

On *Mad Men*

Introduction

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‘I don’t know who you are.’

Betty Draper¹

In November 2010 a seminar was held at the University of Sydney to discuss the American cable television series *Mad Men*. *Mad Men* was in its fourth season at that time; contract negotiations put the show on a protracted hiatus and its fifth season began and concluded in 2012. A hiatus of similar duration stretched between the seminar and the publication of these essays, and so the temporal drag that is characteristic of academic writing about contemporary culture is given an extra nuance. Each season of *Mad Men* follows discontinuously from the season that precedes it, embedding a sense of disconnection only augmented by the protracted delay between seasons four and five. That time has allowed us to think some more about *Mad Men*. As a result this collection has the quality of work that arises through collaborative investigation, while each author has made clear his or her own interests and investments in the series.

Writing on *Mad Men* has been gathering in the wake of the show. From early projects such as *In Media Res*’ theme week on *Mad Men* in 2009, through ‘companion’ volumes such as *Mad Men and Philosophy* and *Mad Men: Unbuttoned* to

Mad Men, Mad World: Sex, Politics, Style, and the 1960s, a collection forthcoming from Duke, the show has found an academic audience invested in a multidisciplinary approach to its central issues.² This collection shows the ways in which the series, and its viewers, engage with issues that are central disciplinary concerns in cultural studies and which articulate cultural studies' relationship to other disciplines. The broad cultural significance of the series is demonstrated by each essay's identification of a cultural question at stake in the reception of the show. Rather than understanding the series to be motivated by a desire to chart sociohistorical changes, an understanding its period stylings have sometimes invited, these essays move in other directions. Their analyses focus on genre, on dynamics of gender and sexuality as they are implicated in the series and in its reception and on the complicated work of representing the making of history. They take seriously the role of creativity and the aesthetic in the putatively 'low' cultural domain of advertising. Moving in a variety of disciplinary directions they address questions central to the work of cultural studies.

Melissa Jane Hardie's essay opens the collection by identifying ways in which *Mad Men* advances critical understanding of 'quality' television and its relationship with mid-century anxiety over 'middlebrow' culture. She engages the series' interest in gender in tandem with its concern with the reproduction of text and image in an era of post-mechanical and pre-digital reproducibility, arguing that the series is best located in the formulation of a temporality that she describes, after Svetlana Boym, as 'off-modern'. She situates mid-century debates about the 'middlebrow' as an anxiety the series revives through its representation of the troubled relationship between pleasure and aesthetic experience, a concern she identifies as one with gendered indices.

Monique Rooney's article identifies the link between 'desire as a theme and desire as a structuring and elusive presence' in the series to interrogate *Mad Men*'s relationship to melodrama. She takes hold of this complicated and contentious term to find the way in which the 'burden' of the series' melodramatic 'turns' is both to elicit and portray the 'unconscious drives of a desiring subject'. Rooney's article animates the trope of catachresis to analyse the ways in which melodramatic dramas of misrecognition and category error might be indicative of the reformation

of the melodrama as it reinvents itself 'according to the specificities and demands of new media and changing social and cultural conditions'.

Prudence Black and Catherine Driscoll discuss the way *Mad Men* uses television footage of key moments in the Kennedy administration as a way of representing a historical period and representing the making of history, rather than history itself. The article also makes a claim for the way the periodisation and the use of the archive creates a kind of nostalgia for an audience—of whom many did not experience the period. The authors conclude using Nietzsche's argument about the importance of forgetting and his three modes of history: the monumental, the antiquarian and the critical, and their place in the 'temporal yearning' that forms part of the affect of *Mad Men*.

In an elegant and persuasive survey of the potential relationship between queer theory and television studies, Lee Wallace examines the 'narrative entanglement' of sexuality and space by charting the ways in which *Mad Men*'s 'highly stylized representation of screen space' is indebted to early cinematic styles and cognate with the self-conscious historicism of a cinematic account of the closet and other formations they so demarcate as dated. According to Wallace, *Mad Men* distinguishes televisual style for its capacity to do more than afford representations of 'personal history and subjective depth' by stylising 'the capacity for temporalization itself'.

Caroline Hamilton contextualises *Mad Men*'s passionate followers by revisiting the notion of 'vintage' as an aesthetic as well as a category of contemporary consumption. She moves from a critique of the show that identifies its interest in style as by definition insubstantial to postulate that like vintage aficionados generally, the fandom of the show requires grappling with a double temporality located in the identification, acquisition and appreciation of historically marked objects. Hamilton argues 'these consumer reengagements with the material culture of the past demonstrate how previous eras might be reappropriated for the present in a manner which challenges typical preconceptions'.

Melissa Gregg pays homage to postwar suburban commuter narratives and the compromises of modern masculinity citing Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, Billy Wilder's work in *The Apartment* and Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* (made into a sumptuous cinematic product by Sam Mendes). For Gregg, *Mad*

Men inhabits the 'structure of feeling' between work and family and the role of 'organisation man' in his drive to participate in the America Dream; a dream of home ownership, job security and domestic family life. Gregg concludes by discussing the waning of the nine-to-five commuter narrative with the introduction of work-worlds defined by 24-hour a day electronic networks.

One of the key themes of the series is the articulation of the tension between creativity and alcohol. Julie Robert provides a critique of the romantic view of creativity while acknowledging the way alcohol can fuel creativity and be part of professional recognition. Her essay also explores the way creativity, as a moment of originality, becomes part of organisational practice, in this instance in the advertising industry.

Rod Taveira's article locates *Mad Men*'s central character Don Draper in what he argues are the queer social and intimate spaces of California. It is in these scenes that Don's double life is made spatially as well as temporally narratable. Taveira suggests *Mad Men*'s main concern is with the way the past and the present come together, deploying the literary scheme of 'hysteron proteron' to present the temporal complexity of Don's reversion to 'California dreaming'. *Mad Men*, Taveira argues, uses the dream diegesis of art cinema to secure its place in the realm of quality television.

In the final article, Kate Lilley analyses the circulation of Frank O'Hara's 1957 poetry collection, *Meditations in an Emergency*, within season two of *Mad Men* and its striking cathexis by the show's viewers. She considers the interplay of poetry, advertising and television as intimate and impersonal modes of address in the context of *Mad Men*'s commitment to exploring the poetics of aesthetic and historical redaction. Lilley's article offers an intricate tracing of distinct domains of mediation as they converge in detailed *mises-en-scène*.

—NOTES

¹ 'The Gypsy and the Hobo', *Mad Men*, series 3, episode 11.

² Rod Carveth and James B. South (eds), *Mad Men and Philosophy: Nothing is What it Seems*, Wiley, New Jersey, 2010; Natasha Vargas Cooper, *Mad Men Unbuttoned: A Romp through 1960s America*, Harper Collins, New York, 2010, to Lauren M. E. Goodlad, Lily Kaganovsky, Robert A. Rushing (eds), *Mad Men, Mad World: Sex, Politics, Style, and the 1960s*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2013 (forthcoming).