On 16 July 2010 the *New York Times* online edition ran an interactive feature on what reviewer Alessandra Stanley, in an accompanying piece, called a “cultural phenomenon.” The occasion was the season 4 premiere of *Mad Men*, scheduled to air nine days later. As most readers of this book know, *Mad Men* is an *AMC* television show about Don Draper, a fictional character who is creative director for Sterling Cooper, a fictional New York advertising agency in the 1960s. What stood out in July 2010, therefore, was the seriousness of the *Times* reportage, which interspersed photographs from the 1960s with scenes and stills from a television drama. In a piece labeled “Seeing History in ‘Mad Men,’” the *Times* oscillated between describing the historical 1960s and *Mad Men’s* characters (Egner). “The Korean War created Don Draper,” the newspaper of record wrote, as though asserting a biographical fact. *Mad Men*, the *Times* seemed to say, was creating a window on the nation’s past through which viewers might experience America’s history in narrative form. Don Draper was not fiction but biography; *Mad Men* was not television but a repository of the past. Pastness itself was redefined as the past of the 1960s, the past of postwar America, a past of knowable events about which one might read in the *New York Times*.

The *Times*’s soft spot for *Mad Men* is hardly surprising. The show, set in the last golden age of print, appeals to the same well-heeled professionals who read newspapers, re-creating a time before television and the Internet supplanted broadsheet journalism as the premier venue for news and opin-
season 4 thus gave us Don announcing his withdrawal from cigarette advertising in the same venerable pages that had just proclaimed *Mad Men* a “cultural phenomenon.” Such paradoxes have become common. An article on Cary Grant in the August 2010 issue of *Vanity Fair* opened: “Our story is set in the years before *Mad Men*, when Eisenhower was in the White House and America had only 48 states” (Beauchamp and Balban). What does this willful conflation of fact with fiction suggest? As the show invites its audience to look with post-*Mad Men* eyes on iconic media from the 1960s, is it reconfiguring our conception of the past?

At one level *Mad Men* has simply awakened memories of an early-1960s America that had been lost between the vintage 1950s of *Leave It to Beaver* and the late-1960s explosion of Woodstock, feminism, black power, and *The Mod Squad*. It is also clear, however, that *Mad Men* is not simply jostling memories but creating them: as the historian of the 1960s Jeremy Varon writes in this volume, “The show is more plausibly the staging of a fantasy than the rendering of history.” Likewise, as Mabel Rosenheck proposes in her chapter on fashion, the show’s relation to the vintage artifacts it displays is performative: an active construction that bespeaks twenty-first century representation of the 1960s. Thus media commentators on the *Mad Men* zeitgeist are not so much seeing the 1960s in the show as seeing them through it. Their doing so arguably tells us less about the 1960s than about the current desire for collective memories of the past.

By and large, the essays in this volume do not look to *Mad Men* for an accurate depiction of the 1960s, but they do explore the show’s remarkable impact on how history is experienced. Americans have generally been a presentist people, seldom invoking the past beyond occasional nods to forebears. Recent soothsayers have announced “the end of history” (the title of Francis Fukuyama’s bestseller of 1992), as well as technology’s reshaping of the globe (Thomas Friedman’s *The World Is Flat* [2005]). If *Mad Men* has seemed to put history back on the map, it is a sign of the show’s groundbreaking approach to period drama: its use of the forms of historical fiction to capture and create an intense experience of the present day. In this way, phantasmatic and millennial though it may be, *Mad Men* has altered the vision of the 1960s, and of pastness itself.

The show’s ability to do so, we suggest, rests on a few interrelated premises. First, despite the hype about the show’s historical accuracy, *Mad Men* is as selectively anachronistic as it is showily mimetic. Perhaps never before has a television show been praised so effusively for its “realistic” qualities and painstaking attention to period details. Fan participation ritualizes this
fetishism of the detail, with websites such as Natasha Vargas-Cooper’s *The Footnotes of Mad Men* following each new episode with research on early-1960s artifacts and events. Viewers get caught up in discussions about the books in Don’s office, the clothing used to develop principal characters, and the use of nuanced interiors such as season 3’s update of the Drapers’ living room or season 4’s creation of a new office space for Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce. Paradoxically, the spotting of occasional inaccuracies (Bryn Mawr didn’t have sororities when Betty would have attended; the IBM typewriters featured in the pilot, set in March 1960, weren’t available until 1961; Joan quotes Marshall McLuhan’s famous phrase “the medium is the message” three years before it was published) seems to intensify the show’s mimetic halo, exacerbating the tendency for discourse about the show to “forget” that it is fictional.

On closer examination, however, *Mad Men*’s lovingly tended mimicry is selective and deliberately counterpoised with other features of its diegesis. Thus, as Lauren M. E. Goodlad observes in this volume, the show’s overall realism tends toward a literary naturalism associated with groundbreaking nineteenth-century novels such as Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1856) and Anthony Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now* (1874–75)—both of which, like *Mad Men*, first appeared in serial form. By contrast, the show’s visual aesthetic (as Robert A. Rushing notes in his chapter) takes its cues from the most glamorous cinema of the mid-twentieth century, along with glossy period magazines such as *Vogue*, *Playboy*, and *Ladies’ Home Journal*. *Mad Men* thus combines naturalism’s relentless exposure of social pathology with a surface allure culled from the most glittering self-representations of the era. The show’s most significant anachronisms, therefore, are not the occasional errors, but the conspicuous departures from all but the façade of the period texts that *Mad Men* invokes.

THE BEST OF EVERYTHING

In “Six Month Leave” (2.9), wise-guy comedian Jimmy Barrett hails Don as “the Man in the Gray Flannel Suit,” a reference to Sloan Wilson’s novel of 1955 and Nunnally Johnson’s film of 1956. *Mad Men* thus inserts itself into a period archive that includes Grace Metalious’s *Peyton Place* (1956) and Frank O’Hara’s *Meditations in an Emergency* (1957). To be sure, Don’s sartorial panache, as performed by Jon Hamm, re-creates the aura of matinee idols such as Gregory Peck, Cary Grant, and Sean Connery (see Jim Hansen in this volume). Yet despite Jimmy’s determination to peg Don as
a Peck look-alike—“I loved you in *Gentleman’s Agreement*,“ he tells him in “The Benefactor” (2.3)—Don is hardly the double of characters like Philip Schuyler Green in Elia Kazan’s movie of 1947, Thomas Rath in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, or Atticus Finch in Robert Mulligan’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962). Don may be a suburban commuter with a wartime secret, but his problems have little to do with the Fordist-era conformity that Wilson saw threatening postwar America.

In a memorable scene from *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, three men, one of whom is Rath, walk into a business meeting wearing nearly identical garb, an iconic statement of the “uniform of the day” (S. Wilson, 11; fig. Intro.1). As Catherine Jurca observes, “Tom Rath’s renowned attire” signifies “the massification of the middle class” and “the deterioration of [its] status and privilege” (85). Wilson’s answer to this engulfing corporate culture is a return to moral values: Rath saves his integrity and marriage by telling the truth about past infidelity, putting family and community before corporate ambition. Of course, deteriorating middle-class privilege—albeit of a post-Fordist and neoliberal kind—is a defining experience for *Mad Men*’s audience. But Don is hardly a likely candidate for moral redemption. Indeed, while *Mad Men* sustains identification with Don by holding out the possibility, even the hope, that he will change or grow in Rath-like manner, it also makes clear that the impulse to “believe in Don” is the ultimate sucker’s bet (witness season 4’s Faye Miller as a memorable reminder of the odds).

If Don cannot be Rath—if he is in fact an anti-Rath who casts doubt on the very idea of male virtue—that is partly because films like *Gentleman’s Agreement*, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* are firm in their conviction that secular progress, however precarious, is achievable through moral agency, an expectation that naturalistic narrative tends to flummox. Thus, while Rath learns the value of being true to himself, Don hardly recognizes a boundary between self and self-invention. Though rarely unfeeling, and even quixotic, Don reflexively brings Madison Avenue to bear on the non-office world Rath holds sacrosanct. Whereas Rath defines himself *against* the limitations of his job in public relations, Don is an ad man to the roots of his Brylcreemed hair.

Here is where a second premise behind *Mad Men* becomes especially significant: although the show’s investments in historical contexts are multifold, history functions first and foremost as the material fabric of an arresting aestheticism. Aestheticism explains how Don Draper—whose very name suggests the artful donning of masculine drapery—transforms the well-cut business suit into a mark of nimble self-fashioning. Thus, like much
else in the show, the riff on the Man in the Gray Flannel Suit adopts tropes from a pre-counterculture 1960s to articulate experiences relevant to a post-counterculture twenty-first century. If this is hardly a magical time machine, like the “Carousel” Don pitches to Kodak, it represents an innovative play between mimesis and anachronism.

Then too, it is not only Don but also the show’s strong female characters whose embedding in “realistic” early-1960s contexts relies on motifs abstracted from period texts. In “Babylon” (1.6), Betty and Don discuss The Best of Everything, Rona Jaffe’s novel published in 1958 and Jean Negulesco’s movie of 1959. Mad Men cannily borrows from the movie a template for the offices of Sterling Cooper (figs. Intro.2–Intro.3) as well as the set piece of the young woman’s first day at work in a sophisticated Manhattan firm. As Dianne Harris writes in her chapter in this volume, “Location lends reality and authenticity to action.” Mad Men’s borrowing inspiration for its ad agency interior from Negulesco’s comparable set for Fabian Publishing Co. (based on Jaffe’s real-life experiences at Fawcett) thus imports the topos of female clerical workers spatially and professionally ensconced by male executives (an aspect of midcentury office life that male-centered narratives like Wilson’s obscure). As Harris suggests, the extensive open space in which Sterling Cooper’s secretarial staff labors mobilizes “panoptic qualities that not only permit but actually produce the sexual tensions and sexual harassment” that make the show so arresting.

Like Mad Men, The Best of Everything is a tell-all tale of the midcentury working girl. As the movie opens, Caroline Bender (Hope Lange) is a young secretary starting a new job in the big city, much like Peggy Olson. Another secretary, Gregg Adams (1950s supermodel Suzy Parker), is an aspir-
ing actress. Notably, Fabian employs a female editor, Amanda Farrow (Joan Crawford), who has chosen career over domesticity. The New York Times review described this genre as a cautionary tale of “the hearth vs. the desk” (H. Thompson). Behind the comic air of pink opening credits and Johnny Mathis crooning that “romance” promises “the best of everything,” the film insists that young women balance the enticements of urban freedom against the hazards of premarital sex and defeminizing professional ambition.

As in Mad Men, the sexual double standard is everywhere on display: an older editor, Mr. Shalimar (Brian Aherne), puts his hand on Caroline’s knee while offering to advance her career; Gregg ends up in the arms of a ladies’ man (Louis Jourdan) who quickly tires of her; and when another secretary accidentally becomes pregnant, her boyfriend tricks her into thinking he will marry her while driving her to an abortionist. Less familiar to Mad Men’s audience is the depiction of career aspirations as antithetical to female nature. Thus, when Caroline, a Radcliffe graduate, begins making savvy business suggestions, the eligible executive Mike Rice (Stephen Boyd) accuses
her of angling for his job. Toward the end, Miss Farrow decides to find domestic happiness with a widower, only to discover that it is “too late” for her to dispense womanly care. The movie closes with Caroline happy to restore “the desk” to her returning boss, and to embrace “the hearth” as Mike’s wife-to-be.

The Best of Everything provides a number of interesting insights into Mad Men. As Don lies in bed reading Jaffe’s novel, Betty zeroes in on Farrow—the character whom she least resembles. “Joan Crawford is not what she was,” she tells Don. “Her, standing next to Suzy Parker—as if they were the same species. . . . To think, one of the great beauties, and there she is so old” (1.6). Betty thus refuses the proffered identification with Caroline: a well-educated, upper-middle-class blonde, much like herself, whose happy ending is marriage to a handsome executive. Instead, she idealizes the youth of the most self-destructive character, Gregg, who falls to her death from a fire escape while clinging to the heartless playboy who discards her. Fittingly, the scene closes with Betty confessing a dependence that recalls Gregg’s desperate need for the errant lover who deems her “suffocating” and “possessive.” “I want you so much,” Betty whispers. “It’s all in a kind of fog because . . . I want you so badly.” When Don replies reassuringly, “You have me, you do,” we know he is lying. If Betty intuits that her storybook marriage to a handsome executive is as precarious as Gregg’s affair with an infamous ladies’ man, the reason, of course, is that Don is playing both parts.

Here once again Mad Men reproduces the resplendent surfaces of Hollywood cinema while stripping out the stark moral contrasts and idealized domestic norms. This signature fusion of glamour and naturalism works quite differently from other recent retrospectives such as Todd Haynes’s Far from Heaven (2002). In this celebrated tribute to Douglas Sirk, Haynes reconstructs the world of the 1950s—not as it might really have been, but as it was represented in Sirk’s magnificent Technicolor melodramas. What viewers and critics loved about Far from Heaven were not only its period details and capturing of Sirk’s visual richness, but also its filling in of the gaps left in his narratives. In a literal return of the repressed, homosexuality and interracial romance are made visible, while vices like cigarettes are hidden. Subtext becomes text as Haynes brings to the surface what Sirk circled around and disavowed. In doing so, Haynes seems to correct the movies he commemorates, taking his revision of midcentury narratives much further than Mad Men’s. As many critics have noted, Mad Men unmasks—but does not decenter—the white middle-class narratives that dominated the period. If the risk for the show is the disturbing dissonance of a luscious mise-en-scène saturated
by jarring prejudice, the risk for Haynes is a complete rupture from what made Sirk’s aesthetic compelling in the first place—the social tensions that Hollywood’s mainstream could not yet openly render.

“YOU’LL LOVE THE WAY IT MAKES YOU FEEL”

Consider historical fiction as it typically appears on television: *Foyle’s War* (ITV, 2002–) depicts a middle-aged police chief in a small English town during the Second World War. In one episode (“Among the Few,” 2.2), Foyle’s son is training to be a pilot in the Royal Air Force when his squadron-mate comes under suspicion of a crime. Foyle learns that the young man is innocent of the crime but is homosexual. As most viewers would agree, in the 1940s a provincial policeman’s most likely reaction to discovering that an RAF pilot was homosexual—and in love with his son to boot—would be to arrest or report him. But Foyle displays an open-minded compassion that would be unusual in such a figure even today. *Foyle’s War* thus allows us to have our enjoyment and eat it, too: viewers can both warm to Foyle and the glamour of wartime flyboys and have them untarnished by the prejudices from which the show’s feel-good heroism is abstracted.

Ironically, period shows like *Foyle’s War* are rarely if ever singled out as “smug,” while for some viewers, the charge of smugness clings to *Mad Men* like the stale odor of cigarettes. Alongside profuse acclaim from every quarter, including Emmy Awards for Outstanding Drama for four consecutive years, *Mad Men* has been subject to this line of critique from several academic and literary corners. Thus, according to Sady Doyle in the *Atlantic*, *Mad Men* “affords viewers an illusion of moral superiority”; and for Benjamin Schwarz, also writing in the *Atlantic*, the show “encourages the condescension of posterity” by inviting its audience “to indulge in a most unlovely—because wholly unearned—smugness.” Both writers echo Mark Greif’s earlier claim in the *London Review of Books* that “*Mad Men* is an unpleasant little entry in the genre of Now We Know Better.” In the most extensive critique so far, Daniel Mendelsohn argues in the *New York Review of Books* that the show’s “attitude toward the past is glib and its self-positioning in the present is unattractively smug.” Why is a show that lays bare the racism, sexism, and decadence of the past judged to be self-congratulatory, when more conventional historical fare spares viewers entirely from reflecting on injustice? The question points to a set of ongoing debates about *Mad Men* that this volume explores in multiple ways.3

To be sure, *Mad Men* does not have the mass appeal of a network hit. For
some audiences the pace is unnervingly slow. Many viewers old enough to have experienced the 1960s report that *Mad Men* brings back memories they would rather forget. Similarly, some younger viewers find realistic depiction of racism and misogyny too uncomfortable to tolerate. For still other audiences, *Mad Men*’s aestheticism is itself an obstacle to pleasure. As one colleague mused, “I think I may be too personally ambivalent about style to have the same response . . . as some of my better-dressed friends. I hate myself at some level if I spend too much time on clothes and décor.” The assumption here is that watching *Mad Men* entails positive embrace, perhaps even emulation, of its glamorous style (although plenty of *Mad Men* watchers neither sport vintage fashion nor throw elegant cocktail parties). Then too, some male viewers find it difficult to identify with the show’s spectacularly flawed protagonist. “I think Don is harder to take for men than [for] women,” writes one interlocutor. “Heterosexual women can likely assume that he is hardly relationship material, and fantasize about pleasure without strings or commitment. But for men, he’s a threat—someone who sinks their esteem and incurs a sense that ‘life isn’t fair’ insofar as a mysterious lout is rewarded with his choice of beautiful women.”

Writing on his blog, *Just tv*, the television scholar Jason Mittell wrestles with the disconnect between his critical “habitus” and his reflexive “dislike” for the show: “I fully acknowledge that it is a ‘good’ series. . . . It is objectively better made . . . than the vast majority of programs airing on American television. But . . . I would rather watch many programs that are less well-made, less intelligent, and less ambitious, as I find them more satisfying and pleasurable” (“On Disliking”). Such reactions not only illustrate the intense feelings the show incites, they also suggest that part of understanding *Mad Men*’s strong appeal means recognizing that it is not for everyone.

Still, it is worth pointing out that none of these reactions is at all self-congratulatory. For Caroline Levine, writing in this volume, shows like *Mad Men* and *The Sopranos* (*HBO, 1999–2007*) give us characters who, despite their flaws, are too compelling to enable the thorough detachment that a smug attitude requires. *Mad Men* “does not invite us to displace pernicious assumptions about sexism, racism, and homophobia onto an exotic, far-off place or time,” she argues, “but brings them just close enough to us to give us [a] feeling of uncanny familiarity.” Following Levine, one needs to ask, Who are these smug viewers whom *Mad Men* allegedly flatters? In Greif’s analysis, unexamined hostility toward the show and its cast stands in for the answer. Assessing the role of Draper, Greif writes, “[Jon] Hamm looks perpetually wimpy and underslept. His face is powdered and doughy. He lacks
command. He is witless. The pose that he’s best at, interestingly, is leaning back in his chair; it ought to be from superiority, but it looks as though he is trying to dodge a blow.” One can appreciate the critical bravado here without being convinced by the argument it purports to confirm: Is it likely that Mad Men “flatters us” because its leading man looks doughy and witless?

Doyle’s feminist analysis also invites questions. Disturbed that audiences do not recognize that Joan Holloway was raped by her fiancé in season 3—not “sort of” raped—Doyle unaccountably blames the show: “our inability to identify misogyny, even on a show that presents it so melodramatically,” points to the persistence of sexism. While Doyle is surely right about continuing sexism, she offers no evidence for the theory that Mad Men somehow obscures this reality. “We can’t face [sexism] directly unless we’re assured that it’s behind us,” Doyle claims. When she cites a female story editor who explains that several incidents depicted on Mad Men “come directly from experiences that I and the other women writers have had in our lifetimes,” Doyle seems to think that viewers will be shocked to hear it. This presumption of a gullible audience, indulged by a show that panders to its weakness, echoes the premise embedded in Greif’s title—“You’ll Love the Way It Makes You Feel.” Adopted from the tagline that Peggy writes for a weight-loss device—cum—vibrator, Greif’s title likens watching Mad Men to masturbation. In a comparable essay, Anna Kelner of Ms. worries that Mad Men “is crafting a whole new generation of would-be Bettys (Draper’s stylish wife) not Peggys (the show’s ambitious ‘career girl’).” Yet since many viewers dislike Betty (or, perhaps, love to hate her), the commentary surrounding this much-criticized character hardly suggests that the show is inspiring female viewers to become neurotic housewives and unhappy mothers. Instead, viewers’ favorite female characters by far are Joan, Peggy, and the unforgettable Rachel Menken from season 1—all three formidable “career girls” whose stories underline the tensions between marriage and work.

Condescension is also at play in Mendelsohn’s critique, though to do this essay justice, many of its perceptions are accurate: Mad Men’s plotlines are melodramatic; its interiors airless and “boxed”; and the style of acting it cultivates, mannered and flat. But Mendelsohn’s tack is less to elucidate how such supposed flaws produce “unattractive” smugness than to establish the viewer as rube: “That a soap opera decked out in high-end clothes (and concepts) should have received so much acclaim and is taken so seriously reminds you that fads depend as much on the willingness of the public to believe as on the cleverness of people who invent them.” This critical condescension concerns characters and viewers alike: “The writers don’t really
want you to think about what Betty might be thinking; they just want you to know that she’s one of those clueless 1960s mothers who smoked during pregnancy.” This said about a character who is on to her husband’s infidelity from the start, who takes out her neighbor’s pet pigeons with a shotgun—a woman who is complex and frustrated enough to lure a friend into a vicarious affair while she herself has sex with a stranger in a public rest room. Can it really be true that none of this prompts viewers to ponder what Betty is thinking?

In what is perhaps his most damning criticism, Mendelsohn argues that the writing in Mad Men is “very much like the writing you find in ads.” This interesting analysis of Mad Men and advertising (a topic explored in this volume by Lynne Joyrich, Lilya Kaganovsky, Lauren M. E. Goodlad, and Michael Bérubé) might be different if Mendelsohn did not accept the much-hyped premise of a show that accurately documents America’s history. As several contributors to this volume show, Mad Men is less interested in reproducing 1960s advertising than in capturing what the late-capitalist social world surrounding advertising means to viewers watching the show today. Like the best historical fiction, the show adopts resonant material from the past to speak audibly to the present. Historical realism of this kind directly contrasts with the “capitalist realism” that Michael Schudson, in one of the most penetrating studies of the topic to date, aligns with advertising. What advertisements portray, writes Schudson, is “relatively placeless,” “relatively timeless,” “abstracted,” and “self-contained” (211). Yet while advertisements do not depict particular realities, they strive for the illusion of reality as such. The “rich, cinematic, often crowded detail in magazine ads and television commercials” bespeaks an “obsessive attention to making every detail look ‘right’” (217).

Mendelsohn’s analysis is thus partly right: Mad Men captures the look and, at times, the feel of a 1960s advertisement; it does so, however, not to flatter us but to defamiliarize a millennial condition that is entirely our own. Mendelsohn’s blind spot on the show’s contemporaneity is especially striking in his analysis of Salvatore Romano’s closeted gay identity. Sal’s season 3 story line, he objects, “isn’t really about the closet at all.” Of course, the point is debatable given that Don, who discovers Sal’s secret while the two are traveling together, is in a closet himself—which, as Alexander Doty shows in this volume, endows their interactions with multiple tensions. But for Mendelsohn the show fails because it diverges from accurate documentation. Noting that Sal is fired after he rebuffs the sexual advance of the firm’s most important client, Mendelsohn protests: “That’s not a story about gay-
ness in the 1960s . . . it’s a story about caving in to power, a story about business ethics.” He may be the only writer today who thinks that Americans should not be watching more television stories about business ethics.

Similarly, Greif thinks he has found the smoking gun when he points out that “It’s toasted,” the slogan Don produces in “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” (1.1), was “first used by Lucky Strike not in 1960 but in 1917.” The scene pivots on Don’s need to surmount the daunting marketing problem cigarette advertisers faced in 1960, after facts about smoking and cancer began to spill into the popular press. Whereas all advertising contends with the need to differentiate brands that are virtually indistinguishable, tobacco advertising peddles products that are indistinguishably toxic. Seizing on a toasting process that all cigarette manufacturers employ, Don articulates a special instance of the marketing strategy that Rosser Reeves, the legendary executive at Ted Bates, called the “unique selling proposition”: the elevation of a particular feature (such as chocolate that melts in your mouth, not in your hands) to the status of a brand’s inimitable raison d’être. Thus when Don’s tagline replaces a pernicious universal (“Everybody else’s tobacco is poisonous”) with an abstracted particular (“Lucky Strike’s is toasted”), it shows how advertising disarticulates an illusory freedom of choice from the actual constraints and perilous addictions of consumer capitalism. Since the show is dramatic fiction, it no more matters that Lucky Strike used this slogan long before the proven cancer link than that “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” is borrowed from a song written in 1933. Greif goes on to point out that in the 1950s and ’60s, advertisers were “eager to believe in a Svengali model of mass persuasion. The black-magic prestige of professional psychology was at its height.” It never seems to occur to him that the writers of Mad Men mute this midcentury scientism, with its strong echoes of The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit, in order to engage in deliberate anachronism.

**IT’S NOT A SCIENCE**

It is not just any anachronistic account of advertising that Mad Men constructs, but a rich one that over-layers the Brave New World of midcentury behaviorism with a story about countercultural cooptation told by Thomas Frank in The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism (1997). The advertising of the 1950s and early 1960s, Frank explains, was of a piece with a business culture known for “soul-deadening conformity” and “empty consumerism” (7). Guided by leading lights, such as “Father of Advertising” David Ogilvy, the agencies of this period viewed
their work as a science, adopting the bureaucratic hierarchies and managerial style of the Fordist corporation. Under Reeves, Ted Bates’s ads favored repetitious taglines and scientific endorsements. Advertising, Reeves claimed in *Reality in Advertising*, does not need copywriters who indulge in a “solipsist universe,” like Tennyson’s “Lady of Shalott,” but rather, professionals under “the strict discipline of attaining a commercial goal” (121–22). Likewise, Ogilvy subjected the creative process to time-tested rules, scientific positivism, and managerial control. Critical of any approach that smacked of “the mystique of the Bauhaus,” he warned in *Confessions of an Advertising Man* that “aesthetic intangibles do not increase sales” (121). In such a context, books like Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957) could describe a manipulative ad industry that used psychological research to “probe our everyday habits” (12). Packard’s argument was part of a growing anticorporate critique that included David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney’s *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and William H. Whyte’s *The Organization Man* (1956), as well as fiction such as Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and Richard Yates’s *Revolutionary Road* (1961). Sixties counterculture was, in this sense, the fruit of rebellious energies defined in opposition to business and advertising.

Thomas Frank, however, rejects this simple contrast between corporation and counterculture. He argues that business culture not only coopted the storied rebellions of the 1960s but also anticipated and in some ways fueled them. The epicenter of this corporate insurrection was an advertising industry that had burst the bonds of Fordism and liberated its inner hipster. By the end of the decade, Frank writes, “advertising would . . . transform itself from a showplace of managerial certainty” to a “corporate celebration of carnivalesque difference” (49–50). This was, in effect, to demote researchers, account executives, and upper management in favor of the copywriters, artists, and creative directors whom Ogilvy had dismissed as “the Bauhaus brigade” (124). As ads began to mock and ironize the bromides that Madison Avenue had once proudly blazoned, the end result was commodification of the counterculture and the rise of a “cool” consumerism.

Although this transformation extended into the 1970s, the first major salvo came in 1959 when Doyle Dane Bernbach’s (DDB) Volkswagen ads “altered the look, language, and tone of American advertising” (Frank, 55). Bill Bernbach, the leader behind this coup, would become an “enfant terrible” and “hero among creatives” (Twitchell, 193; Schudson, 57). With an almost Wildean flair for aphorism, Bernbach declared that advertising was an art, that rules were meant for artists to break, and that “the real giants
have always been poets, men who jumped from facts into the realm of ideas” (qtd. in Frank, 57). By the late 1960s, agencies were increasingly following DDB’s example: they dethroned management, assembled charismatic creative teams, and even argued with clients. Advertising, for a time, became “anti-advertising,” a proto-postmodern ironization of consumer capitalism (Frank, 68).

Of course, the Sterling Cooper depicted in the first three seasons of Mad Men is precisely the kind of white shoe agency that preexisted DDB’s rise to prominence in the early 1960s. Whereas rising stars like Bernbach and the Volkswagen copywriter Julian Koenig were Jewish, Sterling Cooper’s lone Jewish employee works in the mailroom. In “Marriage of Figaro” (1.3), Sterling Cooper’s writers nervously eye the Volkswagen “Lemon” ad (fig. Intro.4). In “Babylon,” when a representative from the Israeli Tourist Board declares her intention to compare Sterling Cooper’s “traditional” offerings to DDB’s, Don tartly replies that “Sterling Cooper doesn’t like to think of itself as traditional.” Moreover, Ken Cosgrove and Pete Campbell recall Rosser Reeves in nurturing literary aspirations. That is, the same utilitarian technocrat who exhorted admen to “believe only what they can weigh, measure, calculate, and observe” had another side to his character (Reeves, 153). Reeves would go on to write a semiautobiographical novel about a poet-hero who leaves behind millions to become the kind of Greenwich Village bohemian with whom Don cavorts in season 1. Indeed, Don himself considers a comparable escape into the hedonism of California in season 2.
While _Mad Men_ thus dramatizes the tensions between research, accounts, and creative, the overall effect is historical composite, not reenactment of the DDB-led creative revolution. Set in 1960, the pilot already constructs Don as creative impresario and aligns market research with the professo-

rial Dr. Greta Guttman, whose Freudian shibboleths seem out of touch. It is not until season 4, by which point Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce is a fledg-

ling start-up, that Dr. Faye Miller represents a sophisticated form of market research in tension with creative instincts. When Faye’s focus group sug-

jects that Peggy’s idea for a cold cream ad centered on self-indulgent rituals will be less successful than a campaign promising matrimony, Don insists that advertising’s job is to invent ideas consumers have not yet imagined for themselves (“The Rejected,” 4.4). Pete illustrates the ascendancy of this Bernbachian ethos when he shows off Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce’s up-

to-date Creative Lounge. Pointing out the youthful ambience to prospective clients, he says, “We can’t tell you how it happens, but it does happen here” (“The Chrysanthemum and the Sword,” 4.5). Meanwhile, the ever more ir-

relevant Roger, a product of the Reeves generation, pens his risible memoir, _Sterling’s Gold_.

Advertising thus provides a structure for exploring the moral quanda-

ries of a corrupting world. Although this is not a documentary portrait of Madison Avenue in the 1960s, it captures resonant features of the zeitgeist while using specific campaigns to shape story worlds in multiple ways: for example, the brilliant Kodak “Carousel” pitch discussed in Irene Small’s chapter. Turning “surface into depth,” according to Small’s masterful read-

ing, the pitch provides a fitting close to season 1’s narrative of mounting de-

spair, just as season 3’s “Limit Your Exposure” ad underlines the continuing theme of closeted identity (Doty, this volume). In her chapter on “Maiden-

form” (2.6), an episode named after a brand, Kaganovsky shows how an advertising campaign subtends _Mad Men_’s sophisticated play with gendered spectatorship.

Some of the most memorable accounts, such as season 1’s Nixon cam-

paign and Israeli tourism bid, do not culminate in scripted pitches but in-

stead percolate into the show’s narrative substrate. In 1963 when the Ken-

edy campaign hired DDB, they signaled their attunement with the changes that led to the creative revolution. But the point of making Sterling Cooper Nixon’s choice, according to Michael Szalay, is to isolate Don’s embodi-

ment of the ascendant “hipness” that structures the show’s depiction of race (“Mad Style”). Thus, according to Szalay’s chapter in this volume, the adman-artist is a Maileresque “hipster manqué” and Don, a symbolic black
man (like his silhouette in the credits) trying to pass for white. Likewise, in Goodlad’s reading, Don’s resistance to selling Israel as a global commodity reveals his ambivalence toward a position of Judaized exile and otherness. In all of these ways, Mad Men uses advertising to glimpse the structures that make 1960s history palpable in our own day.

Still, while Mad Men has not yet scripted ads in the DDB style, the show itself is frequently self-referential, metatextual, and ironic. As Don says to the hapless client he manipulates in “The Hobo Code” (1.8), if advertising is not a religion, it’s also “not a science.” Like Don making his pitch, Mad Men understands very well that it is putting on a show, constructing the fetish of the magical time machine. Indeed, the show underscores its artifice, reminding viewers that they are watching a “remake” of the 1960s that should never be taken for the original. To see this self-referential aspect at work we need go no further than advertising (of course): for example, Sal’s failed Patio commercial. “Love among the Ruins” (3.2) opens with the first bars of “Bye Bye Birdie,” and when the screen fades in from black, we are watching George Sidney’s film of 1963 (fig. Intro.5). When the scene cuts from the actress to reaction shots from the Sterling Cooper boardroom, viewers do a double take as they find themselves caught within the mise en abyme world of fictional representation. The client’s idea for Patio, a new diet cola, is to replicate the opening sequence of Bye Bye Birdie “frame for frame.” “Is it just a knock-off?” Peggy asks. “Are we allowed to make fun of it at least?” But
while Peggy thus gestures toward the ironic stance that was making DDB’s ads all the rage, the men in the room cannot see past Ann-Margret’s charms. Although Sal’s remake is a technical success, both the ad men and the clients recoil from it, as if they are seeing an uncanny double. Ken and Don point out that the commercial is “an exact copy, frame for frame” and exactly what the clients had asked for, but the two clients insist that there’s something “not right about it.” As Roger sums it up, “It’s not Ann-Margret.”

The problem is not simply that we have a copy in place of the original. As Slavoj Žižek suggests, “the more formally identical the remake, the more palpable the difference between original and copy.” “Sameness” underscores the “uncanny difference” particular to each version’s “underlying libidinal economy” (Enjoy Your Symptom, 234–35). Thus as Sal’s wife, Kitty, watches him reenact the Bye Bye Birdie scene, she realizes the “truth” about Sal’s sexuality. Sal’s “exact copy” of Ann-Margret is a kind of “drag” which produces an ambivalence that gets coded in the ad as “pretend” or “off.” The ad is not queer because Sal is, it is queer because there is an added layer of meaning that the viewer (both inside and outside the show) cannot help but understand, which adds something to the original and decenters it.7 Mad Men repeats the opening scene of Bye Bye Birdie five times over several episodes, and the uncanny repetition points to the problem of the “remake” as a whole, which in trying to produce sameness always ends up with difference. In this way, Mad Men has some fun with its own fetish for period accuracy as it “remakes” the 1960s.

THE FOG

Historically, the 1960s marked the last great expansion of middle-class prosperity and the crest of U.S. prestige; but globalizing currents were already under way that would make borders more porous and place transnational capital beyond the reach of the nation-state’s regulatory oversight. Paradoxically then, the same revolutionary trends that enabled hip consumerism to thrive on the growing cultural and economic power of women, students, African Americans, Catholics, Jews, and other minorities, eventually promoted the so-called free market as the perfect arbiter of every need and desire, constituting neoliberalism as we know it. For several contributors, the secret to Mad Men’s appeal is Don’s ability to figure this unassimilable doubleness.

The point of such readings, however, is not to posit Mad Men as a utopian text. Writing in this volume, Dana Polan notes that the show does not take its
meditation on “madness” from pioneering media like Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961) or Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), which saw madness as a source of revolutionary political potential. Leslie J. Reagan’s chapter makes a comparable point about *Mad Men*’s depiction of reproductive practices: while the show portrays Peggy’s gynecological exam with painstaking accuracy, its engagement of abortion rights is less radical than the television show it cites—the groundbreaking episode of *The Defenders* aired in 1962 from which *Mad Men*’s “The Benefactor” (2.3) borrows its title. This deliberate distance from a counterculture that is always imminent but never quite born is one of the several ways through which the show engages a present-day neoliberalism that handily channels revolutionary energy—an impasse that shapes the Mad World that we know. Nevertheless, such fidelity to a post-1960s–as–pre-1960s stance on the *longue durée* is bound to strike some commentators as an acceptance of what is.

Although some readers may disagree, we think it unlikely that *Mad Men* spurs nostalgia for the 1960s housewife. Indeed, given the vogue for male protagonists with fascinating secret lives—a feature integral to *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad* (*AMC, 2008–*), and *Dexter* (*Showtime, 2006–*)—*Mad Men* stands out for its reliance on strongly developed female characters. By contrast, even a profoundly novelistic show like *The Wire* (*HBO, 2002–8*) focuses primarily on relationships between men. Katie Roiphe may declare that *Mad Men* incites the “tiniest bit of wistfulness” for the prefeminist era (“On ‘Mad Men’”). But as the historian Claire B. Potter argues, Roiphe seems to miss the show’s point: “The retro fashion and perfect sets only provide a brittle frame for a fraying heteropatriarchal culture.” Like Potter, we think that viewers recognize the difference between midcentury aesthetics and pre-feminist inequality, distinguishing readily between the sexy and the sexist.

We also agree with Potter that the show is not “sexist and racist” but rather “provides a forum for pondering sexism and racism.” And yet we are not surprised that the determination to provoke reflection by rendering white middle-class America in all its glaring privilege and insularity (what Kent Ono in this volume calls “demographic realism”) causes consternation for some viewers, including contributors to this book. Thus Latoya Peterson argues that *Mad Men* is “afraid of race,” refusing to “engage” the world of minority characters like Carla (the Drapers’ housekeeper) and Hollis (the elevator operator in Sterling Cooper’s office tower) (“Afraid”). Clarence Lang’s chapter in this volume proposes a different view. When Hollis tells Pete that African Americans have “bigger problems to worry about than TV,” the interaction, Lang notes, does more than accurately depict the inequality between
the two men. Rather, the scene in “The Fog” (3.5) “acknowledges the sea change occurring in U.S. race relations” as blacks like Hollis began to gain power as consumers. Lang goes on to describe a blues-oriented “cool” in dialogue with the era’s black freedom struggles, arguing that Mad Men’s story world would be enriched if hipsters of color made their mark beyond the suggestive credits sequence. Jeremy Varon concludes on a similar note, urging that social movements of the 1960s remain crucial because of the “moral imagination and impulse for change” that they display—examples of which Mad Men might also inspire in its viewers.

In what is perhaps the most nuanced theoretical take on Mad Men and race to date, Ono argues that the show is symptomatic of postracism, a cultural condition “premised on the assumption that race and racism are . . . passé.” Thus a character like Carla is there to signify “Mad Men’s self-conscious awareness of the fact that racism existed in the 1960s.” By not showing more, however, the show not only demonstrates “the irrelevance of her personal life to white people in the 1960s” but also “objectionably produces the irrelevance of her personal life to television viewers now.” While this is the strongest critique of Mad Men and race in the volume, the desire to see Carla rendered more fully is shared by several contributors and doubtless many viewers. By contrast, Bérubé’s afterword argues that the impulse to wish that Mad Men “follow Carla home” is mistaken. Although it would be pleasurable “to transcend the Drapercentric worldview,” to insist on it is to demand that the series “accommodate more of What We Know Now by letting us see what the white inhabitants of Mad World neither knew nor cared about.” Bérubé thus joins Ta-Nehisi Coates in judging the strategic focus on white perspectives to be “incredibly powerful,” an important “statement on how privilege, at its most insidious, really works” (“Race”).

We do not propose to settle this debate, but we do wish to highlight its complexity and significance. If criticism of Mad Men’s white perspective often reproduces a familiar plaint about the limitations of realism, there is clearly more to say: both about the value of unvarnished depictions of white racism and about the formal capacities of naturalistic realism. As rendered in the first four seasons of Mad Men, Carla (Deborah Lacey), without a last name or a home we can see, is nonetheless a powerful presence whose facial expressions, body movements, and careful speech convey more than mere measure of her time onscreen suggests (fig. Intro.6). Confuting the pernicious trope of the Good White People who enable racial progress (Bérubé, this volume), Carla equally evades the opposing trap of the “magic negro” — the pitfall to which Far from Heaven’s idealized African American gardener...
arguably succumbs. Yet while we share Coates’s view that the show’s white vision “works,” we also find it interesting that Mad Men director Phil Abraham thinks that a glimpse of Carla’s family would be “cool” and consistent with the show we know (see appendix A). From Abraham’s perspective, if Mad Men “fears race,” it is because the creators do not wish their white progressivism to overwrite the exclusions of the past.

Taken as a whole, the essays in this volume suggest that there is no single formula to explain what Mad Men gets right or wrong about race. The device of embedding story lines in the ebb and flow of history works at different levels and with different degrees of success: brilliant, for example, when the breakdown of the Draper marriage plays out against the “thirteen days” of the missile crisis; far less so when excerpts from “I Have a Dream” provide the background for Don’s pursuit of Sally’s teacher. A minor black female character may work well to support Paul Kinsey’s pompous variation on the Good White Person and less well in a plotline about a British expat’s predilection for “chocolate.” Resisting the charms of an attractive “Asian waitress” may make sense in a scene about Don’s guilty capitulation to corporate imperatives, whereas portraying Honda’s executives as hapless dupes, caught in their Japanese culture, seems downright un–Mad Men–like.
It is testimony to *Mad Men*’s status as a “cultural phenomenon” that in introducing a collection of essays on the topic, one finds much to say before discussing the series as a television show. *Mad Men* surely belongs to the elevated category of *quality television*, a term denoting the kind of writerly cable drama that entered the scene with HBO’s now classic series *The Sopranos*.10 While *The Sopranos* is an obvious forerunner for *Mad Men* in being the show Matthew Weiner helped to produce in the years before launching his own series (see Szalay, this volume), there are various ways in which *Mad Men* connects to other “quality” series.

One of those ways is audience. *Mad Men* has grown steadily more popular: from the one million viewers who watched the premiere in 2007 to the three and a half million viewers for the fifth-season premiere in 2012 (Kondolojy). If these are not especially large numbers by network television standards, they are respectable for a cable drama.11 Moreover, like *The Sopranos* and *The Wire, Mad Men* is a prestigious critical success that singlehandedly established AMC as a destination for quality TV. Although *Breaking Bad*, with a similar size audience, is also acclaimed, it is *Mad Men* that explores its position as the flagship series for a network attempting to make its mark (see Joyrich, this volume).

*Mad Men*’s viewership is also considerably larger than the audience for each broadcast. In 2010 it was the number-one show among the “time-shifted” viewers who watch a show after it airs on recording devices such as TiVo (*Nielsenwire*, 2). Moreover, digital recording is only one form of time-shifting. *Mad Men* viewers who dislike commercial interruption may download a “Season Pass” from iTunes and watch digital files at their leisure. Then too, a whole set of additional viewers watches the show months or even years later on DVD.

If *Mad Men* attracts fewer viewers than the most popular network shows, the viewers it attracts are notably affluent. According to the *Hollywood Reporter*, more than half of the households that watch *Mad Men* earn more than $100,000 per year, making these “the wealthiest fans in all of cable TV land.” Such viewers can afford cable, DVR, iTunes, and possibly even the BMWs frequently advertised during the series’ season premieres (Armstrong). One might also hypothesize that *Mad Men*’s viewers are more media-centered than other viewers. The cinematic character of quality TV is enhanced by uninterrupted viewing, or by viewing the show as an “event” (for example, the numerous *Mad Men*–themed parties that accompany each season’s opening
installments, including one in Times Square, New York, for the third-season premiere).  

According to Advertising Age, liberals are 124 percent more likely to watch Mad Men than conservatives (Bulk).  Although we found no firm data to support it, our impression is that most viewers of the show are at least thirty years of age (many of our graduate students watch Mad Men but only those undergraduates with interest in topics such as film studies or fashion do). It therefore seems safe to surmise that the show’s viewers are relatively wealthy, politically liberal, and technologically “plugged-in.” Although there is no hard data on the racial demographics of the viewership, popular imagination has the show’s fans as white (Mad Men appears as number 123 on the satirical blog Stuff White People Like, just below Moleskine notebooks).

Of course, while Mad Men viewers may often be white, they need not be Americans or residents of the United States. That is, Mad Men is not only about globalization but also a product of it: a quintessential American cultural export in telling a story about the height of U.S. hegemony that speaks to Britons, Czechs, Danes, Finns, Hungarians, South Koreans, and Ukrainians, among others. (When the show aired in Turkey, it was fined for excessive onscreen smoking.) Receiving an award in Cologne, after watching himself and Elisabeth Moss (Peggy Olson) dubbed into German, Jon Hamm told reporters, “It seems incredible that something that seems so specific to a particular time and place in America . . . can reach an international audience” (Roxborough). But the fact is in many ways predictable. Mad Men’s Madison Avenue is a hub in a global network, an industry that produces ad campaigns for Hilton Hotels, Rio de Janeiro, and Haifa alongside public relations campaigns for the new Penn Station. Stylistically, the show illustrates a high-modernist chic that resonates even in places where Ossining, New York—the original Draper family hometown—has never been heard of. Will Mad Men one day air in Bangalore, Beijing, Johannesburg, or Kuala Lumpur? We do not know, but we imagine that it is already playing on iPads and DVDs in these and many other global nodes. The show’s aestheticization of the alienation to which globalization gives rise seems to translate into many languages.

Mad Men’s audience ranges from occasional viewers to those for whom the show is “destination TV.” There are also relatively intense fans who meet for live discussion, stage Mad Men–themed parties, and even produce original art or fiction set in the world of Mad Men—all typical fan rituals. In one of the best-known iterations of such activities, Mad Men enthusiasts created the Internet application MadMenYourself.com, which was eventually incor-
introduction

porated into AMC’s website. The site enables users to design their own Mad Men–inspired icons to match their gender and appearance, complete with vintage fashion and hair. Blogging on the show on Just TV, the television scholar Jason Mittell invokes the category of the “acafan,” or academic fan (“On Disliking”). Although none of the editors of this book is likely ever to own a BMW, we think it fair to acknowledge that some readers may judge the writing of scholarly articles and books to constitute a fan ritual all its own.

While AMC invites Mad Men fans to call themselves “Maddicts,” Saturday Night Live ridiculed fans as “Mad Mennies” in a skit hosted by Mad Men actor January Jones in November 2009. The piece depicted fans as obsessed eccentrics, dressing like characters and memorizing the dialogue. When Jones opined that such fans are “like Trekkies,” the “Mad Mennies” invoked the narcissism of small differences: “Trekkies are losers who live with their parents and pretend they’re in space. We live with our parents and pretend we work in advertising—much cooler!” Of course, Saturday Night Live can hardly claim immunity to the malady: Hamm’s three SNL appearances include two parodies of his performance as Don that have been viewed on the Internet thousands of times. Meanwhile, cast and crew members from Mad Men have been interviewed on the National Public Radio show Fresh Air no fewer than four times—another indication, like Frank Rich’s admiring columns in the New York Times or even our own Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory series of Kritik blog posts on the last two seasons—that Mad Men enthusiasm is taken seriously in some quarters. There is perhaps a fine line between participating in these relatively elite forms of appreciation and the kind of fandom SNL simultaneously ridicules and perpetuates.

Many scholarly studies (e.g., Bacon-Smith; Jenkins, Convergence Culture; Penley) argue that fan activities resist dominant models of passive consumption, constructing “practices of everyday life” that creatively reuse the culture industry’s materials (de Certeau). More recent studies (e.g., Sandvoss) suggest that fan activities simply represent the minimum amount of “play” necessary for consumerism to function. Mad Men fans offer some evidence for both views. On the one hand, some fan activities appear to be disconnected from consumer tie-ins such as the Banana Republic campaigns in which huge placards of the show’s stars are plastered on city streets and shopping mall windows. In contrast to such corporate fare, Mad Men fans have produced, for example, cakes that incorporate images of the show’s stars or official logos, but not always in ways that reproduce AMC’s interests. Likewise, Mad Men fan fiction runs the gamut from tame drabbles such as Mary Jane Parker’s tale of Sally helping Joan in the office (“The Name on the Door”),
to elaborate narratives about the sexual lives of the show’s characters such as “Portrait of a One Night Stand” by kasviel in which Don “punishes” Pete for revealing his alter ego— with spanking and sex. Such fan activities generate new objects for private consumption that are unlikely to appear on AMC’s website. If such “resistance” is clearly limited, it does take Mad Men fan participation beyond the passive consumption of imitation 1960s furniture, cocktail shakers, and Brooks Brothers knock-offs of vintage fashion.

That said, Mad Men enthusiasts do use fan communities to talk about products they would like to buy. For example, Basket of Kisses, a popular Mad Men blog focused on discussion of the show, features a “What to Buy” link displaying products such as dolls, cufflinks, and DVDs. The website has asked its readers, “What props from Mad Men do you covet? It can be furniture, highball glasses, a cigarette lighter, anything. Do you adore mid-century styling? . . . ‘Fess up” (Lipp). What is, perhaps, unusual about Mad Men’s fandom is that its mainstream demographic—affluent fans of an award-winning series and subject of much NPR and New York Times chatter—must still “‘fess up” to desiring common objects like a set of highball glasses. This suggests that media fandom and consumption may be mutually sustaining. Indeed, there may be an extra thrill for the purchaser of that midcentury cigarette lighter who not only acquires a coveted object but also does so for reasons that are socially suspect (his or her “embarrassing” media fandom) and potentially libidinally charged (think of Sally Draper watching The Man from U.N.C.L.E. [4.5]).

TOMORROWLAND

If Mad Men is “cinematic” television at its finest, it is television nonetheless. As Lynne Joyrich emphasizes in this volume, television, unlike the movies, is characterized by flow: the fragmentation of the viewing experience through segmentation, commercial interruptions, and so forth. Television also differs in its address (we go to the movies, but television lives with us). Yet perhaps the most important televisual feature for Mad Men, like many other quality shows, is its seriality. As Mittell observes, the first decade of the twenty-first century was remarkable in terms of the transformation in American television, not least because of the “spread of serial narrative across a wide range of fictional formats” (“Serial Boxes”).

As Sean O’Sullivan notes in an essay on Deadwood (HBO, 2004–6), serial formats foster special kinds of audience engagement because they “exist at the crossroads between the old and the new.” Unlike stand-alone novels or
fils, serial dramas constantly offer the “promise of the new,” often introducing “a new plotline or character that will change everything.” Moreover, given their “leisurely unfolding,” serials draw us “into the past, as old characters appear and disappear . . . or old episodes of a program burrow into our memory, creating a history commensurate with our lifespan unlike the merely posited past of a text we can consume in a few hours or days. Every reading, or every watching, requires a reconnection of old and new, an iteration of past and present; and within a week or a month what was new will get funneled into the old” (117). As O’Sullivan further observes, Victorian novelists such as Dickens understood these lived aspects of the serial form and crafted their fiction accordingly.

The same is true of shows such as Mad Men that combine serial temporality with the writerly features of well-crafted novels. Indeed, the advent of quality shows packaged in box sets confers the prestige of publication on a medium once characterized by ephemeral broadcasting. The DVD box set highlights a new narrative complexity that aligns television with classic multiplot fiction while providing a physical object that can be displayed on a shelf like the works of Flaubert or Trollope (Mittell, “Serial Boxes”). As Phil Abraham says in this volume, he actually thinks of Mad Men as a novel, an idea he shares with Matt Weiner and others who work on the show. In this way, Mad Men is much more like a nineteenth-century novel than is The Sopranos, which often challenged the tight diachronic arc of realist narrative by including “stand-alone episodes” (Polan, Sopranos, 32).

These novelistic features heighten the serial audience’s engagement. Recorded formats offer viewers the ability to “immerse” themselves in the spectator experience: “binging” on multiple episodes and reviewing particular scenes at will (Mittell, “Serial Boxes”). Just as Victorian readers of serial fiction published reviews, commentaries, and letters to the press, so today’s TV viewers discuss their favorite shows at the workplace, on new social networks, on blogs such as Alan Sepinwall’s What’s Alan Watching?, and in the comments section for online media from Salon and the Huffington Post to the Los Angeles Times and the Wall Street Journal. Cable television’s reinvention of the novelistic serial thus demonstrates the potential to summon a public in which viewers take part even if they never attend a Mad Men theme party.18

This communal effect is enhanced by the regular intervals of waiting between serialized installments that encourage a daily routine of reflection and anticipation (Mittell, “Serial Boxes”). Indeed, according to Robyn Warhol, serial narratives are “devices for structuring what bodies do in time
and space,” their resistance to closure a means of prolonging the relation between audience and text (72). Whether by reading a novel published in monthly parts or viewing a television narrative that airs weekly, audiences of serial media cultivate rituals of enjoying new installments followed by interludes of contemplation, discussion, and expectation—developing a serial habitus. The most striking effect of the serial temporality is the generation of feelings at once more “familiar” and “intense” than those elicited by non-serial media (Warhol, 72).19

As the editors of this project, we have experienced these intervals of contemplation, discussion, and expectation. In preparing this book, we have become highly attentive to the impact of serial forms. Indeed, as we conclude this introduction to a volume begun after Mad Men’s third season, we are especially conscious that many readers will have seen more of the show than we have right now (as we write in November 2011, the fifth season of Mad Men is expected to air in March 2012). Thus, although our book is finished, Mad Men still exists “at the crossroads between the old and the new.” Throughout this introduction we have spoken of history, pastness, and the longue durée; but the situation necessitates our concluding in a different tense.

Mad Men’s pattern so far has been to slightly outpace the real time between seasons: from its debut in July 2007 to the fourth-season finale in October 2010, the show’s calendar advanced from March 1960 to October 1965. Will the show continue to move incrementally through the 1960s? Or will it surprise us by leaping ahead or even taking us back to the years before Don met Betty? Will Betty’s story become ever more distantiated from the twin focal points of Don and advertising? Will Don age into the 1970s, still a dandy but sporting wide lapels, graying sideburns, and the “dry look”? Will Harry like Star Trek? We are not foolish enough to venture any guesses, though we recognize that the nature of serial narrative is to orient us toward an unforeseeable future.20

“Our worst misfortunes never happen, and most miseries lie in anticipation,” wrote the serial maestro Honoré de Balzac—an aphorism that Mad Men has paraphrased twice.21 In The Sense of an Ending, a book he collected from lectures delivered in 1965, the literary critic Frank Kermode speculated that human beings turn to fiction to escape from the emptiness of time. “The clock’s ‘tick tock’” suggests the stories we call “plots,” which are vehicles for “humanizing time by giving it a form” (45). That is, by providing us with the meanings we grasp from “the sense of an ending,” fictions seem to redeem us from time. (As Don might say, fictions provide a special kind of solace from
the overwhelming perception that “the universe is indifferent” [1.8].) For the ancient Greeks, whose preferred form was drama, the sense of an ending came from tragedy. But serial forms do not promise the sense of an ending: to the contrary, their special illusion is that they will never end at all. Instead, the attachments we cultivate to the temporality of the episode, the season, and the intervals in between give us a different way to humanize the clock. Serial narratives, premised on the perpetual possibility of the new, intuit this fact; they know that audiences lead serial lives poised between what has already happened and what cannot yet be foreseen.

As Mad Men embeds its characters in a stream of events that viewers recognize as the historical past, the effect it most often creates is not tragedy, with its powerful sense of an ending, but dramatic irony, with its intimation of lessons learned and resolutions still to come. We glimpse, for example, in season 3, an invitation to Margaret Sterling’s wedding, realizing that the day will be ruined by a terrible event. We watch the action unfold before characters who, unlike us, do not know what they are about to encounter. Then too, sometimes Mad Men’s savvy writers have fun with their audience, inventing fictitious figures to send fact-finding fans to their search engines in vain. Sometimes the irony works in both directions. When Joan’s husband joined the army to complete his medical training, many anticipated that the not-so-good doctor was heading for Vietnam. “The guy is toast,” viewers opined on cell phones, blogs, and message boards. Will Dr. Harris outlive their speculations? Perhaps by now, reader, You Know Better.

The “promise of the new” is irresistible to us because our greatest hopes (like our worst fears) lie in anticipation. Advertising knows this too and tempts us to believe that the next great experience will come through some novel purchase. As a show about advertising, Mad Men shows us how frequently our fond expectations of the future disappoint us. In this way, an insistent dramatic irony runs through the series. In “Ladies Room” (1.2), for example, the agency works on an ad for an antiperspirant in a newfangled form: the aerosol can. The irony here is how quickly today’s hot product becomes tomorrow’s environmental hazard. Who knew? Not, in this instance, Paul, who is ready to label the product “space-age”: “It’s from the future—a place so close to us now, filled with wonder and ease.” Don, however, is skeptical: “Some people think of the future and it upsets them. They see a rocket and they start building a bomb shelter.” Yet in season 3 their roles are reversed. When Paul barely contains his contempt for a client who plans to raze Penn Station, a magnificent Beaux Arts structure from 1910, Don saves the day with a vision of a new New York as a “city on a hill” (3.2).
Even if this pitch did not include a glowing reference to California, Don's words would be an ironic prelude to the protagonist of season 4's finale, “Tomorrowland” (4.13). A Disney exhibit filled with midcentury visions of space-age travel like the TWA Moonliner, Tomorrowland is the destination for Don's visit with his children and his secretary, Megan. Perhaps we could have guessed that the man who lost the Hilton account because he couldn't deliver “the moon” would never make it into the space age. Instead, Don finds his future in an uncanny repetition of the past. The closing music for the episode is “I Got You Babe,” the pop hit by Sonny and Cher from 1965—the same song that greets Bill Murray every morning when he wakes up in the movie *Groundhog Day* (1993), in which Murray plays Phil Connors, a narcissistic weatherman trapped in the events of a single day.

In *Groundhog Day*, the sense of an ending comes when the protagonist becomes a better person. Connors hankers for his producer (Andie MacDowell), and when he finally transforms into a man she can love, he wakes up beside her and knows that Tomorrowland has come. Like *Groundhog Day*, *Mad Men*’s fourth season posed the question of whether a man thoroughly devastated by mistakes of his own making can change. Of course, change is a loaded idea for *Mad Men*: while the show is a modern-day realist narrative, it has never yet been a bildungsroman in which the narrative trajectory coincides with the protagonist’s moral growth. Rather, Don is an antihero—albeit one who convinces us that he is somehow better than the world that made him. We must believe in Don’s nobler instincts and thrill to his moments of transcendence even while knowing that if he ever sustained them, he would no longer be Don, and we would no longer be watching *Mad Men*. This is the irony of our serial viewership: watching Don reinvent himself in the face of a new challenge, inspiration, or object of desire, we somehow forget that *We Should Know Better*.

Yet for all their evasion of the sense of an ending, even the longest-running serial narratives eventually end. To be sure, some television forms extend over a seemingly endless period of time: *General Hospital* (ABC) has aired since 1963, and *M*A*S*H* (CBS, 1972–83) lasted eight years longer than the Korean War. *Mad Men* is now poised to continue for as many as seven seasons. But whereas soap operas occupy the diurnal temporality of their broadcast and *M*A*S*H* elongated a particular historical span, a historical fiction such as *Mad Men*, which moves forward into a knowable stream of events, has a harder creative burden to bear. What will *Mad Men* be like if, advancing into the decade, it no longer pivots on the premise of looking at the
pre-counterculture 1960s from a post-counterculture vantage point? *Mad Men* will then have to do what so far it never has: tell us what it thinks about those 1960s. It will need to open itself to newly empowered voices—voices either excluded from or marginalized in a mise-en-scène that was first imagined as a vehicle to articulate white male privilege and insularity.

Perhaps some new character development will emerge that changes the show’s center of gravity (an aggressive Megan? a teenage Sally? a renegade Pete? A civil rights or anti-war narrative?). But so far *Mad Men*, when not about the Draper marriage and its adulterous satellites, has made the dialectic of Don and Peggy its emotional center. Indeed, Don could not have been so compelling a character were he not also Peggy’s mentor and (usually) supporter. Don’s words at Peggy’s hospital bedside (taken up in Rushing’s chapter); Peggy’s bailing Don out of the lockup; Don’s telling Peggy he would spend his life trying to hire her; and, in season 4, Peggy’s taking Anna’s place as the one person who understands Don are among *Mad Men’s* most memorable moments. If the show were about the sense of an ending, there could be plenty to say about a Peggy ready to move on from her apprenticeship and take the leading role in her own Peggy-roman. But can Peggy thrive in the world of advertising, the quintessence of alienated creativity in the show’s symbolic economy? Is the young woman Don helped to rescue from the stigma of unwed motherhood destined to become another version of Don?

And what about Don? The show pulls us toward him because he only very partially embodies the fantasy of a resilient masculine will-to-power. Paradoxically, Don works as a serial character because again and again he manages to be just one step away from the abyss into which we see him drop in the opening credits; and because the fallen world over which he walks his tightrope feels so palpably real. Don, in other words, is imbued with the sense of an ending, but it is an ending that viewers want to defer. We know Don will fall, but we do not want him to—yet.

**NOTES**

2. On the books, see *Vulture*; on the living room, see *Grad*. On “Mad Style,” see Tom and Lorenzo’s series of blog posts at http://www.tomandlorenzo.com/category /television/mad-men. According to the *Times*, only HBO’s *Deadwood* generated comparable discussion about the “authenticity of its language” (Zimmer).
3. Compare *Mad Men* to a show that unabashedly condescends toward the past:
Life on Mars (BBC, 2006–7; remade in the United States for ABC in 2008–9). The conceit of a present-day detective trapped in the 1970s of his childhood enables the protagonist’s contrast between his own enlightened ethics and the sexism and corruption depicted as endemic to the 1970s. See also Michael Bérubé’s discussion of Pleasantville in this volume.

4. Emails to Lauren Goodlad, 10 September 2010.

5. Discussion of Betty’s being one of the worst mothers in media history can take on misogynistic overtones or the reverse. Blogger Kevin Fitzpatrick ranked Betty twenty-third in a list of “TV’s most undeniably horrible mothers,” describing her “as one of the most universally reviled characters on television.” Yet in response to “Betty Draper: Is She as Bad as She Seems?,” a post by Amy Graff on the San Francisco Chronicle blog The Mommy Files, one respondent wrote, “She married a guy who swept her off her feet, started pumping her full of children and then rarely showed up at home. It’s really hard raising kids alone. Then she finds out he’s using an assumed name, has been married and has been sleeping with most of the women on the East Coast behind her back. . . . No adult in the show cares about her, and she was trained to keep her troubles to herself” (lovescats789, 29 July 2010).

6. While critics often see self-referentiality as distinct from the character-driven, naturalist narrative we have so far described, we think realism’s capacity for irony and self-referentiality is underestimated.

7. As the feminist critic Gail Finney points out, the current usage of “queer” reflects its development from the Low German for “oblique or off-center” into the contemporary German quer (“diagonally, sideways, or against the grain”) and the English queer (“strange, odd, deviant”). Finney, 122.

8. However, for additional reflection on Mad Men and race in light of season 5, see Goodlad and Levine, “You’ve Come.”

9. On the “magic negro,” a simple black character who exerts extraordinary impact on white lives, see, for example, Hughey. In Haynes’s version of the trope, the character is more sophisticated, though still fundamentally “magical.”

10. On earlier uses of the term with reference to prestige comedies like The Mary Tyler Moore Show, see Feuer, “MTM Enterprises.”

11. The 11.9 million viewers who tuned in for the finale of The Sopranos in 2007 represented a “historical feat” for cable; the 5.1 million viewers drawn three years later to the season 3 premiere for HBO’s youth-oriented True Blood are cited as the next-best showing for a cable station (Associated Press; Andreeva). This makes Mad Men’s 3 million viewers considerable even if numerous commentators rightly suggest that the show’s “buzz” exceeds its viewership or ability to attract advertising.


13. The study, however, defined “social liberals” somewhat questionably as those
who “disdain moral authorities and believe children should be exposed to moral dilemmas and allowed to draw their own conclusions” (Bulk).

14. The Fresh Air interviews were originally broadcast on 9 August 2007, 22 September 2008, 26 July 2010, and 16 September 2010.

15. One cake altered the iconic Draper silhouette to show a woman’s hairdo and the logo “Mad Mom” — a Mother’s Day gift for a Mad Men fan. See Masket.

16. “Drabbles” are probably named after a Monty Python sketch featuring a game called Drabble in which whoever writes a novel first wins. “Portrait of a One Night Stand” is an example of “slash fiction” in which mainstream, heteronormative media culture is repurposed to show a homoerotic romance.

17. Although some recorded formats remove the evidence of flow, it remains part of the DVR experience even for viewers who fast-forward through the interruptions.

18. Michael Warner’s notion of the counterpublic summoned by the circulation of print thus applies to the serial television text.

19. For Mittell, the asynchronous and potentially solitary viewing of the DVD-watcher inhibits “communal engagement” (“Serial Boxes”). This effect may be more typical of a forensic show such as Lost (ABC, 2004–10) than a neonaturalist and highly novelistic narrative such as Mad Men. That is, Mad Men’s community of engagement seems to integrate participation of late-coming DVD-watching viewers alongside those who keep up with the latest episodes.

20. As this volume goes into production in July 2012, the editors of this volume have viewed (and blogged on) season 5 — but we retain our concluding comments as they were written in 2011. It turned out that Betty did indeed become more and more distanced from the show’s focus; and it was Paul, not Harry, who became a Trek fan.

21. In “Out of Town” (3.1), Sal condenses it to “Our worst fears lie in anticipation,” and Don says the same in “The Fog” (3.5).

22. For example, the pointed reference to “Dr. Lyle Evans” in “The Chrysanthemum and the Sword,” a subject of much Internet chatter as viewers developed a consensus that the man did not exist.