

THE WORLD OF MAD MEN: POWER, SURFACE AND PASSION

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Mad Men is disturbing to post-millennium viewers, particularly those of a “certain” age, on three counts. First, it invokes a particular historical context of gender oppression; second it captures the prevailing post-War injunction that emotional distress is unseemly and distasteful; and third, it captures the zeitgeist’s celebration of surface over substance in relationship. However, just as disturbing as these historically situated interpersonal premises is the niggling question that each relationship pairing and each episode leaves with the viewer. To wit: How much of the disconnection and the unrequited longings are reflective of a particular historical era, and to what degree do they reflect timeless aspects of character and relationship? Thus *Mad Men* provides an exquisitely rendered sociocultural tableau in which the viewer struggles, however articulated or not, with one of the essential knots of psychoanalytic as well as couples treatment: the complicated interpenetration of culture and character, of time and timelessness.

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My own response to the *Mad Men* (Weiner, 2007–2010) series has been relatively obsessive. From the start, I felt immersed in the narrative and deeply connected to the characters, all of them. I was disheartened at the ending of every episode. I can take a step back and praise the aesthetic excellence of the writing and directing, the gift of having characters take sudden turns in impulse and decision which both surprise and persuade us. But what I think is most compelling about *Mad Men* is the experience, which mirrors what grips us psychoanalytically, that is the dual immersion in memory and reenactment. As Brody writes (2009), “Transference allows

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us to cross the boundary between the past and the present ... Like the Proustian smoke that fills the room, it is 'a medium through which psychic time can be re-processed' (Modell, 1989, p. 71). With our analytic knives we open up and enter a parallel universe. We cross back and forth, uncovering, agitating, and repairing" (p. 88).

Mad Men is disturbing to post-millennium viewers, particularly those of a "certain" age on three counts and indeed a psychoanalytic colleague told me that she suffered a panic reaction during her first viewed episode and desisted thereafter. What is disequilibrating about this series? First, it captures the prevailing post-War injunction to avoid emotional distress as unseemly and distasteful. Second, it captures the zeitgeist's celebration of surface over substance in relationship. Third, it invokes a particular historical context of gender oppression, racism, and homophobia. However, there is a superficial reassurance that watching the series offers many viewers, a smug sense that we have transcended the narrowness and proscribed role-taking that characterized this particular moment in American culture.

The denial of emotional distress whether in children or adults is seemingly passé. Our profession has seen to this; there is not a human problem or conundrum that hasn't yielded a popular psychological self-help book targeted towards its resolution. But how much of a difference does our current embrace of emotional life indicate? In many ways, I think that our culture at large still denies emotional pain, struggle and the inevitable loss that human life entails. We have substituted a very American pragmatic attitude that these dilemmas can be efficiently managed and massaged. Oprah says so and so do the quick fixes that are most popular as psychological remedies. A particularly disturbing scene in Season One portrays Don's dismissal of his wife's recent surge in anxiety, which has led her doctor to recommend a psychiatric consultation. Don invites her to look around her home, think about her sleeping children and then incredulously asks her if she is not indeed "happy?" "Of course, I'm happy," she demurs. So though we can recoil from a scene in which Don dismisses his wife's distress, and others in which their children are reprimanded and silenced when they act up or speak up, I think as a culture we're still afraid of facing head on what living a human life really means. There is a particularly penetrating moment portrayed in Series One, actually in the first episode, in which Don is talking to one of the many women he becomes romantically involved with – Rachel, the Jewish daughter of a department store owner he hopes to represent. Rachel is career oriented, which puzzles Don and he is equally skeptical about her notions of profound love and commitment. He says, "You're born alone and you die alone and this world drops a bunch of rules on you to make

you forget those facts but I never forget.” This moment represents a kind of underbelly of existential reality to the Series, a reality which is hauntingly denied and defended against throughout.

I think that the second perturbing aspect of watching *Mad Men*, the valorization of surface over substance, is still clearly with us. We can make short shrift of any smug reassurance that five decades has brought us a culture with more resonant humanistic depth, rather than a glittering surface of newly minted prosperity. If anything, we are now ever more drowning in gadgetry and consumerist distractions. We can’t seem to stop making and buying things which take more and more time to master and control. Though the *Mad Men* in this series struggle to keep their accounts in a shifting marketplace—new spins just ahead of the curve of longing—they always succeed. And Madison Avenue, now serving Apple and Google and Amazon, still find us easily enough.

Lastly, it might be the view of early 1960s gender oppression that makes us feel most triumphant. Did they think they could keep us girdled and crinolined forever I ask myself, with my feminist smirk? What’s with the kitschy shrine of that suburban, nuclear household? And boys have more fun? Not anymore. There is the ongoing and exquisite pleasure of celebrating the victory of the feminist movement as one watches the 1960s choreography of patriarchal dominance begin to fray ever so slightly and then with gathering momentum as the decade progresses.

But it is the quality of psychological relating underneath this seismic social shift, which perturbs in familiarity and feels potentially eruptive in any intimate relationship. As I’ve suggested, I think that the power of *Mad Men* is its ability to entertain with antediluvian social identities, and haunt with timeless existential struggles. How much of the disconnection, and the unrequited longings of the relationships are historical versus inherent difficulties of dyadic bonding? Every relationship in *Mad Men* is an amalgam of electric attraction and profound disconnection. At the center of the drama is Don Draper, a man tortured by a past he has severed from his public but not internal psychic life. Betty, his wife, is his trophy and poster presentation of his absent emotional engagement. However, my current work with couples is replete with examples of disconnection: partners whose definitions of disclosure and privacy are diametrically opposed, and spouses who live in a state of perpetual hunger for affirmation.

How many couples today have substituted the constant companionship of the BlackBerry and the illusion of Facebook intimacy for ongoing and more challenging dyadic connection. The timeless difficulties in monogamous bonding don’t go away, whether because as Mitchell (1997) warned us, the illusion of security breeds withered desire, or in fact because the challenge of blending two selves into one life is considerably difficult.

Individuals in *Mad Men* use their partners for their own gratification, which is seemingly embedded in the greed and psychological market economy of the era. Betty is trophy; Don is the primal provider. Roger Sterling is mega power in the office, and by becoming his lover, Joan, the office manager, ascends from her secretarial status. But once again, we are left wondering about our own “object usage,” our capacity for intimacy or as Sullivan (1953) described it, taking someone else’s needs as seriously as our own. In our era of electronic bonding, in which relationships begin on dating sites and end with excision from them, or with perhaps a brief email explanation, how much less objectified is the other? I think we have found new forms of object usage in relationships today. I work with couples who lose interest in a partner when he or she becomes temporarily lost in the responsibilities of managing a complicated life. “Why shouldn’t there be an endless supply of throbbing energy available for marital consumption?” the dissatisfied partner wonders.

Another aspect of *Mad Men* which is highly resonant to us, and deconstructs the wish to make this a period piece, is the degree to which past developmental experiences penetrate the drama, via flashbacks for Dan, and for Betty, a father who enters her home and family life, reviving hurt and confusion. The bravado that Don Draper communicates to the world is constantly shredded by the legacy of his early trauma. When Betty’s father comes to live with her, her own daughter develops an almost eerie, inchoate connection to him which we know is intergenerationally recycling unspoken dilemmas from Betty’s own development. Of course this is the bread and butter of our work, but I believe that the rendering of how past experience underwrites our destiny is very alarming and particularly convincing in this series. Yes, in our own analyses and in our work with patients we examine and explore and expose and enact, but there is something about the visual and dramatic rendering of past in present in *Mad Men*, which I think disturbingly persuades us that our degrees of freedom for change are ultimately constrained, even after the most successful of analyses.

How could this series not carry the amalgam of cool retro detail and wrenching drama, given what it represents to its creator and director Matt Wiener, who furbishes the set with his own family artifacts. He states in an interview (Mendelsohn, 2011): “... part of the show is trying to figure out—this sounds really ineloquent—trying to figure out what is the deal with my parents. Am I them? Because you know you are ... The truth is it’s such a trope to sit around and bash your parents. I don’t want it to be like that. They are my inspiration, let’s not pretend.” We witness Wiener’s struggle with identification, his wish to wrest from the morass of his personal and socio-cultural inheritance an understanding of his own character and

destiny. The very process of examining how our parents live on in ourselves links us inexorably to intergenerational penetration and provides no safety hatch in a facile contempt for the mores of an earlier era.

Lastly, I think I experience an unsettling time warp in watching *Mad Men*. I have the uncanny experience as an Interpersonal-Relational analyst, of enjoying the excitement of a Freudian world. The characters in *Mad Men* lead with id and impulse. It's not that the id has vanished, but its cultural representation today is not as immediate and unfiltered. These characters do not practice mentalization and reflective functioning. What seems subversive in the *Mad Men* series is the hot passion of its couples who seem to know their conformist place by day and release at night: Don and Betty; Roger and Joan; Peggy, and on and on. Now this is good TV drama since sex always sells, but there is a quality of uncomplicated rawness captured in the interaction of men and women, which we have culturally tamed.

Kate Roiphe (2010) in discussing the series states: "When we talk about the three-martini lunch these days it is with contempt, with a pleasurable thrill of superiority ... And yet don't these messy lives tell us something? Is there some adventure out there that we are not having, some vividness, some wild pleasure, that we are not experiencing in our responsible, productive days?" (p. 2).

My psychoanalytic nostalgia in watching the series is linked to re-experiencing an era in which drives were dangerous and egos were shaky rudders, replaced by our current sage attention to recognition, co-construction and mutuality. I know this is terribly politically incorrect for me to suggest but then *Mad Men* is the poster series for political incorrectness and perhaps I am lost in an enactment.

However, with regard to past in present, though we stake our psychoanalytic careers on sub-group affiliation with a canonical set of assumptions, we know that all psychoanalytic formulations have truth and value. Similarly I believe that though as we watch this series and think, "How awful it was to be person, woman, man, American, in that era ... before feminism, before sexual liberation, before the Civil Rights movement," we are nevertheless haunted by the existential timelessness of the psychological drama enacted before us.

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