Mad Men, Mad World
Rushing, Robert A., Kaganovsky, Lilya, Goodlad, Lauren M. E.

Published by Duke University Press

Rushing, Robert A., et al.
Mad Men, Mad World: Sex, Politics, Style, and the 1960s.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/69125

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2500635
PART TWO
MAD AESTHETICS
The pleasures of popular culture have long been a target of attack. Where upholders of high culture have worried about the seductions of lowbrow sensationalism and violence, Marxists have argued against the profitable industry that produces mind-numbing entertainment to fill the hours not committed to deadening and dehumanizing labor. Both conservatives and radicals have bewailed the passivity of a mass audience lulled into a mindless stupor by frivolous amusements. And it is precisely pleasure, according to theorists of the Frankfurt School, that distracts us from the possibility of resistance. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer write, “To be pleased means to say Yes” (144). Television and media scholars have worked for decades to unsettle knee-jerk objections to popular pleasures, but the media itself continues to circulate dire warnings about the consequences of enjoying mass culture too much.

In a brilliant study of nineteenth-century theories of novel reading, Nicholas Dames makes the case that the suspicion of media pleasures has remained relatively constant for the past two centuries, but its targets have shifted. In our own time, Dames argues, philosophers including Richard Rorty and Martha Nussbaum have held up the nineteenth-century novel as a model training ground for democratic citizenship, contending that the
absorbed attentiveness demanded by long realist texts provides an antidote to the lazy pleasures of television and the Internet. Ironically, however, nineteenth-century thinkers often understood absorption in the novels of their moment in precisely the opposite terms, as producing habits of indolence and inattention, distracting readers from the other, more important aspects of social existence. The strange fact that the same readerly experience can be cast as a virtuous, arduous attentiveness and as a listless automaticity masks a crucial continuity: for more than a century critics have persistently valorized active labor over lazy pleasure (Dames, 18–20, 98).

I begin this way because I want to draw attention here to a technique of televisual pleasure that I call the “shock of the banal.” I associate this pleasure with three of the great, critically acclaimed television serials that have hit the screen in the postnetwork age: *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007), *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–8), and *Mad Men*. And it is *Mad Men* that puts this pleasure to the best political use. Critics have roundly condemned the show for inviting its viewers to feel smug and self-satisfied. I suggest, however, that this critique takes part in a long tradition of presupposing the evils of popular pleasures, rather than engaging in a genuine analysis of the work that they do. For all its pleasures, the shock of the banal has potentially progressive—even radicalizing—effects.

While on first glance *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Mad Men* may seem different from one another in mood and focus, they share a dedication to a version of realism that surprises us, ironically enough, with ordinariness. Long defined by their concern with the quotidian, realist representations are not often associated with the goal of startling their audiences. And if they do err too much in the direction of thrilling plots or surprising characters, they risk losing their claims to verisimilitude. “All this is very exciting,” wrote a reviewer of the sensation novel *Lady Audley’s Secret* in 1863, “but is also very unnatural” (*Living Age*). Thus it may seem strange—even paradoxical—to insist on joining shock to banality. But it is the peculiar achievement of *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Mad Men* that they all generate a jolt of surprise from precisely the most humdrum of experiences.

Take the premise of *The Sopranos*, for example: a Mafia boss suffers from panic attacks and has to learn from weekly therapy sessions to let go of the dream of total control. We could of course read this opening allegorically, as a symptom of the Mafia’s breakdown, or even of the collapse of a whole nation’s confidence (see D. R. Simon); but the literal yields its own pleasures: the surprise of seeing the typically glamorized figure of the ruthless Mafia don reduced to the condition of the most mundane of bourgeois circum-
stances. As Tony struggles to convince his mother to enter a nursing home, and his son, A.J., is diagnosed with borderline attention deficit disorder, the criminal mind startles us most not by a willingness to commit violence or by a struggle to maintain power, but by its entanglements in the commonplace. As Chris Albrecht of HBO puts it: “[Tony has] inherited a business from his dad. He’s trying to bring it into the modern age. He’s got an overbearing mom that he’s still trying to get out from under. Although he loves his wife, he’s had an affair. He’s got two teenage kids. . . . He’s anxious, he’s depressed, he starts to see a therapist because he’s searching for the meaning of his own life. . . . The only difference between him and everybody I know is he’s the don of New Jersey” (qtd. in Delaney).

The Wire makes a comparable set of representational moves. If at first we expect a conventional face-off between lawful cops and lawless robbers, we soon realize that the police department and the underworld drug business share a similar set of organizational hierarchies and pressures. The business of drugs turns out to produce the same kinds of pecking orders, promotions and demotions, incentives for good work, quality assessment, and business mergers as official institutions. Stringer Bell’s borrowing of Robert’s Rules of Order for his cross-Baltimore drug consortium is perhaps the most elegant example of the spread of mundane forms.

At times the show makes the similarities between official and unofficial organizations explicit. In the beginning of season 3, for example, the detectives Jimmy McNulty, Lester Freamon, and Kima Greggs target Drac, a garrulous mid-level drug dealer in Proposition Joe’s hierarchy (fig. 6.1). Drac reports to Lavell Mann, a “soldier” who is unlikely to inform on Prop Joe. “But if we take [Lavell] off,” Freamon explains, “They gotta promote someone to replace him.” “What makes you think they’ll promote the wrong man?” asks Police Commissioner Burrell. “We do it all the time,” responds Lieutenant Daniels. Burrell laughs, but it is worth noting that he also uses this point to turn the conversation to the question of Daniels’s own promotion, telling him that his wife’s run for office is prompting the mayor to hold up Daniels’s position (“Time after Time,” 3.1). Throughout its five seasons, The Wire involves the shock of recognizing that the supposedly sensational criminal underworld is uncannily like the most humdrum bureaucracy: subject to bad management, ineffective organizational plans, and a frustrating absence of qualified personnel. It shares much more with the workaday world of the mass of middle-class viewers—including academics—than conventional cop dramas have taught us to expect.

Mad Men does not dwell on the workings of a criminal underworld, but
given its creator Matthew Weiner’s frequent participation as a writer for *The Sopranos*, it is not surprising that the *amc* show bears some resemblance to its *hbo* forerunner. “Both are alien and amoral worlds in which people do terrible things,” writes Anna McCarthy in *The Nation*, “and both shows draw us in by exposing the vulnerability of the monster” (“Mad Men’s”). But even beyond these thematic concerns, I would argue that *amc*’s show offers a remarkably similar pleasure in the shock of the banal. As the first season serves up three-martini lunches, car travel without seatbelts, pregnant women smoking cigarettes, and confidential conversations between a woman’s husband and her psychiatrist about what she has said in therapy sessions, we are invited to dwell with surprise on the vast distance our own culture has traveled in a mere fifty years. “The recent past,” we learn, “is a different world” (McCarthy, “Mad Men’s”). We are startled less by sensational plot twists or characters’ hidden depths, in other words, than by the recognition that eating raw eggs or smacking a neighbor’s child across the face used to be so awfully ordinary.

All three shows prompt a pleasure that lies, at least in part, in recognizing everyday assumptions just far enough removed from us to feel distant while remaining strangely familiar. But *Mad Men* is in some ways an inversion of
the other two. The ordinariness of The Sopranos and The Wire is astonishingly similar to the ordinariness of the contemporary middle class but occurs in circumstances that are exotic—the murderous underworld of Mafia and drug trade. The ordinariness of Mad Men is remote but occurs in typically bourgeois homes and offices. The HBO shows surprise us with the banal in extraordinary places, while Mad Men startles us with extraordinary practices in the most banal of places.

These models of familiarity-in-strangeness and strangeness-in-familiarity probably bring to mind Freud’s notion of the uncanny. For Freud, the un in unheimlich refers to the negation of the experience of feeling “at home,” which produces discomfort and unease. But since the sensation of uncanniness emerges from desires that have been repressed, and since those desires begin in the self, they are in some sense more intimate and private—more heimlich—than the experience of feeling “at home.” For Freud, then, the unheimlich necessarily tacks back and forth between familiarity and strangeness.

And yet these three extraordinary television serials do not offer us a strictly Freudian version of the uncanny. If there are infantile feelings to be censored in The Wire and The Sopranos, they are those that are most out in the open to viewers: violence, vengefulness, and greed. Thus the usual experience of the uncanny is turned upside down: what return, unbidden, are the routines of ordinary life, their very mundaneness producing our frisson of surprise. The role of the repressed in Mad Men’s version of the uncanny is subtler still: when the Drapers, at the end of a picnic in an idyllic scene, dump their garbage on the grass and leave, or when the children run around the house covered in dry-cleaner bags (fig. 6.2), these startling actions gesture not to the fulfillment of certain frightening and shameful desires but to another, fully functioning regime of thoughtless habits, different from our own but equally routinized and automatic. What has been repressed is another system of repression. That which, in Freud’s terms, “is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (241) is a cultural-historical past instead of an individual psychic one. And this version of the uncanny produces affective results very different from our usual accounts: not feelings of anxiety or a desire to subdue foreign elements, but rather a kind of comic pleasure.

It is of course this particular pleasure that has drawn the most persistent critique of Mad Men. From the beginning, critics have charged that the show invites us to feel smug about ourselves. Mark Greif wrote in the London Review of Books in 2008:
Mad Men is an unpleasant little entry in the genre of Now We Know Better. We watch and know better about male chauvinism, homophobia, anti-semitism, workplace harassment, housewives’ depression, nutrition and smoking. We wait for the show’s advertising men or their secretaries and wives to make another gaffe for us to snigger over. “Have we ever hired any Jews?” —“Not on my watch.” “Try not to be overwhelmed by all this technology; it looks complicated, but the men who designed it made it simple enough for a woman to use.” It’s only a short further wait until a pregnant mother inhales a tumbler of whisky and lights up a Chesterfield. . . . Mad Men flatters us where we deserve to be scourged. As I see it, the whole spectacle has the bad faith of, say, an 18th-century American slaveholding society happily ridiculing a 17th-century Puritan society —“Look, they used to burn their witches!” —while secretly envying the ease of a time when you could still tie uppity women to the stake.

Similarly, Melissa Witkowski in the Guardian argues that Mad Men offers “an attractive fantasy that creates an illusion of distance between our past and our present,” and so flatters the contemporary viewer: “The expected, self-congratulatory response is: ‘Look how far we’ve come!’” (see also Schwarz). The presumption here is that we take pleasure in the remoteness of a historical past that was characterized by injustice and ignorance, which allows us to feel distant and superior.

But there is a crucial element to Mad Men that this critique overlooks.
The shock of the banal would not work in a representation that merely distanced us from the world represented: it must offer us the play of familiarity in strangeness. As with The Wire and The Sopranos, the series gives us characters compelling and familiar enough that we cannot thoroughly detach ourselves. This is part of what makes Mad Men a pleasurable and popular drama, but it is also what always and necessarily undermines the position of easy superiority. Unlike The Sopranos and The Wire, however, Mad Men also uses the shock of the banal to train our attention on the fact of rapid historical change. That is, it repeatedly reminds us that a familiar, recognizable world of home and office has been transformed within a short period—much briefer than an average lifespan. “Look how far we’ve come” must surely be followed by “and in such an incredibly short time!” Thus Mad Men does not invite us to displace pernicious assumptions about sexism, racism, and homophobia onto an exotic, far-off place or time, but brings them just close enough to us to give us that feeling of uncanny familiarity—of being both at home and not at home.

Part of what irritates Mad Men’s critics is precisely the series’ emphasis on social transformation: the notion that it persuades us that we have come farther than we actually have, that it prompts us to believe we are beyond racism and sexism and homophobia, living in an enlightened present. This irritation depends on the presumption that there has in fact been very little social change since 1960. While I would be the first to agree that our society continues to be structured by racial, economic, and sexual inequalities, I would also argue that Mad Men does something far more important, politically, than to show us difference where there has in fact been sameness. It confronts us with the reality of social change; it compels us to face the fact that social worlds can—and do—undergo transformations, both large and small. That is, if there have been even minor shifts in the texture of ordinary experience, from habits of smoking and drinking, to childbirth, to routine assumptions about divorce and women in the workplace and gay male sexuality, to definitions of rape and the relaxed acceptance of casual racism and anti-Semitism, then how on earth have these changes come to pass? From episode to episode, Mad Men actually gives us very little reason to leap to the conclusion that we are now postrace and postgender, but it does give us a strong incentive to entertain the serious and radical political questions: Is change possible? And if so, how does it happen?

Here, I think, is where Mad Men is actually far more progressive than any other show on television. The show reminds us in all kinds of ways—from the passing mentions of civil rights to Kurt’s casual coming out—that the
radical social movements of the 1960s are looming on the horizon. Critics have sometimes charged that these moments in the series are too marginal, and that a better show would have made them central (see, e.g., Peterson, “Doesn’t”). But while it is certainly true that the series has so far failed to treat such figures as civil rights activists or feminists in any detail, Mad Men does make them historically pivotal: it conveys an elite social world that, all unknowingly, is about to come under attack by a powerful set of movements that will change it for good. And this is rare in contemporary popular culture. Since the Reagan years, it has been commonplace in the United States to show contempt—if not outright hostility—for the movements of the later 1960s. From Allan Bloom’s Closing of the American Mind (1987) to popular resentment against affirmative action, welfare, and the “permissive society,” the 1960s has been vilified as the source of a range of contemporary ills. But Mad Men never suggests that this was either a naively idealistic or a misguided moment: to the contrary, we feel the social movements of the later 1960s approaching, and they are on the verge of unsettling and transforming the world of Mad Men, making it strange to us now. Thus it is the political activism of the 1960s that makes it possible for us to experience the shock of the banal at all.

I would go so far as to say that the series makes us long for the 1960s. Its three major women characters—Betty, Peggy, and Joan—all have powerful moments of yearning for fulfilling professional work. Joan’s may be the most moving: after her success with a daytime television soap campaign in “A Night to Remember” (2.8), Harry abruptly thanks her for filling in as a reader of television scripts and asks her to train a replacement—a man, of course. Joan’s disappointment in the moment is compelling (fig. 6.3), though she quickly reasserts her composed professional façade and even tells Peggy that she would not trade places with her if she could. But Joan’s brutal and unequal marriage belies her blithe confidence in the happiness she imagines will come to her from her femininity alone, and her accomplishments as a script reader have suggested that she has the talent and enthusiasm to go far in a professional career. However ambivalent Joan is herself, the show puts us squarely on the side of women at work. And while the women achingly imagine themselves in successful careers, Don Draper gives us ample time to consider the feelings of purposelessness, alienation, and emptiness that come from career success divorced from other, more personal kinds of satisfaction. Thus Mad Men prompts us to yearn to overcome the separation of workplace and home life. In our own moment, conservatives routinely argue that such integration is impossible, and blame the 1960s for the demise of the
family: we might think of popular figures such as “Dr. Laura” Schlessinger, whose best-selling book *In Praise of Stay-at-Home Moms* (2009) insists that women should be the primary caregivers of children and explicitly targets “Alice Walker” feminists as the problem (15; see also Schlessinger, “Mommy Wars”). In this context, *Mad Men* is a valuable counterweight, intent on provoking viewers’ desire for precisely the kind of feminist activism that conservatives have habitually disparaged.

Even what might seem like trivial signs of change in *Mad Men* have serious political implications. In “The Gold Violin” (2.7), after the Drapers have finished a picnic in the woods, they prepare to leave by dumping their garbage on the ground (fig. 6.4). Don casually tosses his beer can into the woods. This blithe disregard for the landscape feels startling in our own historical moment, but our visceral objections to littering come from somewhere. We can trace them to the concerted efforts of such figures as Lady Bird Johnson, whose campaign for national “Beautification” became highly visible when she helped to engineer the passage of the Highway Beautification Act in 1965, resisting powerful corporations that insisted billboards were essential to the economy. Changing the traditionally passive character of the first lady into an activist role, she also orchestrated publicity for the conservation of national parks, for urban renewal, and against pollution and littering, ushering in the green movement and making the case for its importance not just as a matter of cosmetic beauty but as an economic and social problem with wide-ranging implications: “a total concern for the physical and
human quality of the world we pass on to our children” (qtd. in Carlin, 288). *Mad Men* is silent on all of these details, but what the picnic scene makes starkly clear is that the mainstream of a national culture has shifted from one set of entrenched routines and expectations to an equally automatic but strikingly different set of norms in less than fifty years. On first reading, then, the littering scene may seem a mere comic effect—at best laughable, at worst self-congratulatory—but the environmental implications are arguably significant indeed. Much of the debate about climate change today revolves around the question of whether or not we can change our habits, and whether we can do so quickly enough to avert an ecological catastrophe; *Mad Men* reminds us that we have changed them before, and with surprising speed. And yet the show does not distance us from this past altogether, but always and significantly maintains the play of sameness and difference: after all, the impulse to exploit and vandalize the natural world remains strong, and thus the uncannily tranquil, relaxed, familiar feeling of this scene may serve to evoke at once our own ecological habits and the ones we have left behind.

As for the other shocks of the banal, they too point us to a variety of activist campaigns. In 1962 the Consumers Union, along with the Association for the Aid of Crippled Children, sponsored a conference on “passenger car design and highway safety,” which led to the passage of a new federal law in 1964 mandating that all passenger vehicles except buses be fitted with three-point seat belts. The real difference in seat-belt use came in the 1980s, however, in the wake of the huge Traffic Safety Now campaign, ironically sponsored by
automobile manufacturers who were trying to resist legislation promoted by Elizabeth Dole, then secretary of transportation, to require air bags in all cars (Conley and McLaren, 118–20). On a larger scale was the major event of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Title VII of this law concerns workplace discrimination, prohibiting “employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin,” and it allows employees to file suits when they have been subject to “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature.”

But the law has not been the only site of change since 1960. Among the most striking cultural transformations we see in Mad Men are the practices and expectations around childbirth. “The Fog” (3.5) shows Betty Draper undergoing the extraordinarily alienated process of a thoroughly medicalized birth. Thrown into a nightmarish, drugged “fog” during labor, she awakens to find herself holding a baby whose sex she does not know. Don, of course, is not allowed to attend the birth, and he drinks with another expectant father as they wait. Already in the 1940s women had begun to show dissatisfaction with the medicalization of childbirth, and for the next two decades the work of the obstetricians Grantly Dick-Read and Ferdinand Lamaze, advocating natural childbirth, appealed to an assortment of audiences, from Catholics such as the founders of the La Leche League, who wanted to promote an ideal model of Marian motherhood, to counterculturalists who embraced the body in its natural, uncorrupted state (see Umansky, 52–76; Ward). By the early 1970s many feminists had added their critical voices to the arguments against “twilight birth” and other medical interventions, understanding the rise of the male doctor and the decline of the female midwife as a sign of the breakup of communities of women by masculinist models of science. Grassroots organizations—from the International Childbirth Education Association, which grew from 9 to 160 chapters in the United States between 1955 and 1975, to small local groups such as Birthday in Boston—offered women an array of alternatives to what an early edition of Our Bodies, Ourselves called the “condescending, paternalistic, judgmental, and non-informative” medical model of childbirth (qtd. in Wolf, 144). Our experience of medicine is no less alienating today—it may in fact be more so, thanks to the complexities of health insurance, the vastness of the pharmaceutical industry, and the medicalizing of new areas of our experience, such as sex drives and attention spans. But that only reinforces the double experience of the uncanny: the alienating encounter with hospitals and doctors remains painfully familiar, but the particularities of our experience have altered, and in some ways radically.
From civil rights to seat belts and from dry-cleaner bags to childbirth, the shock of the banal in *Mad Men* persistently points to the fact that ordinary life has changed quite dramatically in fifty years. It therefore makes clear that social, cultural, and legal transformations are possible. And while we may marvel at how far we have come, *Mad Men* does not offer the unmixd pleasures of easy superiority. To the contrary: the historical uncanny in AMC’s remarkable series persistently invites us to feel both near and far, both at home and not at home. It also invites us, in its own subtle way, to honor the social movements of the late 1960s, which rise up between our present and the past represented, creating the shock of historical difference. Of course, there is no question that much still needs to change. On poverty and on race the United States has shown few if any strides since the early 1960s, and some entrenched social inequalities have grown deeper. Smugness on the question of racial inequality in particular is a very real danger in the wake of Barack Obama’s election as president. But the austere, even punishing, imperative never to take pleasure may be taken too far. If it is politically dangerous to get too comfortable with the progress we have made, it is surely far more dangerous to insist that we have made no progress at all.

NOTES

1. For a wonderful collection of the whole range of views, see Rosenberg and White.

2. Among the landmark texts by television and media scholars in this tradition are Coward; Fiske; and Radway. A defense specifically of televisual pleasure can be found in Caldwell, *Televisionality*. For the dire warnings, see, for example, Clark; Mc-Whorter; and Stein.

3. As Mark Bowden puts it, “The heads of both organizations, official and criminal, wrestle with similar management and personnel issues, and resolve them with similarly cold self-interest. In both the department and the gang, the powerful exploit the weak, and within the ranks those who exhibit dedication, talent, and loyalty are usually punished for their efforts.”