is important to question whether the proliferations of sexually agentic women in popular culture represents a real and positive change for gender equality, or «whether, by contrast, it is merely a postfeminist repackaging of feminist ideas in a way that renders them depoliticized and presses them into the service or patriarchal consumer capitalism» (Harvey & Gill, 2011, p. 56). The sexual ideology of postfeminism thus relies on a neoliberal rhetoric of individual choice: the idea of fulfilling men's sexual desires has been repackaged as self-chosen and empowering for women. It would seem that, with the possible exception of *Clementine*, who subverts the MPDG trope in many ways, the cine-

matic women analyzed in this dissertation all put their sexuality at the service of the males, particularly Ruby, who Calvin literally writes up to «love giving blowjobs.»

Postfeminism's exaltation of neoliberal sexual freedom has coined a new sexual contract and a new figure that McRobbie has termed the phallic girl, which endows women with the capacity to be symbolic phallus-bearers «as a kind of licensed mimicry of their male counterparts,» giving the impression of having won equality with men without critiquing masculine hegemony. For example, when Summer claims that she is the Syd Vicious of the relationship, or when she states that she might as well have fun while she is young without committing to a relationship, the men in the film automatically mark her as «a dude.» The phallic girl understands sex as light-hearted pleasure, as a recreational activity, while she also adopts other habits of masculinity such as heavy drinking (particularly in Clementine's case), swearing, consuming pornography and so on...but without relinquishing her own desirability to men (McRobbie 2009, p. 83). While the postfeminist masquerade undercuts women's increasing independence and power by encouraging them to adopt the mask of feminine submission, the phallic girl constitutes a more assertive alternative, being able to take up some of the traits of masculinity- the drinking (particularly in Clementine's case), the swearing, the anecdotic sex with other girls. The MPDG, as an almost perfect embodiment of the contradictions of postfeminist ideology, is able to become both extremes: she undertakes the postfeminist masquerade in her hyper-femininity and cute vulnerability while her relationships with men fall on the realm of girl phallicism, particularly on the way she is able to conceive sex as a recreational activity and does not necessarily look for romantic attachments.

Therefore, it would seem that the postmodern sexual hedonism postfeminism has made available for woman, although advocating sexual performance for enjoyment, does not recognize in any way «the systems of oppression and power imbalance circulating around young women's sexuality» (Farrimond, 2013, p. 54). Although women must be sexually assertive and self-determining under neoliberalism, they must also retain aspects of traditional femininity, combining a highly constructed sex-appeal with an emotional sensitivity to others. In this sense, and central to postfeminism's double entanglement, Feona Attwood (2011) declares that "discourses of sexual agency have been seen as central to the development of new femininities, part of the broader shift in which "older" markers of femininity, such as homemaking skills and maternal instincts, have been joined by those of image creation, body work and sexual desire"(p. 203). Nowhere is this more clear than in the figure of the MPDG, whose performance of traditional and cute femininity renders her liberated sexuality unthreatening for men. Through the conventions of the romantic happy ending, postfeminist rom-coms harness the threat that women's sexuality represents to men by suggesting that such performance of sexual agency is «merely affected, and that women's ultimate goal is romance and marriage» (Bowler, 2013, p. 201). Indeed, Summer, in spite

of all her discourses on how women can enjoy their sexuality while they are young and how she does not want to be anybody's girlfriend...ends up married.

The figure of the girl has been resuscitated by postfeminist discourses to highlight the empowering possibilities of a reconfigured femininity – for example, through the 1990s rhetoric of "Girl Power" best exemplified by music bands like *The Spice Girls*; - however, it does not take into account girliness' associations with vulnerability and immaturity. The ideal postfeminist female character is thus marked as girly, not much in relation through her age as by a display of "a set of character traits such as immaturity, spontaneity, hedonism or coquetry," (Radner, 2011, p. 4) character traits undoubtedly displayed by the MPDG (Summer challenges Tom to scream the word «penis» on a park while Clementine makes Joel lie on an frozen lake with her). Under postfeminism, women are not only expected to display a youthful appearance, but also to act like girls, being spontaneous and fun-seeking. This exaltation of girlhood has another consequence; because freedom and choice have been inextricably connected to young women, feminism now is decisively aged and made to seem redundant, establishing a huge generational gap between the old feminist who merely denounce misogyny, and the young postfeminists who are (supposedly) able to utilize it for their purposes. The attribution of perpetual girlhood to women on their twentysomethings has thus become a strategy utilized to dismiss women as political subjects on the grounds of their supposed immaturity; put simply «girls are presumed to be more subject to ideological manipulation than women» (Driscoll, 2002: 130). The competent, professional adult woman is thus made safe by being represented as still a girl; girls cannot be political subjects, nor independent from men. In addition, a girlish, cutish sexuality is assumed to be less threatening for men, since young women are presumed to be mere objects of masculine desire rather than agentic subjects with desires of their own.

In spite of their use of irony, nostalgia, and overemphasizing, the films analyzed in this dissertation do offer a model of femininity largely compliant with heteropatriarchy, advocating for sexual freedom and hedonism only when it is convenient for the male, and presenting women as needy, unthreatening creatures in need of protection who are too immature to constitute political subjects. The MPDG's equivocal engagement with neoliberal sexual freedom combined with her nostalgic femininity, grounded on cuteness and girliness, and presented as personal choice thus provides a fantastic account of the way Indiewood productions negotiate postfeminism's double entanglement. However, I would like to end this epigraph with a positive note; while the MPDG offers a role model sadly grounded on traditional femininity, it is also true that nowadays less female protagonists conform to this stereotype, which I interpret as a symptom that the era of postfeminist discourses may be coming to its end. Indeed, when young actresses such as Emma Watson and Ellen Page boldly define themselves as feminist, it is undeniable that a change has happened, and that feminism has stopped to be envisaged as an unpleasant, desexualizing Other to be

embraced as the true political discourse through which women can acquire true equality without necessarily renouncing to their femininity.

4.3. A Psychoanalytical Study of the MPDG

Of the three main films analysed in this article, two of them (*Ruby Sparks* and *(500) Days of Summer*) are entirely monopolised by the subjectivity of the male protagonists, who are portrayed as authentic subjects largely at the expense of their MPDGs, only seen through their fantasizing eyes. The MPDG is thus portrayed as the object of desire craved by the male and defined by his fantasies, the objet petit a designed to fill the subject's missing piece (his depression, his need for inspiration), «a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies... by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning» (Mulvey, 1975, p. 6). And silent and de-subjectivized are indeed Summer and Ruby, their interiorities never explored, and in Ruby's case, thoroughly defined by her being for the Other (Calvin), who in one of the last scenes deprives her of her various agencies to the point where she cannot speak nor leave the room, is made to strip, and even to bark like a dog, entirely de-subjectifying her. Furthermore, when he publishes a novel based on his relationship with Ruby, Calvin even strips her of the last marker of her identity: her name, by giving it the title of *The Girlfriend* (again, defining Ruby as what she was for him, and not for herself).

As Virginia Woolf stated almost a century ago (1929), «women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice his natural size;» (p. 36) this is particularly true for the MPDG: Summer stimulates Tom to become an architect, and Ruby inspires Calvin to write a novel based on their relationship - Calvin even makes her shout «you're a genius!» The idealization of Woman that takes part in the construction of the MPDG stereotype, her elevation to the sublime object of love is fundamentally narcissistic in character. Deprived of every real substance, she functions as a passive mirror onto which the subject projects his ego-ideal, quite literally in Calvin's case, who becomes a modern Pygmalion by bringing his ideal woman into existence (Zizek, 1994, p. 90). However, as Calvin's brother points out, «quirky, messy women whose problems only make them endearing are not real:» Calvin has not created a person, but a fantasy; Tom's friend says something similar when analysing his idealization of Summer; «my girlfriend may not be perfect, but at least she's real.» The problem with fantasy, though, is that the moment you get what you seek, you do not want it anymore, because in order for desire to exist it must have its objects perpetually absent. This is due to the circular logic of desire; since the objet petit a is what sets desire in motion by retaining the radical perplexity of the Other, when said objet petit a is too close desire inevitably dies, as the subject gets confronted by his own irreducible lack (Zizek, 1994, p. 178). Therefore, when

Ruby comes into life, Calvin has to give up the fantasy of her for the reality of her, getting confronted with her desires – to take painting classes and see friends, – something he is initially incapable of. It is only through that traumatic traversing of the fantasy that Calvin will be able to reaffirm his identity and find «true love,» since true love «aims at the kernel of the real, at what is in the object more than the object itself,» (Salecl & Žizek, 1996, p. 3) and not only as a narcissistic projection. To some extent, Calvin re-meeting the real Ruby at the end of the film gives him an opportunity for true love, which «is supported by what remains of the object when it is stripped of all its imaginary and symbolic features» (Salecl & Žizek, 1996, p. 3) – this is, the real Ruby, deprived of the artificial attributes Calvin projected onto her. Traversing the fantasy, as Lacan (1988) understands it, implicates accepting one's own responsibility for how one experiences the world instead of projecting it onto a fantasy; in this case, Calvin needs to accept the fragility of his ego instead of filling it up with the fantasy of Ruby, who reassures him of his desirability and his talents. By the end of the film Calvin has progressed from a state of primary narcissism and self-centeredness to be able to engage on adult, mature relationships where he can understand the beloved object (Ruby) as a person out of his control and not entirely monopolized by his needs and desires.

Lacan (1982) once famously explained sexual difference in terms of «[woman] being and . . . [man] having . . . the phallus,» (p. 279) an understanding that essentially subordinates Woman to Man: she is the phallus only insofar as she represents male lack, and she is the objet a (object-cause of his desire), all formulas that define Woman in relation (or distortion) to man and say nothing of her possible being in herself (Soler, 2002, p. 103). As Elizabeth Bronfen (1992) puts it, the object of man's desire «is never real but rather the symptom of the lover's fantasy» (p. 102): indeed, Charlie Kauffman, author of the script of *Eternal Sunshine*, remarks that, to some extent, Clementine is actually a projection of Joel's mind that allows him to be more adventurous. Ruby, on her turn, stands as the signifier for Calvin's narcissistic lacks and insecurities, and nowhere this becomes more clear than when he makes her scream first that she loves his face, mouth and cock (erogenous desires; after all, desire is the desire of the Other), and then that he is a genius, revealing Calvin's anxieties with regards to his artistic talents. As Calvin's ex-girlfriend points out, the only person Calvin is interested in having a relationship with is himself, hence his need to control every single aspect of Ruby's life and personality, something she protests («There has to be space in a relationship, otherwise it's like we're the same person.»)

As Teresa de Lauretis (1984) accurately noted, by being inextricably impregnated with desire, narrative is always already heterosexed, with Woman standing on the side of the promised Object and Man on the side of the Subject (p. 140). Summer, as the object of Tom's desire, has to endow herself with the attributes of artificial femininity via masquerade in order to attract his desire, dressing herself in the colours of the Other's desire (clothing,

music taste), for «it is only an object inasmuch as the Other recognizes its own marks in it» (Soler, 2006, p. 32). When Woman refuses to be for the Other, to house the lack in his ego and wear the female mask, then she becomes a «bad object» (Restuccia, 2006, p. 8); Tom calls Summer a «coldhearted bitch» after she proves incapable of falling in love with him. However, a feminist view on this masquerade may be invoked: because all her features are artificially put on (or attributed by the male), both Summer and Ruby become more of a subject than Man, who naively believes that there is something «essential» in himself that makes him worthy of love. Interestingly, *(500) Days of Summer's* ending somehow subverts the narrative fantasy that the union of Man and Woman will bring in the subject's (the male) completion: as the extra-diegetic narrator states, «Tom believed that he was missing The One to be complete...in the end he didn't.» In the films, «there is no relationship between what the loved one possesses and what the loving one lacks» (Zizek 1994, p. 103). This is due to the fact that what the loving one (Tom) sees in the beloved (Summer) is something that she cannot give, for she does not possess it – she is not the quirky life muse Tom fantasizes about, but a real woman with real problems. The MPDG is a masquerade whereby Woman submits to the conditions of the Other's love in order for man's fantasy to find «its moment of truth,» his inspiration in her (Soler, 2006, p. 79). These films show what Woman is for the Other, not as a Subject, for spectators are never allowed to see her but through the always already gendered gaze of the protagonist, the director/scriptwriter, and the camera; woman-as-woman, as Claire Johnston (1975) denounced, «is absent from the text of the film» (p. 26).

Because Gondry's film subverts to some extent the myth of the MPDG by allowing Clementine a darker and fuller personality than her more frivolous counterparts, in the film she can contest the myth of Woman being for the Other by stating: «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 looking for my own peace of mind. Don't assign me yours.» However, this was a warning Joel did not take: «I still thought you were going to save my life, even after that,» he tells Clementine, repeating the idea that Woman exists only to complete Man, to fill his gaps and coax him out of his insecurities. Initially, Joel is attracted to Clementine because he falls in love with every woman who shows him the least bit of attention, which is partly due to his loveless childhood («Why doesn't she look at me?» he says as a child when his mother is ignoring him). She is everything that he is not, grounding and enlarging Joel's «I,» making him more real and himself in the repeated acknowledgement of Clementine's «you,» which in many ways she exceeds him (Toles, 2009, p. 135). Joel's need for Clementine's liveliness in his otherwise dull life is also expressed visually; the brown-greyish colours he favours highly contrast with Clementine's bright and often ravishingly beautiful ones (Reeve, 2009, p. 22).

There is a soliloquy that illustrates particularly well the space Clementine occupies as Joel's objet petit a, as what the filler of the gap that can complete his subjectivity:

I need to be tripped up, confounded, wrapped in pain by someone just like you. Your face and gestures, the force that you carry, seem – as I come to know you – to be as much inside as outside me. I think you have the capacity (and maybe the will) to undo me, to take everything that I value and *hide* it in terms of you... Without your provocations and your excitement I am stalled; with them, I seem in the hair-raising process of becoming who I think I am meant to be.

The morale of all three films is therefore quite clear: Woman can never be made to fit Man's preconceived fantasy of her, she does not house the lack of his ego and cannot confirm his subjectivity through her desire of him, because she is also a being with subjectivity, desires of her own, insecurities, and private fantasies. When women are made to artificially fit this preconceived fantasy, three different outcomes (exemplified by the films) can occur: in trying to respond to Man's desire, Woman will become a hysteric, her subjectivity entirely disintegrated (when Calvin strips Ruby of agency by making her do whatever he wants she literally collapses); once Man realizes Woman is not the objet petit a housing what he lacks, he will see her as «a bad object» (Tom accusing Summer of being a «coldhearted bitch» when she refuses to conform to the ideal he has set of her); or, alternatively, Man will accept that Woman is not a pre-fixed concept that will complete his ego, but a human being with her own problems and lacks (Joel accepting Clementine for what she is at the end of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*).

5. CONCLUSIONS

I started this article by asking myself three main questions: Which contextual factors propitiate the proliferation of this specific stereotype during the early 2000s? How does the MPDG negotiate the double entanglement of postfeminism with feminist discourses? What psychoanalytical demands on the part of the male does the MPDG respond to? By analysing the MPDG's performance of traditional femininity both through attire (Summer's vintage dresses) and behavior (Ruby's neediness, Clementine's vulnerability) we can conclude that the mode of femininity these characters enact still conforms to the ideals set by the patriarchy. Although her spontaneity and hedonism may render them attractive to the alienated male protagonist, they also mark her as irremediably girly and cute, rendering her neoliberal sexual freedom less threatening for men. Indeed, there are glimpses of feminist discourses permeating the figure of the MPDG (Summer insisting she is allowed to enjoy sex without commitment, for example), but they are immediately counteracted by the heteronormative endings of the films. Her individualism, in line with postfeminist neoliberal discourses on personal choice and consumerism, is more based on superficial personality

markers (hair colour, vintage clothing, music tastes) than on an actual desire to create less stereotypical female characters. As I noted on my introduction, despite its alternative disguise, the MPDG is still situated within the socially constructed image of femininity, becoming a contemporary adaptation of the muse an impersonation of male's projections of the ideal woman which essentially perpetuates what Imelda Whelehan (2000) calls the postfeminist mystique.

The growth of the *hipster* demographics, the popularization of indie films with their penchant for eccentric characters, and the reproduction of a certain ethos of intensity and hedonism are some of the contextual factors that explain the popularity of the MPDG during the early 2000s. Indeed, Summer Finn's picture, with her high-waisted skirts, her love for Belle & Sebastian, and her fixed-gear bicycle could feature next to the dictionary's definition of a *hipster*, so we can contend that these characters are consciously designed to appeal to that specific segment of the audience, perhaps rendering the gender ideology they carry (which is not so different to Hollywood's) less obvious with such patina of alternativity. The MPDG's *carpe diem* philosophy also fits neatly into our current's era indictment to «Enjoy!», filling a desire on the part of the fragile, depressive, and bored postmodern man to embrace life at its fullest, and get rid of his insecurities, for, as explained on the third section of the article, it is masculinity that creates ideal femininity and not the other way around.

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