

Don, Betty and Jackie Kennedy

On *Mad Men* and Periodisation

PRUDENCE BLACK AND CATHERINE

DRISCOLL

UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

This essay considers the use of period detail and historical reference in *Mad Men* and the importance of periodisation to its mode of address. The embrace of period detail in *Mad Men* is at once loving and fetishistic and it belongs, as in all period film and television, to the politics of the present. But how is it that we watch *Mad Men* and think it represents a period? Flashes of patterned wallpaper, whiskey neat, contact lining for kitchen drawers, Ayn Rand, polaroids, skinny ties, new Hilton hotels, and Walter Cronkite all evoke a time when the world and how we might live in it was different in powerful ways. They comprise the evocative period setting for the series' central ethical dramas: Don Draper asks 'What do women want?' and dry old Roger Sterling can reply 'Who cares?' And it is as period drama that these ethical questions can offer a speculative political drama that at once disavows and proclaims its present-tense politics.

The series begins with the start of the Kennedy administration in 1960 and consistently refers to an image of cultural revolution associated with both the

Kennedys and the 1960s. The story about the sixties which frames *Mad Men* centres on this image of cultural revolution periodised by new hopes and fears and by the decline of 'the American dream'. Is it nostalgia that draws an audience to this commercial period piece? After all, much its audience never experienced the sixties themselves or experienced it as children and thus in ways marginal to the dominant *Mad Men* narratives. *Mad Men* asks to be viewed as both a historiographical text—a writing of history—and a period drama. To both ends it uses period detail to foreground the difference between the lives of its audience and that on screen, stressing a radical difference between how early twenty-first century and 1960s experiences of gender, domesticity, family life, business, aesthetics, politics and many types of anxiety and pleasure are different. What that difference *looks like* is crucial to the way *Mad Men* represents history.

In its focus on appearances, on representing the difference of the sixties as iconically visible, it is possible to read *Mad Men's* appeal as nostalgic in Jean Baudrillard's terms—as circulating 'myths of origin of signs of reality'.¹ Baudrillard famously accounts for nostalgia as the triumph of simulation over the real and his focus for elaborating this theory of simulation is, significantly, the United States from the 1950s to the 1970s—the period of Disneyland and *An American Family* (1973). Baudrillard argues that:

When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality—a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity. Escalation of the true, of lived experience, resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. Panic-stricken production of the real and of the referential, parallel to and greater than the panic of material production: this is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us—a strategy of the real, of the neoreal and the hyperreal that everywhere is the double of a strategy of deterrence.²

In Baudrillard's terms, reading this series as nostalgic means claiming it conveys little historical content. Although *Mad Men* in one sense seems to exemplify that nostalgia Baudrillard associates with a proliferating field of signs floating free of any anchoring historical meaning, we want to argue that *Mad Men's* investment in a

myriad of period details continues to say a great deal about the sixties, the present, and the relation between them.

Within the frame established by its archival claims, *Mad Men* says many things that would otherwise seem outrageous or at least inappropriate for contemporary mainstream television drama. And whether outrageous or glamorous, *Mad Men's* use of historical detail and its period film claims are what make it so timely. It is only among other pleasures invested in the period film genre, including pleasure in transgressing present limits by reference to the past, that *Mad Men* provides content for a nostalgic genesis story about a perceived cultural decline—a present-day failure of that 'American Dream' it imagines the sixties as both epitomising and doubting. *Mad Men* claims the sixties as a period in which the idea of 'hope' created a ripple over the surface of sceptical realism. This is the very same 'audacity of hope' that would appeal to *Mad Men's* audience as US presidential candidate Barack Obama's catch cry. In entwining images of 1960s' 'cultural revolution' and a proleptic anxiety about the destabilisation of the American Dream, *Mad Men* clearly belongs to a broader contemporary popular public narrative about 'American' hopes and fears which cling to and yet question a version of the American Dream centred on personal fulfilment through fame and fortune.³ But it is crucial that *Mad Men's* ripple of hope manifests in a melancholy reference to the past—achingly familiar and heralding its own decline. *Mad Men's* storylines generally centre on image-production, but these are images produced in response to uncertainty; always invoking a sense that some meaning or value has just been lost, has just slipped out of reach, or is yet again under threat. At the beginning of the twenty-first century this story continues to be compelling at the border between popular and public culture. The melancholy central to characterisation in *Mad Men* thus makes multiple uses of this period frame, converting it into a retrospective story about foreshadowed decline that blends historiography with conventional melodrama.

Mad Men's story about America in the 1960s would not withstand the kind of historical scrutiny that asked it to represent a collective national experience or to accurately portray any of the past events it references. There are many unresolvable contradictions in the popular narrative about cultural revolution in the sixties on which it depends, and the popular image of the Kennedys as marking a shift to a new cosmopolitan sophistication, on the one hand, and a new libertarian radicalism, on

the other, is at least questionable. But in this essay we are not interested in questions about historical accuracy so much as in *how Mad Men* tells its own story about the sixties. We want to consider how *Mad Men's* historiographical strategies are entwined with the period it sets out to represent. Its success seems to us grounded not only in its high production values, which aid its claims to get the iconic look of the sixties right and place the series in an unfolding history of 'serious' 'quality' television, but also on the contemporary cultural resonance of the period in which it is set.⁴

The popular image of the Kennedy administration plays a central role in *Mad Men's* discourse on American history. The image of cultural sophistication associated with the Kennedys is celebrated, but also used to question what America is relative to what it has been. It is significant, then, that in its own historical context the image of the Kennedys did similar work. John F. Kennedy made a point of reading, writing and talking about American history, and so did his wife Jackie. In season 2, episode 1, 'For Those Who Think Young', central character Don and his wife Betty celebrate Valentines Day by spending a night at the Hotel Savoy. After a failed lovemaking attempt—'I wish you would just tell me what to do', says Betty—Don orders room service and turns on the television. And there is Jackie, in her bouffant hairdo pushed to one side with a bold sweeping curl and a triple strand of pearls. In a wispy voice she gushes, 'this piano was designed by Franklin Roosevelt'. And so it was, that on Valentines Day 1962 Jackie whipped around the White House in a fervour of knowledge describing every period of decor within what she called her 'restoration' project.⁵ As she put it for this broadcast, 'It's so important the way the presidency is presented to the world.' No one seemed to mind, or even notice, that some of the furniture pre-dated 1802, when the house was built; instead, the world witnessed Jackie's transition from hostess to diplomat through a new sphere of image control.

The central *Mad Men* characters are united and riveted as they watch 'A Tour of the White House' in this episode. Betty tells Don not to change the channel. Closeted gay art director of Sterling Cooper, Salvatore Romano, wants to know where President Kennedy is. Glamorous senior secretary Joan stops making out with her young male friend and says, 'You have to see this.' While he replies that no, he doesn't, and continues to grope her, as a minor character less cued to the history-

making power of images he reinforces the opposite point of view for the series as a whole.⁶ Later, Betty is back in her own kitchen sorting the laundry and discussing Jackie with her friend Francine Hanson, who says 'She seemed nervous, even when she saw Jack at the end. It's like they were playing house.' Betty ignores Francine's remark but in a sly reference to Jackie's predilection for all things French she holds up one of her daughter Sally's dresses and remarks, 'That's chocolate icecream, or blood. I couldn't throw it away, it's French.'

The popular resonance of the Kennedys' conscious address to style pervades and exemplifies the *Mad Men* story about image control. The producers might have considered a scene where Sally, who we know is a precocious reader, reads from the guide book to the White House Jackie prepared for both children and adults. For children it was 'to stimulate their sense of history and their pride in their country' and adults were to be reminded of the 'many First Families [who] loved this house—and [who] each and everyone left behind something of themselves behind in it'.⁷ Jackie's claim that she restored the White House is no more accurate than a claim that *Mad Men* recreates the sixties. Although the artefacts in the White House state rooms through which Jackie guided her viewers often related to a specific period, no one room actually represents a given moment and each room's iconic centerpieces remain tied to the less clearly referenced process of making history in that room. But it makes the importance of history to the Kennedy image quite clear. Jackie's tour is a tour of 1960s America in the way any history is written from a particular moment.⁸ The control of style doesn't just extend to history in the Kennedys public image. Writing history is fundamental to that stylistic control.

Mad Men seems far more clearly focused on representing a past period than Jackie's White House restoration. *Mad Men's* archival centerpieces are all iconic sixties moments and the most dramatically significant are also moments of consuming the making of history. *Mad Men's* use of archival footage is crucial to this, and archival footage is frequently inserted into episodes by the device of television. If the Kennedys are famously the first televised US presidency, they also mark the point at which major historical events and private domestic spaces were first pervasively linked in a present tense sense of what was happening right now via television. In the archival film and television footage set into *Mad Men* the Kennedys have a particularly prominent place. Don slumps in his armchair and watches

Nixon's concession speech; Don watches Kennedy's address regarding the Soviet Union's accumulation of missiles in Cuba; and Betty and her black maid Carla fleetingly bond, while Pete Campbell takes a sharp turn towards social critique and black turtlenecks, watching coverage of the Kennedy assassination.⁹ Despite the historical force of JFK being mapped in this way, Jackie Kennedy has her own special kind of resonance because she intersects this force with the explicit management of style across all elements of her visible personal life. Jackie's speaking Spanish to the returning Bay of Pigs prisoners on 29 December 1962, for example, also appears on television in *Mad Men*, where she is seen speaking Spanish in a bid to attract the Spanish vote. Intertextually, this connects to the domestic melodrama as much as the historical placement of *Mad Men* and a parallel between the Kennedys and the Drapers that remains aware of subsequent developments and revelations about the way the 'private' truth of their lives is continually used to add historical poignancy to the series melodrama.¹⁰

Considering the popularity of *Mad Men* in the early twenty-first century, and a series like *Pan Am* (2011), a fourteen-part series about the iconic America airline appearing in its wake, does something still seem presently relevant about the sixties, and the Kennedys, today?¹¹ Gearing up for the 1960 election, Kennedy employed Harvard historian, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, as a special assistant. In his 1963 book *The Politics of Hope*, Schlesinger reflected on the importance of their moment as a sense of being on the cusp of the old and the new. He writes:

We have awakened as from a trance ... and we have wakened so quickly and sharply that we can hardly remember what it was like when we slumbered. Our complaints now are that we have not made more progress, not that our capacity for progress is extinct.¹²

For Schlesinger, this 'trance' refers to America's comfortable isolation from the rest of the world; a comfort resting on an 'American-ness' that required no examination. Such an image of America awakening appeared more broadly at the time. Also in 1963, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was billed as 'The Year's Most Controversial Bestseller' with a related, if very differently directed, narrative about the awakening of American women from domestic entrapment.

Such claims that the sixties awakened America from a trance is crucial to *Mad Men*. They are personified in the paired figures of Don and Betty Draper. From the

beginning Don centres a story about revelation of what's behind the image of America's 'self-made man' and Betty figures the trance of those who do not realize the way things are, or at least pretend they don't. *Mad Men* thus extends a story about America awakening in the sixties beyond the careful packaging of the period as a time of social upheaval that is already particularly familiar to its audience. And if Don is centrally responsible for talking about the production of image in the series—especially images of America and images of the sixties as an historical break—Betty brings home the relevance of Friedan as much as Schlesinger to this story.

Betty's finely-coiffed trance-like state is maintained over four seasons despite her own awakening through increased access to the truth of her own situation and that of America. She remains apparently troubled by what, for contemporary viewers, particularly oppresses her. She is always awaiting what we now widely understand as the 'second wave' of feminism to reach her: *The Feminine Mystique* is not yet at Betty's bookshop. But if things seem not to have moved fast enough for Betty in one sense, the sixties was documented at the time, and since, including in *Mad Men*, as shifting more rapidly than any other. As Schlesinger has it, 'the sheer pace of momentous events, most of them unanticipated, now seems crushing'.¹³ And it is a story about history overtaking us, and what is left as 'History' in its wake, that anchors *Mad Men* to the politics of today even if that story wasn't new then and certainly isn't now.

This returns us to the question with which we opened. Why is it that we watch *Mad Men* and think it represents a period? The opening titles are a homage to the graphic design of Saul Bass, gesturing to the period detail that preoccupies the production at every level from set to script to political orientation. The period detail lovingly, even fetishistically, embraced in *Mad Men* varies enormously in form and texture, from glimpses of briefly fashionable objects through citations of or appearances by influential texts and figures, to the invocation of ground-twisting social movements. Periodisation is at the centre of the show's appeal, spelled out for us in the claims of every frame. What distinguishes *period film*, and by extension the less discussed genre of *period television*, is less historical setting itself than the mode of displaying a period. If period film can and does use the available film archive to access verified period detail and invoke its object era, the equivalent television

archive communicates a more intimate access to many-layered memory. Whether previously experienced firsthand or not, the television archive deployed in *Mad Men* draws on television's function as a recording device and a relay of the passing historical present tense. At the level of its overarching story, if not in its finer melodramatic grain, we recognize what's coming in *Mad Men* from one piece of iconic footage to the next, counting through dates via landmarks like the moon landing and one assassination after another. We watch as Marilyn dies and Jackie takes over as 1960s' icon. But the pleasure involved in hearing and seeing iconic moments arranged in a history that we already know through television's documentary and archival functions warrants more careful consideration. Does it resemble JFK's own famously distracting nostalgia—the 'happily-ever-aftering' of Camelot as he lay on his bed nursing an aching back and listening to the disk on the turnstile of the Victrola night after night?

On the terrain of 'serious television' *Mad Men* stands out as a period piece. And the sixties resonates with a late 2000s audience in a way that other periods might not. 'The sixties' itself has become an iconic claim about the ground upon which we became who we are. *We* in this sense is not confined to Americans and not to those over fifty despite the many critical engagements with an image of the sixties as the mythos of a 'baby boomer' generation.¹⁴ The ways in which this image of the sixties encompasses a younger audience cannot be captured by stressing the cultural dominance of 'baby boomers' in now *de rigueur* ways. *Mad Men* is set in the *early* sixties, a period dominated by perceived disjunctions between now monumental categories of the fifties and sixties—an image of immanent liberation, as if any minute now Don and Betty, or Peggy, in particular, who arrives in the story as we do and shares our orientation in the plot and the period it depicts, will be freed from the period's constraints upon them. The sense that they are born just a little too early to share our moment also brings with it the melancholic implication that we (the audience) are just born too late.

Mad Men's form and content are both heavily stylised, and its archival claims are central to the way an emphasis on visual style forms part of its narrative. As image production dominates *Mad Men* as a story about the sixties the ways in which representation and reality interweave is key to every episode. But in this overt stylisation, where self-image is a construct assembled from a mesh of desires and

ideals (including frustrated desires and oppressive ideals), *history* is established as the reality with which such representation negotiates. On every scale—private relations, domestic arrangements, consumer choice, state politics and transnational trade—history operates as an empirical terrain on which the possibility of change is articulated. This dress was there, this typewriter, this style of kitchen cupboard, and on this date Martin Luther King Jnr was shot, and recorded on this sort of television in this precise way. Precision of this kind drives the production. Even the ice blocks that tinkle in the scotch glasses are made using vintage metal trays because, according to the production team, ‘the cubes are more regular’.¹⁵

Don appreciates some of these details on our behalf. There is a telling encounter with an iconic flight stewardess in transit in a hotel lobby. The precise details of her uniform—the little pillbox cap (kept in place throughout dinner), the white gloves, the slip on court stiletto shoe, and the half-wing badge—capture her moment, and Don’s attention.¹⁶ In the episode ‘Hands and Knees’ we meet the Playboy Bunny in her satin ‘bunny suit’ with collar and bow tie, cuffs and cufflinks, satin bunny ears, black fishnet stockings and her name on a rosette attached to one hip.¹⁷ Such scenes position the sixties as seductive in ways that Baudrillard might explain as yet another triumph of the image happily congruent with nostalgia.¹⁸ But it is equally crucial to *Mad Men* that the Playboy Bunny wanders through in this iconographic way, while incorporating Gloria Steinem as a ‘real’ Playboy—her Bunny stories were also published in 1963—would have required something very different.¹⁹ Period detail in *Mad Men* belongs to a panorama of private references and personal secrets. The Kennedys too appear in lounge rooms or between the lines of private workplace dramas.

Mad Men’s production of history as image is an open secret. We know Betty is a stylised image of early sixties upper-middle-class suburban housewives even as we recognise specific historical authenticities in her story. She lines her kitchen drawers with contact; exploits and patronises Carla; mends clothes with a Singer sewing machine on her kitchen table; bakes cakes with Robert and Sally; and exits, perfectly groomed, to go horse riding. Very similar images of Jackie Kennedy appeared then as they do now: Jackie in the kitchen with her black housekeeper Mattie Penn at Dent Place, Georgetown, in 1954; horse riding with Caroline and John around 1962; or on the porch at Hyannis Port with the children and dogs in 1963.

Across these images 'Jackie' is compiled as a life staged as fiction. *Mad Men* has not only learnt from this strategy of transmedia assemblage but deploys audience pleasure in knowing Jackie was this new kind of assembled image.

Whether directly or by such intertextual means, *Mad Men* also draws on a 1958 novel *The Admen*, by Shepherd Mead, billed at the time as 'savage' and 'corrosive'.²⁰ By 1962 the book had sold over two million copies. The back cover of the paperback edition describes the advertising world of Madison Avenue, where Don also works, as 'a frenzied jungle of graft and glittering make-believe':

This is a novel about men and women who work in the advertising business—not mythical creatures in a world of sincere neckties and gaudy jargon, but ambitious and nervy people who have elected to work in an industry where the pressure is terrific, where the risks and rewards are uncommonly high. Here is how they move to the top, how they stay there, and how, sometimes, they don't stay there.

Certainly we might find something of Don in Mead's description of an 'ambitious and nervy' adman type, and early in the book we are introduced to Grace Darrow, who bears a striking resemblance to the voluptuous Joan 'Joanie' Holloway: 'Gracie looked better than most secretaries. She was a de luxe model, a little plumper and with fancier trim than the Standard Model girl.' Gracie wears her dresses to match her changing hair colour. In a copper-coloured dress which 'showed off her bosom, which might in any other age have been considered too ample, and tried to diminish her hips, which were the same', Mead describes not only a look that might be Joanie's but a sensibility concerning style and gender which *Mad Men* self-consciously tries to invoke.²¹ Throughout *The Admen* the central male characters sketch vignettes for *Mad Men*'s image of the sixties, gulping their Scotch and sodas and smoking serial cigarettes as they negotiate and trade in images of their own lives.

In such appropriations, whether literal citations or not, *Mad Men* not only makes use of but produces an archive of sixties details. As historian Greg Dening points out:

In order to make sense of the past, one always strives to create a narrative from an archive; 'an exegesis of an order already there'. The archive was once something that was related to religious or 'familial use'. Today the

documents in an archive can change 'something which had its own status and role into *something else* which functions differently'.²²

The set of objects *Mad Men* collates as 'the sixties' in one sense appears as a levelled field of historical reference points, in which Joanie's dress and Don's drinks are as substantial citations of the period as, for example, the politics of race stretched between Betty, Carla, Martin Luther King and the television in season 4. But this is not the realm of simulacrum depicted by critics of 'postmodernism' like Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson. *Mad Men's* archival citation works quite differently than that which, as in their overlapping analyses of Disneyland, is *historicist* but not *historical*. In fact *Mad Men* has something to say to the way such analysis not only cites but also exemplarily turns on Disneyland. Disney is another fifties narrative troubled by its own success in the sixties, underpinning Jameson's claim that 'for Americans at least, the 1950s remain the privileged lost of object of desire' as an image of stability and prosperity.²³

For Jameson's critique of what he calls 'pastiche', nostalgia collects historical references and removes history from the scene:

the nostalgia film was never a matter of some old-fashioned 'representation' of historical content, but instead approached the 'past' through stylistic connotation, conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image, and '1930s-ness' or '1950s-ness' by the attributes of fashion (in that following the prescription of the Barthes of *Mythologies*, who saw connotation as the purveying of imaginary and stereotypical idealities: 'Sinité', for example, as some Disney-EPCOT 'concept' of China).²⁴

The historical claims of *Mad Men* are more complex than this. Without them, *Mad Men* is a very glossily produced soap opera.²⁵ At its best and its worst it is a morality play in which Don's failings and virtues are one and the same. But its excellence within this genre cannot stand apart from its historical claims. And Barthes' *Mythologies* does offer useful conceptual tools for understanding this, although less in his discussion of 'Italianicity' (and so on) than in his account of wrestling as a morality play.²⁶ In both *Mad Men* and the wrestling Barthes discusses, an emphasis on stark moral types and displays of injustice articulate a sense of what is missing in the world framing it. But as Barthes puts it, 'only the image is involved in the game, and the spectator does not wish for the actual suffering of the contestant; he only

enjoys the perfection of an iconography'.²⁷ As a morality play, *Mad Men* is both closed off from and opened up to its audience by a strategic historical distance. And to think about the way history operates in *Mad Men*, Friedrich Nietzsche thus seems more useful than Baudrillard or Jameson.

In *Mad Men and Philosophy*, John Fritz argues that, 'More than anything else, *Mad Men* is a television show about remembering and forgetting' and that reference to Nietzsche's argument for the importance of forgetting can offer 'a potent explanation' and illumination of its plot and character twists.²⁸ We would push this suggestion further. Forgetting has evident value in *Mad Men*, and what Nietzsche calls the 'creative forgetting of critical history' seems to be the only way out of a melancholy stalemate in which all the characters are eventually caught. Pete, for example, is the man who refuses to forget; is weighed down by remembering. And Don's polished facade also reveals his melancholy aspect because he not only keeps but regularly pours over a documented past that contradicts it—contracts, certificates and photographs. He desires just that forgetting Nietzsche recognises as central to the man of action: 'the cultivation of the faculty of "obliviation" without which action in the present is not possible at all'.²⁹ But he never comes close to achieving it.

It takes little effort to draw Nietzsche into *Mad Men* in this way and such a reference also belongs to the period it represents. It faintly appears in Bert Cooper's praise for 'objectivist' Ayn Rand's story about intellectual and creative superiors, *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), and specific reference of it to Don. 'I believe we are alike,' Bert says. 'You are a productive and reasonable man, and in the end, completely self interested.'³⁰ Rand claimed to have learned from Nietzsche that she did not need to 'defend man as the species' because by such self-interest 'the species can be vindicated by one man'.³¹ But whatever Roger imagines Don to be, for the series as a whole he is neither Nietzsche's superman, set against the rest of the world, nor Rand's self-assured egoist. Don is defined by his fears and his doubts as much as by his intelligent opportunism.

The subjective importance of forgetting for the man of action is only one strand of Nietzsche's argument about the promise and dangers of a 'historical sense' in *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* (1873). Here, he distinguishes between three historical modes: the monumental, the antiquarian and the critical. We

contend that *Mad Men* succeeds by deploying all these forms of history, and their different appeals to belonging *in and through* history, and the more approved 'critical history' might in fact be the least relevant to *Mad Men* overall.

Most succinctly, monumental history is the history of great names, dates, and events, and of memorialising social transformation. It's an inspirational historiography in which 'looking to the past impels' people 'towards the future and fires their courage to go on living and their hope that what they want will still happen, that happiness lies behind the hill they are advancing towards'.³² Antiquarian history, on the other hand, collects and reveres that which is past—antiques, family trees, local traditions and stories—as a site for belonging:

The antiquarian sense of a man, a community, a whole people, always possesses an extremely restricted field of vision; most of what exists it does not perceive at all, and the little it does see it sees much too close up and isolated; it cannot relate what it sees to anything else and it therefore accords everything it sees equal importance and therefore to each individual thing too great importance.³³

Nietzsche's critical history, however, is that history which creatively rewrites, and also forgets.

As Hayden White points out, Nietzsche's three modes of history are distinguished by their 'dominant form' of 'temporal yearning'.³⁴ For White, antiquarian history:

places an absolute value on anything old, just because it is old, and succours man's need for a feeling of having roots in a prior world and his capacities for reverence, without which he could not live. Monumental history, by contrast, seeks not the old but the manifestly great, the heroic.³⁵

Thus monumental history, while it points to past events and names, is future-directed—White even calls it utopian—exemplifying 'man's creative power to change or transform his world'.³⁶ *Mad Men* might be understood as laying some claim to write monumental history, but like period film in general it is dominated by an antiquarian sensibility. This refers not only to the way it lovingly displays statements about the past but also the way it collects and organises them into a set that belongs to a particular identificatory point of view. For Nietzsche's particular argument this was paradigmatically German nationalism, or the walking

encyclopedias of 'men of culture'. Nietzsche's account of critical history describes an engagement with history that resembles much praise for *Mad Men*. He argues that:

since we are the outcome of earlier generations, we are also the outcome of their aberrations, passions and errors, and indeed of their crimes; it is not possible to free oneself from this chain. If we condemn these aberrations and regard ourselves as free of them, this does not alter the fact that we originate in them.

Critical history is:

an attempt to give oneself, as it were *a posteriori*, a past in which one would like to originate in opposition to that in which one did originate.³⁷

But is *Mad Men* a victory of this kind?

In most scenes from *Mad Men* the *mise-en-scène* is a spectacle of a particular kind. Often, the action is framed by a hesitation in which only the *mise-en-scène* speaks, and it only speaks about periodisation. The narrative consists as much in its display of period details as in (melo)drama. These details are a panorama of references that presume themselves to be already well known. In 'The Summer Man', Peggy jokes 'I feel like Margaret Mead!' as she watches the men she works with show off.³⁸ This reference seems especially apposite as watching *Mad Men* is always somewhat anthropological, striving to compile proliferating references into a cultural map. But this map is, self-consciously, a brave attempt to produce a lost world. Like the tension between Don's life story and his smooth executive image—the vivid tension summarised at some points in the series as Don's unknowability—the collage of authentic historical touches suggests a story more real than any that could be true. *Mad Men* turns on fantasies about the past that are as seductive and frustrated as Joan Holloway.

Thus *Mad Men's* plethora of period details doesn't challenge any received sense of the 1960s. Its history is a kind of collector culture, and its audience framed as deriving pleasure from the possibility of having the full set, the most complete array of details. For this set Don is a central focus and his women, pre-eminently Betty, are less important accessories. Perhaps *Mad Men's* history is, at the antiquarian level, most like the history produced by Barbie doll collections or Disney memorabilia. In such a collector culture nothing can be *used*; nothing can bear the mark of historical tiredness; everything must transcend history in its historicity. Nothing must be

played within the present tense. As a survey of possible accessories Betty is the housewife, the hostess, the horsewoman, the home decorator, the adultress, the mother, the model, the dressmaker, the tea party activist and the analysand on the shrink's couch. She anchors a history in and as accessories—but then so does Jackie Kennedy. Jackie is an accessory at a tea party in the Green Room during the White House restoration in May 1961; reading Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* on the campaign plane with Caroline around 1959; watching a television screen with Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson on 5 May 1961 as Alan Shepard makes an historic suborbital flight to become the second person in space. This is monumental history *as* antiquarian history.

Blending the period film's antiquarian attitude with a monumental history about the sixties, it is as antiquarian history rather than 'simulation' that *Mad Men* evens out its field of objects. It's by validating this whole array of references by iconic periodisation that the series produces a monumental history—offers a story of social transformation. If Nietzsche criticises many effects of the collector ethos, and the self-aggrandising attitude of antiquarian and monumental history respectively, he does not dismiss these modes of remembering in favour of the critical. For Nietzsche the wilful forgetfulness of critical history also has its flaws. Pushed to its limit, critical history can destructively suggest that nothing is worth remembering, and this is why *Mad Men* cannot narratively afford the kind of interrogation mounted by critical history. All the challenges and questions confronting Don remain relative to an elusive something that would be worth repeating. However often it rereads the question of whether and how one can forget, and despite the constant presence of the audience's present tense, *Mad Men* takes the sixties as *a posteriori*—a period without any history of its own. It is a closed set.

This mode of history is of course entirely familiar to, entirely appropriate to, the shorthand and capital claims of advertising on which the series in part focuses. And when it does work nostalgically, as in an ad campaign it does so self-consciously, in fact troubling the neatness of nostalgia. In the final episode of season one, 'The Wheel', Don's pitch for the Kodak slide projector includes a story about an old Greek copywriter who told Don that something new was good, 'but it creates an itch' and that 'a deeper bond' with any product comes from nostalgia. '[D]elicate but

potent', the copyrihter tells Don, nostalgia is 'the pain from an old wound', 'a twinge in your heart far more powerful than memory alone', and 'it takes us to a place where we ache to go again'.³⁹ This claim re-enters the series' metanarrative in season four, when Don and Peggy are searching for a pitch for a breakfast cereal. A drunk Don opines: 'I keep thinking about nostalgia. How you remember something in the past and it feels good, but it's a little bit painful ... like when you were a kid'.⁴⁰ This refrain foregrounds *Mad Men's* use of nostalgia, refusing simulation by sharing its production as an open secret which speaks to frustrating politics of historical reference.

Matthew Weiner made his reputation as writer and executive producer on *The Sopranos*, which screened from 1999 to 2007 and thus closes as *Mad Men* opens. These two series bookend a monumental story about the 1960s. While *Mad Men* looks forward to change, Tony Soprano's therapy mourns what this change brings about. If Don dreads his past, the audience is expected to already know that the future lacks the strength it takes to break with that past. Don's failure to let go is finally what forges his bond with the audience of *Mad Men*, who come together around the presumption that they want him to hold on. The Kennedys resonate through *Mad Men* as an image of both immanent promise and palpable loss, and *Mad Men's* careful blend of the antiquarian collector set and monumental claims about past transformation keeps change itself always out of reach. If *Mad Men* does invoke the world of its core audience's parents, and that of its creator Weiner's parents, this is a world that looms indecipherably as clearly as it offers nostalgic comfort. It cannot lead anywhere but to the decline it predicts. And it is in this respect that *Mad Men's* period film claims make it so timely.

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Prudence Black is an ARC DECRA fellow in the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney. Her book *The Flight Attendant's Shoe* was published in 2011.

Catherine Driscoll is an associate professor in the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney. Her research has focused on cultural

sustainability in Australian country towns and methods for rural cultural studies, media classification and minority, cultural studies' debt to pragmatism and phenomenology and the intersection of fan culture and online culture. Recent publications include *The Australian Country Girl* (2012, forthcoming) and *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction* (2011).

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—NOTES

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila F. Glaser, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1994, p. 6.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

³ Within and outside of the *Mad Men* narrative for this political context the American dream of self-made success is differentiated from and juxtaposed with Martin Luther King's famous 1960s revisioning of that dream. Martin Luther King Jr, 'I have a Dream' (28 August 1963) in Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2003, p. 9.

⁴ See Jane Feuer's discussion of the genealogy of twentieth-century 'quality television'. Feuer sees the genre as closely linked to the marketing of cable television and to a history of cultural hierarchies produced in television programming since the 'quality dramas' of the 1950s. Jane Feuer, 'HBO and the Concept of Quality TV' in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, I.B. Taurus, Sydney, 2007, p. 146.

⁵ On 14 February 1962, this 'Tour of the White House', in which Jackie narrated her tour from memory, was watched by 80 million people. ten thousand letters to the White House were received in response to the broadcast and Jackie was subsequently awarded an Emmy for her contribution to television. See Joseph P. Barry, *John F. Kennedy and the Media: The First Television President*, University Press of America Lanham, MD, 1987.

⁶ For Those Who Think Young', *Mad Men*, season 2, episode 1.

⁷ White House Historical Association, 1962. *The White House: An Historic Guide* (foreword by Jacqueline Kennedy), White House Historical Association, Washington, p. 1.

⁸ The premise that history is written always from the present tense is of course no recent discovery for historians, as Certeau makes clear in his discussion of the writing of history. In order to elaborate on *Mad Men's* relation to and use of this premise our argument takes for granted that, to adopt Certeau's

use of Schelling, 'the tale of facts is doctrine', and that writing history, in any genre, simultaneously 'seeks, honors, and buries' the past as an 'other' to the present. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley, Columbia University Press, New York, 1988, pp. xxvii, 2.

⁹ 'Nixon vs Kennedy', *Mad Men*, season 1, episode 12; 'Meditations in and Emergency', *Mad Men*, season 2, episode 13; 'The Grown Ups', *Mad Men*, season 3, episode 12.

¹⁰ A further string of intertextual connections to Jackie is thus continued in the show's emphasis on Betty Draper speaking Italian and, later, Don's fiancée Megan speaking French.

¹¹ ABC's 2011 series *Pan Am* was cancelled after 14 episodes.

¹² Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, *The Politics of Hope* and *The Bitter Heritage: American Liberalism in the 1960s*, with foreword by Sean Wilentz, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, [1949] 2008.

¹³ Wilentz in Schlesinger, p. viii.

¹⁴ See, for example, Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture*, Routledge, New York, 1992. In an Australian context, see Mark Davis, *Gangland: Cultural Elites and the New Generationalism*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1999.

¹⁵ Guy Adams, 'Why Mad Men is Top of the Pops', *The Independent*, 6 September 2010.

¹⁶ 'Out of Town', *Mad Men*, season 3, episode 1. The US ABC series *Pan Am* turns on the recognisability of this iconic sixties figure of the stewardess as much as on the success of *Mad Men*.

¹⁷ 'Hands and Knees', *Mad Men*, season 4, episode 10. Responses to this episode's use of the Playboy Club could be used to exemplify how the historical referentiality of *Mad Men* appeals to its audience especially by the distance it maps between the audience and a past made more coherent by iconicity. See, for example, Raphael Brion, 'The Playboy Club on Mad Men: The View Is Better Here', *Eater.com*, 27 September 2010, <<http://eater.com/archives/2010/09/27/the-new-york-playboy-club-on-mad-men.php#playboy-mad-men-8>> (accessed 2 December 2010).

¹⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1990.

¹⁹ In 2011, NBC's *The Playboy Club* set in the 1960s in Chicago was cancelled after one series.

²⁰ Shepherd Mead, *The Admen*, Panther Books, London, 1962 [1958].

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²² Greg Denning, *Performances*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p. 36.

²³ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 1991, p. 19.

²⁴ Jameson, pp. 19–20.

²⁵ See Matt Hills to understand how a series like *Mad Men* moves beyond a television 'soap' and becomes considered as part of the 'canon' for what gets studied in television studies. 'When Television Doesn't Overflow "Beyond the Box": The Invisibility of Momentary Fandom', *Critical Studies in Television*, vol. 5, no. 1, May 2010, pp. 97–110

²⁶ In 1957, writing about wrestling, Barthes argues that 'What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself. There is no more a problem of truth in wrestling than in theatre. In both what is

expected is the intelligible representation of moral situations which are usually private. This emptying out of the interiority to the benefit of its exterior signs, this exhaustion of the content by the form, is the very principle of triumphant classical art.' Roland Barthes, 'The World of Wrestling' in *Mythologies*, Granada, London, 1980, p. 18.

²⁷ Barthes, p. 20.

²⁸ John Fritz, 'Pete, Peggy, Don, and the Dialectic of Remembering and Forgetting' in *Mad Men and Philosophy: Nothing is as it Seems*, ed. Rod Carveth and James B. South, John Wiley and Sons, Hoboken NJ, 2010, p. 53.

²⁹ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1973, pp. 68, 350.

³⁰ 'Public Relations', *Mad Men*, season 4, episode 1.

³¹ Ayn Rand quoted in Shoshana Milgram, 'From Airtight to *We the Living*: The Drafts of Ayn Rand's First Novel' in *Essays on Ayn Rand's We the Living*, ed. Robert Mayhew, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2004, p. 37.

³² Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life' in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1997, p. 65.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

³⁴ White, p. 68.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.* 68.

³⁷ Nietzsche, p. 76.

³⁸ 'The Summer Man', *Mad Men*, season 4, episode 8.

³⁹ 'The Wheel', *Mad Men*, season 1, episode 13.

⁴⁰ 'Waldorf Stories', *Mad Men*, season 4, episode 6.