Duncan of Jordanstone
College of Art & Design
University of Dundee

WINTER RYAN

Beyond the Manic Pixie Dream Girl: Disability, Femininity and Representation in Visual Culture

May 2026

Fine Art

DOI 10.15132/30000125

Beyond the Manic Pixie Dream Girl: Disability, Femininity and Representation in Visual Culture

By Winter Ryan

Abstract

Visual culture plays a significant role in shaping societal expectations of gender, beauty, and identity, yet disabled women have historically been misrepresented, marginalised, or rendered invisible within dominant visual narratives. This dissertation examines how disability and femininity intersect within visual culture, with a particular focus on the misrepresentation of neurodivergent women through the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* trope. While feminist theory and disability studies have critiqued structures of power and representation, disabled women have often been excluded from intersectional analysis, leaving ableist and gendered stereotypes unchallenged. Drawing on feminist theory, disability studies, and feminist disability studies, this research employs visual and textual analysis to examine film, art, and media. Through the use of case studies, this dissertation argues that mainstream visual culture frequently aestheticises or instrumentalises disabled femininity, while alternative, disability-led practices offer more ethical forms of representation. By centring authorship, lived experience, and self-representation, this research highlights the importance of challenging ableist and patriarchal visual frameworks in order to create more inclusive and meaningful representations of disabled women.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

Visual culture profoundly shapes society's understanding of gender, beauty, sexuality, and identity. In this dissertation, visual culture refers to the images, media and visual practices through which meaning is produced, both shaping and being shaped by society (Cronin & Dobbie, 2023). Because of this impact, inclusive representation is crucial. Despite this, portrayals of disabled women have often been exclusionary, distorted, or reduced to stereotypes. While there is now broader inclusion of neurodivergent individuals in art and media, many portrayals continue to reinforce ableist and sexist narratives.

This dissertation critically examines how disability and femininity intersect in visual culture, focusing on the misrepresentation and marginalisation of disabled women through the ‘Manic Pixie Dream Girl’ trope and its impact on depictions of neurodivergent women. It argues that both feminist discourse and mainstream media often exclude disabled women, limiting intersectional understanding and meaningful representation. In addition to critiquing misrepresentation, this dissertation discusses visual media that challenge stereotypes and offer more authentic portrayals of disabled women.

The subject of this dissertation is of personal significance. As a neurodivergent woman, I have experienced how visual culture shapes societal perceptions of disability and the harm that arises from inaccurate or stereotypical depictions. Frequently, aspects of neurodivergence are reduced to quirks or character flaws, while disability itself is dismissed, invalidated, or rendered invisible. These

experiences inform my research perspective and approach, connecting individual insight with theoretical analysis.

As well as being of personal significance, the subject of this dissertation directly informs the development of my studio practice, which critically engages with the visual construction of femininity, domesticity, and normative embodiment. Through the creation of an immersive installation resembling an idealised mid-century domestic interior, my practice examines how women's bodies and identities have historically been regulated and aestheticised within visual and cultural frameworks.

Chapter one will introduce the theoretical and historical foundation of this dissertation. It introduces key concepts such as the male gaze and intersectionality, and examines how feminist, disability, and feminist disability studies frameworks inform the analysis in the following chapters. By outlining how these ideas shape approaches to visual representation, this chapter provides the analytical tools to understand the 'manic pixie dream girl' trope through the lens of feminist disability studies.

Chapter two applies these frameworks to contemporary visual culture, focusing on the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* as a case study for gendered and ableist misrepresentation. This chapter explores how this trope romanticises or trivialises traits associated with neurodivergence and examines its persistence across film and media, highlighting its impact on cultural perceptions of disabled femininity.

Chapter three turns to alternative representations and examples of creators who challenge these reductive narratives. Drawing on visual art and media that offer more complex, empowering representations of disabled women, this chapter considers how these works combat and resist ableist, sexist narratives and offer alternative, more authentic ways of seeing disability and femininity.

Together, these chapters support the overall aim of this dissertation: to analyse how disabled women, particularly neurodivergent women, are represented in visual culture, and to explore how alternative portrayals can contribute to more inclusive and accurate representations of disabled femininity.

Chapter One: Gender, Disability, and the Gaze

Feminist disability studies has remained under-explored within academic scholarship until more recently, despite its importance in understanding the intersection of disability and gender within visual culture. While feminist theory has thoroughly examined power structures and representation, it has often neglected the experiences of disabled women, creating a significant gap in scholarship and visibility. This lack of dialogue between feminist and disability discourse enables ableist representations to persist within cultural narratives, reinforcing narrow ideals of femininity, beauty, and value. Feminist disability studies addresses these gaps by integrating feminist theories on representation and identity with disability studies' critiques of social exclusion and normative standards. This chapter establishes the theoretical and historical foundations of this dissertation, drawing on key concepts such as Laura Mulvey's 'Male Gaze' (1975), Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality (1989), and the work of scholars including Susan Wendell (1996) and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1989), who connect feminist and disability thought. These concepts provide a foundation for analysing how visual culture reflects and shapes societal attitudes towards disabled femininity.

Laura Mulvey's essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) is a cornerstone of feminist film theory, introducing the concept of the 'male gaze'. Mulvey argues that film primarily presents a masculine perspective, positioning women as objects of visual pleasure, writing, *"The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly"* (Mulvey, 1975). Her analysis demonstrates that classical cinema reinforces patriarchal power structures

by constructing women and femininity as a means for male pleasure, rather than as individuals with agency. The concept of the male gaze is essential for understanding how the objectification of women operates as a mechanism for generating visual pleasure. Although Mulvey's work is vital to feminist film theory, it has been criticised for its limited inclusivity, particularly its failure to consider race, sexuality, and disability in its analysis of visual representation (Hooks, 1992). Mulvey's 'male gaze' does not directly explore gender and disability together in visual culture; in the context of this dissertation, it provides a foundation for examining how the gaze operates in relation to gender and the construction of able-bodied norms. When combined with insights from disability studies, the 'male gaze' can be reinterpreted as both patriarchal and ableist, marginalising disabled women through the visual promotion of idealised, normative bodies.

To understand the 'male gaze' in relation to feminist disability studies, it is first essential to gain an understanding of Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw developed the concept to describe how overlapping systems of oppression, such as racism, sexism, and classism, intersect to create complex individual experiences of privilege and discrimination. Crenshaw argued that traditional feminist and antiracist movements often failed to address the unique experiences of black women, whose identities are shaped by overlapping systems of power. Intersectionality, therefore, challenges binary approaches to identity by highlighting that social categories such as race, gender, class and disability are not independent of one another; they are linked and mutually inform one another. While Crenshaw draws attention to the overlapping of systems of oppression in the form of gender, race, and class, she fails to take into account the perspective of disabled

women within this research. Despite this, within the context of feminist disability studies, intersectionality provides a vital framework for analysing how disability interacts with gender and other identity markers to produce distinct experiences of exclusion and representation, allowing for a more nuanced take on how ableism and sexism reinforce one another within visual culture.

When intersectionality is applied to the ‘male gaze’, it exposes how the gaze privileges not only male perspectives but also white, heterosexual, and able-bodied norms. This intersectional lens, therefore, expands Mulvey’s framework, revealing how women who live outside of these normative categories, such as disabled and neurodivergent women, are rendered invisible or represented through reductive stereotypes. This invisibility is not only present within visual culture, but it is also reflected in academic fields, a concern highlighted by contemporary scholars who critique the exclusion of disabled women from feminist and disability discourse.

Wilde and Fish (2024) expand this intersectional perspective by arguing that feminism has historically overlooked disabled women, resulting in their marginalisation within both feminist and disability scholarship, as well as cultural narratives. They describe disabled women as *“becoming overlooked within CD/S, being something of an ‘absent presence’”* (Wilde & Fish, 2024), illustrating that although women may be referenced within critical disability studies (CD/S), they are often excluded from meaningful participation or representation. This absence highlights a broader issue; without the inclusion of disabled women’s voices, critical disability studies risks limiting the intersectional understanding of how disability and femininity interact to shape lived experience, including the ways disabled women

navigate representation, identity and social exclusion. This recognition of disabled women's exclusion within feminist and disability scholarship echoes earlier critiques by theorists such as Susan Wendell, whose work also highlights how cultural norms surrounding the body shape the representation and lived experience of disability.

The Rejected Body (Wendell, 1996) offers an essential foundation to understanding why disabled women have been marginalised within feminist theory and visual culture, arguing that society constructs rigid ideals for the normal and acceptable body, which then excludes disabled women from femininity itself, othering them. Wendell further identifies how this exclusion impacts representation as well as societal understandings of disability,

> *Canadian and United States culture rarely includes people with disabilities in their depictions of ordinary daily life, and they exclude the struggles, thoughts, and feelings of people with disabilities from any shared cultural understanding of human experience* (Wendell, 1996).

This highlights the exclusion that disabled people face culturally, which Wendell then goes on to argue,

> *This tends to make people with disabilities feel invisible (except when they are made hypervisible in their symbolic roles as heroes or tragic victims), and it deprives the non-disabled of the knowledge and perspectives that people with disabilities could contribute to culture* (Wendell, 1996).

This distinction between invisibility and hypervisibility explains how disabled individuals are either omitted from cultural narratives entirely or presented through harmful stereotypes framing these individuals as inspirational, pitiable or a burden, rather than being seen as complex individuals. Their lives are simplified, and they are often reduced to solely their disability. Within visual culture, these dynamics

contribute to a persistent erasure of disabled femininity, with disabled women rarely being portrayed as complex subjects with agency. Wendell's work, therefore, provides a critical foundation for understanding how ableist and sexist norms shape cultural representations, informing the analyses developed in subsequent chapters.

Building on this, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997) offers a crucial analysis of how disabled bodies are visually interpreted, exploring how disabled women become objects of fascination and regulation within visual culture. Garland-Thomson argues that disabilities are subjective, not fixed; bodies do not become disabled simply because of their physical or cognitive characteristics, but because the surrounding environment and cultural expectations fail to accommodate them, creating a specific, intensified devaluation placed on disabled women within a visually driven society. As she notes,

> *In a society in which appearance is the primary index of value for women (and increasingly for men), beautification practices normalize the female body and disabilities abnormalize it. Feminization prompts the gaze; disability prompts the stare. Feminization increases a woman's cultural capital; disability reduces it.* (Garland-Thomson, 1997).

The distinction between the *gaze* and the *stare* illustrates how disabled women are simultaneously hyper-visible, as objects of curiosity or discomfort, and also invisible as full subjects within cultural narratives. Garland-Thomson's analysis, therefore, demonstrates how ableism and sexism intersect within visual culture, not only determining how disabled women are represented but also determining how they are valued and understood.

Martin Norden's historical analysis, Cinema of Isolation (Norden, 1994), shows that misrepresentation of disability in visual media is not a new phenomenon, but part of a long-standing pattern in which film has shaped public attitudes towards disability through reductive stereotypes. He argues that disabled characters in Western cinema are often used as narrative devices, positioned as objects to be pitied, feared or looked at with contempt, rather than complex individuals. These portrayals, spread across decades of filmmaking, have reinforced the idea of disability as a plot device rather than a lived identity, shaping how audiences understand disability. This history is significant as it reveals that many of the stereotypes and erasures experienced by disabled women today are rooted in long-established visual conventions predating contemporary media. Norden's work demonstrates how visual culture repeatedly reduces disability to metaphor, inspiration, or spectacle, leaving little room for authentic representation. By situating disabled individuals within such limited narrative roles, cinema has contributed to the cultural marginalisation of disabled women, whose identities become constrained by cinematic tropes rather than their own lived experience. This context helps explain how more recent tropes, such as the 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl', continue to build upon and perpetuate earlier patterns of ableist representation.

Together, these theoretical frameworks highlight how gendered and ableist assumptions have shaped the representation of disabled women in visual culture, revealing patterns that continue to influence contemporary media. Mulvey, Crenshaw, Wendell, Garland-Thomson, and Norden each expose different aspects of the same issue: that cultural narratives are built upon normative expectations of femininity and ability, and that these norms determine who is seen, how they are

seen, and what value is assigned to their bodies. By demonstrating how disabled women become invisible through exclusion or hyper-visible through reductive stereotypes, these theorists reveal the structures that continue to restrict authentic representation. This foundation is crucial for understanding how contemporary tropes, such as the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl*, emerge from long-standing traditions in visual culture that prioritise able-bodied, male-centred perspectives. The following chapter builds on this theoretical groundwork, examining how these patterns persist in modern film and how neurodivergent femininity becomes appropriated, romanticised and misrepresented within contemporary visual culture.

Chapter Two: The Manic Pixie Dream Girl

Building upon the theoretical foundations established in Chapter One, this chapter applies those frameworks to the analysis of gendered and ableist misrepresentation in contemporary visual culture. It focuses on the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* trope, one of the most persistent examples of how femininity is constructed to serve male-centred narratives. By examining this archetype through the lens of the male gaze, intersectionality, and feminist disability theory, this chapter explores how traits associated with neurodivergence are often romanticised, trivialised, or used to reinforce patriarchal storytelling. By examining the origins of the term, it becomes possible to understand how this trope has evolved and what its persistence reveals about contemporary attitudes toward femininity and disability.

The *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* trope is one of the most persistent examples of gendered misrepresentation in modern media. Film critic Nathan Rabin first coined this term in his 2007 review of *Elizabethtown*, where he states, “The Manic Pixie Dream Girl 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. The Manic Pixie Dream Girl is an all-or-nothing-proposition.” (Rabin, 2007). Rabin’s description of the trope immediately establishes it as a projection of male fantasy rather than a woman’s lived experience, highlighting how the trope centres around male development, while the female is a tool to actualise this development. Since its creation, the ‘manic pixie dream girl’ has been used to describe a recurring archetype in film and television: an eccentric, quirky, whimsical woman who exists primarily to inspire a male's self-discovery, or plot development.

This archetype not only perpetuates gendered stereotypes but also reflects a broader cultural narrative that positions women as a mechanism for male growth, rather than complex individuals with their own stories.

Later, Rabin (2014) reflected on when he first created the term, feeling as though he had finally named and given recognition to something that had been a prevalent part of our culture for some time. He acknowledged

> *"The trope of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl 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." (Rabin, 2014).*

This reflection demonstrates Rabin's developing awareness of the tropes' reductive nature and its influence on how femininity is constructed and portrayed by the media. By identifying the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* as both a symptom and perpetrator of patriarchal ideology, Rabin's views align with Laura Mulvey's (1975) theory of the male gaze, which similarly explores how women are framed as objects existing solely for male pleasure and narrative progression.

The persistence of this archetype across decades, alongside its overlap with theories such as 'the male gaze', suggests that patriarchal storytelling continues to depend on female characters to rehabilitate men. By portraying emotion and eccentricity as feminine traits that exist to inspire male growth, the trope reinforces narrow ideas about femininity and neurodivergence.

Further building on this connection, Rabin revisited the trope in his 2024 blog post, '*The Neurodivergent Underpinnings of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl Mythology*', where he reflected on how many of the characters and characteristics associated with the

trope display traits commonly linked to neurodivergence (Rabin, 2024). Rabin's recognition of the tropes' alignment with neurodivergent traits offers a valuable point of entry for analysing how ableism intersects with gendered representation. Traits such as eccentricity, emotional intensity, and social awkwardness, which are often romanticised through the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl*, are characteristics that in many other contexts are pathologised or stigmatised. He observes,

> *" In MPDG-based entertainment, Dream Girls on the Spectrum are great for life lessons and spiritual evolution, but they're not the kind of girls you marry and have children with." (Rabin, 2024).*

This distinction exposes the underlying ableism and sexism of this trope; neurodivergent presenting women are celebrated as mechanisms for male growth, yet denied narrative legitimacy as full, desirable subjects. Such portrayals reinforce the cultural belief that women who deviate from normative standards of behaviour and emotion are worth less than their neurotypical peers, and are valuable only in relation to male self-discovery.

Before looking at specific examples of the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* trope, it is necessary to consider how traits associated with neurodivergence in women are frequently misrepresented or pathologised within visual culture, creating the stereotypes that are embodied in this trope. Research on neurodivergence in women shows that traits such as emotional intensity, sensory sensitivity, social atypicality and impulsivity are frequently misunderstood or overlooked due to gendered expectations of femininity, with women often perceived as presenting with less severe symptoms than their male peers with the same neurodevelopmental disorders. Alongside this, many neurodivergent women are more likely to internalise

their symptoms, developing coping strategies, or learning to mask their symptoms to meet the societal expectations of appropriate feminine behaviour (Quinn & Madhoo, 2014; Ochoa-Lubinoff et al., 2023). Within visual culture, these gendered misrepresentations allow neurodivergent traits to be reframed as charming eccentric personality traits, rather than recognised as aspects of disability. Behaviours such as emotional intensity, impulsivity, or social atypicality are frequently aestheticised, portrayed as quirks, detached from the challenges that accompany them, offering neurodivergence as palatable and appealing within male-centred narratives. A process that obscures the lived realities of neurodivergent women, showing difference is valued only when it can be consumed without discomfort or when used to support another character's development, thereby creating the conditions that sustain tropes such as the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl*.

The *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* trope can therefore be understood as a cultural mechanism through which traits commonly associated with neurodivergence are selectively appropriated, aestheticised and rendered non-threatening within patriarchal storytelling. Characteristics such as emotional intensity, impulsivity, social awkwardness, unconventional communication styles, and resistance to social norms are frequently detached from the struggles they cause or their lived context and reframed as whimsical or liberating personality traits. When embodied by young, attractive, and most often white female characters, these behaviours are no longer treated as signs of disability or difference, but instead become markers of charm or desirability. The *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* is unique, not like the other girls; she is different and exciting, existing to broaden the horizons of the male who becomes infatuated with her. This selective framing allows neurodivergent-coded traits to be

celebrated only when they are visually pleasing and narratively convenient, reinforcing ableist distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable forms of difference.

This process of appropriation obscures the realities of neurodivergence, particularly the labour involved in masking, self-regulation, and navigating social norms and exclusion. While real neurodivergent women face frequent penalisation for displaying the same behaviours that are romanticised on screen, the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* is permitted to transgress social norms without consequence, as her difference is carefully curated to serve male emotional development. The trope therefore operates within what feminist disability scholars identify as a narrow framework of conditional acceptance, in which difference is tolerated only when it remains entertaining, non-disruptive and useful to others (Wendell, 1996; Garland-Thomson, 1997). By detaching neurodivergent traits from disability and reframing them as aesthetic quirks, the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* reinforces the erasure of neurodivergent women's lived experiences, transforming difference into spectacle while leaving underlying systems of ableism intact.

Marc Webb's 500 Days of Summer (2009) offers one of the most explicit and influential expressions of the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* trope in contemporary cinema, presenting a female character whose emotional intensity, eccentricity, and detachment from social convention are framed almost entirely in terms of their impact on male self-development. The film is often regarded as a self-aware critique of romantic fantasy, explicitly encouraging the audience to view Tom's perspective as

unreliable; however, this apparent self-awareness stops short of granting Summer full subjectivity, leaving her defined largely in relation to Tom's emotional development. Summer Finn is portrayed as quirky, emotionally guarded, and resistant to traditional romantic narratives, traits that position her as unconventional and alluring from Tom's male-centred perspective. A particularly revealing moment occurs when Summer explains she is not interested in love or commitment, prompting Tom's friend to respond, "Holy shit. You're a dude. She's a dude." (500 Days of Summer, 2009). This line frames Summer's emotional boundaries and rejection of romance as masculine, implying that emotional detachment, autonomy, and resistance to relational expectations are incompatible with femininity. Within the context of feminist disability theory, this moment highlights how deviation from normative feminine behaviour is treated as abnormal, insisting on categorisation instead of understanding. Summer's refusal to conform to traditional feminine expectations around commitment, emotional availability, and sexual purity is not treated as a legitimate position; it is reinterpreted through masculine comparison. Crucially, once Summer ultimately serves her purpose as a catalyst for Tom's emotional development, she is replaced by Autumn, symbolically resetting the romantic cycle. This transition reinforces the disposability of women who exist within the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* role, suggesting that once a woman is no longer a catalyst for male growth, she is easily replaced with a substitute. Ultimately, 500 Days of Summer reproduces the structures it seeks to critique, reaffirming the cultural belief that a woman's difference is only tolerable as long as it remains useful, digestible and emotionally productive for men.

While 500 Days of Summer presents a relatively grounded version of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl, Edgar Wright's Scott Pilgrim vs. the World (2010) exaggerates the trope through stylised spectacle, transforming neurodivergent-coded traits into a hyper-visible aesthetic performance. Ramona Flowers is perceived as unpredictable, impulsive, and emotionally distant, with a chaotic personal history, all of which are central to her narrative function. Ramona's ever-changing hair colour becomes a visual motif signalling her instability and impermanence, a surface-level marker that attracts Scott, whilst also leaving him unnerved. Scott explicitly admits her frequent hair colour changes scare him; this frames Ramona as exciting and threatening, rather than her hair being an expression of autonomy, it becomes a curated signifier of difference, designed to intrigue rather than be understood. Alongside this, Ramona comes with literal baggage in the form of her "seven evil exes," transforming her romantic history into a series of obstacles that Scott must defeat in order to gain access to her. By gamifying Ramona's past, the film positions her as a prize to be won, rather than a complex individual with a lived history. This reduces Ramona and her experiences as a spectacle, something for Scott to overcome. In doing so, the film reinforces the logic of the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* trope: female difference is entertaining and permissible only when it can be contained and conquered in service of male progression. Rather than framing Ramona's difference as existing on its own terms, the film repackages it as a spectacle, preserving male-centred control over narratives of feminine unpredictability.

In contrast to the exaggerated spectacle created in Scott Pilgrim vs. the World, Michel Gondry's Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004) presents a more self-reflective engagement with the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* archetype, using a

fractured narrative structure to complicate and seemingly critique the romanticisation of female eccentricity, while ultimately reproducing many of the male-centred dynamics it appears to confront. Clementine Kruczynski is depicted as emotionally volatile, impulsive, and resistant to authority and stability. These traits are framed in opposition to our male lead, Joel, whose emotional passiveness, fear of vulnerability, and resistance to asserting control over his own life position Clementine's difference as a disruptive yet necessary catalyst for Joel's emotional development. The film exposes Joel's selective memory and idealisation of Clementine, suggesting a critique of romantic fantasy; however, her character remains largely confined to Joel's perspective and the role of catalyst, rather than as an individual with narrative autonomy. Clementine's eccentricity is simultaneously aestheticised and pathologised, perceived as alluring yet destabilising, reinforcing gendered associations between femininity, emotional intensity, and unpredictability. The memory-erasure process makes this dynamic explicit, transforming Clementine into a figure that can be edited, simplified, or even erased when her difference makes her too emotionally challenging. Although the film presents itself as reflective, it ultimately maintains the logic of the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl*, allowing female difference to exist only in relation to male self-discovery, where it is valuable, palatable, and convenient. In doing so, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (Gondry, 2004) exposes how contemporary romantic cinema continues to centre male subjectivity, reproducing gendered and ableist assumptions even within seemingly self-aware narratives.

Together, these representations highlight how the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* trope has become a culturally recognisable narrative framework through which

neurodivergent-coded femininity is romanticised and aestheticised, while remaining constrained by the prioritisation of male-centred storytelling. Across the examples discussed, traits commonly associated with neurodivergence are detached from their lived realities and reconfigured as aesthetic quirks that exist primarily to facilitate male emotional development. Even in films that appear self-aware or critical, female difference remains conditional, valued only when it is palatable, narratively convenient, or emotionally productive for men. By framing neurodivergent-coded femininity as whimsical and intriguing, whilst also being disruptive or disposable, these representations overshadow the marginalisation and lived struggles of neurodivergent women, reinforcing narrow ideals of acceptable difference. This analysis establishes the need to move beyond male-centred portrayals and towards representation shaped by disabled and neurodivergent women themselves, a shift that forms the focus of the following chapter.

Chapter Three: Reclaiming Representation

Building on the critique of gendered and ableist misrepresentation established in the previous chapters, this chapter turns to alternative visual representations that challenge dominant narratives surrounding disabled and neurodivergent femininity. Rather than reinforcing reductive tropes or positioning disabled women as narrative devices, the artists and works discussed here centre self-representation and lived experience, offering more authentic depictions of disabled women's experiences. These works resist the romanticisation and spectacle that often characterise mainstream depictions of disability and femininity. By centring disabled women as subjects rather than symbols, this art offers more ethical and complex modes of representation. This chapter examines the work of artists such as Frida Kahlo, Marc Quinn, and contemporary neurodivergent-led filmmaking, exploring how visual culture can move beyond misrepresentation towards visibility grounded in autonomy. These approaches directly inform the development of my studio practice, offering alternative strategies for representing femininity, disability and domesticity outside of patriarchal and ableist norms.

Frida Kahlo offers a crucial counterpoint to the passive and idealised representations of disabled women explored in earlier chapters. Kahlo was a disabled woman who asserted control over her own image within a male-dominated art world, positioning disability not as a spectacle or metaphor, but as a lived experience shaped by gender, pain and visibility. Frida Kahlo contracted polio in childhood and later suffered a severe spinal injury in a bus accident, resulting in chronic pain and physical impairment throughout much of her life (Zelazko, 2024). These experiences became central to her artistic practice; rather than being concealed or aestheticised, Kahlo used repeated self-portraiture to claim authorship over her own representation, rejecting both the erasure and romanticisation of disabled bodies that dominate visual culture. Her work resists normative ideals of femininity and bodily wholeness, presenting the disabled female body as complex, self-defined, and confrontational. Alongside her artistic exploration of her disability and pain, Kahlo's work frequently references her lived experience as a woman, engaging with themes of love, betrayal, and emotional vulnerability connected to her tumultuous marriage to Diego Rivera (Zelazko, 2024). In contrast to the male-authored, romanticised depictions of neurodivergent femininity in the previous chapter, Kahlo's practice centres the disabled woman as an active subject rather than a narrative device. Her self-portraits function as a site of resistance, representing disabled femininity on its terms by asserting agency and authorship over the female body. This resistance is articulated through Kahlo's use of symbolism, compositional choices and bodily presentation, which the following analysis examines.

Through a series of self-portraits, Kahlo rejects idealised notions of femininity, presenting her disabled body as complex, confrontational, and unapologetically present.

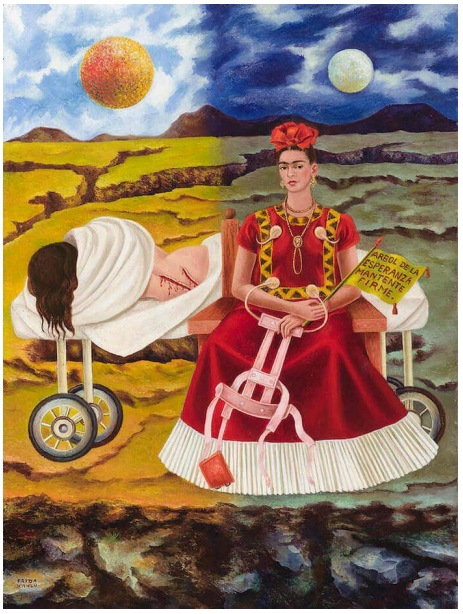

Figure 1. Frida Kahlo, Tree of Hope, Remain Strong (1946): Oil on masonite.

Tree of Hope, Remain Strong (1946) presents a dual self-portrait set against a barren, fractured landscape divided between day and night. Kahlo juxtaposes her wounded, exposed body lying on a surgical table with a second upright figure dressed in traditional clothing, who confronts the viewer, holding a brace and a flag as symbols of endurance. This duality refuses a singular narrative of suffering or recovery, presenting vulnerability and resilience as coexisting states. By transforming medical apparatus into an emblem of strength, Kahlo challenges cultural expectations that disabled bodies must be either concealed or inspirational, positioning disabled femininity as visible, self-defined and resistant to idealisation.

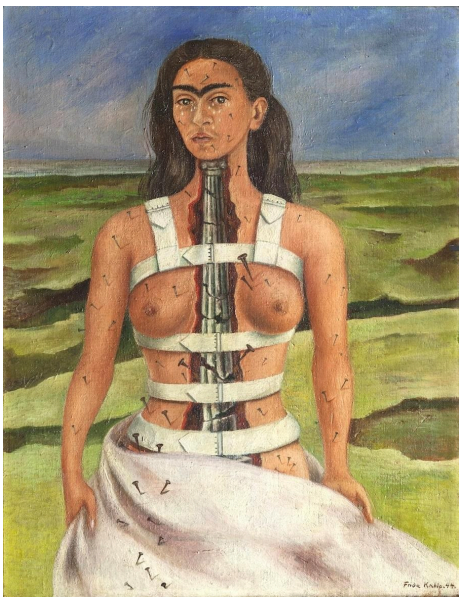

Figure 2. Frida Kahlo, The Broken Column (1944): Oil on masonite.

The Broken Column (1944) presents Kahlo's body split open, revealing a crumbling column in place of her spine, visually exposing her internal pain as a structural collapse. Her torso is pierced with nails, while a medical corset restrains her body, emphasising her physical suffering and constrainment. This piece contrasts heroic depictions of endurance in the face of suffering, directly confronting the viewer. Kahlo's expression is composed, rejecting pity or spectacle. The exposed body is neither eroticised nor concealed; instead, it asserts the reality of chronic pain and impairment as part of her, inseparable from her identity. By replacing the spine with a crumbling architectural form, Kahlo links bodily damage to instability and endurance, challenging ideals of bodily wholeness and the cultural demand that women conceal their pain and vulnerability, remaining composed. Disability here is not symbolic of a moral failure that requires correction but an embodied, ongoing condition, worthy of recognition.

Together, these self-portraits reject linear narratives of recovery, instead presenting disability as something complex and lived. Kahlo refuses the binaries of strength versus weakness or visibility versus concealment, portraying disabled femininity as both vulnerable and defiant. Through self-authored representation, Kahlo resists the cultural norms that either erase disabled bodies or frame them as inspirational objects, reclaiming agency on her own terms.

Where Kahlo's work challenges the invisibility and idealisation of disabled women within modernist painting, Alison Lapper Pregnant (Quinn, 2005) relocates this resistance into a monumental public space, utilising sculpture to directly confront cultural assumptions about disability, visibility, value and reproductive autonomy. Created by Marc Quinn in collaboration with Alison Lapper, the sculpture draws directly from Lapper's own body and lived experience, exposing tensions around authorship, representation and agency within public art.

Figure 3. Marc Quinn (2005): Marble Sculpture

Installed on the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, the sculpture depicts Lapper's nude, visibly pregnant body carved in white marble, a material historically associated

with classical sculpture, heroism, and permanence. The scale and material of the work deliberately reference traditions of monumental statues, positioning a disabled female body within a visual language more commonly reserved for male power, military achievement and national pride. Lapper is presented upright, looking outwards with a calm expression, refusing shame or concealment. Her limb difference and pregnancy are not sensationalised, depicted as they truly appear, asserting bodily presence without apology. By situating a disabled, pregnant woman at the symbolic centre of British public space, the sculpture challenges the exclusion of disabled women from dominant narratives of beauty, motherhood, value, and normative bodily ideals. Rather than framing disability as tragic or inspirational, Alison Lapper Pregnant presents disabled femininity as self-possessed and authoritative, demanding recognition and understanding rather than admiration or pity.

The public and media response to Alison Lapper Pregnant reveals how deeply ingrained ableist and gendered assumptions shape reactions to disabled women's visibility, demonstrating how disabled bodies remain scrutinised and regulated within visual culture. BBC news coverage from the time described the work as "a statue of a naked, pregnant woman with no arms" and emphasised it was "already dividing opinion" upon its unveiling (BBC News, 2005), framing the sculpture as controversial before even engaging with its meaning. While disability advocates described the work as "powerful and arresting," critical responses described it as "ugly" or "repellent," revealing how aesthetic judgment becomes a mechanism for regulating disabled bodies that diverge from normative ideals of beauty and femininity. Even more sympathetic comments frequently framed Lapper as "brave" or inspirational,

positioning her body as a symbol rather than acknowledging her agency as a subject. These reactions reflect the dynamics identified by Garland-Thomson, in which disabled women are rendered hyper-visible as objects of fascination while simultaneously subjected to scrutiny and control (Garland-Thomson, 1997). The reception of Alison Lapper Pregnant, therefore, exposes the limits of inclusion within visual culture, demonstrating that when disabled women claim public space, visibility often intensifies scrutiny rather than dismantling ableist and sexist frameworks.

The Stimming Pool (2024) presents a significant shift in the representation of neurodivergence as a collaborative project led by neurodivergent filmmakers, The Neuroculture Collective (Neurodivergent Films, 2025). The film centres autistic perspectives by prioritising sensory experience and self-expression over narrative coherence and audience comfort. Rather than organising autistic experience through linear storytelling or prioritising the neurotypical understanding of film, The Stimming Pool centres sensation, rhythm, repetition, and bodily response. The film moves between moments of overstimulation, withdrawal, repetition, and calm, using sound, editing, and camera movement to reflect autistic sensory experience. Everyday environments such as waiting rooms, public transport, workplaces, and social spaces are presented as overwhelming and intrusive, while moments of stimming, movement, and repetition are shown as grounding and regulating. In refusing to explain or translate autistic experience for a neurotypical audience, the film resists the expectations that disabled subjects must be made easily understandable or emotionally accessible. Instead, it presents neurodivergence on its own terms, allowing sensory experience to guide the structure of the film. In doing so, The

Stimming Pool positions neurodivergent characters as subjects with agency, rather than as objects to be fixed or utilised towards neurotypical development.

The film also directly addresses how autistic embodiment is shaped by gendered expectations, particularly through Lucy's reflections on stimming. Lucy describes how, as a child, she moved her body often, in what she refers to as "weird movements," forms of stimming that were discouraged or corrected. This process of being "taught out of" bodily expression reflects broader cultural pressures placed on autistic girls to appear controlled and quiet, behaving in ways deemed socially acceptable. Within a visual culture that prioritises composure and aesthetic femininity, these movements are framed as disruptive or inappropriate, rather than necessary forms of self-regulation. Lucy's experience demonstrates how autistic femininity is shaped through masking, suppressing regulatory needs in order to conform to narrow ideals of womanhood. This is something also reflected in feminist disability studies, which identifies that disabled women are required to minimise visible difference in order to access social legitimacy, often at the cost of comfort, autonomy, and self-expression (Wendell, 1996).

This approach stands in direct contrast to the representations explored in Chapter Two. Where the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* selectively aestheticises neurodivergent-coded traits, presenting difference as alluring, whimsical, or emotionally productive for male characters, The Stimming Pool refuses to make autistic behaviour palatable or narratively useful for neurotypical growth. Stimming in the film is not romanticised or explained, nor is it framed as inspirational; it is

repetitive, sometimes uncomfortable, and often disconnected from conventional narrative progression. Rather than existing to facilitate another character's growth, these moments centre autistic experience itself. By removing male-centred storytelling and rejecting the demand for coherence and resolution, the film challenges the conditional acceptance of difference that underpins tropes such as the Manic Pixie Dream Girl. Neurodivergence is not presented as a temporary disruption or a tool for transformation, but as a valid way of being that does not require justification.

By reclaiming visibility on their own terms, the artists discussed in this chapter offer models of representation that move beyond fetishisation, erasure, and stereotype, revealing the importance of authorship and lived experience in challenging gendered and ableist frameworks that continue to shape visual culture. These works resist the demand that disabled women's bodies be inspirational, explanatory, or aesthetically palatable within mainstream visual culture, through self-authorship and disability-led production. In contrast to the reductive tropes explored in earlier chapters, these works centre disabled women as subjects with agency, whose bodies and behaviours are not required to justify their presence, nor serve external narratives. When viewed together, these examples demonstrate that meaningful representation occurs not through inclusion within existing visual conventions, but through the disruption of these conventions themselves.

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined how disability and femininity intersect within visual culture, with particular focus on the misrepresentation and marginalisation of disabled women. By moving from feminist and disability theory, through contemporary film tropes, to alternative forms of disability-led representation, it has demonstrated how visual culture continues to privilege narrow, able-bodied and gendered ideals, shaping who is seen, how they are seen, and whose experience is valued. Central to this analysis has been the argument that disabled women are frequently rendered either invisible or hyper-visible within visual culture, reduced to stereotypes that serve external narratives rather than reflecting lived experience.

Chapter one established the theoretical foundations necessary to understand these dynamics, drawing on feminist film theory, intersectionality, and feminist disability studies to reveal how gendered and ableist frameworks structure representation. The work of Mulvey, Crenshaw, Wendell, Garland-Thomson, and Norden demonstrated that visual culture does not simply reflect social attitudes but actively participates in producing and reinforcing normative assumptions about femininity, beauty, and bodily value. These frameworks revealed how disabled women are excluded from dominant cultural narratives or positioned as objects of fascination, regulation, or spectacle.

Building on this foundation, Chapter Two analysed the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* trope as a contemporary example of gendered and ableist misrepresentation in visual culture. Through close readings of film, this chapter showed how traits associated

with neurodivergence are selectively aestheticised, detached from lived reality, and repurposed to facilitate male emotional development. While these characters appear unconventional or progressive, they ultimately reinforce restrictive ideas about femininity and difference, offering conditional acceptance that depends on usefulness, palatability, and narrative convenience. This demonstrates how such representations obscure the realities of neurodivergent women's lives, perpetuating exclusion beneath the guise of representation.

In contrast, Chapter Three examined alternative forms of representation that resist these dynamics through self-authorship and disability-led production, which depict lived experience. By examining Frida Kahlo's self-portraiture, *Alison Lapper Pregnant* as a collaborative sculpture, and The Stimming Pool as a neurodivergent-led film project, this chapter highlighted how alternative, meaningful modes of representation can challenge the regulation and erasure of disabled women in visual culture.

Together, this dissertation argues that the persistent misrepresentation of disabled women within visual culture is not the result of absence alone, but of deeply embedded gendered and ableist structures that determine how difference is allowed to appear. However, it also shows that these structures are not fixed. Through feminist disability studies and disability-led visual practices, alternative ways of seeing become possible, ways that recognise disabled femininity as complex, lived, and self-defined. By prioritising authorship, autonomy, and lived experience, this research contributes to ongoing conversations about representation, visibility, and

power. It highlights the necessity of centring disabled women in the creation of visual culture that seeks to represent them.

Bibliography

500 Days of Summer. (2009). [Film] United States: Fox Searchlight Pictures.

BBC News (2005). *Square's naked sculpture revealed*. [online] Bbc.co.uk. Available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/london/4247000.stm [Accessed 10th Oct. 2025].

Crenshaw, K. (1989). *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: a Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. University of Chicago Legal Forum*, [online] 1989(1), pp.139–167. Available at: https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf. [Accessed 12th Oct. 2025].

Cronin, J.K. and Dobbie, H. (2023). *Look Closely: A Critical Introduction to Visual Culture*. [online] By J. Keri Cronin and Hannah Dobbie, Brock University. St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada. Available at: https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/introtovisualculture/ [Accessed 12th Oct. 2025].

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind. (2004). [Film] Focus Features.

Garland-Thomson, R. (1997). *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hooks, B. (1992). *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. New York: Routledge, pp.115–131.

Mulvey, L. (1975). *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. Screen,* [online] 16(3), pp.6–18. Available at: https://academic.oup.com/screen/article/16/3/6/1603296. [Accessed 12th Oct. 2025].

Neurodivergent Films (2025). *The Stimming Pool*. [online] The Stimming Pool. Available at: https://www.thestimmingpool.com/about [Accessed 15th Dec. 2025].

Norden, M. (1994). *The cinema of isolation: A history of physical disability in the movies.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Ochoa-Lubinoff, C., Makol, B.A. and Dillon, E.F. (2023). *Autism in women. Neurologic Clinics*, 41(2), pp.381–397. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ncl.2022.10.006.

Quinn, M. (2005). *Alison Lapper Pregnant.* [online] Available at: https://marcquinn.com/artworks/single/alison-lapper-pregnant [Accessed 10th Dec. 2025].

Quinn, P. and Madhoo, M. (2014). *A Review of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder in Women and Girls. The Primary Care Companion For CNS Disorders*, [online] 16(3). doi:https://doi.org/10.4088/pcc.13r01596.

Rabin, N. (2007). *The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: Elizabethtown*. [online] The A.V. Club. Available at: https://www.avclub.com/the-bataan-death-march-of-whimsy-case-file-1-elizabet-1798210595 [Accessed 10th Dec. 2025].

Rabin, N. (2014). *I'm Sorry for Coining the Phrase 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl'*. [online] Salon. Available at: https://www.salon.com/2014/07/15/im_sorry_for_coining_the_phrase_manic_pixie_dream_girl/. [Accessed 10th Dec. 2025].

Rabin, N. (2024). *The Neurodivergent Underpinnings of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl Mythology*. [online] Available at: https://www.nathanrabin.com/happy-place/2024/5/22/the-neurodivergent-underpinnings-of-the-manic-pixie-dream-girl-mythology. [Accessed 10th Dec. 2025].

Scott Pilgrim vs. the World. (2010). [Film] Universal Pictures.

The Stimming Pool. (2024). [Film] Dartmouth Films.

Wendell, S. (1996). *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*. London: Routledge.

Wilde, A. and Fish, R. (2024). *Gender, feminism and the project of critical disability studies (CDS)*. *Disability & Society*, 40(3), pp.1–22. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2023.2298774.

Zelazko, A. (2024). *Frida Kahlo.* In: *Encyclopædia Britannica*. [online] Available at: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Frida-Kahlo. [Accessed 10th Dec, 2025].