UNFAITHFUL

The false nostalgia of *Mad Men*

By Jenny Diski

Discussed in this essay:

Mad Men. AMC.

In 1959, by pure accident, Roger O. Thornhill was mistaken for another man. Actually, he was taken for a man who did not and had never existed. Thornhill's initials spell ROT, which is printed on his monogrammed matchbooks, and when asked what the O stands for, he replies, "Nothing." That O in the center of his name zeros in on Thornhill's lack of identity, an all-style-no-substance absence that first allows and then forces him to be whomever anyone else wants him to be. The cipher is actually a Madison Avenue advertising executive, played by Cary Grant at his most elegantly slippery, wearing a dolphin-gray single-breasted suit and a melting, noncommittal smile. Between them, in the very first scene of *North by Northwest,* Alfred Hitchcock and Grant nail the handsome, sophisticated Thornhill as a moral sliver. The rest is largely adventure, but it is also Thornhill finding his own substance through his nonexistent double.

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The television show *Mad Men*'s central emptiness is heard in its echoes. The series derives straight from the movies of the time it is portraying. It doesn't just hint or casually nod at *North by Northwest,* or that film's near contemporaries *The Apartment* (Billy Wilder, with Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine) and *Lover Come Back* (Delbert Mann, with Doris Day and Rock Hudson), it rolls them as credits. The crucial difference between these movies and the modern series that recollects them is that each of the movies was made about their time in their time. They offer, as thriller, drama, romance, and high comedy, their contemporary view of social relations and notions of self-worth in the period that concerns *Mad Men*'s makers and viewers only retrospectively.

The O through the middle of Roger Thornhill becomes the ghostly absence in the existence of Dick Whitman, a.k.a. Don Draper. For all that he chooses to live his life as a man who died beside him in the Korean War, Don Draper isn't drawn into an external adventure; instead, over four seasons, he leads a remorselessly stereotypical life as a 1960s adman. *Mad Men* shows in extensive detail—including suits furnished by Brooks Brothers—what we see briefly in the early moments of *North by Northwest*: how Roger Thornhill lived on regular days when he wasn't being mistaken for a CIA straw man. Like Thornhill, Draper has too many amorous women to manage, constant meetings with other professionally predatory males in offices and hotel bars to the sound of bourbon glasses clinking, a nagging woman forever trying to housebreak him, and an overweening sense of his own talent and superiority.

Audiences are mad for *Mad Men*'s nostalgic vision of urban and suburban America, and quite besotted with Don Draper in particular. In 2009, the Web magazine *Ask Men* voted him (Draper, not the actor, Jon Hamm) the most influential man in the world, ahead of Usain Bolt and Barack Obama. Women want him, men want to be him—copying his crisp notched lapels and slender ties, adopting his swagger, trying for his craggy but very limited set of facial expressions (don't we miss Grant, terribly?). I have to admit, I don't get it. Maybe you had to not be there. Whereas Roger Thornhill was his own non-man in his own era, Draper strikes me as a retro-puppet in a stylized shadow play.

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Unless, of course, the unconvincing stiffness at the heart of *Mad Men* is precisely the point. Are the clever writers of the series slyly dramatizing, to the tune of the 1960s, much of what still goes on and wrong in the world of work and gender relations? I'd like to imagine that the downright idolatrous response to Don Draper & Co. is part one of a double take that the makers of *Mad Men* are hoping to encourage in their audience. If so, it seems the second look has yet to come. We aren't really supposed to take rugged Draper and lush Joanie as role models, are we? Surely not, since both of them are such victims of the social and business climate of the Sixties. Yet there's such style and gloss, so much devotion, money, and time paid to hyper-real period detail (the designer Michael Kors called the recreation of Sixties fashion in *Mad Men* "beyond forensic"), that it's easy to stay as comfortably amused and mildly entertained by *Mad Men* as it is by the frothy (and sometimes wittier) *Desperate Housewives*, or the Eighties high camp of *Dynasty*. Is the series simply a soap, lubricating the audience, rather than considered drama?

The fixation on style seeps into the drama itself, as if the perfect tailoring justified the preassembled plotlines and characterizations. The writers never choose to walk away from a rehashed metaphor: Don has his ghostly vision of Anna—wife of the real Don Draper—standing in his room with a forgiving smile and a suitcase on the night she dies on the other side of the continent. A mouse scuttles across his office and vanishes, so Don has to murmur to his secretary Peggy Olson that there seems to be some other way out of his office but he can't find it. Does the ever-unreconstructed Betty Draper, with the insight of a frozen petit pois, have to be so hopelessly dim and trim, so perfectly turned out, while the somewhat smarter, more questioning Olson, with her awkward fashion sense, is obliged to be socially and sexually gawky in her struggle to find her place as a modern career woman? Must Don Draper relive *The Lost Weekend* every week in order for him to get the message that he's drinking and screwing around too much, and then, in the middle of the fourth season, suddenly begin a diary in voice-over, so that the writers can be sure we've got the message that his unpleasantness is the result of the human condition?

Yes—if all the received opinions and typologies are to remain in place. Because everyone in the series really does conform to an expected type. Spoiler alert: Draper proposes to the willowy yet maternal secretary rather than the too-smart Jewish psychologist. It's supposed to be a surprise in the final episode of the fourth season, but it isn't, it fits so neatly with what we know these days about men's fear of women in those days. There are the women of wasted intelligence who get lost because they are too busty and good-looking, or not busty and good-looking enough; women who struggle to negotiate the pressures of social conformity, the women who are negated by it or who benefit from it. There are the men who crack in manly ways from the burden of playing their manly roles, the men without qualities who luxuriate in the status quo, the men who can't keep up with Change. Historical moments get ticked: Kennedy has been assassinated, nothing will ever be easy again. Listen, is that the sound of trouble down South? I see Joan's husband is off to Vietnam, I guess the times they are a-changin'.

The social, sexual, gender, and work relations of the Sixties are rigorously defined, but they are defined from the perspective of a smugly knowing present. The show often wags a moralistic finger during the closing credits with old hit songs of shallow love and angst, or warning: Marilyn Monroe, "I'm Through with Love"; Doris Day, "I Enjoy Being a Girl"; Brenda Lee, "Break It to Me Gently"; Bob Dylan, "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right." We watch in wonder at those crazy fellows inhaling tobacco and at their heavily pregnant women freely imbibing, as if we were children at a pantomime, our eyes as wide and round as Roger Thornhill's middle initial. It's extravagant so that it can be also a little gross. We love the S-curve of Joan's bosom and buttocks, even feel deprived of the womanly ripeness that was appreciated back then, but we are aware, too, of all the corsetry that's needed to prevent her seeming plain overblown. Even at the time ripeness was not all: imagine Joan in the group changing room of Loehmann's where the clothes probably never went above a size ten. She is the only ample sexy woman in the show; all the other attractive women are stick-thin "dolly birds" in waiting. Don't we love to ogle, while noting with regret and satisfaction that Joanie's other, less fleshly gifts would be more readily recognized now? So our eyes enjoy the feast and our superegos enjoy the shock of her curtailed life.

The clothes and the cigarettes have received the most acclaim. People admire the authenticity, but it's a curious authenticity that screams at you with its excess. Everything is so carefully of its time in a way that things during actual times are not. You see this in those exhaustively researched Agatha Christie shows set in the 1930s where everyone lives in curvy white modernist houses with the very latest Art Deco furniture and clothing, all marabou feathers and walnut sideboards. In fact, people mostly live somewhat behind their times. They live with much of the previous generation's furniture: a not-quite-up-to-date gramophone; clothes, hair, and brassieres that span several years either side of now. The Sixties look like the Sixties only once they're over (so also the Seventies, Eighties, and Nineties); at the time they look like the present as the present always does. The style of the Sixties in *Mad Men* is so relentless and polished in every detail that it actually deals a death blow to authenticity. It is caricature, not authenticity, and although that, in a David Lynch sort of way, can be thrilling and effective if you subvert the style to darker devices, *Mad Men* isn't sure whether it wants to be pastiche or historical realism. It wants it both ways, and for me, it is this indecision, which feels muddy and expedient as opposed to subtle or sly, that is *Mad Men*'s self-sabotage—"simultaneously contemptuous and pandering," as Daniel Mendelsohn put it last year in *The New York Review of Books*.

It makes a lot of sense to read that the cigarettes the characters incessantly and a bit awkwardly smoke (I speak as a former smoker) are in fact not tobacco but something herbally

acceptable to twenty-first-century on-set regulations. (Jon Hamm says they taste "like a mixture between pot and soap.") It all looks too deliberate. Back then people just smoked; in *Mad Men,* they *smoke.* Today's blue carcinogenic haze is noticed only by non-smokers, or people who have been out of the room a long time. Here, it signifies the willful ignorance of the period, something we have apparently outgrown. The cast always look as if they know they're in fancy dress, and that their problems, too, are costume details from the past.

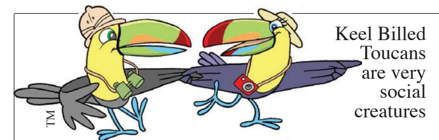
Should I even be thinking of *Mad Men* as serious drama at all? Is "seriousness" only for high art? I hesitate, because, when in a Facebook flame war I instantly regretted engaging in, I suggested in passing that *Mad Men* struck me as overdetermined by style, someone responded angrily that the show was "just a piece of great entertainment and some good storytelling." This commenter wished that even a small percentage of the dramas on television were half as good, and went on to ask, Are we to be "this harsh on everything else on TV?"

It's an interesting question in that I was quite shocked by it. My answer is a simple "Yes, we should be equally harsh," or in my terms "thoughtful." Are we to be grateful for whatever we can get on TV that isn't complete dross and not want better, or do we give the work of television writers and producers the same consideration we would give to literature or stage drama, to anything that we would want to call art? Shall we be gratefully content with "half as good" as *Mad Men,* or do we take television seriously enough to suppose it can do all the things other serious art can do, as well as entertain? When such series as *Deadwood* and *The Wire* offer astonishing, original writing and complex structures, it is surely patronizing to apply a lesser standard to what we call "good" television than the one by which we evaluate books or film or theater—unless we don't anymore.

Lover Come Back (1961) does a better job of critiquing the advertising business than *Mad Men* ever sustains. A man in his thirties of my acquaintance recently watched this film insisting throughout that it was a satire. It is, instead, a sophisticated comedy that quite accepts its time. Watching it now, it plays as excruciatingly sexist and very funny: a brilliantly slick movie that takes the assumptions of its day as gospel, allows the merest hint that there might be other views, and then winks hugely at that idiotic notion, returning the audience to the comfort of proper gender roles, domesticity, and all being unthreatening in the world. Throughout the film, executive adwoman Doris Day is dressed in pencil skirts cut so sharp they look painful (as near as she can get in that business world to wearing the trousers). Doris Day/Peggy Olson confronts Rock Hudson's version of Roger Thornhill, who wins a client by plying him with drink and women rather than beavering away on the fine new pitch she has stayed up all night preparing. She takes her rival to an advertising morals court, all male executives, who exonerate him when faced with the irresistible tits of his chosen representative. In order to make a fool of Day, Hudson advertises a nonexistent product that, naturally, the real world goes mad for, and he very nearly seduces (which is to say punishes) the "frigid," professional Day by pretending to be a hapless scientist. At last they end up accidentally drunk and in bed, to discover, after a moment of titillation, that they conveniently got married while in their cups (which takes care of the Hays Office), and then, nine months after the wedding has been annulled by Day, humiliated and wrong-footed from start to finish, Hudson races to the rescue just as she is braving her contractions all alone, bringing with him a minister to remarry them and set domestic bliss in motion.

Everything we need to know about *Mad Men* is here, although we might wonder how Day broke through the glass ceiling so early—Hudson suggests that it was her dogged virginity. The bogus product "VIP" gets the entire U.S. population to want something that doesn't exist (yet), and the man gets the uppity woman back where she belongs: on her back with a wedding ring thrust on her finger while a baby batters at her cervix for a lifetime's attention.

The Apartment (1960) attempts a slightly more severe look at its time. *Mad*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Men mimics the gossamer style of *Lover Come Back* but wants to take its weight from the monochrome Billy Wilder film, whose style is as close a thing to unglamorous documentary realism as Hollywood would allow. Set in the insurance rather than the advertising business, *The Apartment* gives Jack Lemmon free rein to play C. C. Baxter, that funny, alarmingly dark and bitter little guy at which he excelled, while Shirley MacLaine, as Fran Kubelik, an elevator operator, established her signature role: the gamine but brave loser in love. These two sad, put-upon people are brought together by the ruthless entitlement of business executives who use Baxter's flat and Kubelik's body for their extramarital entertainment. Baxter is promised the key to the executive washroom for what amounts to his pandering, and Kubelik has a ring dangled in front of her that will never be put on her finger—for all her kooky charm, she still wants to be the bourgeois housewife. Baxter and Kubelik spend time together in the brothel/apartment after her suicide attempt there and the hasty withdrawal of her executive lover into his family Christmas. Baxter takes the social flack for his boss's indiscretion and looks after Kubelik over the holidays.

Finally, the schnook and the loser ("Some people take, some people get took") see that they can have each other if they give up their corporate, social, and marital ambitions. The rising music and Kubelik racing back to Baxter at his apartment on New Year's Eve, where he is packing, having returned the key to the executive washroom and left his job rather than continue to supply his boss with the woman he loves, ding all the right emotional bells, and the lump rises in the throat. But it isn't love triumphant; it's a recognition of the way things are, "corporate-wise" and "marriage-wise." In the final scene, they sit side by side on the sofa, neither executive nor trophy wife, playing gin rummy. The last lines of *The Apartment* always trouble me:

> *Schnook Lemmon*: Did you hear what I said, Miss Kubelik? I absolutely adore you.
> *Loser MacLaine:* Shut up and deal …

Joanie of *Mad Men* comes close to Fran Kubelik, but there's no obvious candidate for the redeemed C. C. Baxter. The series has plenty of executive true believers like Pete Campbell and Harry Crane, but no heroic schnooks (although maybe Ken Cosgrove is shaping up that way for the next season, having refused to inveigle his father-in-law into a meeting with account-hungry sharks). Don Draper writes his supposedly world-shaking anti-smoking advertorial for the *New York Times*, but only after he's been dumped by Lucky Strike and has nothing to lose.

There is a moderate kind of payback suggested in the two 1960s movies: Rock Hudson gives up bachelorhood to settle down with one woman (theoretically), and maybe in their quiet contentment Baxter and Kubelik never give the executives another thought. Yet we know the executives won't give the schnook and loser another thought either, will carry on skimming all the bonuses and bonbons they know to be their right. (Unless the schnook and loser become really obnoxious and start a revolution.) Some moral questions raised, the status quo is restored. Nevertheless, what *The Apartment* knows about its own time is that there's a problem. And what is missing in *Mad Men*—even if its subject is the past—is the knowledge that the present is the problem. ■

January Index Sources

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