

The Return of Organisation Man

Commuter Narratives and Suburban Critique

MELISSA GREGG

UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

In a world changing so fast, in a world in which he must forever be on the move, the individual desperately needs roots, and The Organisation is a logical place to develop them.

William H. Whyte, *The Organisation Man*¹

Now our lives are changing fast
Hope that something pure can last

The Arcade Fire, *The Suburbs*²

Late in season two of AMC's acclaimed series *Mad Men*, the comedian Jimmy Barrett, a client of Sterling Cooper, greets Don Draper at a gambling table. 'Look everybody! It's the man in the grey flannel suit!' Bobby quips, in reference to Don's characteristic attire. Don's response—a knock out punch that leaves the funny man reeling—is compelling for its dramatic irony: by this stage, viewers accustomed to Draper's womanising know that he is having an affair with Jimmy's wife. In the context of the series as a whole, however, the scene is additionally significant for the

way that it foregrounds the intertextual homage *Mad Men* pays to some of the great US postwar commuter narratives. These stories, of which Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* is but one, pivot on the tension between individualism and conformism, specifically in relation to the rise of The Organisation.³ It is this tension that the archetypal businessman's uniform continues to symbolise in popular culture, even if—as this article argues—it is no longer the most fitting expression available.

In charting *Mad Men's* place in the history of commuter narratives, the following discussion recalls previous visions of mid-century modernity, including the film adaptation of Wilson's novel and the more recent production of *Revolutionary Road*, based on the Richard Yates book of the same name.⁴ Among the many cultural references evident in *Mad Men* (which this special issue amply demonstrates), knowledge of the conventions established in these preceding plotlines also enhances a reading of the program in the present. Sharing key themes, symbols and scenes, suburban commuter narratives illustrate the pressures, ideals and compromises of modern masculinity in a similar way to the western genre of an earlier era.⁵ Fresh from the trauma of battle following World War II, they are stories that illustrate what had been at stake for so many in the wartime effort to secure the American Dream.

The prospect of safe, ongoing employment, the seduction of home ownership and the love of wife and family are the normative features of this genre. The conflicting desires arising in the interplay between these elements, and the means by which they come to be resolved, constitute points of progression in the wider history this article plots. To the extent that such generic features of domestic fulfilment may hold less appeal to viewers today—in the wake of a global financial disaster largely precipitated by US mortgage debt—I suggest *Mad Men's* creation and reception is conditioned by events that reveal the 'fantasmatic' role of genre. Indeed, in contrast to accounts that read the show's depiction of work in terms of nostalgia, I argue the very idea of The Organisation Man as a trope for modernity should be understood in generic terms.⁶ With this realisation, it is perhaps no coincidence that Sam Mendes' adaptation of *Revolutionary Road* appeared within a year of *Mad Men's* premiere.⁷ Viewed with the insights of other suburban narratives emerging after World War II, the combined effect of these screen visions is to

reinforce a wider 'structure of feeling' regarding the American project, including the increasingly unsustainable dream of the suburban domestic lifestyle.⁸ Invoking the imagery of *The Organisation*, and complicating the commuter narrative's established coordinates, *Mad Men* illustrates what Lauren Berlant calls 'the waning of genre' in the political impasse of the affective present.⁹

The literal adoption of grey suits by male leads is the key visual motif shared by commuter narratives. This gesture is underscored by the experience and iconography of travelling by train to a work-focused urban core. A clear juxtaposition of suburban domesticity and city-based employment sees company men leaving home for work while their wives suffer a dull and tedious existence in their absence. The Academy Award-winning 1960 comedy *The Apartment* is an exemplar as much as it is a satirical spin on these conventions and the spatial separation of home and office.¹⁰ Seeking advancement in the office hierarchy, company clerk C.C. Baxter (Billy Wilder) finds favour with his superiors by offering his Manhattan studio for intimate trysts outside the orbit of wives in the suburbs. The film's hyperbolic rendering of organisation life, complete with synchronised elevator schedules that funnel workers in at peak hour, resolves happily when the city-based bachelor finds his own true love to marry. In a less humorous vein, *Mad Men* extends this spatial structure in the trajectory of Draper, whose commute to metropolitan Manhattan helps give rise to his sequence of extra-marital affairs. In the show's initial seasons, wife Betty is left alone in the suburbs raising the couple's two children. While she has help from Carla, the household maid, the lack of solidarity between women is an inkling of the class and racial divisions that will affect the period's fledgling feminist politics. The gendered spatial logic in commuter narratives is recognition of the sexual contract underpinning the Fordist period more generally, and I return to this point later.¹¹ For now, several precursors to this representation of mid-century white collar work underscore the aesthetic sensibility that *Mad Men* both summons and disrupts.

—THE ORGANISATION MAN

In Australia, the John Brack painting *Collins St, 5pm* famously depicts a sea of suits surging down a central thoroughfare of Melbourne, with hats and jackets protecting workers from the notorious city cold.¹² The contrast of bodies on the near and far



Edwin Tanner, *White Collar Worker*, 1954
(Courtesy of Art Gallery of South Australia)

sides of the street allows individual faces to be discerned, even if the overall impression is one of bleak conformity. Less well known, but conveying a sinister edge that is far more personal, is Edwin Tanner's *White Collar Worker*.¹³ Appearing a year earlier than Brack's iconic piece, in 1954, the painting shows two thin male figures, gaunt and narrow as pins, standing in surveillance of a fellow worker who is seated at his desk in a grey suit. The stark room has few accoutrements other than a heater and a briefcase. Nothing is to distract the employee from the paperwork at hand.

While their approach differs, both images draw on the aesthetic register accompanying organisation life that the commuter narrative also mines. Early in his film, Sam Mendes features the morning commute from the suburbs in *Revolutionary Road*—a flipside to the afternoon peak hour depicted in Nunnally Johnson's *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*.¹⁴ The hypnotic rhythm of bodies emerging from central

station at peak hour in the former and the frenzy of clocks, whistles and bells signalling the evening rush in the latter are hallmarks of modernity and white collar routine.¹⁵ The 'structure of feeling' conveyed in each of these compositions is that the modern workplace threatens the individual. Like city footpaths at day's end, the rigid power structure and hierarchy of organisation life leaves little space for agency.

Mad Men differs from these antecedents in that scenes are rarely filmed in transit or on city streets.¹⁶ Sterling Cooper's location is established only through a set number of shots outside the building as workers enter. Bars, elevator journeys and office windows framing the Manhattan skyline provide the main points of contrast to the domestic furnishings of the Draper residence. And unlike the protagonists of earlier commuter narratives, where train journeys serve to emphasise distance from heart and home, Draper is shown in only a handful of carriage scenes over the series' first four seasons. Brief phone exchanges with Betty ('I'm on the 5.31') mark her limited reach into Draper's other life.¹⁷ But it is a train that hosts Draper's initial betrayal—and seduction—on return from active service, as he ignores his family of origin, relinquishes the Whitman title and ingratiates the attention of a young woman.¹⁸ In this moment, the train marks a point of departure and transition from the past to an open future.

The aesthetic vocabulary commonly attached to mid-century commuting suggests the *idea* of 'the organisation man' is culturally pervasive even as it floats free from some of its original contexts of signification. In the book from which the name arises, William H. Whyte's description of the organisation man is in fact quite precise. For Whyte, there is a distinction to be made between those who merely work for the organisation and those who effectively '*belong* to it as well'. These workers 'are the ones of our middle class who have left home, spiritually as well as physically, to take the vows of organisation life'.¹⁹ The organisation man follows the principle: 'be loyal to the company and the company will be loyal to you'.²⁰ In the organisation era, faith in the firm is based on a sense of harmony between the objectives of the company and the individual. Whyte's reading explains that the 'social ethic' embodied by an organisation is what generates 'a sense of dedication' from workers.²¹ This is the commitment that the promise of career progression can ultimately reward.

Central to Whyte's description of the period is his take on 'the new suburbia, the packaged villages that have become the dormitory of the new generation'.²² Several chapters are dedicated to detailing 'the outgoing life' demanded of residents inhabiting suburbia—if only briefly—on their rise up the company ladder. Speaking of Chicago's Park Forest, Whyte observes that the area 'was set up, quite simply, to make money, lots and lots of it'. Following the war, property speculators saw that there was 'a huge population of young veterans, but little available housing suitable for young people with (1) children, (2) expectations of transfer, (3) a taste for good living, (4) not too much money'.²³ The 'communal way of life' of the suburbs offered a 'way station' for the organisation man; a salve for the condition of 'transiency' and 'rootlessness'. Recent social commentary in the United States continues to describe the upwardly mobile salaried class in much the same way as Whyte's pioneering account.²⁴

Through his participation in two spheres—the workplace and the suburban neighbourhood—the organisation man posed new questions for sociological analysis, bearing in mind that sociology was itself a growth field at this same period. The coercive sociality at the heart of organisation life captured core questions for the discipline, for it provided a model for the base tension between individual actions and the dynamics of the social group. As Whyte wondered, in conforming to the rules and expectations governing his public and private engagements, did the organisation man sacrifice his identity entirely? While the answer clearly depended on the personality, Whyte's interviews with Ford and General Electric executives led him to see merit in the commuter lifestyles developing with the support of organisational employment. This was because of the unprecedented prosperity such a lifestyle could deliver: 'Unless one believes poverty ennobling, it is difficult to see the three-button suit as more of a strait jacket than overalls, or the ranch-type house than old law tenements'.²⁵ At a time when Americans were adjusting to the possibility of considerable affluence, Whyte encouraged individualism '*within* organisation life'. His book is remembered for the mobilising dictum: 'Organisation has been made by man; it can be changed by man.'²⁶

This optimistic premise is shared by Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, published three years before Whyte's non-fiction analysis. (Whyte was a Princeton graduate who spent a good part of his career writing for *Forbes* magazine, Wilson studied at Harvard and later wrote for *Time*). The novel's central character, Tom Rath, is employed by a media company in the television business. His boss, the aristocratic and overworked Hopkins, is modelled on Wilson's superior, Roy Larsen, president of Time Inc. for fifty-six years.²⁷ In *The Organisation Man*, Whyte cites the characters in Wilson's novel as a means to distinguish between two types of employee in the organisation: the 'well-rounded man' and 'the executive'. The former works hard, 'but not too hard'; for this majority of workers 'the good, equable life is paramount and they see no conflict between enjoying it and getting ahead'.²⁸ The executive, by contrast, is motivated by an inner drive that is internally rather than externally generated. He works considerable hours at the consternation of others—including colleagues and family—'because his ego demands it'.²⁹

Showing promise in the emerging field of public relations, Rath is on the brink of moving from one category of organisation man to another. Offered a chance to join the executive ranks in a higher paying job, his dilemma is to decide between the long hours required for career success or the family ties of wife and home. This choice is the central animating dynamic of commuter narratives of this type. The revelation that Rath fathered a child while serving in Italy during the war is the major complication to the plot in this instance. A series of flashbacks to the battlefield and a passionate relationship with Maria punctuates the drama. This structural device is a reminder of the film's initial audience and the immense psychological distance that returning soldiers and their wives had to overcome. The conflicting claims on Rath's attention and affection are heightened as his obligation to provide financial support for a growing child coincides with Betsy's demand for a new home. In the film's denouement, Rath rejects corporate ambition just as Betsy accepts the need for him to satisfy the monetary claims of a third party. The decision to put family first is central to the closing scene, in which Rath declares to Betsy: 'I adore you.'

The 'man in the grey flannel suit' is here an accommodating signifier for a host of competing tensions faced by American servicemen returning from one field of

duty to another. The story's powerful suturing function comes at a time when the stakes of the good life were being tested and refined. In the period this narrative marks, Rath is a man who chooses the responsibilities of home and family rather than following careerist satisfactions. That he does this by forging a partnership with his wife is an important element of the Fordist worldview. The film's moral economy is balanced in favour of Rath's decision to eschew executive privilege, as can be seen in Hopkins' dismay at having his overtures rejected. 'Big successful businesses aren't built by men like you,' he says in response:

9–5 and home and family. You live on them, but you never build them. Big successful businesses are built by men like me. Give everything they've got to it. Live it, body and soul. Lift it up regardless of anybody or anything else. And without men like me there wouldn't be any big successful businesses. My mistake was in being one of those men.

In choosing to benefit from the organisation, but not belong to it—to 'live on' the business rather than build it—Rath is a man for the times.

—*REVOLUTIONARY ROAD*

Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*, coming just a few years later, paints a darker picture of suburban life and the interplay between work and home. The title of the book, which is also the couple's street address, alerts us to the journey that characters Frank and April conspire to take together. Theirs is a love that will avoid the fate of ordinariness. The idea of travelling to Paris is key to April's initial exchanges with Frank, whom she describes as 'the most interesting person I've ever met'. Their dream of moving to Europe and escaping the predictable confines of suburban society animates the story. It is the solution that promises to fix the troubles affecting the pair in the present. As the plot progresses, however, an unexpected pregnancy intervenes just as Frank shows a growing investment in his job. An office affair with a subordinate further accentuates the temptations of the city-based world of work. With their plans to move to Paris apparently thwarted, a self-administered abortion attempt takes April's life at the end of the film. Since the event transpires in the family home, it is the climax to an excruciating critique of the domestic idyll. Its proto-feminist message anticipates what would later be known as 'the problem with no name'.³⁰

April's segregation from social contact through her relegation to the suburbs is the fate she shares with Betty Draper and Betsy Rath. In different ways, the narratives reflect a wider cultural unease regarding suburban life, particularly as experienced by women.³¹ The stories express the frustrations of a time when middle-class women's fortunes were more closely tied to the career prospects of her husband. 'What I want to know is, you don't expect to be with the foundation forever do you?' Betsy asks Tom Rath, the original 'man in the grey flannel suit'. He replies: 'Well of course not. But you've got to admit it's an absolutely safe spot'. For Rath, the routine comforts of salaried work are a welcome contrast to the horrors of wartime battle. But they may not be enough to deliver Betsy's great hope, which is to have a 'nice house in a nice neighbourhood'. Betsy articulates some of April Wheeler's despair in describing their home as 'a graveyard of everything we used to talk about. Happiness, fun, ambition.' Betsy deploys an armoury of emotional triggers to motivate her husband, including an indictment on his character as a man. It is not just the house that has been tarnished by the war, but Tommy himself, she says: 'You've lost your guts and all of a sudden I'm ashamed of you.'

In *Mad Men*, such appeals to masculinity, like the conventions of suburban critique in commuter narratives more broadly, reach a kind of conclusion—or in Berlant's terms, an 'impasse'. For Draper, the domestic life of family fails to mount any kind of successful gravitational pull as the city-based work world triumphs. Draper chooses the firm over his family repeatedly throughout the series. Major accounts (American Airlines), restructures (the UK office) and takeovers (McCann → PPL → Sterling Cooper) happen on public holidays, whether Palm Sunday, 4th of July or New Years Day. Co-workers' decisions to share Draper's commitment to the office are in this sense less about showing loyalty to the job than choosing *this* form of fulfilment at the expense of others. This is certainly the case with Peggy, Draper's protégé, who memorably chooses to stay working with him on the night of her birthday while her boyfriend and family wait at dinner.

This renovation of the commuter narrative and its coordinates reveals the pleasure and intensity of work-based relationships and their power to captivate.³² It also means that the series is free to experiment with a range of devices exploring the 'rootlessness' of organisation life, the effects that corporate lifestyles impose on the broader culture. Affirming the possibility of a life beyond suburbia, *Mad Men* draws

attention to the experience of transience, movement and mobility that has come to shape the experience of the professional class privileged in the text.³³ It is not simply Draper, whose stolen identity is the strongest example of a lack of stable origins. Notable accounts also bear witness to this shift. Whether it is the designs for Penn Station, or pitches for particular brands of suitcases and airlines, the series offers constant reminders of modernity's appetite for travel, movement and change. By season three, the paragon of the business establishment, Conrad Hilton, emerges as Draper's mentor. The man whose fortune rests on an empire of 'way stations' between work and home symbolises the clout of the globe-trotting business culture that is dawning.

This last move also signals the final development assuring that Draper surrenders his characteristic autonomy to join executive ranks. To this point, Draper stands out for refusing the compromises involved in organisation life—a feature that, along with his creative genius, distinguishes him from his peers. Taking Draper aside, Bert Cooper, the senior partner of the advertising firm, makes his future plain: 'There are few people who get to decide what will happen in our world,' he says. 'You have been invited to join them. Pull back the curtain, and take your seat.' Cooper's compelling imagery paints a picture of elite corporate power, one that Draper, unlike Rath, decides to join.

In contrast to the moral virtues of the postwar period, our sympathy for this position is perhaps greater today given the inequalities of income that have skyrocketed since the 1960s. As the Occupy Wall Street protests have shown, there is little variegation between the 99 per cent shut out from the privileged circuits of capital and the 1 per cent 'who decide what will happen'. Nonetheless, if Draper pursues a lifestyle that ultimately supersedes the aspirations accompanying suburbanisation, his success at work rests on an ability to sell these ideals with every conviction. The finale of *Mad Men*'s first season captures this cynical bind in Draper's successful bid for the Kodak account, which uses images of his own family to sell the idea of a slide show carousel. Like the suburban narratives I have been discussing so far:

Kodak brings together nostalgia for an era that has passed, the desire for domestic comfort and suburban bliss. Ultimately, the dream is only fully

articulated in the boardroom, in advertisements, in creative work. In reality, it's too late.³⁴

—'WE HAVE TO STEAL EVERYTHING': FROM ORGANISATIONS TO NETWORKS

One of the ways *Mad Men* avoids the neat opposition of individualism and conformism—the tension that characterises organisation life as much as sociological and aesthetic accounts of it—is in the rupture that concludes season three. As Sterling Cooper is by degrees bought out and streamlined by a larger company in England, Draper leads a daring corporate raid on the firm's clients, convincing key staff to join him in starting a new business. Roger Stirling's mobilising call, 'We have to steal everything', is crude acknowledgement of the new economy of networks.³⁵ The inadequacies of bureaucratic power in an emerging multinational framework are here surpassed by that other resilient American trait: entrepreneurialism. The new business articulates the interests of all Alpha male egos in the previous office setting (Sterling Cooper Draper Price) even while this gender makeup fails to reflect the vital skills of Joan Holloway—the only employee who knows *how* to steal the company secrets—and Peggy Olsen, the copywriter whose ideas regularly save the day, even when they are credited to others. What also changes in the course of season four is that Draper becomes attracted by the charms of family life, insofar as this comes to be displayed in the nannying skills of his secretary. The difference between the two women may lie in the fact that unlike Betty, a trophy wife if ever there was one, Megan proves herself capable through paid labour. The ambition that leads her to the city to follow her dreams is the vital ingredient commanding Draper's respect and interest in their office seduction scene.

Ambition is the overriding value and reward system in the *Mad Men* workplace; 'well rounded' men and women of the organisation are few and far between. In the entrepreneurial world facilitated by networks, those who aren't prepared to sacrifice everything for the deal are liabilities for the company. *Mad Men's* answer to Tom Rath is the character of Cosgrove, who makes an impression by avoiding the conventional plays of corporate culture and traditional male networking. Pitched against the maniacal Pete Campbell as head of accounts, Cosgrove thrives by avoiding the opportunism of his colleague. In one instance he refuses a weekend invitation from one of the firm's partners, orchestrated to woo an account from his

father-in-law. Asserting that 'his fiancée is his life', Cosgrove questions the priorities of co-workers who put the job before everything else. Viewers lacking the memory to recall Tom Rath's similar choice may yet wonder how much longer such admissions will remain tolerable, as new workplace norms appear to be on the horizon.

The first four seasons of *Mad Men* thus advance from the protocols of executives and employees working in a secure organisation context to anticipate the entrepreneurial skills necessary to navigate the decentralised, flexible workplaces to come.³⁶ As Pierson notes, the opportunistic Draper 'represents a crucial transitional figure for both pre-1970s corporate and post-Fordist, flexible capitalism'.³⁷ Set before the management innovations that transformed the experience of salaried office work for good, the narrative nonetheless hints at the ways in which individualised responsibility would become a hallmark of the professional settings familiar to viewers. In the shift from organisations to networks, employees are required to develop their own support systems to withstand the omnipresent threat of layoffs and redundancies. Survival entails maintaining *employability* even when the promise of permanent employment is forever lost.³⁸

For a contemporary audience, *Mad Men* also provides the fantasy of a workplace without the constant company of computers. It is a rendition of office life before mobile devices allowed it to follow us all the way home.³⁹ In this vein, the show's explicit rehabilitation of the flannel suit repertoire responds to something more fundamental about the changing experience of work, which now escapes the confines of the 9 to 5, suburb-metro routine. The waning of the commuter narrative in *Mad Men* testifies the affront to our sensibilities posed by work worlds that do not recognise a need to retreat to the suburbs, or travel time free from email, Facebook and phone. Of course, the modernist spatial imaginary that afforded the luxury of the commuter reverie is the same paradigm that supposed there could be carefully segregated sites for labour and love—and it is here, in its explicit framing of the emerging professional woman, that *Mad Men's* challenge to the commuter genre takes its most forceful shape. Peggy Olsen's choice of career over children is an omen of the decisions many middle-class women will make as feminism reconfigures the landscape of modern work.

If the gendered spatial logic of modernity is thoroughly exhausted, as *Mad Men* convincingly implies, in this final section I turn to other representations of suburbia that illustrate the power relations more fitting to the digitally mediated network era. In these screen visions, individualism and conformism retain their fraught relation, even if the workplace is no longer the prime site for surveillance and compromised autonomy. When indie band The Arcade Fire took out the Album of the Year Grammy for 2010's *The Suburbs*, some saw this as due recognition for a group that had successfully captured the nostalgic pleasures of commuter towns spread across North America and elsewhere. Critics applauded Win Butler's desires to 'have a daughter while I'm still young' along with the group's evolution from anti-Bush sermonising (in 2007's *Neon Bible*) to more mundane mythologising typical of musical influences such as Springsteen.⁴⁰ The album's appeal lies in summoning listeners' own associations with poignant moments of childhood:

We rode our bikes to the nearest park
Sat under the swings and kissed in the dark
We shield our eyes from the police lights
We run away, but we don't know why

alongside scathing appraisals of new housing developments:

Living in the sprawl
Dead shopping malls rise like mountains beyond mountains
And there's no end in sight
I need the darkness, someone please cut the lights.⁴¹

These antithetical reflections appearing within the course of the same song press upon the contradictions at the heart of suburban life—the compromises involved in comfortable prosperity that Whyte also identified. A number of spin-off projects attached to the album also respond to the theme, including a 28-minute short film, *Scenes from the Suburbs*, directed by Spike Jonze. But it is the significance of the band's decision to develop a viral online video for one of the album's key tracks, 'We Used to Wait', in collaboration with Google and other stakeholders, that speaks to our experience of security, mobility and identity in an information economy.

In the interactive video and website known as 'The Wilderness Downtown', fans are invited to enter the site after typing the street address of their childhood home into a dialogue box. What follows is an individually tailored experience of the same basic film clip with a selection of pop-up images across the screen. Animated by HTML5, these boxes draw on a repository of images summoned from the archive of Google Maps. In effect, what begins as a video of a kid running down a suburban street in a hoodie turns out to be a kid (you) running down your own street and pausing in front of your old house. Other flashing frames reveal sweeping vistas of the surrounding neighbourhood. Assisted by the music, the visuals reinforce the feeling of place and have the aim of triggering a multitude of memories. It helps that it is a beautiful song. The lyrics sing of the curiosity whereby 'we used to write letters' and then 'we used to wait' for them. By extension, the song is about the temporality of the suburbs, the space where as children 'we used to wait' for the rest of our lives to begin.

The Wilderness Downtown is a moving experience when it works; depending on your home address and your location in the world the results vary. In the broadband-heavy settings for which it was designed, the favourable response to the project is largely due to its demonstration of the affordances of HTML5 and its success as an example of viral marketing. Google Chrome improved its market share as a result of the investment, while the website won site of the year in the 2010 Favourite Website Awards.⁴² Of course central to the project's pleasures—leaving aside its default assumption of a suburban upbringing—is a willingness to impart personal information. Google provides the experience for free on the condition that certain aspects of one's identity be surrendered. In this sense, the terms of participation follow a familiar pattern, since anxieties about 'suburbia', 'the man in the grey flannel suit' and 'the organisation man' are all to do with conformity. We surrender vital aspects of ourselves, our privacy and uniqueness, for safety, community and connection. For better or worse, the suburban idyll has been a powerful means of sanctioning a compromised degree of individuality in the interests of gaining membership in a larger group. In workplaces, too, management surveillance has been the necessary pact securing ongoing monetary payment.

As we enter the information age, The Arcade Fire project shows how the act of surrendering one's identity to a higher power spills from the workplace to the

network. In this context, the security of the firm and its promise to protect our aspirations gives way to a new landscape of monitoring and exchange. Passwords and login formulae act as feeble defence for our digital vulnerabilities.⁴³ When it comes to identifying information, the network turns individuals to 'dividuals', to use Deleuze's term.⁴⁴ On the pretext of personalisation, elements of our biography are reflected and quantified in data and code, producing simulations of the selves we may or may not be. The same processes that turn our intimate details into opportunities for advertising inform the measures of accounting and risk that contribute to making our identities—and hence our lives—seem viable and productive.⁴⁵ As I will suggest in conclusion, 'the man in the grey flannel suit' genre and the tradition of suburban critique it gives rise to are equally ill-fitting for a work-world defined by networks rather than organisations, a lifestyle that is subject to the monitoring regimes of 'big data', and a housing market that has exceeded its mobilising capacity.

—THE WANING OF THE COMMUTE

In Johnson's screen adaptation of *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, Betsy Rath's determination to bring about a better future rests on the belief 'that things are going to get better. Promotions. Opportunities. Some good breaks. That's what life is: hope ... and the breaks. You can't just accept things the way they are now.' When her husband is told about a job in 'public relations' on his way to work on the commuter train, it is this entreaty that leads Tom to pursue the position, despite having little inkling as to what the job entails. 'You got a clean shirt, you bathe every day, that's all there is to it,' his colleague assures him. It may be mere coincidence that the first episode of *Mad Men* season four is called 'Public Relations'. In any case, to the extent that the series follows an evident tradition in its critical representation of the suburban idyll, in a contemporary viewing context this is matched with a degree of cynicism or compromised knowingness that Lauren Berlant terms 'cruel optimism'. *Mad Men* takes for granted the limitations of suburbia as a model for domestic fulfilment, just as its depiction of corporate downsizing in later seasons offers a retrospective on the Fordist promise of secure and stable employment. Ambition alone will not deliver 'the good life' for audiences in the present. Housing foreclosures and paralysing levels of personal and sovereign debt are the

accumulation of years of advertising copy and public relations dedicated to the products of consumer capitalism. The basic standard of living for the American middle class today pales in comparison to the postwar period of *Mad Men*, and it is this recognition that helped generate momentum for the Occupy protests at the end of 2011.⁴⁶ Originating, like the television show's plotlines, in the business precincts of downtown Manhattan, these popular uprisings speak a new kind of anomie in the street-level slogan, 'You are not a loan.' Observers of the movement have been challenged to articulate a range of sentiments designed to express the contradiction that is white collar precarity. For now, reacting to the very forms of spatial segregation underpinning previous economic formations, 'Occupy' names the power of a multitude of potential workers now discovering their agency.

Reflecting the changing experience of modernity in the wake of major conflict, commuter narratives represent the cultural impact of the organisation and the rise in suburban living that accompanied it. They herald the alliance between individual workers and corporate capital that, for a time, looked set to ensure a finite set of hopes and aspirations. In its opening seasons, *Mad Men* draws on elements of the commuter genre, offering a vision of suburbia untainted by questions of consumer debt, speculator sprawl, or peak oil. Stirling Cooper's workers dwell in an organisational setting as yet unaffected by flexible management techniques, human resources departments and the online obligations of Facebook friends. The show's performative historicity offers insight into the 'attrition of a fantasy, a collectively invested form of life' that the suburban commuter took for granted.⁴⁷ One of its accomplishments is to allow the privileges of postwar prosperity to be briefly entertained by viewers steeped in the knowledge that for a growing majority, the benefits of salaried work and the joys of home ownership are unlikely to return.

—

Melissa Gregg works in the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney. Her previous publications include *Work's Intimacy* (2011), *The Affect Theory Reader* (with Gregory J. Seigworth, 2010) and *Cultural Studies' Affective Voices* (2006).

—NOTES

- ¹ William H. Whyte in *The Organisation Man*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1963 [1956] p.p. 152–3.
- ² The Arcade Fire, 'We Used to Wait', *The Suburbs*, Merge, 2010.
- ³ *Mad Men*, AMC, 2008–12. Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, Cassell, London, 1956. The Organisation is capitalised in this instance to anticipate the usage adopted by Whyte in *The Organisation Man*.
- ⁴ *Revolutionary Road*, Dreamworks Home Entertainment, 2009. Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, Vintage, New York, 1961.
- ⁵ The western served to assuage the contradictions and ethical dilemmas arising from the settlement of the US frontier, relying on stock tropes and a host of gender and racial cultural stereotypes to do so. See Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice*, London, Routledge, 1988, which draws on Will Wright's classic account, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1975.
- ⁶ On the 'fantasmatic' function of genre, and for a more thorough application of Raymond Williams' 'structure of feeling' (see note 6 below) to contemporary screen visions, see Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2011. In separate essays, both Maura Grady and Scott F. Stoddart invoke nostalgia in their discussion of *Mad Men* in Stoddart's *Analysing Mad Men: Critical Essays on the Television Series*, Macfarlane and Co., Jefferson, NC, 2011. In 'Camelot Regained', Stoddart provides a helpful overview of media commentary linking *Mad Men* to the *MGFS*, alongside creator Matthew Weiner's own thoughts on the character, pp. 209–15.
- ⁷ The film, starring Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio, brings together the same pair that in many ways defined Hollywood cultural imperialism in the previous decade through their roles in James Cameron's *Titanic* (2007). *Revolutionary Road* continues Mendes' personal interest in suburban critique earlier evident in his award-winning film, *American Beauty* (1999).
- ⁸ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977.
- ⁹ Berlant, pp. 6–7.
- ¹⁰ *The Apartment*, United Artists, 1960. I am grateful for this reference from colleagues at the original 'On Mad Men' symposium at Sydney University in 2010.
- ¹¹ On the gendered Fordist contract see Carol Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Polity, London, 1988. Also Lisa Adkins, 'From Retroactivation to Futurity: The End of the Sexual Contract', *Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2008, pp. 182–201.
- ¹² John Brack, *Collins St, 5pm*, 1955, National Gallery of Victoria.
- ¹³ Edwin Tanner, *White Collar Worker*, 1954, Art Gallery of South Australia.
- ¹⁴ *The Man In the Gray Flannel Suit*, dir. Nunally Johnson, 20th Century Fox, 1956.
- ¹⁵ The normativity implied in these visions becomes apparent when seen in juxtaposition to official government representations of a similar period. *Life in Australia*, a film advertising Sydney as a

destination for skilled migrants in the 1960s, includes opening scenes closely following the composition of fictional commuter narratives this essay describes, with a male breadwinner/commuter waving his wife goodbye before catching the train from the suburbs to work. See <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vR1CU8NjGW0>> (accessed 29 January 2012). Thanks to Anita Bressan for this reference and many others during our teaching term as this article was written.

¹⁶ Subsequent to the writing of this article, *Mad Men* season five makes a feature of the commute endured by newly suburbanised Pete Campbell, just as it underscores the connection between train transit and adultery outlined below.

¹⁷ Such moments also indicate the scriptwriters' extensive research efforts in tracking down the original timetables linking Manhattan to Draper's residence. See Matthew Weiner in interview, *Lumina: Australian Journal of Screen Arts and Business*, no. 2, 2010.

¹⁸ I am grateful to Enrica Picarelli for this observation. See her 'The Folding of the American Working Class in *Mad Men*' in *Blue Collar Pop Culture: From NASCAR to Jersey Shore*, ed. M. Keith Booker, Praeger Publishers, 2012.

¹⁹ Whyte, p. 8.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 127.

²¹ Ibid., p. 11.

²² Ibid., p. 14.

²³ Ibid., p. 260.

²⁴ Which makes us question the use of the term 'new' in the subtitle of Peter Kilborn's book *Next Stop: Reloville. Life Inside America's New Rootless Professional Class*, Times Books, New York, 2009.

²⁵ Whyte, p. 15.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 16, 18.

²⁷ This suggestion in the Wikipedia entry on the film is not supported with evidence, although the biographical details suggest its merits. See

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Man_in_the_Gray_Flannel_Suit> (accessed 28 February 2012).

²⁸ Whyte, p. 127.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 138.

³⁰ Betty Freidan, *The Feminine Mystique*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1963. The fact that Don pays for Betty to seek therapy for what contemporary viewers recognise as the 'housewife syndrome' central to middle-class feminism is one of the show's most obvious reflections of mid-century patriarchy: especially when it becomes clear that Draper is receiving personal updates by phone from the doctor. Unplanned pregnancy is also a repeated feature in *Mad Men*, affecting several lead characters.

³¹ Another intertextual coincidence is that *Betsy* in *MGFS* is played by Jennifer Jones, while *Betty* in *Mad Men* is played by January Jones. Meanwhile, in *The Apartment*, the secretary who plots the downfall of her philandering boss has the name 'Ms Olsen': Peggy Olsen in *Mad Men* is an uncanny echo.

³² This argument is outlined in my three-year study of office professionals published as Melissa Gregg, *Work's Intimacy*, Polity, London, 2011.

³³ An experience that finds its most extreme depiction in the screen adaptation of Walter Kim's *Up in the Air*, released in 2009, and also heavily inflected by the US economic crisis. See Melissa Gregg, 'White Collar Intimacy' in *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion: Feelings, Affect and Technological Change*, ed. Adi Kuntsman and Athina Karatzogianni, Palgrave MacMillan, London, 2012.

³⁴ Ellie Rennie, 'Pitching the American Dream', *Inside Story*, 13 January 2009, <<http://inside.org.au/pitching-the-american-dream/>>.

³⁵ On the shift from organisational power to 'network capital' see P. Bradwell and R. Reeves, *Network Citizens*, Demos Report, 2008, <www.demos.co.uk/publications/networkcitizens>.

³⁶ Maura Grady's 'The Fall of Organisation Man: Loyalty and Conflict in the First Season' argues: 'The series illustrates that the very notion of an organisation man is flawed; he is a straw figure who never actually existed but rather was held out as an unattainable ideal, a subset of the equally elusive American Dream that workers reached out for but were always already unable to grasp' in Stoddart, *Analysing Mad Men*, p. 46. This is a neat way of capturing my point, that the concept has generic rather than empirical value.

³⁷ David P. Pierson, 'Unleashing a Flow of Desire', in Stoddart, *Analysing Mad Men*, p. 80.

³⁸ These ideas draw from Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1998; Alan Liu, *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004; and Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. G. Elliott, Verso, London, 2005.

³⁹ Melissa Gregg, 'Home Offices and Remote Parents', *Inside Story*, September 29, 2011, <<http://inside.org.au/home-offices-and-remote-parents/>>.

⁴⁰ Helena Fitzgerald, 'We Will Never Get Away From the Sprawl: Arcade Fire Resurrects the Suburban Dream', *The New Inquiry*, 11 August 2010, <<http://thenewinquiry.com/post/937003353/we-will-never-get-away-from-the-sprawl-arcade-fire>>; Daniel Levis, '"The Suburbs" Revisited', *Precipitate: Journal of the New Environmental Imagination*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2010, <<http://precipitatejournal.com/home/archives/volume-2/issue-1/review-keltner/>>; Ian Cohen, 'The Suburbs', *Pitchfork*, 2 August 2010, <<http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/14516-the-suburbs/>>. Thanks to Shannon Mattern for recommending these reviews.

⁴¹ The Arcade Fire, 'Sprawl II (Mountains beyond Mountains)', *The Suburbs*.

⁴² FWA.com, 'FWA Site of the Year', 15 January 2011, <<http://www.thefwa.com/article/fwa-site-of-the-year-2010>>.

⁴³ Liu, p. 42; see also Mark Andrejevic, *i-Spy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era*, University of Kansas Press, Lawrence, 2007.

⁴⁴ Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October* 59, 1992, pp. 3–7; see also Gregory J. Seigworth, 'Pockets, Pools, and Plasma: Secretions of Social Media', *Theory, Culture and Society*, forthcoming.

⁴⁵ Patricia T. Clough, 'The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedia, and Bodies', *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, Duke University Press, Durham, 2010.

⁴⁶ Just one of the many graphs that chart employment figures and the wealth gap online is this one at *Business Insider*, <<http://www.businessinsider.com/what-wall-street-protesters-are-so-angry-about-2011-10?op=1>>. Further background in David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*, Profile Books, London, 2010.

⁴⁷ Berlant, p. 11.