Mad Men, Mad World

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PART ONE
MAD WORLDS
MADDENING TIMES

Mad Men in Its History

DANA POLAN

LANE PRYCE: [looking at the newspaper for a movie to go see with Don Draper]
“It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World.”

DON: Yes, it is.—“The Good News,” 4.3

Mad Men: it’s a pretty nifty title. Obviously and efficiently (and aided by the consonance of those monosyllabic words), it puns on Madison Avenue and on that location’s key role in the development of postwar advertising culture (“ad men”). And it taps perhaps into a general if intangible anomie, frustration, and even anger that these men in gray flannel suits sometimes feel toward the way of life they’re caught up in (and caught in), and that we, the spectators, are typically supposed to feel that men in the popular culture devoted to life in Madison Avenue corporations are supposed to be feeling.

But it’s here—in the reference to “men”—that the title already reveals an incompleteness: clearly, Mad Men has been as much about women, and their own desires and dreads, as they confront the fraught historical period referenced over the course of the series. Just as it was easy to forget the plural in Matthew Weiner’s previous series, The Sopranos (HBO, 1999–2007), and imagine it as being centrally and even primarily about Tony Soprano’s “issues,” it is tempting to see Mad Men as another installment in the ongoing saga of popular culture’s representation of a “masculinity in crisis”
(and here the show would be doubly invested in that representation as both a show about men in the 1960s and a show made in the newer representational moment of the first decade of the twenty-first century—which has brought its own sense of the imputed crisis of masculinity to bear on the subject matter).

Obviously, *Mad Men* is not not about an overbearing, omnipresent, and (to its own view, at least) omnipotent masculinity. One could even suggest that the incompleteness of the title is ironic and contributes to the series’ ongoing depiction of the way these men themselves confront the incompleteness of their masculine hold on their world. If the very end of the very first episode serves as a sort of punch line to suddenly reveal that Don Draper has a suburban life complete (or incomplete in its own way) with suburban housewife (this after much of the episode has shown him cavorting with a beatnik woman from Greenwich Village), it is one consequence of later episodes to fill in that other world, and give perspective and voice to the wife (and to other women characters) in a manner often apart from Don (and from other male characters). Of course, that the women are sometimes given their own scenes and their own points of view independent of male presence does not mean that they in any way become independent. Not for nothing, if the series title focuses on masculinity, is a season 4 episode that focuses on the women overall named “The Beautiful Girls” (4.9), picking up the sort of patronizing phrasing that we might imagine the ad men to use, precisely, to pigeonhole the women in their work and leisure lives.

In this respect, if, from the very partiality of its title to the course of its narrative over the seasons, *Mad Men* bears an incompleteness to its representational project, it is as possible to argue that the representation of such incompleteness is its project, rather than a failing within it. In other words, it might be that the series uses the partiality of the worlds it depicts—such as the world of “men” in the corporate demographic—to dramatize limitation and the forms of narrative struggle against it. This is not a total or totalized picture of the times as they were but a deliberately partial and incomplete picture of how some people lived some parts of those times and, in some cases, groped toward other ways of living them. The issue of incompleteness then becomes less a question of accuracy—does, for instance, the title “correctly” sum up the series?—than of representational function: How does *Mad Men* use incompleteness in the service of its dramatic project and to what ends?

In this respect, just as we can see as ironic or deliberately limited the emphasis in the series’ title on “men,” it is worth noting that the qualification of them as “mad” seems incomplete in its own right. Notions of being “mad”
run rampant through the 1960s, but *Mad Men* invokes them only indirectly. Again, the issue is not one of accuracy. And the point is not just to catalogue the absences but to clarify how their nonpresence is often a deliberate choice and has constitutive effects on what the show prefers instead to show of its times. In 1966 the French philosopher Pierre Macherey analyzed gaps in a cultural text’s representational coverage as what he termed “structuring absences,” and it is the way in which valences of the “mad” hover around *Mad Men* even as it chooses other representational projects to explore that serves as the impetus for this chapter.

For instance, Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), the doctrine of always trying to outdo the enemy in nuclear firepower so that the would-be belligerent will blink and back down from first-strike actions, is nowhere mentioned in the show, but it is there implicitly in continued references to the Cold War threat (for example, in season 1, one elevator conversation is about how absurd it is that the French, too, now have the bomb; in seasons 2 and 4, the agency flirts with a defense contract and all that it entails in terms of security clearance; and season 2 ends with the Cuban missile crisis).

Likewise, *Mad Men* offers little awareness of that sense of the absurdity of war that is summed up in the last line of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), “Madness! Madness . . . madness!,” and that increasingly filters into 1960s popular culture with works like Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961) — where Yossarian’s feigned madness is outdone by the military’s real insanity — only to then move beyond representation into reality with the Vietnam war. Even though by season 5 of *Mad Men* we are past the midst of the decade, there is little mention of the war’s increasing escalation and media visibility (Joan’s one-time husband, a doctor, serves in Nam, but we get minimal glimpses of the war [most often through brief news reports on TVs in the background of scenes], and certainly no assertions of any absurdity to it). More generally, *Mad Men* eschews that 1960s reversal of values so well depicted by Heller or by Stanley Kubrick, Peter George, and Terry Southern in their screenplay for *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), in which it is institutions of control — like the military, but also, by extension, schooling, medical establishment, government, and so on — that are seen as insane, and the seemingly crazy or damaged people they are processing as so much fodder who are seen as having a visionary sanity beyond institutional recognition. (As Hot Lips Houlihan puts it in *M*A*S*H* [1970], “This isn’t a hospital; it’s an insane asylum!” In the cult classic *King of Hearts* [1966], a soldier on mission [Alan Bates] falls in with the inmates of an actual asylum and comes to find their company preferable to the absurd and deadly insanities of military command.)
True, Sterling Cooper’s founder Bert Cooper is presented as somewhat not quite right in his love of abstract painting (always a giveaway in mainstream popular culture) and in his insistence on going barefooted. There is something a bit off at the top of the corporate world. But Bert’s eccentricities are presented generally as amusingly benign (both to the workers at the office and to us spectators), and there is little sense of a generalized institutional insanity that has dire consequences for the lower-echelon inhabitants of this world. It would be hard to argue that *Mad Men* is using the advertising agency as in any way a metaphor for the madness of institutionalized power in the manner that *Catch-22* does for the military.

Similarly, the 1950s and ’60s are the moment in which that great symbol of what-me-worry irreverence, *Mad Magazine*, flourishes, but *Mad Men* doesn’t have much of that publication’s wacky, even sick humor aspect to it. Perhaps the moment from the episode “Guy Walks into an Advertising Agency” (3.6) in which, during a wild party, one of the secretaries, on a demonstration lawnmower out of control, runs over the foot of one of the executives and mangles it, comes close in its morbid yet comically zany weirdness, but the moment is ultimately just that—a moment, a single instant pulled from the flow of the show (and given special narrative explanation by the fact that the accident happens at a party that got out of control). *Mad Men* is wicked and sardonic, but rarely in the consistent and committed scandalous way that *Mad Magazine* was.¹

To take a different notion of “mad,” the series does, as noted, seem to tap into a common, even stereotypical, figure of the postwar nine-to-five male as consumed by an anomie that can render him anywhere from frustrated to cantankerous to, at times, downright angry. But being “mad” would then seem to connote something so variable (in frequency, in reach, in quality and intensity, and so on) that it would seem too vague to be a serviceable concept.² This seems to be the case no matter which contemporary valences of being mad we choose to look at. For instance, the discontent of the “mad men” on the show very rarely converts into that excessive anger that drives, say, Bobby Dupea (Jack Nicholson) to explode at a waitress in an iconic scene from *Five Easy Pieces* (1970), a film at the very end of the period, or that pushes Howard Beale (Peter Finch) in *Network* (1976) to declare as his infamous motto, “I’m as mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this any more.”

And for all the obsession of the period with psychiatric and antipsychiatric conceptions of madness as mental disorder—reflected in the popular culture in such titles as *The Mad Woman of Chaillot* (1969) or *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (1970) or *A Fine Madness* (1966)—*Mad Men* itself offers few repre-
sentations of a vibrant nuttiness. The most literal case of mental dysfunction in the series is that of Betty Draper’s father, Eugene, who is suffering, in quite ordinary and realistic fashion, from senility. There is little here of the energetic madness that takes over 1960s figures in Marat/Sade (1967) or Morgan: A Suitable Case for Treatment (1966)—to reference two films from the decade in which madness is seen as an inspiration in a generalized rejection of social norms. And although Betty herself sees a psychiatrist in season 1, in this case the series’ flirtation with the psychiatric establishment ultimately peters out: Betty discovers that her husband, Don, is being given updates on her treatment by the psychiatrist, and she uses the information against both of them, a triumph that basically causes the plotline to drop away.³ (This often seems to happen with Betty’s accomplishments in the course of the series: when she does something affirmative, she scores an immediate, local point, but then the show offers no follow-up, as if her achievements have no lasting impact.) To the extent that Betty is indeed a character consumed by anomie, it is worth noting that by season 4, this has manifested itself not just as rage (her misguided dismissal of the nanny who has been with her children from the beginning) but as its opposite: a descent into a passivity little different from inertia. The fourth season’s last image of Betty Draper is of her curled up in veritable fetal position in her bed. In pointed contrast, 1960s madness in the popular culture of the moment was often an uplifting, invigorating leap into action: for example, “Charlotte Corday” (Glenda Jackson) in Marat/Sade is an inmate with sleeping sickness who rouses herself both to act the killing of Marat and, more important, to participate in the lively revolution of the inmates over the aristocrats that ends the film. What many viewers of the fourth season saw as the increasing rendition of Betty as a horrid harridan (one piece I came across ranked her as one of the worst moms of all time, along with Medea and Joan Crawford!) was also the increasing framing of her as powerless to the point of inconsequentiality (followed by her frequent absence from the episodes of season 5). From Thomas Szasz, to David Cooper and R. D. Laing, to Foucault and Guattari, the 1960s were all about finding revolutionary potential in madness, but this is not a historical path that Mad Men thus far has chosen to venture into. (Sally Draper may be one exception, but I will reserve discussion of that for the last paragraphs of this chapter.)

Nonetheless, it is worth returning to the question of accuracy for a moment, since one particularity—and perhaps peculiarity—of Mad Men is that in addition to being seen as an example of “quality TV,” it is somehow taken to be, and admired as, a document or even documentary of upper-middle-class
suburban life in the late 1950s and into the 1960s. Viewers assume it offers a picture of the way things were in those times. The paradox here is that a series appreciated as an aesthetic accomplishment—that is, as a construct whose value lies precisely in its creative divergence from reality (which we might take to be one mark of quality TV) — is also appreciated as an accurate picture of its time. Among the quality shows, *Mad Men* may be unique in this respect: *The Sopranos*, for instance, might often end up being about ordinary issues (family, work, relationship, moral choice), but it would be difficult to imagine that its comic Mafia was in any way to be taken as a deep document of “real” Mafia life.

Maybe there is something in the long sweep of the postwar period in America—from the clichés of a 1950s that is simultaneously conformist and about rebels without a cause into the impression of the 1960s as the period in which rebellion becomes wholehearted—that generally tempts us to take aesthetic representations of this cultural moment as veritable documentations of it. These years are ones we feel we know well, and any cultural work that offers even minimal iconic markers of that knowability can become elevated into an accurate portrayal of the times. In particular, the 1950s, we might say, seem directly sociological: that is, there is an ongoing representation of the period that invests in a set of common tropes and motifs to make us feel that we have a clear picture of what 1950s society was all about. Significantly, the most common picture of the period is built up not only from fictional works (from contemporaneous examples such as *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* [both the novel of 1955 and the film adaptation of 1956] to recent ones like *Mad Men* itself) but in the critical accounts of it which themselves play on recurrent iconography and narrative stereotypes. One has only to read virtually any scholarly study on the 1950s to come quickly across references (often quite similar from text to text) to sociologists of the time such as William Whyte or C. Wright Mills or David Riesman or even Vance Packard, as if they summed up the period and can still easily be referenced for doing so. The writings of these figures are adduced as symptoms of the time but also as accurate analyses that can still be used for their evidentiary, explanatory yield (thus, for instance, Riesman’s notion of the “outer-directed” American is somehow taken to indicate that Americans in the period were overwhelmingly outer-directed in point of fact). Even as the classic sociologists from the time talk about how the decade witnesses the hardening of identity into sociological categories, their own writings participate in the very same process of reification and of constraining categorization. It is as if people in the 1950s were direct embodiments of abstract laws.
It is an easy step, then, to go from this seductive impression of the categorical knowability of the average American to the sorts of stereotypes on display in a film such as Revolutionary Road (2008), which came out after Mad Men’s second season: a shot of men in gray flannel suits getting off a commuter train and then marching in veritable unison is all the viewer needs to feel in the presence of a familiar set of themes (alienation, the white-collar worker as cog in the machine, etc.) and to believe that this is the way it was back “then.” Such works of popular culture so become conventionalized symbols of a time that they then start to be taken as reference points for other works that come after them (in other words, conformity to their vision is taken somehow to be conformity to the historical times they claim to be representing). Thus, in 2010, when Variety reported on plans by the BBC to develop a television series that would be about “sexual tension against the backdrop of the ruthless, male-dominated world of 1950s mass media,” the industry journal could offer as its single commentary, “Sound familiar?”—obviously suggesting that the show sounded a lot like Mad Men (Clarke).

Now (and the reader may have been itching to remind me of this salient point), it is in fact the case that Mad Men is only marginally about the 1950s specifically. The first season pointedly begins the story in the first months of 1960 as the agency gears up for an advertising campaign for Richard Nixon’s presidential run, and it ends at Thanksgiving of that year. By season 3 we are well within the 1960s, past the Kennedy assassination (November 1963). By the beginning of season 4, it is Christmas 1964, and by the end we have had the Beatles and the more foreboding side of the British Invasion in the form of the Rolling Stones in 1965. Season 5 ends in 1967. The astuteness of Mad Men is to choose to be a show not about the 1950s but about the ostensibly departure from that decade to something else—something that often comes into the show as mere glimpse, unassimilated foreshadowing, vague premonition, and the transient allusion to new worlds and ways of life that threaten the stable, conventionalized meanings of the 1950s. This is true both for the characters in the series and for the viewers who have to keep revising their sense of what they are watching as the episodes keep “progressing” in historical time (I put that term in quotation marks since although the dates advance, it is often a question of the characters’ ability to seize the day and move forward with a history that is in motion all around them). This, then, is one source of the incompleteness that I have suggested is integral to the representational project of the show.

If in common convention the 1950s are fixed into stereotypes, the 1960s are about all of that seeming to come undone. Part of what seems so particu-
lar about *Mad Men* in the history of serial television is that it is not merely about the narratively internal changes that happen to its fictional characters as they interact with each other but about how a real, extratelevisual history is seen to be impacting them. The show is filled with real events and registers how the characters register them. It is, like certain novels of the nineteenth century to which it is sometimes compared, a work of “historical fiction” (see, e.g., Goodlad, this volume).

Take, as a contrast, Matthew Weiner’s previous television effort, *The Sopranos*, for which he was a writer, producer, and sometime director: that show is set in a recognizable time, but except for a few references to 9/11, there is little sense of weightier, larger events pushing in on this enclosed Mafia world. (Of course, at the broadest level, as Tony Soprano admits, and as the title of the series’ final episode, “Made in America,” implies, the story of these latecomer Mafiosi does bear a connection to the larger story of late capitalism: as Tony explains early in episode 1 of season 1, he has the feeling of coming in at the end of something.) Or take, as another point of contrast, another recent work of quality TV, *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–8): as numerous commentators have noted, *The Wire* does have ambition of showing a city in all its urban complexity and interconnection. And there is a sense of history here (for example, the decline of the white dockworkers as social force), but it is still one pitched at the broadest level of the long-durational changes in late capitalism rather than in the impingement of immediate historical events on the lives of the fictional characters.

Some of what we might call the historicism of *Mad Men* is about getting the surface details right: this is a show very much about the look of clothes, the clink of drink glasses, the wafting up of cigarette smoke, and all those other markers that help contribute no doubt to the impression that somehow the series is serving as documentation of the times. But *Mad Men* also enters into its times through a concern with large-scale punctual events: political (e.g., presidential campaigns, elections, and assassinations; the suicide of a presidential mistress [Marilyn Monroe]), cultural (e.g., contemporary movies and songs, the Beatles invasion), and social (e.g., the increasing struggles of African Americans for visibility and agency in society). The workers at Sterling Cooper (and later Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce) may be rooted in a very specific place, the space of their office, but the show is all about opening them up to other spaces—for instance, the road trip that Don takes with young druggies in “Seven Twenty Three” (3.7) and in which he gets mugged by them, the journey downtown to wild Greenwich Village that Peggy goes on in “The Rejected” (4.4)—including, pointedly, the space...
represented by the presence of the electronic medium of television, which brings seemingly faraway events into the proximity of the fictional characters.

There are the historical events, and then there are the reactions of the fictional characters to them and what they do with them. Even though Don Draper is the seeming protagonist of the series, it is noteworthy how often he is shown to be on the wrong side of history, supporting in his professional work causes that are either doomed to failure (Richard Nixon for president! Don even declares, “I am Dick Nixon,” as a point of identification) or promised success in the immediate present only to go down in the longer annals as errors of moral judgment (the demolition of Penn Station). The show wants us to recognize that Don often gets it wrong. And not only in his professional life: for instance, he bets on Sonny Liston in his infamous ill-fated match with Cassius Clay (“The Suitcase,” 4.7), and he dreads the Beatles concert he is taking his daughter Sally to (“Hands and Knees,” 4.10). *Mad Men* needs from us this recognition of the characters’ fallibility in history because it is key to the way we watch the show from our historical present and reflect back on fraught lives such as Don’s and the mistakes he (and others around him) often make as they grope toward a new world for which they are only partially prepared. It is telling that in a very early episode (“Marriage of Figaro,” 1.3), we see the Sterling Cooper admen, including Don, confused by the success (and great acclaim in advertising history) of Volkswagen’s campaign engineered by the ad firm Doyle Dane Bernbach in which it ironically referred to its own car as a “lemon”: despite their acumen in the business, these “experts” don’t get hipness and irony and are at a loss to understand the new cutting edge despite their own frequent desire to be part of it.

Of course, against all the fixities of 1950s life, Don Draper offered his own form of attempted liberation by changing his identity and trying to build his life anew. On the one hand, this is very 1950s in its own way—the man who goes “on the road” to new worlds of discovery. But it is also key in 1960s culture, where dropping out of the existence one has been given to try to make something new of one’s self is a common theme. (It receives a nightmare version in John Frankenheimer’s film *Seconds* [1966], in which a discontented white-collar New Yorker has his life reinvented for him by a secret corporation only to discover that he is in a trap from which death is the only escape.)

Like Bobby Dupea in *Five Easy Pieces*, a key cinematic swan song to the 1960s, Don Draper moves between different levels of the American class hierarchy, trying out different ways of being. Draper finds none of them without their own dead ends. *Five Easy Pieces* in contrast opts for an open-
ended ambiguity typical of 1960s and early 1970s films, where the film terminates in nondecision: here, Bobby simply goes off—to the future but also directly off-frame. One could perhaps imagine the multiyear run of *Mad Men* ending that way: Don simply vanishing on one more of his trips west (as he almost seemed to do toward the end of season 2, only to return readily to the advertising way of life). But it is as likely that Don will dig deeper into the business way of life he has chosen for himself.

In fact, if Don’s change of identity somewhat resembles that dropping out that was so much an aspiration of 1960s youth, it matters that his choice to begin again is ultimately, if I can put it this way, to “drop in”: that is, by throwing off his original life, Don does not so much reject the establishment as create conditions in which he can more wholeheartedly embrace it. It is not insignificant that “Don” began on a farm but finds his new life in the city, the place of corporate success: his trajectory is the opposite of that romanticized journey back to the land that characterized so many 1960s dropouts. (One episode, “Waldorf Stories” [4.6], is filled with flashbacks about his eager-beaver desire to enter into the advertising business and show that he has what it takes.)

And it matters too that Don had his conversion of identity long before the 1960s (during the Korean War, in fact). By the time Don gets to the 1960s, he is already in many ways fixed in who he is now, and there is little room for additional openness to radical change. Thus in “Blowing Smoke” (4.12), where his colleagues at Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce might view as a willful act of self-destruction of their firm Don’s decision to write a *New York Times* op-ed piece against the ways other ad firms shill for big tobacco, Don’s dramatic act is, we might say, a lateral move within the corporate world, rather than a rejection of it. Don is shaking things up not to destroy his professional world but to find a new path within it (we know he’s not sincere about the moral high ground he’s taking since we see him puffing away at a cigarette as he writes his screed against smoking and advertising’s support of it; as the episode’s title tells us, he is “blowing smoke”). By the 1960s Don can act impetuously, but generally he does so in the service of career building, rather than any sort of anti-establishment large-scale revisioning of fundamental values and identity. At the end of season 4, fans might have been blogging vociferously about whether Don’s sudden desire to propose to his very composed and, in all things professional and domestic, competent secretary Megan was “crazy,” but whatever the advisability of his move, it has little of that radical rejection of establishment identity that characterized inspired acts of identity change in the hipper realms of 1960s culture. On the
one hand, as his own staff (especially the women such as Peggy and Joan) note cattily, Don is simply performing to type (the boss involved with his secretary, as happened earlier to his colleague Roger Sterling and legions of other men in the business world), rather than somehow dramatically breaking away from corporate typecasting. On the other hand, in Megan, Don is gaining both a domestic goddess (she is a woman who knows how to handle his children, unlike his ex-wife, Betty) and a professional whose perceptive assessment and ambition in the corporate world is no less endorsing of that world than Don’s.

A key figure in 1960s popular culture’s valorization of madness was the independent free spirit who became involved with a more uptight person, who through this relationship opened up to new, unconstrained modes of being. In some couples, the figure of mad inspiration might be the male (as with the corporate slave–turned–grand iconoclast played by Jason Robards in A Thousand Clowns [1965] who tries to bring the by-the-books social worker played by Barbara Harris out of her shell), but it was more often a hip, even hippie, woman who in the typical plot took it as her veritable life’s mission to bring the male out of his establishment trap. There is now even a newly minted moniker for this special character across the history of cinema: she is, the Internet instructs us, to be known as the “manic pixie dream girl,” with Wikipedia’s entry quoting one definition of her as “that bubbly, shallow cinematic creature that exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures.”4 Harking back to screwball comedies such as Bringing Up Baby, of 1938 (in which Katharine Hepburn teaches the repressed paleontologist Cary Grant to embrace the wacky side of life), narratives of mad, enlightened inspiration by a zany hippie chick proliferate through the 1960s. (This setup even occurs in the fluffy TV series That Girl! [ABC, 1966–71], in which fun-loving Ann Marie [Marlo Thomas] has to keep trying to get emotion out of square Donald [Ted Bessell], leading some spectators to wonder why she even wasted time on him in the first place.)

In Petulia (1968), for instance, a staid and conventional doctor (George C. Scott) is given the chance in a San Francisco that has already experienced the “Summer of Love” to catch up on life’s new possibilities by the fun-loving title character (played by Julie Christie). All the uptight male has to do is witness the pixie (often in silhouette as, arms outstretched, she romantically embraces the whole world) and he is ready to turn his back on his old way of life (see, for instance, Peter Sellers’s extravagant conversion to San Francisco hippie life in I Love You, Alice B. Toklas [1968] when he meets up
with free-spirited Leigh Taylor-Young, who became a veritable icon of such a role). The dire paranoid conspiracy film *Seconds* confirms how widespread the convention was, since it is able to use its seeming familiarity to subversive ends. Here, the corporate executive who has been given a new identity by a mysterious corporation is about to give up on his new way of life until, walking on the beach one day, he sees a barefooted, flowing-haired vision of a woman who fully draws him over to her way of being when she runs madly into the surf and cries, “Ocean, I love you!” with her arms outstretched. Only later does he discover that the corporation has assigned her to seduce him into accepting his new identity (as a Malibu artist).

In *Mad Men*, Don Draper comes close to meeting his own free-spirited dream girl in the form of Miss Suzanne Farrell (Abigail Spencer), his daughter’s schoolteacher with whom he has an affair in season 3. In typical pixie fashion, Miss Farrell appears to Don in a dreamlike moment: outside with her class, she dances around magically, her hair wafting poetically, as Don looks on at this vision of inspiration. But their adventure is short lived and seems to inspire Don to no major rethinking of the coordinates of his existence. In keeping with his 1950s nature, what matters to him is the fulfillment of sexual conquest rather than finding himself opened up to a new, life-altering experience. Don likes to think he is in love with some aspect of these idealized women that he doesn’t find in Betty, but there is something in him that prevents him from moving forward with that love (just as he has trouble moving forward with broader history). When he unexpectedly (for the viewer as well as characters in the series) proposes to his secretary, Megan, at the end of season 4, it might well seem that Don is making a break to a new way of life, a new mode of being, although it is more than tempting to see Megan as simply the better version of the 1950s he wishes he could hold onto (Megan attracts him because she does so well with his children; she promises — in his starry eyes, at least — to be the perfect suburban housewife that Betty never could be).

With exceptions like Miss Farrell, most of the women Don has affairs with across the show’s seasons bear strong connections to his work world (for example, Rachel, a client; Bobbie, a client’s wife; Faye, a consultant; Megan, his secretary) and thereby cement his connections to that way of life rather than zanily suggesting any sort of alternative to it. They are all business women, just as he is a business man. Perhaps Midge (Rosemary DeWitt), a beatnik artist that Don sees on the side in the first season, might have represented another version of the inspiring hippie pixie (and she comes close to the role when, as Don looks on, she nonchalantly tosses her television set out of her
upper-floor apartment window). But from the start Midge seems to represent for Don no more than a superficial flirtation or casual experimentation with an alternative way of life (and Don’s lack of interest in embracing her way of life is confirmed for him—and for the spectator—when he meets the kinds of beatnik friends Midge hangs with and finds them aggressive and pretentious).

Of course, although Don Draper is at the center of Mad Men, the series is an ensemble work, with multiple character arcs and story lines, and other characters on the show have their own flirtations with the romantic, alternative possibilities of 1960s cutting-edge culture. For example, as the seasons of the show progress, Peggy has a series of intriguing encounters with the 1960s promise of new ways of living. It is important to note, though, that in chronicling Peggy’s forays into bohemian culture, the show is not somehow suggesting that Women as a general demographic are being given chances that the (perhaps more entrapped) men are not. Clearly, for instance, Joan is not entering the 1960s in the same way as Peggy. Peggy is not a symbol of a general condition of woman, and what matters is the specific biography she is given and how she develops in relation to it. In particular, it matters that from the very first episode of the very first season, the spectator is made to think that Peggy is stuck in a rut—somehow prudish, somehow repressed, and somehow screwed up (her way of dealing with her own prudishness is to sleep with the wrongest man and then, in a later episode, to vamp up in the wrongest way). The spectator is, I think, manipulated by the show into wanting Peggy to change but also, eventually, into realizing that some changes are just not right for her.

Here, in contrast to what I just suggested, gender does start to matter—but in another manner: in the earliest episodes, it is easy to want Peggy to not be so frumpy, but the way in which the other office workers keep advising her to show off more of her legs becomes a first sign that not every alternative to frumpiness is a liberation. In other words, to become more of a sexy vixen than a seemingly repressed frump offers an alternative—for Peggy herself, for her colleagues who deal with her, and for the spectator who watches her—but it is not clear that this is really the desirable outcome. The spectator has to learn what might be appropriate choices for this 1960s woman, and enticing clues of at least one other possible path toward that begin to appear in season 4 when Peggy encounters new sexualities and new political commitments. As Jim Hansen has noted in a perceptive blog about “The Rejected” (“Coolest Medium”), we see Peggy at a crossroads (between corporate professionalism and bohemian adventure), and she more than any other.
character comes to represent the possibility for change even if the outcome of that is not yet apparent, even by the end of season 5. In fact, just as there are many indications that Peggy could be receptive to 1960s counterculture, there are equally as many hints that she will remain as steadfastly committed to career and advancement: for instance, she may decide in “Chinese Wall” (4.11) to make the somewhat radical Abe her “boyfriend,” as she proudly declares to a copywriter colleague (already there are hints that this new lover is not as great a radical as we might imagine), but she seems almost as much as Don to be interested more in simply getting good sex from the encounter than in letting herself be seduced into her companion’s lifestyle. Earlier, in “The Beautiful Girls,” when Peggy tries out Abe’s integrationist ideas at a corporate meeting only to see them quickly shot down, she appears to realize she wants to put career ahead of liberal political commitment and drops her efforts at consciousness raising among her colleagues.

Again, the issue is not one of accuracy—were commitments to change in the 1960s as fraught and fickle as all that?—but of the show’s own aesthetic and political choices in representing the decade as it does. And the choices it makes are clearly pointed. Thus, if in the first season bohemian Midge might seem to represent a new style of hipness so unlike the seemingly cool but really uptight world of the suited sophisticates from Madison Avenue, her reappearance in “Blowing Smoke” in season 4 confirms just how much of a dead-end the bohemian lifestyle would turn out to be for so many burned-out denizens of the 1960s lifestyle. (And in any case, her world has been shown to be sanctimonious and silly from the start, so one should not have expected much in the way of revolution there.) Midge offers to prostitute herself, and is encouraged in that by her ersatz husband, in an episode that began by suggesting that Madison Avenue work is itself a form of pimping—the Heinz man says to the desperate pitches of an overeager Don, “I bet I could get a date with your mother right now”—and thereby implies a connection between these two worlds of selling out by selling out one’s self. Likewise, Midge’s heroin addiction is in its own way a form of nonprogressing cyclicity (you shoot up only to have to do it again), not some revolutionary strike for the future, and it bears comparison as an unbreakable, filthy habit to Don’s incessant smoking as he writes his supposedly virtuous missive about the dangers of cigarettes.

In turning his back on any further involvement with Midge, Don is turning his back on a certain promise glimpsed in a bohemian 1960s lifestyle. And, it might be said, Mad Men itself is turning its own back in similar fashion through its willed refusal to imagine the experimental and artistic cul-
ture of the decade as anything but a dead end driven by the same instincts of self-satisfaction and self-interest as the squares it was supposed to offer an alternative to. There is nothing inspired, nothing madcap, about Midge’s mode of being as we last see it.

In respect of the series’ general foreclosure of mad inspiration as an acceptable radical alternative, for us and for the characters, it might well be appropriate that one of the very few actual uses of the term mad in Mad Men comes in Lane Pryce’s mention of Stanley Kramer’s It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World (1963), quoted in the epigraph to this chapter. No doubt one shouldn’t overinterpret the quick, inconsequential allusion to what now seems itself an inconsequential piece of movie history (in fact, Lane and Don choose not to see the film). But it is intriguing to note that the one bit of “mad” behavior from the 1960s that Mad Men references in this case has to do with a story about money grubbing by a motley crew of competitors, most of whom are played by a venerable guard of old Hollywood stars and stand-up comic icons including Ethel Merman, Spencer Tracy, Sid Caesar, and Mickey Rooney. On the one hand, this is not “madness” as poetic inspiration of, say, a beat sort: the madness that impels these would-be gold diggers is sheer greed and self-interest, precisely the sort of materialism that beat madness would come to disavow (“Moloch whose blood is running money!” as Allen Ginsberg famously puts it in Howl). Rather than point to the new communal values that the 1960s would hold out as an ideal, however unrealized in actual practice, It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World looks back to a world of everyone-for-him-or-herself where rivalry and backstabbing are the order of the day. (Even the shared laughter that unites all the failed competitors at the end of the film is a vicious laughter, expended at the expense of a character who has injured herself.) On the other hand, but also in a bow, perhaps, to the same competitive world, the film itself seems resolutely to want to refuse its historical time in its insistence on using so many actors who are from previous decades and who can only seem square and even anachronistic faced with the new cinema of the 1960s (the wackiness alluded to in the title is to an older tradition of comic shtick). Like Kramer’s later Spencer Tracy outing, Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner (1967), It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World seems resolutely and even polemically a call to support an increasingly dated mode of cinematic entertainment in the midst of a world that is changing and has its cinematic forms changing along with it. Kramer’s film is an ode to old-fashioned cinema in everything from style to content, and it tries to strike a moral blow against emergent directions in the culture of the decade.

It is interesting, then, that It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World offers its own
image of 1960s hipness but only to subsume the energies of the counterculture within the general race for pecuniary self-interest. Famously, there is an abrupt cut early in the film to a beatnik shack (complete with far-out sculpture) in which a wild hipster, Sylvester (played by a vibrant Dick Shawn), wearing only the briefest of brief red bathing trunks, dances frenetically around a hip chick in a black bikini. The phone rings incessantly as Sylvester boogies around the girl, whose dancing is energetic but robotic and who pays her partner no heed as if she is absorbed in her activity to the point of zen ignorance of the world around her. When Sylvester answers the phone, it is his mother (Ethel Merman) summoning him to the chase after the buried fortune, and he immediately drops the business at hand to go help her. The would-be hipster is here just an easily infantilized mamma’s boy (at least that’s not Don Draper’s problem!), and his hip chick is no obvious fount of poetic inspiration (the more he dances around her, the less reaction he gets).

As with Mad Men, It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World offers glimpses of a less bridled mode of 1960s existence but closes it off as a real option for its characters.

It is always risky with quirky, cutting-edge television series that are still producing new seasons to make predictions as to where things are going to end up. No viewers, for instance, seemed to have anticipated that Don would propose to Megan at the end of season 4. Indeed, as an anecdotal, minor sign of the show’s unpredictability, when I first conceived this chapter I was struck by the lack of dialogue including the word mad in a series that nonetheless referenced the term in its title: I had planned then to cite Kramer’s It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World as one example of “mad activity” from the period that, typically, was not referenced by the show. I was taken aback when the series did end up making pointed, if passing, reference to the film. This is a series that can keep one guessing.

There is always the possibility that some character in the series will have a substantial, life-altering encounter with madness or at least with inspiring madcapness. Indeed, when I discussed earlier the ways in which Betty Draper and her father both have bouts of psychiatric disorder, I could have completed the lineage with the important—but highly ambiguous and, at this point in the history of the series, open-ended—case of Betty’s daughter, Sally. Sally is, quite simply, one of the most vexed or fraught characters on Mad Men, and she is exceedingly difficult to figure out (by both the characters in the series and we the viewers of it). In a strong way, Sally does exhibit many of the forms of madness that the 1960s became so invested in: she is unpredictable (in a manner that sometimes approaches psychosis, as in her
raggedly cutting her hair in “The Chrysanthemum and the Sword” [4.5]), she is adventurous and experimental, she is unruly and rebellious, she is unhappy and searching for pleasures undreamed of (including sexual ones). In Sally, the 1960s senses of madness as mental malady and as liberatory anger merge.

Sally might, like so many other characters, turn back from the promise of the period and opt for conventionality. She does, after all, seem to fall into patterns of passivity and obedience as much as her mother has. In some way, it seems appropriate that on the Internet, Sally’s rage has been turned into one of the most popular animated GIFs (graphic interface format) — clips from media that have been tinkered with to make a single action repeat over and over again in uncanny and hypnotic fashion. The GIF of Sally takes the moment in “The Beautiful Girls” when she falls down in the hallway of her dad’s agency as she tries to run away, and it replays the instant of enraged upset into a disturbing and yet absorbing infinity. The GIF combines anger and endless impotence in one endlessly revolving gesture.5

Of course, the looping GIF is a viewer’s emendation imposed on the TV series rather than something that was scripted into Mad Men’s original narrative world. Nothing in the show thus far confirms that Sally will remain in a narrative limbo. True, the move to a new home that her mother forced on the family at the end of season 4 means that some avenues are closed off to Sally (for instance, it would increasingly be harder for her to develop her complicated bond with Glen [Marten Weiner]). But nothing requires the restless Sally to stay put. If one calculates the historical timeline, Sally would be a young teenager when the Woodstock Festival takes place in 1969. Maybe she will be one of those 1960s runaways who ends up there or somewhere else in the fractured landscape of the period. Perhaps, in the guise of Sally, Mad Men will discover through some plot twist that, as another 1960s figure raging against but also beholden to parental authority, Norman Bates, puts it in Psycho (1960), “We all go a little mad sometimes.”

NOTES

1. A friend of mine refers to the lawnmower scene as “Lynchian” — along with a moment in which Betty suddenly throws up after learning of Don’s infidelity with Bobbie Barrett and the episode abruptly ends on that action (“The Gold Violin,” 2.7), and the memorable moment in which from a striking angle we see Betty shooting a rifle at a neighbor’s homing birds (in the aptly titled “Shoot,” 1.9). The point is that it is recognized that Mad Men has special moments, viewable as weird but iso-
latable as moments specifically, and that these have a particular and partial cultural provenance (the branding of them as “Lynchian”).

2. It is the very imprecision of the notion of being “mad” that an inspired parody of *Mad Men* on *Sesame Street* in 2009 exploits (thereby confirming how much the children’s show is simultaneously for the parents in the room). The Don Draper puppet meets with two assistants (“sycophants,” as he directly terms them) to work on the Happy Honey Bear account. Sketches they have come up with of bears missing out on honey make the ad men mad and then sad. Finally, they come up with a sketch of a joyous bear eating honey, and this makes everyone happy. It’s been an emotional roller coaster, declares Don: they’ve been able to go through a gamut of feelings in such a short time.

3. Similarly, Peggy Olson, a copywriter, is almost institutionalized when anomie she feels because of a pregnancy she is unaware of is misdiagnosed as mental disorder. But Peggy is quickly pulled from the world of the mad and returned to Madison Avenue.
