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Selling Nostalgia: Mad Men, Postmodernism and Neoliberalism

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A much earlier version of this project was published in *Society, May 2012. This version expands upon the issues of individualism under neoliberalism through an examination of ways that the protagonist portrays a neoliberal subjectivity.*

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Fredric Jameson identified postmodernism as the "cultural logic of late capitalism" in his 1984 essay of the same name. Late capitalism, or neoliberalism, produces a society characterized by return to free market principles of the 19th century and cultivates a strong return to rugged individualism. (Kapur) Postmodern cultural logic emphasizes visual representations of culture as a dominant cultural determinant. It is this framework that opens a discussion of *Mad Men,* a series that uses a mid century advertising firm as a filter for a history that is reduced to recirculated images.

In Norman Denzin's discussion of film and postmodernism, he examines how our media culture's embodies neoliberal, postmodern notions of life and self. According to Denzin, postmodernism "encourages a masculinized culture of Eros, love, desire, femininity, youth and beauty…..and continues to argue that the path to happiness and fulfillment is sexual and lies in the marital, family bond. " (149) This emphasis on the nuclear family bond coexists with a neoliberal postfeminism that positions itself in an ironic reception of the commodified, sexualized female body seen in advertising and popular culture. Postmodernism and neoliberalism both commodify individual people and "lifestyle choices" encouraged and displayed through individual self-help products and activities that aim to achieve the perfect weight, beauty, fashion, and the appearance of a successful career. (88)

In a neoliberal regime, individuals lack social or political class, a position that operates as a high profile frame in contemporary political culture in the

United States. This framework operates through a set of assumptions that government is “too big”, and that it should not intrude into free markets, or social issues like health care, but that it should control health issues related to women’s bodies, and civil rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender citizens. This demonstrates the way in which religious thought and social conservatism pervade the individualist mindset of neoliberalism, revealing it to as a system of social control with the aim of producing disciplined workers who do not expect any kind of social safety net, and whose subjectivity accepts social controls of private life that aim at suppressing lifestyles that would complicate the workplace.

While this contradiction seems to undermine the notion of Margaret Thatcher’s famous 1987 comment, “There is no society”, it actually operates as part of the dismantling of political classes by deconstructing the idea that women or GLBT citizens can constitute a recognized political or social class needing legal rights or protections, which would have to come from government.

The neoliberal dismantling of social nets has dissolved some of the glue holding together a “middle class” in the United States, which means that a certain type of social subjectivity has been shattered. This leaves individuals responsible for their own welfare, and generally powerless against corporate exploitation. In such a culture, the individual becomes the “entrepreneur of the self”. (Foucault 2008, 206 and Dilts 8. This entrepreneurship surfaces in the transformation of the historically individual mainstream media hero into a neoliberal, postmodern individual whose actions arise from the enhanced separateness from social

groups. *Mad Men*'s main protagonist, Don Draper, offers a salient case study for a close examination of this new subjectivity.

The idea of neoliberal subjectivity depends upon a "theory of human capital" that includes everyone's decisions about their activities within a scope of temporal and material conditions. (Dilts 11) This pinpoints the site of the apparent contradictions that produce neoliberal subjectivity. The idea of "neoliberal rationality is rightly understood as a set of "practices of subjection"; however, these practices f subjection actually work as an expression of illusory freedom, of cultural choices. (Ibid) These choices are in actuality only selections of nearly identical commodities that advertising glosses with notions of free choice. And this is how human capital gets "spent" in a neoliberal culture. It is the enactment of the process behind this set of illusory choices that *Mad M*en lays bare.

The first season of the AMC series, set in 1960, presents a nostalgic surface of midcentury modern design and a storyline set on Madison Avenue. This period setting forms a critical part of the series' neoliberal and postmodern construction, allowing audiences to visit a world controlled by white males, where ideas of racial and gender equality were only beginning to make inroads. Reviewers in the popular press have argued that a great deal of the appeal of this series lies in nostalgia and fashion, and it is a nostalgia rooted in images of the United States derived largely from television and popular culture. This vanishing of historical world into one of images creates a "history as text", a formative element of the postmodern condition.

Mad Men emphasizes Fredric Jameson's idea of a past that is retrievable only through images. The series incorporates historical media representations as our embodied culture, a form of representation that can be related to recent films like *Star Trek, Public Enemies.* And the Marvel Comic Book films like *Hulk, Thor, Captain America,* and *The Avengers,* all of which revive a cultural past. In the case of *Star Trek,* the past exists solely as fictional media, while in *Public Enemies* the past is partly a material artifact and a cultural, mediated one. (Tudor 2010)

Mad Men exists on the cusp of that dialectical relationship of our mediated past and our actual past – both of which exist and persevere in the media heavy present.

When the series opens, Don Draper, the creative director of Sterling-Cooper Advertising Agency, is an ambiguous character whose identity is the series' initial central mystery. Draper at first seems the perfect self-made man: a suave, outwardly composed, and confident department in the New York advertising firm of Sterling-Cooper. However, Draper has a dual identity. He was born out-of-wedlock as Dick Whitman to an Appalachian farmer and a sex worker, sometime during the late 1920s or early 1930s. When his mother dies at birth, the local midwife brings the baby to the Whitman household and confronts the father. He and his wife take in the child, but this is no happy ending. Flashbacks portray grim, almost dickensian scenes of a Depression-era farm life. Dick suffers through a financially and emotionally impoverished childhood. His father is a harsh and brutal man; his stepmother not much better.

In one childhood flashback, a hobo explains the hobo signs left on the Whitman's' gatepost to young Dick. This wandering figure foreshadows Dick's own wanderings from one identity to another, from one woman to another (to many others), from the bourgeois life of a mid-Century suburbanite to lover of a Greenwich Village bohemian to a swinging sixties urban man married to a much younger woman.

The hobo is a paradigmatic romantic figure of twentieth century literature and also serves as a synecdoche for the failures of capitalism that resulted in the massive Depression of the 1930s. Hoboes are the romantic wanderers, the individuals who choose the open road, constantly in movement, seemingly free from social constraints. They are also the unemployed, the homeless, people for whom society makes no provision, and who society chases from the railway yards and cars, brutally punishing them for infringing on private property. These layers of meaning provide insight into Don as a figure standing between an enduring postmodernity and neoliberalism still active in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Dick's participation in the Korean War allows him to change his identity. He and his commanding officer, Don Draper, are alone at a forward combat post. An artillery barrage kills the officer, damaging his body too much for visual identification. Dick appropriates the dead officer's identity by switching dog tags, and remakes himself on his own, rejecting his birth family. As "Don Draper" he watches from a train as his stepmother, father, and brother meet the coffin. His first wife Betty does not learn of his true past for several years after they marry.

Don also survives several close calls when his adopted name attracts attention from the real Draper's friends. His very success as an ad executive threatens the stability of his assumed identity. When Dick's younger brother sees a photo of Draper in an advertising magazine, he tracks Draper down in New York hoping to reconnect with the older brother he thought he had lost. Don tamps down the emotions this reunion creates, callously rejecting his brother's offer of companionship, and giving him several thousand dollars to go away and never contact him. Don learns later that his hanged himself after this rejection. Don experiences a brief moment of panic and remorse, but quickly reverts to his smooth, affectless surface.

Draper maintains a secret life underneath his convincing surface persona. He works hard to deny his connections to society by destroying relations with family and friends. This requires a juggling act of putting family, lovers, wives and friends "in their place" -- which is at a distance from him and from each other. He has purchased his life, literally with payoff to his brother and figuratively with his careful building of a bourgeois lifestyle, the illusion of a perfected life.

Don's first serious threat of exposure occurs when Anna (Melinda Page Hamilton), wife of the real Don Draper finds him in his pre-Madison Avenue job as a car salesman. Amazingly, he is able to sell Mrs. Draper a solution that keeps her quiet. Acting in her husband's name, he divorces her but continues a friendly relationship until Anna's death. Anna becomes his friend and confidante over the years. Don visits her home in California periodically, disguising these visits as business trips.

During their visits, Don/Dick is a different person than New York Don. He and Anna have a close, affectionate relationship and he speaks openly with her about his doubts, fears, and confusion. Clearly, the Don we see in these scenes is meant to represent some type of "authenticity" that Don Draper, ad executive, does not possess. However, this small window of relative truth closes when Anna dies during Season Four. Don says at the time she was the only person who ever knew him. It is a poignant moment but his prior collusion with Anna's sister to hide the terminal nature of the illness from Anna, and his failure to go to California during her final days undercuts audience certainty about a "real Don" lurking beneath the artifice. The series' own advertising tag line of Season One – "Who is Don Draper?" returns here with a vengeance, only this time it would be better phrased "Is there a Don Draper at all?"

Critics of postmodernism assert that under its regime, the real becomes a commodity, something that has distinct market value. People purchase only the illusory lifestyle promised by commodities purchased through symbolic money in the form of a plastic credit card. A great example of this illusory reality-for-purchase occurs in a striking occurs in a scene where Don does a campaign presentation for the Carousel slide projector to the Kodak executives. He narrates photographic slides of his own family life: images of him, Betty and their two children on picnics, with a newborn baby, and at Christmas, all while sitting in the darkened conference room with his creative team and the Kodak executives. Don's life mirrors the products he advertises; it is as carefully crafted as any of

his ad campaigns; he sells himself as a product situated in a dreamlike world of bourgeois perfection.

Don Draper constitutes a postmodern character that lacks cohesion, effectively resisting narrative unities. This works hand in hand with a neoliberal presence that operates through individualism, a system in which success rests upon the actions of a self-made character. Contemporary neoliberal narratives project an image of egalitarianism while reverting to an elitist, white patriarchy. This totally open society in which individuals who fail have only themselves to blame find an expression in the world of *Mad Men* where the excuse of "the past" overtly justifies the fact that Don Draper embodies this contradictory surface of the neoliberal patriarchy.

Race, Gender, and the Meritocracy

Viewing Mad Men incorporates the understanding of multiple modes of gender representation, encouraging a fragmented point of view. The viewer remains positioned in the present while merging contemporary understanding of gender with the representation of the past. While a past-present dialectic operates in all readings of historical media, the postmodern text differs in that it presents the past merely as a discourse that is equivalent to our mediated placement in the present day. This is especially dangerous for justice, as issues like class and gender structures become only discourse, separated from the experiences of people who experience them as daily conditions of life as is class. In the case of *Mad Men*, it becomes easier to accept in a consumer culture

discourse where the 1960s are simply one among many equivalent fashion choices.

The doubled representational framework that overlays neoliberal ideas of post-sexism/racism onto the show's depiction of mid-century mores enables viewers to simultaneously disapprove and celebrate the series' sexism and racism. Audiences can enjoy the gender-based humor because we operate from a "superior" framework of interpretation. But enjoyment implies at least some level of acceptance of the assumptions on which gender and racial humor are based, unless we take the easy out by claiming that we are always and everywhere ironic these days. Further context to reading the series come from the fact that some of the series' younger viewers know the 1960s only through television images. The occasional historical events like John Kennedy's assassination that the characters in the show watch on television are the same ones that recirculate constantly in popular discourse as markers of midcentury. Their fleeting presence in the show adds a spurious air of historical grounding, when in fact; political culture rarely impacts the work at Sterling Cooper.

Instead of political discourse, marketing logics and dilettante behavior represent progressivism on this show. Young ad executive Pete Campbell (Vincent Kartheiser) admires the early, austere Volkswagen ads, and he recognizes the untapped advertising market of Black consumers. When he presents these ideas, the bosses respond with derision. His interest in Black consumers only pertains to their usefulness as an untapped market; the interaction of these characters with non-whites on this show is quite limited. With

one exception mentioned below, elevator operators and maids constitute the Black presence on this show.

During the fifth season, black presence on show increases slightly. In the season opener SCDP receives an influx of black job applicants. This results from an ad they placed in response to a rival agency's public disgrace following an incident in which that agency's personnel dropped water balloons on the heads of black civil rights marchers. The ad hypes the agency as an equal opportunity employer. The fact that a media prank creates a wedge in the white culture of SCDP helps close the loop of mediated history's presence in this contemporary media.

The American Meritocracy

Under neoliberal patriarchy, civil rights for non-whites and women are assumed to have already been achieved. Consequently the idea of systemic bias has been consigned to the ash heap of history. In the neoliberal world, anyone can compete for any position on an equal field of play. Hence, critiques of racism and sexism are no longer necessary. This ideological framework allows neoliberal narratives to identify all of the characters in charge as white men because all of the best applicants just happened to be white and male. In this system, competition among candidates would "naturally" lead companies to select the best candidate so that a hierarchy headed by white men would signal egalitarianism and opportunity, not white patriarchy. Under neoliberalism, individuals are imagined to be equal competitors, not members of social

hierarchy where some types of people are advantaged and other types disadvantaged. This is the contemporary viewer's framework, and it dovetails neatly with the postmodern ironic sensibility of *Mad Men*, forever quoting history while having its character exist largely outside of political events.

The racism and sexism practiced by the elite white patriarchy in the show is perceived as our past, just like the images of civil rights marches, Kennedy's assassination, the moon landing – touchstone events that we now perceive embedded in a cultural backdrop. This relationship exemplifies the tension between the modernist surface of *Mad Men*, and its postmodern use of history. Of course, among reflective viewers, the social circumstances in the show evoke reflection upon what has and has not changed in our culture; however, the overwhelming emphasis and appeal of the show remains embedded in the notion of historical tourism.

In its merging of apparent egalitarianism with hierarchical structures of race, gender and class, postmodernism combines elements of past histories into one giant mash up. *Mad Men* provides a good look at this combination, as it creates a nostalgic surface that equates mid-century fashion and furniture with midcentury mores. Since postmodernism tends to commoditize all aspects of life, setting the series in an advertising agency allows the characters to reveal how they not only produce consumer need for cars, slide projectors, and makeup, but also how they produce their own lives as commodities. As the nature of postmodern values is very conservative, the contemporary construction of mid Century New York provides a suitable setting. The series depicts the

postmodern, neoliberal commodified life through the figure of Don Draper, his career, and his relationship with women.

Through commodification of the individual, postmodernism encourages the idea that a life can be purchased and enhanced with options, like a car. Neoliberalism also promotes consumerism, which, along with an emphasis on individual responsibility creates a template for people to buy and live a perfected life. The oft-noted absence of dramatic or character unity in postmodern literature and film creates representations of individuals whose relations to each other and to society are not governed by sets of common ideas and practices. Instead, shifting congeries of isolated individuals who hold their idiosyncratic values and beliefs that may or may not align with others would mark a postmodern society. And this is what occurs in *Mad Men*.

Don Draper – Remade Once Again

Don's constructed self falls apart eventually. The "revelation" of his identity and his infidelities destroy his marriage to Betty, effectively shredding the Don Draper persona marketed through the Kodak slideshow. In Season 4, he proposes to his French-Canadian secretary, Megan, and as Season 5 opens, Don has reinvented himself yet again as a sophisticated urbanite. He and Megan live in a large, modern, urban apartment complete with sunken living room, vaguely Scandinavian-modern furnishings, and a killer city view. Don now has a refitted commodified life as a hip urban professional.

Like his previous self-presentation, this version becomes a strain rather quickly, as his new wife, Megan, is much younger than Don, and their views on

lifestyle diverge. Megan wants to become an actress and wants to experience the prepackaged “young urban” lifestyle. Don is frankly middle-aged and less inclined to go out on the town after work, and he and Megan find themselves at odds. After Megan quit working at SCDP, Don assumed she would stay home, and expresses his unhappiness at her acting aspirations. He is embarrassed at his birthday party when Megan sings a sexy version of “Zou Bisou Bisou” and increasingly finds himself out of step with younger colleagues at work.

As Season Five ends, things are falling apart. Don suffers a severe toothache, and hallucinating his dead brother Adam. Megan begs Don for a part in a commercial that his agency is producing. He resists, they fight, and Megan gets drunk. Finally Don agrees both to getting her the part and to the dentist. During the procedure, Don takes nitrous oxide, causing him to hallucinate his dead brother Adam again. As the show ends, Don is in a stage set for the television ad, and Megan enters in costume. Don walks away, into total darkness, and the set is revealed as a traditional proscenium arch. The framing keeps the lighted proscenium arch in which the commercial is being shot in the background as Don strolls off into a black, almost non-representational space. This is the strongest image of Don’s shifting identity, his self re-creation that the show has presented in several seasons.

The blatant obviousness of Don leaving a stage set, in which he was playing Megan’s supportive husband for darkness is only one of a few scenes that overtly reference Don’s constructed, commodified identities. In an earlier self-revelatory scene, Don is with Anna Draper in California. He playfully paints a

daisy on the wall and “signs” it with his real name. After Anna’s death, Don is in the house with his daughter Sally, who asks who “Dick Whitman” is, and Don says “A friend of Anna’s”. Taken together, these three scenes: the “Kodak” moment, the wall signing, and the proscenium arch visualize Don’s process of re-invention, of remaking himself according to his needs at the moment, but always in the service of a neoliberal subjectivity.

CLASS and GLOBALISM

Over the seasons, we watch a wealthy, global, business class develop. The series very quickly begins to depict Sterling-Cooper’s early, tentative forays into international advertising. In the first season, they develop a US ad campaign for Heineken beer, and later, a British firm acquires Sterling-Cooper, making it part of a global conglomerate with branches around the world. Don also gets a shot at developing international ads for the Hilton Hotel chain after he meets Conrad Hilton at a posh country club party thrown by Roger Sterling. Hilton is attending a wedding at the same venue, and runs into Don in the bar. In subsequent meetings with the tycoon, Don learns that the Hilton philosophy is based upon the idea of bringing the United States and its values to the world. In one late night meeting, he tells Don “American is wherever we look, wherever we’re going to be”. It turns out that he is quoting Don’s words back to him. Clearly Hilton’s idea is that America equals the world, and businesses will spread our values. His international focus even includes “Hilton on the moon”, a comment that expands American corporate culture into the future, and indicates

the spiraling expansion of capitalism across borders that will emerge in the decades following the time of *Mad Men*. By the end of Season 4, Sterling Cooper Draper has broken away from the British parent corporation and have become Sterling Cooper Draper Price, a strictly US based firm. However, the company still competes for global corporate business, as when they land the Jaguar account.

The endurance of postmodern and neoliberal culture creates a pushback against the notion of civil society. Public notions of social class, whether that is defined by gender or sexual orientation, race, or economics can be dismissed under postmodernism because they are irrelevant, and should be consigned to history. *Mad Men*, which embodies contemporary concerns through its fictive past, allows the viewer to conflate social and economic constructions of neoliberalism with a postmodern isolation and neoliberal individualism. If we are each of us a self-made individual there is no possibility of considering ourselves part of a political class, or of acting communally for change.

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Biography

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