

Spectacle and Selfhood: The Politics of the Male Gaze in Olivia Gatwood’s *The Manic Pixie Dream Girl*

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Abstract

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis of the poem “Manic Pixie Dream Girl Says” by Olivia Gatwood, with a focus on recurring themes of gendered spectatorship, performative femininity, and resistance to objectification. The analysis is grounded in feminist literary theory, particularly frameworks addressing the male gaze, subjectivity, and narrative agency, drawing from critical insights associated with Laura Mulvey and Judith Butler. The poem was selected based on the criteria of direct or indirect engagement with gendered perception, representation of female embodiment or performance, and thematic alignment with or subversion of the “manic pixie dream girl” trope, a culturally pervasive construct that reduces female subjectivity to a narrative function within heteronormative frameworks.

Close reading techniques were used to examine imagery, tone, voice, and narrative positioning, with particular attention paid to moments where the poetic speaker transitions from object (being seen) to subject (a self-defining voice). In doing so, the study situates the poem within broader discourses of surveillance, internalized gender norms, and affective labour, while also engaging with Foucauldian notions of disciplinary power and normalization. By tracing the speaker’s ironic self-awareness and metafictional articulation, the analysis demonstrates how Gatwood’s poem not only exposes the limitations of the trope but actively reclaims agency, disrupting the visual and narrative economy of the male gaze and foregrounding a resistant, self-conscious feminine subjectivity.

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Introduction: Gender Performativity and Surveillance

The concept of “the male gaze” was introduced by British film theorist Laura Mulvey in her 1973 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, where she describes the mechanics of male gaze in cinema as projecting men’s fantasy “onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (19). Prior to this conceptual coinage by Mulvey focalised on the cinematic representation of the female gender, in literary productions, the male gaze primarily informed female literary characterization; similar to other art forms, the men are typically portrayed as doers, while women are depicted with added emphasis to their appearance as a form of objectification and men’s perception of their character for a male audience (Berger 45). This is manifested in the narrative techniques that centre the male perspective, relegating female characters to a secondary position within the narrative, reducing them to their relationships with men; as passive objects rather than active agents in the narration - “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 phantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey 62).

In classical literary productions, female characters assume archetypal roles of idealized muses, self-sacrificing figures, or seductive temptresses, with the primary function of furthering the male protagonist’s action and development in the narrative. Despite the centrality of their role in some narratives, their thoughts and perspectives are often mediated through a male narrator or filtered through a perspective that prioritizes male concerns (Sharma 21).

The sociological implication of the male gaze’s depiction catering to the male population allows for and dictates the characteristics of the voyeur, the actor, the aggressor, the protagonist, the active doer, the peruser, the dominator, or the consumer of women (Vanbuskirk). Contemporary depictions of women in cultural products of media, movies, advertisements, reels, and memes propagate this hierarchical depiction further. With increased allusion to the concept by feminist critics and writers, recent literary productions recognize this pattern of depiction and dispute the patriarchal gaze with reinterpretations, or by offering an alternative perspective - the female gaze.

As a developing concept in feminist theory, the female gaze has gained traction in the latter half of the 20th century. The article *Reflecting the Male Gaze: Quantifying Female Objectification in 19th and 20th Century Novels* (2024) proposes a quantitative framework for analyzing gender bias in female objectification - the extent to which a text portrays females as objects of visual pleasure, especially novels by 19th and 20th century male novelists (Luo et. al). *What is the Female Gaze in Literature* (2022) explores the spectrum of representation of the female gaze in the

YA fictions of Stephen Meyers and Sarah J. Maas (Dangerfield 9). The folio *Towards a Visionary Poetics: A Female Gaze* features literary works in places where women's voices, poetics, prophecy meet, alter the ground to create something new (Olidort and Raz) - the female gaze. *The Female Gaze in Carol Ann Duffy's The World's Wife (2021)* reflects on how Carol Ann Duffy's poetry collection *The World's Wife (1999)* alludes to Greek mythology and appropriates Medusa's perspective in the narration to display the variation in the vantage point in discussing desire and love in the author's writing, depending on their gender (Sangeetha and Vennila 6397-6399). It reinterprets and reimagines European classical mythology through the female gaze.

Similar to the poetical production of Carol Ann Duffy, Olivia Gatwood, a feminist poet and performer from New Mexico, writes about the feminine - girlhood, female embodiment and reclamation of subjectivity. Gatwood's poetry, especially her 21st-century ode, "Ode to my Bitch Face" from *New American Best Friend*, is a collective expression of how women's bodies are constantly under disciplinary surveillance and subject to men's approval (Dulce). Her second poetry collection, *Life of the Party*, excessively focuses on how the male gaze is internalized through fear and violence surrounding the general female experience. Her works reclaim femininity by stripping away the shame, unimportance and weakness surrounding the concept of womanliness (Gupta) by presenting the world through the female gaze. In the series, she writes about the female experience outside male desire in the poem called "Alternate Universe in Which I am Unfazed by the Men Who Do Not Love Me" in the making of the female subjectivity.

Aim and Objective

This article engages with her poem "Manic Pixie Dream Girl Says", which acknowledges the extent of influence of the male gaze in the creation of the "ideal" female subject in a heteronormative relationship, through the narrator assuming the secondary role offered in a man's life with implied irony of her position. Beyond feminist theory, the Foucauldian conception of disciplinary power functioning as a panopticon of male gaze over female subjectification is explored to assess Gatwood's deconstruction of the gaze from within its normative discourse.

Theoretical Framework

A central conception in the framework of Foucault's reimagined disciplinary power is normalization - an institutional enforcement of standard 'acceptable' behaviour. "The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the 'social worker'- judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements" (Foucault 304). Wherein, the subject internalizes the norms through self-policing and regulation without any explicit external authorities formally enforcing them, owing to the fear of social judgement or rejection. The male gaze, within cinema and as a tangible idea, can be considered as a panoptic framework, as gender is a socially constructed norm through discourses on 'innate'

gender roles and behaviours. “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. Gender is not something one is, but something one does repeatedly, under conditions of constraint and surveillance” (Butler 519- 520). The male gaze, within cinema and as a tangible idea, can be considered as a panoptic framework, as gender is a socially constructed norm through discourses on ‘innate’ gender roles and behaviours. Gender as social identity is instituted through “stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 519), including bodily gestures, enactments, way of thinking, feeling, movements as a social temporality (Butler 520); that both the subject and their social audience internalize. The norms perpetuated by the gender discourse are ideals that are non-existent, arbitrary and imagined, a copy of an authentic discourse (Singh 285).

Feminine Norms and Emotional Labour

The normative discourse on gender constructs the female as docile, submissive, emotional, and nurturant, presented and surveilled through primary institutionalized socialization. This includes the imitation of constantly gendered ideals presented in media and literary depictions of heterosexual attractiveness. The discourse positions the paradoxical responsibility of emotional/affective labour of socially managing other’s emotion and simultaneously suppression of their own, on the female gender; as an idealized form of femininity. The tenets of hegemonic masculinity serve as the binary opposed reference for femininity, with traits of assertiveness, emotional repression, aggression, competitiveness, control, economic productivity and rationality. The discourse on traditional female norms is regulated by the male gaze by its contrast with the hegemonic masculinity, as the “Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object, and most particularly an object of vision” (Berger 47).

Analysis and Discussion

The cinematic trope of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl in fiction, termed by Nathan Rabin, encompasses the depiction of a young woman with eccentric personality quirks, who provides emotional support to the male protagonist and assists him in his self-actualization (Rabin). This trope is referenced in the poem “Manic Pixie Dream Girl Says” by Olivia Gatwood from her poetry collection *New American Best Friend*, where the reductionist role of the female trope is acknowledged – “*says, I’m going to save you / says, Don’t worry, you are still the lead role. This is your love story about the way I teach you to live.*” (Gatwood). As the self-aware title indicates, the poem deconstructs the cinematic trope by providing an alternative perception in normative films with a white-male protagonist by centring the female lead’s perspective. Its subversion of the norm adapts a first-person narration of metafictional consciousness (Patricia 2-3) to describe the man’s self-actualization towards the movie’s/poem’s denouement – “But this isn’t about me, this is about

you” (Gatwood) and again she self-reflexively pauses to narrate, “*Let me put the headphones on for you/ and smile, while you listen. Cut to your point of view*” (Gatwood). The background music of the movie follows the central narrative of the movie, the MPDG, aware of her secondary position as a cinematic archetype, deliberately switches the music to the male as an auditory cue for the protagonist’s point of view. And, this trope does not differ substantially from older female tropes; the damsel in distress is ‘saved’ for the internal growth of the male protagonist in acquiring valour and courage throughout the work of fiction.

As mentioned, the gendered discourse is inauthentic as the inherent characteristic of the pixie trope insinuates its impossibility of occurring in real life; “flesh and blood women. . . are inevitably more complex and substantial than the superficial waifs of our collective pop culture fantasies” (Knisley). The one-dimensionality of her trope, sustained by the narrative’s excessive focus on the man’s experience, culminates in the lines, “*Everything they know about me / they will learn when it is projected onto you*” (Gatwood). The brevity of her depiction, owing to the female character’s purpose as a narrative tool for male actualization defines the reductionism of female subjects by the male gaze. The one-dimensionality of the pixie’s portrayal as the ideal single-purpose emotional regulator in the heterosexual protagonist’s life deprives her character’s possibility to function as a fully autonomous being with a voice, as the “ability to use her voice is essential to a girl’s subjectivity” (Trites 62). The ‘subjectivity’ availed to her within the narrative is in relation to that of the protagonist’s voice or in her efforts to create his subjectivity.

The trope subverts the traditional norms of femininity. The unconventional traits of the pixie are venerated in pop culture, she embodies and performs her gender through a retro aesthetic stylization and cuteness,

Her thrift-store clothing is alternative in style and tends to harken to an era long passed, typically the 1950s or ‘60s; her hobbies often include knitting or crocheting, pastimes usually associated with an older generation as well as with domesticity; and her music tastes are firmly rooted beyond today’s mainstream, with 1980s band The Smiths being an oft-cited Pixie favorite. (Gouck, *The Problematic (Im)Persistence* 528)

In the poem, retro-aesthetics of her interests, as cited above, she still listens to physical media (records), “swing-dancing” from the 1940’s, her suggested christening after the male protagonist’s favourite “dead actress” from his childhood, her metaphorical embodiment as a “vintage dress” to project her as a fantasy artifact, not grounded in present reality, temporally displaced to deprive her of agency or subjectivity. This aesthetic codes her as unspoiled by modern cynicism, a portal to simpler times with well-defined gender roles; an uncomplicated, ideal, traditional woman of the heteronormative discourse, who is filtered through the male gaze and romanticized for their performance of emotional labour for men.

Notably, the characterization of the pixie could be described as “adorkable” (Romero) to cater to the male gaze’s attraction toward this trope from their favourite movies or literature, as someone who is most unlikely respected or considered powerful, but rather consistently infantilized and fetishized. The “quirky is an embrace of the odd against the blandly mainstream”; however, this quirk is “odd, but not *too* odd. That would take us all the way to *weird*, and there someone might get hurt” (Hirschorn 23) and is venerated based on their level of physical attractiveness. She self-describes, “*good girl, just bad enough / a burp / and a curtsy, / let me be not too pretty / hair fried from all of that pink dye... let me apologize when I get caught acting bigger than you/ Let me always wait for this, let me work for this.*” (Gatwood). Unlike the well-groomed and well-mannered traditional woman, the Manic Pixie Dream Girl cares little for her external appearance, yet dedicates herself to the emotional labour of the man’s subjectification like the “ideal” female subject. Her state of unpolished behaviour and appearance does not allow her autonomy, but are rather infantilized in the narrative.

As an “aesthetic that celebrates the diminutive and vulnerable” and thus, resulting in the “eroticization of powerlessness” (Ngai 3-4). The discourse of the subversive female interest with the persona of ‘unfeminine’ quirkiness, a paradoxical position, accentuates the pixie from traditionally ‘feminine’ other women. In the poem, her subversion from traditional femininity is marked by her unconventional and “frivolous” traits, which aid in her dismissal and decentring –

Manic pixie dream girl talks too much
says bad words out loud and cries at the commercials.

That makes me a funny woman, right?

The kind people like to laugh at?

It’s easy to root for you when I act like this –

so disagreeable, such a manic dream.

Dream girl, your almost broken accessory. (Gatwood)

Hence, the portrayal of this alternatively represented trope as the male subject’s site of heterosexual attraction consequently creates norms for the female subjects to adhere to and be dismissed for their frivolity in behaviour.

The voice of the pixie is considered “bubbly and effervescent with a penchant for waxing lyrical about the beauty of nature and of the everyday” (Gouck 535). Furthering the preexisting socio-cultural hegemonic notions on gender of the amplifying male voices and silencing of the female subject’s voices, especially through its normalization in literature. However, structurally and thematically, the pixie’s ultimate silencing or reduction of subjectivity is in the “symbol of her textual impersistence” (536), which is attained in the narration in the act of her final disappearance once her affective labour is completely effected. Her impersistence voice is acknowledged and reflected at the end of the poem, “*The convenient thing*

about being a magical woman / is that I can be gone as quickly as I came." (Gatwood). As a meta-conscious narrative, the poem deconstructs the male gaze by acknowledging the irony of the impermanence of its own voice.

The male subject the pixie corresponds to is typically a "white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class male protagonist" (Gouck, *The Manic Pixie Dream Girl in US YA Fiction* 5) whose life she strives to enrich through her 'quirkiness'. The disillusioned male character in the poem is said to have an unstimulating, heteronormative life - "your cubicle job, your white bedroom, your white Honda, your white mother" and she provides the needed emotional enrichment - "Manic pixie dream girl wants you to do something you've never done before. Like go swing-dancing, or smile". The spontaneity of her character is seldom directed toward or requires her to have equally complex emotional needs. She highlights the dismissal of her traumatic past experience by the male gaze, she writes, "Once, I told you I was afraid of my father, and for a moment, I looked so human, the audience lost interest".

Conclusion

The trope of Manic Pixie Dream Girl, thus, occupies the liminal position of subverting the traditionally feminine, but remaining as a subject of the male gaze in its origin and functionality. Olivia Gatwood's poem "Manic Pixie Dream Girl" self-reflexively deconstructs the trope and its subject position within the heteronormative discourse within the context of male-female desirability and romantic relations; the poetic speaker transitions from object (being seen by the male gaze) to subject (self-defining voice), denoted by italicization in the poem.

Limitations of the Study

The analysis is limited to one of Gatwood's prominent slam poems and does not encompass her entire body of work. The interpretations presented are shaped by a specific feminist theoretical lens and may differ under alternative frameworks. Finally, the study does not include reader-response data, which could further illuminate reception of these themes.

Suggestions for Future Research

- Comparative analysis with other contemporary feminist poets
- Exploration of performance poetry (spoken word) as a site of resistance to the male gaze
- Intersectional analysis incorporating race, class, and sexuality within MPDG discourse
- Audience reception studies examining how readers interpret subversions of the trope

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