DON DRAPER, BUNBURYIST

Season 4 of Mad Men begins with an episode titled “Public Relations.” The episode features a journalist from the magazine Advertising Age who publishes a profile of Don Draper, the creative golden boy of the newly formed Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce ad agency. The article describes Don as “a handsome cipher,” noting, “One imagines somewhere in an attic, there’s a painting of him that’s rapidly aging.” This reference to The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890), one of Oscar Wilde’s most famous works, makes explicit what has been implicit throughout the run of the show: not only do Don’s carefully constructed identity and style appear false, but their falsity has a strangely Wildean character. After all, from the earliest episodes of the show we learn that there is something counterfeit about Don’s life, something superficial about his persona—that, like Dorian Gray, Don has a few skeletons in his closet. Indeed, this is the second reference to Wilde in the series, though the first one is easily missed: in “Nixon vs. Kennedy” (1.12), when “Don Draper” in a flashback brings home the body of “Dick Whitman,” we hear the train conductor announce “Bunbury” just as the train pulls into the station. “This is us, lieutenant,” the captain tells “Don.”
To define someone as a superficial corporate shill today we often refer to him or her as “a suit” or “an empty suit.” But Mad Men reminds me of the words that Wilde’s Lord Henry Wotton speaks near the beginning of Dorian Gray. “It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances,” Lord Henry assures us, for “the true mystery of the world is visible, not invisible” (32). Mad Men is not merely all style. It is a show about how deep the surface is, about the malleability of what Wilde might well call our culture’s “visible symbols.” As Wilde also claims in the marvelous, paradox-laden preface to Dorian Gray, “All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril” (17).

That is why those moments in Mad Men when we watch Don Draper looking into a mirror are always discomfiting. When a character gazes at a mirror in a film—as, for example, Jake LaMotta does at the end of Martin Scorsese’s Raging Bull (1980)—the action generally represents an attempt to “go beneath the surface,” to confront a deeper self. In Mad Men we often glimpse Don shaving, combing his hair, and in the most general sense, polishing and reshaping his image. Such moments often end with Don staring intently at his own face in the mirror. Unlike many of us, however, Don appears to be completely aware of the fact that he stares at his image—his imago—and not at a thoroughly coherent, true, or deeper self. As Jacques Lacan pointed out, an imago attaches the human being to his or her reality, allows the individual to misrecognize him- or herself as a coherent, autonomous subject with at least the potential to control its surroundings (96). Yet Don does not seem to misrecognize himself as a subject in the same way that, say, I do when I wash up and ruminate on my daily responsibilities. Don constantly engages in the act of making himself up in both the cosmetic and narrative senses. He knows that his image is not that of the “true” Don Draper. He knows that he is not an entirely unified subject. By episode 3 of the first season, we viewers all know this as well. Don often seems painfully aware of his lack, but his incisive acts of self-recognition remain uncanny because they allow him a more fluid sense of his own autonomy. He does not need to imagine himself as a unified subject to imagine that he has autonomy. He always prepares a face to meet the faces he will meet, but he rarely concerns himself with the deeper truths behind them. He recognizes identity itself as an illusion. Like any artist, he shapes an illusion in order to produce the effects he seeks. By manipulating surfaces, Don proves himself to be the master of public relations.

This may be why the image of Don staring into a mirror in the episode “Seven Twenty Three” (3.7; fig. 7.1) remains even more unsettling than his
other moments of apparent self-recognition. The episode opens with the image of Peggy Olson, in many ways Don’s female counterpart, lying in bed. Then we glimpse Betty Draper fainting onto a couch. Peggy has just slept with Duck Phillips. Betty is dreaming of Henry Francis. Finally we move to Don lying on a hotel room floor. His hair appears disheveled and his typically spotless clothes, the sartorial armature of his public identity as an advertising executive, show all the signs of a difficult night. He rises, rubs his head and neck, and walks to the mirror. The Don Draper he gazes upon in the mirror appears significantly different from the one we have seen throughout most of the other episodes.

With blood crusted around his nose and his eye slightly swollen, Don looks less like the icon of flexible self-sufficiency, less the continual reshaper of his own imago, than like a beaten, friendless man. The sequence, sexualized by Betty’s fantasy and Peggy’s affair, depicts the show’s master seducer as isolated, outwitted, and left very much the worse for wear by whatever transpired in his room the previous night. By the third season of Mad Men we have grown accustomed to Don’s skillful command of the world that surrounds him, his nearly effortless capacity to comprehend and bend social codes to accommodate his desires. He dresses for success in all things. Seeing his face beaten and bloodied, seeing him taken by surprise, feels unsettling. Don’s reconstructed, 1960s-era masculine dandyism, which might draw comparisons to Cary Grant’s Roger O. Thornhill of North by Northwest
or Sean Connery’s James Bond of *From Russia with Love* (1963) and *Goldfinger* (1964), has a peculiarly modern feel to it. This dandified, potent subjectivity seems all but inaccessible to most of us. When faced with overwhelming opposition, this kind of dandy combines charm with force, and so provides us with an avatar of vigorous, aesthetically conscious self-control. We feel anxiety when that avatar emerges as beaten or sullied.

Of course, the dandy has always been a figure in disguise, an adept manipulator of surfaces, a symbol maker who conceals a particular secret. As a literary figure associated in the English-speaking world most closely with Oscar Wilde, the dandy also remains linked to effeminacy and illicit desire, and to those varied loves that appear at once luridly ostentatious and enigmatically unnamed. The dandy is always passing, always closeted. Wilde’s own dandies, from the tragic Dorian Gray to the dandy par excellence Algernon Moncrieff in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), thrive on disguise, concealment, and misdirection. But the split between the dandy’s carefully constructed exterior and the concealed riddle that composes the core of his inner being remains central to his character today. That nearly uncanny capacity to maneuver back and forth between the superficial detail and the sensational mystery appears to be the dandy’s defining attribute, his true art. The dandy is finally constituted for us neither by his veiled secret nor by his refined surface, but by the radical split between the two.

In Wilde’s most perfectly executed comedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Algernon explains that the modern world of commerce and commitment renders false identities necessary. “The Truth,” he explains, “is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either” (326). For Algernon, social and financial responsibilities form a kind of prison. Modern man, as Algernon sees him, has internalized this carceral space and called it identity. But to pursue his desires and develop new interests, the modern man must develop the capacity to mislead, to wear masks, to live a double life. “I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid named Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose,” he explains to his friend Jack, who has himself invented a younger ne’er-do-well brother named Ernest to impersonate whenever he is “in town” (326). Algernon dubs this act of duplicitous masquerade “Bunburying.” The play revolves around Algernon and Jack as they move dexterously between apparently “true identities” that limit them and the Bunburying masquerades that liberate them. As does Mad Men, *The Importance of Being Earnest* generates anxiety about the possibility that two separate worlds might somehow collide, that the mask of one identity or another might slip off. Pivoting be-
tween identities constitutes nearly all of the plot work, tension, and humor of Wilde’s play.

The Importance of Being Earnest works to break down the distinction between truth and falsehood. Imagined identities, Bunburying masquerades, transform nearly all of the supposedly authentic selves in the play into wholly flexible, syncretic characters. These dandies wear personas like clothing, and they remain scrupulous in their attention to the details of their vibrantly reimagined personas. In a sense, the Wildean dandy appears to us as a playwright within a play, an aesthete-Übermensch whose comprehensive grasp of the context in which he lives allows him to rewrite his own part—and often the parts played by others—at will. By refusing a unified identity, the dandy can revise himself and his desires. Oscillating craftily between surface and depth, the dandy reshapes both. Like Don Draper, Algernon and Jack can revise the worlds that they inhabit. Despite their astounding capabilities, however, all of these characters remain firmly inside of those worlds.

The dandy’s capacity to contain personal and aesthetic innovation within the confines of accepted convention makes him a markedly insightful reader of social codes. But the dandy never destabilizes social narratives, nor does he constitute a radical or progressive force. The capacity to manipulate cultural conventions, to understand a social context so deftly that one can dress oneself for success in all things, finally works to reify those conventions. The codes that the dandy manipulates and accepts are still the dominant ones. Wilde sums this up very succinctly when he has Basil complain to Lord Henry in The Picture of Dorian Gray, “You never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing” (4). The dandy points to and often embodies sociopolitical crises, but he never truly overcomes them. Neither does the dandy represent a mere force for social stability. Rather, the dandy gives form to several of the economic and political antagonisms present in bourgeois social formations, but as Theodor W. Adorno explains, “giving form to antagonisms does not reconcile or eliminate them” (249). In “Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” (1937), Walter Benjamin insists that the dandy, as “a creation of the English, who were leaders in world trade,” has the “gift of pleasing” (60). According to Benjamin, as capitalism changed in the era of industrialization that marked the mid-nineteenth century, the dandy’s “gift of pleasing,” his capacity to smile calmly at arguing businessmen and sneering aristocrats alike, helped to alleviate anxieties about social and financial changes and the inevitable economic tremors that accompanied these changes. Like Don, the nineteenth-century English dandy grasped that communal codes and the aesthetics of persona could be studied and manipulated, that the clever man
in the age of capital was always selling an image of himself. For Benjamin, the
dandy never emerged as a simple force for social stability. Instead, dandies
masked social conflict. They moved between worlds and identities. In signi-
fying neither revealed surface nor concealed truth but rather the radical split
between the two, the dandy also comes to represent the fissure in the histori-
cal reality that gave birth to him.

**THE DANDY AND THE COMMODITY**

In *Materializing Queer Desire*, Elisa Glick argues that the dandy’s identity re-
ains paradigmatic of the cultural antagonisms engendered by capitalist so-
cial formations. In *Capital*, Marx explains that the fetishism of commodities
actively generates a culture of secrecy and concealed truths. In the textbook
Marxian example, the ideological superstructure hides the economic base.
Cultural concerns like clothing design, celebrity, and art conceal the fact that
laborers work behind the scenes to make bourgeois life possible. While the
bourgeoisie focuses on surface details like style, workers sweat away in the
mills to produce shoes and suits. In foregrounding exchange value we also
conceal or neglect use value. Hence we often judge a suit of clothing not by
its use as clothing but by its price tag and its label. The laborers who actually
put the constituent parts of the suit together are concealed behind a manu-
ufacturer’s name brand. Who attached the buttons and sewed them to the
cloth seems, for lack of a better expression, immaterial if the suit is a Brooks
Brothers. Capitalist societies revolve around the manipulation of revealed
surfaces and concealed essences. The commodity structure forces us to look
to surfaces and forget the concealed labor or use values behind those sur-
faces. Those concealed and repressed truths are, nonetheless, present, and
Marx warns us that they will not remain hidden forever.

Glick makes the now familiar argument that since the commodity form
determines our lives, the bourgeois subject revolves around a radically split
“contradictory subjectivity that is constructed around the opposition be-
tween public and private, outside and inside” (18). The split engendered by
the commodity structure forms modern subjectivity. We all reveal certain
surfaces. We all conceal certain secrets. Furthermore, we often tend to be-
lieve that the commodity itself, some mystical “thing,” will fulfill our desires,
satisfy our secret lack. The commodity form promises us the possibility that
we can have or be whatever we want. According to Glick, the dandy em-
odies the split produced by the commodity form. In representing the radical
split directly, in embodying both the carefully crafted surface and the
private depths, the dandy symbolizes capitalist subjectivity. The antagonism between the revealed and the concealed, public and private, that constitutes the dandy’s identity signifies the historical realities of a subjectivity determined by the commodity.

I am tempted to imagine that only with the Wilde scandal and the subsequent reinterpretations of The Picture of Dorian Gray did the dandy emerge for us as a radically divided entity whose persona revolves around the binary of concealed and revealed secrets. Wilde might easily be read as the ne plus ultra of the split between a dandified surface and a veiled truth. But while the public image of dandyism has evolved in fascinating ways over the years, even before Wilde, the dandy had always been a reflection of irreconcilable social binaries. As early as 1859 Charles Baudelaire noted in “The Painter of Modern Life” that “dandyism appears especially in those periods of transition when democracy has not yet become all-powerful, and aristocracy is only just beginning to totter and fall” (28). In Sex and Suits: The Evolution of Modern Dress, Anne Hollander traces the history of the dandy from its genesis in the writing and style of the Regency-era sartorial icon George Bryan “Beau” Brummell—who is often credited with the invention of the modern men’s suit—through to contemporary formulations of dandyism. Although educated at Eton and Oxford and a friend of the prince-regent, Brummell was not a nobleman, and his role as the leading authority on male dress represented a sort of fissure in the rigidified class structures of early nineteenth-century England.

Following the Reform Act of 1832, middle-class men were given the right to vote, and a series of parliamentary acts altered the ways that banks, factories, and railways could do business (C. P. Hill, 176). These reforms strengthened the development of “joint stock” companies, those business, economic, and industrial concerns with multiple shareholders that had already come into being during the eighteenth century (C. P. Hill, 111). This was compounded by parliament’s passage of limited liability legislation in 1855, which made companies liable directly to creditors and shareholders, and hence made it much easier for the general public to establish corporations. In Making a Social Body, Mary Poovey argues that the passage of the 1855 legislation demonstrated that the social classes in England were changing, that “the aggregate—and problematic—social body had begun to dissolve into its constitutive members” (24). The landowning gentry, along with the concept of single-family ownership of large properties or of businesses, began to recede. The new industrial, legal, and financial changes resulted in a bourgeoisie that commanded vast economic power. With more money at
its disposal, this bourgeoisie could mingle more openly with shareholders from the noble and aristocratic classes. Aristocratic privilege in England was transformed into—if not purchased by—economic privilege over the next century and a half, but this transformation was a sluggish, uneven one, and an interstitial space of identity seems to have developed that reflected precisely the concealed fissures in this uneven development.

During the rise of Regency England, as Parisian fashions were overshadowed by the political turmoil following the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, British tailoring became the dominant style of men’s clothing in Europe. As Hollander explains, the ideal male form was reconceived by Brummell and Regency-era English tailors. No longer dressed in the flowing silks and wigs of the eighteenth-century aristocracy, the modern man, the English dandy, was “part English country gentleman, part innocent natural Adam, and part naked Apollo the creator and destroyer. . . . Dressed form was now an abstraction of nude form, a new ideal naked man expressed not in bronze or marble but in natural wool, linen, and leather, wearing an easy skin as perfect as the silky pelt of the idea” (92). Form-fitting coats and pants accompanied by cravats and vests were quickly replacing the excessive late-rococo styles of the previous century.

As the public male body transformed from a flowing, silk spectacle into the more overtly eroticized, muscular Apollonian one sought after by the modern subject, it also signaled an emphatically polarized identity. Spurred on by economic changes, the dandy came to embody the height of Regency fashion. Like Don Draper, however, this figure was no longer fully at home with the working and mercantile classes and acted as something of an interloper in aristocratic circles. The Regency dandy always passed for someone else, always deployed what Benjamin calls “the gift of pleasing,” to fit into any social environment. In Mad Men we often see Don isolate himself from his upper-middle-class social circle and gaze at the old photos from his youthful life as the son of a farmer and a prostitute. Like Don, the Regency dandy belonged to both worlds and to neither. Furthermore, as creator and destroyer, natural innocent and worldly gentleman, Apollo and Dionysus, the dandy personified the distinction between surface and depth. The highly charged, sexualized, robust masculinity that the dandy’s bodily form came to represent following the rise of the English suiting industry was balanced by the dandy’s cold and distant character. As Christopher Breward explains in “The Dandy Laid Bare,” the sartorial philosophy offered by Brummell made “casual effortlessness” the “central desideratum of the new dandy creed” (224). This modern masculine code of dress was less frilly and more Hel-
lenic than its eighteenth-century predecessor. Rather than constituting a marker of social station, men’s clothing had transformed into a symbol of self-sufficiency, of austere composure, of visible autonomy.²

For Baudelaire, “the specific beauty of the dandy consists particularly in that cold exterior resulting from the unshakable determination to remain unmoved; one is reminded of a latent fire, whose existence is merely suspected, and which, if it wanted to, but it does not, could burst forth in all its brightness” (29). The dandies discussed by Benjamin and Baudelaire came into being in Regency England, but since his emergence, the dandy has taken quite a few forms. In “Decadent Heroes,” Drew Todd argues that a dandified hero reemerged in the Hollywood films of the 1920s and ’30s. “Contrary to most representations of aesthetes in American popular culture,” Todd says, “this version was a masculine ideal in the highly designed universe of popular Art Deco movies. His ‘classlessness,’ coupled with his imperatives of leisure and consumption, made him a timely hero in Depression America” (168).

Figures such as William Powell’s Nick Charles in The Thin Man (1934) and Fred Astaire’s Jerry Travers in Top Hat (1935) dressed stylishly, drank heartily, and walked—or in Astaire’s case, danced—between the gritty world of the street and the aristocratic world of parties and champagne. By the late 1930s, as the Second World War began, the martini-sipping dandy played by Powell was being superseded by the tailored, world-weary, hard-drinking film noir protagonist played most memorably by Humphrey Bogart in The Maltese Falcon (1941) and The Big Sleep (1946). This cold, distant, noir-style antihero signaled a definitively forceful yet self-sufficient form of masculinity.

Although adding an actor like Bogart to the list certainly alters the terrain of any discussion of dandyism, strangely enough it is Bogart’s version that resonates most fully with Baudelaire’s conception of the dandy as a possessor of some “latent fire,” a man determined to remain “unmoved.” And like the dandies of the generation before, Bogart’s hard-boiled detective moved between the world of the aristocrats for whom he worked and the working class with whom he drank and fought. Bogart’s vigorous, assertive, less flamboyant sartorial masculinity constitutes the missing link between the flashy Wildean dandy and the reconstructed masculine dandyism of the late 1950s and early 1960s.³ Most important, in all of his incarnations, the dandy appears to achieve the apotheosis of capitalist masculine subjectivity. He can be whatever he wants to be. He walks wherever he chooses to walk. He conceals whatever he chooses to conceal. He communicates between worlds. The dandy provides us with the fantasy of a capitalist subject as virtuoso Bunburyist, a subject who, like Don Draper, manipulates the various masks
provided by modern society. But what effect does our cultural fantasy have on the dandy whose vaunted autonomy and flexibility we all appear to crave?

**RED HERRING OR HANDSOME CIPHER**

Popular culture had imagined a Mad Man before the retro-incarnation of Don Draper.4 Alfred Hitchcock ended the 1950s and opened a window into the style of the early 1960s with *North by Northwest*, his film about Roger O. Thornhill, a Madison Avenue ad executive who wears what Todd McEwen calls the “best suit . . . in the movies, perhaps the whole world” (119). Played by Cary Grant, that embodiment of midcentury male charm and beauty, Thornhill, like Draper, becomes a man caught between two identities (fig. 7.2). During the course of the narrative, Thornhill is forced to take on an identity as government agent George Kaplan in order to survive in a world that has grown hostile to his hopes, desires, and everyday life. As played by Grant, Thornhill is as much a manipulator of style and a master of cultural codes as Jon Hamm’s Don Draper. He finds his way out of every dilemma, and he does so with great panache. Like Roger Sterling, Don’s supervisor, Thornhill wears a gray suit during most of his screen time.

Thornhill’s ensemble is so striking that most of the other characters in *North by Northwest*, including James Mason’s villainous Phillip Vandamm, Eva Marie Saint’s Eve Kendall, and Martin Landau’s Leonard, feel compelled to comment on it at some point during the film. The various characters refer to Thornhill/Kaplan at separate moments as “polished,” “well-tailored,” and an agent with “taste in clothes.” In fact, watching the suit survive its many Hitchcockian perils remains one of the most distinctive pleasures of the film. The suit was designed by the famed British Savile Row tailors at Kilgour.5 Its simple, slender cut, thin lapels, and pleated pants were imitated in the decade-defining Conduit-cut suits designed by the Savile Row tailor Anthony Sinclair and worn by Sean Connery in the first four James Bond films. At the end of the 1950s, an era when America, as McEwan explains, was “a white-shirt-and-black-suit nation,” Grant’s Kilgour, with its tie a touch lighter and socks a touch darker, remains a spectacle in shades of gray. Style might well be shallow, but its role in our visual and cultural imaginary invariably complicates the social world.

In *Mad Men*, as in Hitchcock’s film, stylistic surfaces determine identity. The surface tells the truth, but one has to determine how to read it. *Mad Men* makes this problem explicit by dressing Don to project the image of an urbane, empowered, masculine sophisticate, while he remains a construct
of pure style, an imagined man. The intersections between *Mad Men* and Hitchcock’s film become quite intriguing here. Roger Thornhill wears his tailored suit throughout the film until he is knocked unconscious by the police, who remove his shades-of-gray Kilgour and replace it with a store-bought white shirt, black pants, and loafers. Once he has been interpellated into the system—and renamed George Kaplan—he moves from being an individual with style to an agent of the government without it. He moves from *useless* Mad Man to *useful* agent. In contrast, Dick Whitman moves from being a private in the army, who has a state-recognized name and wears the clothes

*Figure 7.2. The “best suit in the movies”: Cary Grant as Roger Thornhill (North by Northwest, 1959).*
provided by the government, to an individual defined by his style. We would do well to recall that in “The Soul of Man under Socialism” (1891), Wilde argues that “the State is to make what is useful. The individual is to make what is beautiful” (1088). In the case of both Don/Dick and Kaplan/Thornhill, the surfaces are quite compelling because they provoke our desires. Both characters draw us to and help us to identify with supposed corporate shills who often speak on behalf of others. But the carefully crafted surfaces that define both men also illustrate the artistry and ingenuity that go into being a dandy. They imagine and then play identities extraordinarily effectively. Moreover, as Madison Avenue ad men, Thornhill and Draper are “suits” whose jobs entail manipulating our hopes and desires.

The distinctions between Mad Men and North by Northwest seem equally compelling. Although Mad Men is a show about the manipulation of façades, a show about a creative stylist who knows how to seduce both women and men, it has also been committed to revealing secrets, to the idea that everyone conceals certain truths. The show about style and surfaces remains obsessed with concealment and revelation. The ad men at Sterling Cooper know that there is something “closeted” about Don. A signal moment where the show acknowledges this comes in “Seven Twenty Three” when Bert Cooper, the agency’s cofounder, convinces Don to sign an exclusive contract with the firm by asking, “After all, when it comes down to it, who’s really signing this contract anyway?” (The contract is dated 7/23/1963.) Bert knows Don is not wholly or only Don. The episode that begins with a standard film trope, the beaten man looking into a mirror and apparently seeking answers, ends by acknowledging the fungibility of identity itself. Like Don, most of the characters at the agency know that a unified and singular identity is a fiction, but they all remain obsessed with keeping their various secrets, with concealing their supposed truths. The terrain of the show is a thoroughly postmodern, suspicious one. No one ever really confronts a symbolic “big Other” here. No one seems to fully control the ideological forces of this world. The characters exist in a social structure they have neither made nor fully accepted. By providing us with Don as a locus for this radically split identity and then going on to demonstrate how Peggy, Joan, Betty, Sal, and the other characters are likewise engaged in the act of moving between different performed identities, Mad Men represents both the seductive allure and the powerful limitations intrinsic to bourgeois social economies, to economies that appear to offer great social mobility while demanding rigid social codes and definite kinds of façades and performances.

Conversely, although Roger Thornhill seems compelled by accident and
by state power to transform into George Kaplan, he remains committed to the idea of a singular, unified identity. He believes himself to be a victim of circumstance who must deploy style, charm, and force in order to rescue himself. A government willing to sacrifice the welfare of its citizens, even its prettiest, most charming citizens, readily fills the role of big Other here. *North by Northwest* renders all identity subject to the whims of powerful ideological forces. Where *Mad Men* appears committed to a dramatic Foucauldian critique of life under bourgeois capitalism, *North by Northwest* operates on a more overtly psychoanalytic register. As with Wilde’s dandies, however, the figures in *North by Northwest* and *Mad Men* remain firmly inside the confines of accepted cultural conventions. Draper and Thornhill ultimately gain a modicum of control over their own lives by embracing the fact that they are, to borrow the Lacanian term, constituted by lack. They realize more desires by embracing lack than they ever could as subjects who pursue stable, unified, or singular identities (figs. 7.3–7.4).

Like Wilde’s Algernon, Thornhill and Draper oscillate between two identities. They exist between a supposedly false surface and an allegedly true self. Roger Thornhill never truly becomes George Kaplan; he exists and moves between his Thornhill and Kaplan identities. Likewise, Dick Whitman never truly becomes Don Draper; he exists and moves between his Whitman and Draper identities. Although he ponders and remembers his past, he mostly works to conceal it. Finally, the dandy shuffles between two fake identities but never between a “real” self and a “fake” mask. He juggles two masks, neither of which can be said to constitute a “real” identity.
Grant’s dual role as Thornhill/Kaplan has become such a symbol for his own identity that even Marc Eliot’s 2004 biography of him begins by describing a scene from *North by Northwest*. For Eliot:

Kaplan’s faked murder two-thirds of the way through the film forces the question of whether he actually is who others believe him to be, someone entirely separate—Roger O. Thornhill—or whether he really ever exists at all. Out of this question a larger one emerges: is Kaplan the creation of the Hitchcock-like CIA operative (Leo G. Carroll) who has, thus far, remained largely unseen while cleverly directing the either/or/ neither Kaplan/Thornhill’s every move? Or is he someone, or something, else, an externalized elaborate fantasy, perhaps, of Thornhill’s most repressed desires for an idealized life of exciting adventure, of romance, of meaning? (1)

In arguing that the Thornhill/Kaplan split be read as a symbol for Grant’s own identity, Eliot asserts that Grant must have found the dual role appealing because it so obviously reflected his own lifelong effort to balance his public persona as a suave leading man with a troubled, sexually ambiguous private life (2). Married five times and by most accounts at least bisexual, he existed between his public celebrity as the superlative Cary Grant and his private life as the tailor’s son, Archibald Leach.

The critic Edward Buscombe argues that with “his beautifully cut grey suit, matching grey silk tie, [and] white shirt with discreet cufflinks . . . Cary Grant’s late-1950s elegance appeals to women, straight men and gays” (201). This kind of statement has become an oft-repeated mantra about Grant, who has come to personify one of cinema’s supreme objects of desire. Women wanted him, and those men who wouldn’t admit to wanting him would at least confess to wanting to be like him. In her classic *New Yorker* piece on Grant from 1975, Pauline Kael calls him “the Man from Dream City,” and in claiming “it makes us happy just to look at him,” Kael sums up what many filmgoers had been thinking since Grant first appeared onscreen in the mid-1930s. Grant provides a kind of fantasy, an example of how style and elegance work together to create the illusion of a fully autonomous individual. During his lifetime his image became such an objectified fantasy that he once told an interviewer: “Everyone wants to be Cary Grant. Even I want to be Cary Grant” (qtd. in Eliot). Don plays a similar role: the women want him, the men want to be him. And vice versa. The autonomy that we imagine the dandy to have so elevates him beyond the realm of real human relations that
it becomes impossible even for the dandy himself, even for Don Draper, or Cary Grant.

In reimagining Lacan’s discussions of Das Ding from The Ethic of Psychoanalysis, in his essay “Courtly Love, or, Woman as Thing,” Slavoj Žižek discusses how certain objects can be spiritualized and so rendered unattainable. For Žižek such an object is attainable only “by way of an incessant postponement, as its absent point of reference.” This action elevates the object, as Žižek explains, to “the dignity of the Thing” (95). For Lacan, the Thing constitutes an unreachable, primordial, nearly transcendental object of desire. The Thing functions as an empty space around which the subject’s desire is structured. The Lacanian Thing, like the commodity form, promises something as it allows us to imagine that our desires will be fulfilled. Commodities, but also people, can occupy the role of Thing for us. When we seek a stand-in for the Thing, though, and most particularly when that stand-in is a human being, we transform that stand-in or subject into an object to be manipulated. We erase its autonomy. Draper and Thornhill might represent “empty suits,” but we have emptied those suits and filled them up with our desires. The dandy—as embodiment of the commodity form—represents the antagonisms of late capitalist society. As he becomes the Thing around which we shape our desires, the Thing we want and the Thing we want to be, he transforms into a subject without autonomy, a suit emptied of all will, into a persona without real self-sufficiency.

The dandy transforms into his exact opposite, into a nearly lifeless object, obliged to move in a phantom zone between identities, obliged to imagine which mask people want him to wear. When Thornhill finally confronts the CIA operative who has been pulling his strings and transforming him into an object desired by others, he angrily cries out, “Now you listen to me: I’m an advertising man, not a red herring!” Actually, he’s both. The dandy is a survivor and manipulator of social codes, but never a fully self-determined subject. The autonomy that capitalist society fantasizes about never comes into being at all. If the dandy embodies the radical split of the commodity form, if the dandy must move between two identities, then his supposed desires are conditioned by that split, that movement. The episode “Seven Twenty Three” finds Don caught between the young thieves who drink with him and then beat and rob him, and Conrad Hilton, the CEO who demands that Don imagine a new personality for his hotels. He is desired by the wealthy and the poor. He walks in their respective circles, but he is there to provide them with something that they want. The man who looks into the mirror and signs
the contract in “Seven Twenty Three” may call himself Don Draper, but like
the dandies who preceded him, he remains the embodiment of a radically
divided identity, a red herring, a handsome cipher.

NOTES

1. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites the novel *Glitter Street* (1979), by Tim Sulli-
van, as the first published usage of the word *suit* to denote a business executive.

2. As Hollander explains, the dandy’s “heroism consisted only in being thoroughly
himself” (92).

3. Moreover, as in “Seven Twenty Three,” *Mad Men* often deploys noir-style flash-
backs to fill in the gaps about Don’s past. Of course, Bogart as dandy would have
to stand alongside Clark Gable’s cultivated cad Rhett Butler in *Gone with the Wind*
(1939).

4. Tom Rath of Sloan Wilson’s novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) re-
mains the most important and obvious forerunner to Don Draper; see the introduc-
tion to this volume.

5. According to Edward Buscombe, six identical suits were made for the film.