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## The World of Mad Men: Study of the Show "Mad Men" and its Influence on Retro-Sexism in Advertising and Media

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**The world of Mad Men** Study of the show  
Mad Men and its influence on retro-sexism  
in advertising and media *Michaela Hordyniec*

“Sexism in advertising. It sounds almost quaint. The very words have a retro ring to them, conjuring up, on the one hand, scenes of be-aproned housewives serving casseroles to hungry husbands, and on the other, posters of leggy models in platform boots and hotpants with—and this is a key image in the scenario—feminists in dungarees slapping ‘this degrades women’ stickers all over them. For sexism isn’t just a phenomenon, it’s an idea: and has no currency as such without people who actually hold it, discuss it and apply it. Without some public the idea itself falls out of fashion.”<sup>1</sup> This paper is part of a thesis entitled Retro sexism—Is it enough for sexist advertising to be acceptable by society because of its humorous and retro

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1. Judith Williamson, 'Retro sexism', *Eye Magazine*, v.12, no.48 (Summer 2003), 44 – 45

2. Although it might not be such a baby, since it became popular in 2009.

3. Alexandra MacAaron, 'TV Review: 'Mad Men'', *Women's Choices For Change*, last edited September 13, 2010 <http://womenschoicesforchange.org/tv-review-%E2%80%9Cmad-men%E2%80%9D.htm> last accessed November 17, 2011

4. MacAaron, 'TV Review: 'Mad Men''

5. Sady Doyle, 'Mad Men's Very Modern Sexism', *The Atlantic* 2, August 2010 <http://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2010/08/mad-mens-very-modern-sexism-problem/60788/>) last accessed October 19, 2011

6. [ibid]

undertones? When talking about retro sexism, especially as a newborn trend, it is difficult not to link it with AMC's TV series *Mad Men*.<sup>2</sup> It could be said that *Mad Men* was one of the main reasons why the retro-sexism trend has taken root and is now here to stay. In this paper I discuss *Mad Men*'s portrayal of sexism in the 60s, and how, although it seems to glamourize the idea of the lifestyle and workplace in 60s, the show does not hide the fact that sexism was an integral part of the that period in US culture. If anything, the show keeps surprising us with reminders of how tough those times were for women, glamorous and well-dressed or not. As MacAaron states, "it also exposes the sexist, racist underpinnings of that world with a bluntness and candor that add up to truly shocking drama."<sup>3</sup>

*Mad Men* is an iconic show set in the advertising world of the 1960s. It invites us to an era of smoking wherever you want and not knowing the risks; of drinking whiskey in the office when you arrive; and where cocktail lunches were the way to do business; an era when men were men and women were women, with their roles clearly assigned and with no room in between. The men of Madison Avenue were held up as captains of industry, business heroes, suave and successful. The women, on the other hand, seemed to fall into stiff stereotypes: the suburban housewives, the steno pool. The *Mad Men* female characters were well-coiffed, waist-cinched arm candy. They kept the typewriters humming and the home fires burning.<sup>4</sup> In her article, 'Mad Men's Very Modern Sexism' in *The Atlantic*, Sady Doyle believes that the "real draw of the series is the way that its characters revel in things that we find unthinkable in 2010."<sup>5</sup> They are unaware of effects of alcohol, that tobacco is harmful and can kill them. They are also unaware that sexism at work might be unacceptable. "Misogyny has been an integral part of *Mad Men* since its first episode. [...] *Mad Men* lets us imagine that it [sexism] is just one of those things that We Don't Do Any More."<sup>6</sup>

Here are the principal characters.

## The Men

### *Don Draper*

Don Draper is the central character in the show. Equivalent to Creative Director these days, he is an advertising guru working in Sterling Cooper

Advertising Agency (later on in the series changed to Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce), the ultimate Mad (Ad) Man of the 60s in his professional life. Throughout the series we love him, hate him, feel sorry for him—with this cocktail of emotions, he never leaves us bored. "Don is likeable because of this cutting cultural intelligence, and also because he is a loner, an outsider drawn to other outsiders with secret lives."<sup>7</sup> He cheats on his wife, never has time for his kids and does not have much respect for his mistresses either. On the other hand, he is intelligent, funny and handsome. Although in his personal life he is a sex addict with no respect for women, in his professional life he has more understanding and respect for women. "Yet because Don is out of joint with his times, he's also a refreshing antidote to the stifling conformity of the early 1960s world."<sup>8</sup>

This is not to say that his treatment of women is not sexist. In the first season, he retorts to an owner of a Jewish department store, Rachel, his company's client and later his mistress, "I'm not gonna let a woman talk to me like this," outraged that a woman could disagree with his point of view.<sup>9</sup> His behaviour, these days viewed as sexist, back in the 60s would be viewed at the most as arrogant, but acceptable. However, when his secretary Peggy Olsen gets pregnant by the company's mid-executive Peter Campbell, Don is the only person who visits her in hospital and advises her what to do—dump the baby and move on with her career.<sup>10</sup> The show is bluntly straight about what women in the 60s had to do for their careers if they wanted to be like men. Perhaps Don respects Peggy more and aids her in climbing the career ladder of advertising because she has never tried to gain his respect through sex, but rather through hard work and dedication, qualities he would only associate with a man.<sup>11</sup> I shall discuss Peggy's character and her role in the series later in the chapter.

### *Roger Sterling*

Roger Sterling is one of the co-owners of Sterling Cooper Advertising Agency, a privileged rich white guy living in New York: "He drinks; he smokes; he nails beautiful women; he spews an infinite number of sassy one-liners."<sup>12</sup> He is one of those characters you want to hate, but you cannot live without. He is, perhaps, the most sexist man in the show. He treats

7. J M Tyree, "No fun: debunking the 1960s in *Mad Men* and *A Serious Man*," *Film Quarterly* v. 63 no. 4 (Summer 2010), 33

8. [ibid]

9. Matthew Weiner, *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes*, *Mad Men*, Season 1 Episode 1, directed by Alan Taylor, aired September 1, 2008

10. Tyree, "No fun...", 33

11. Don later promotes her to Copy Writer position, a role never given to a woman in the company before.

12. Sady Doyle, "Mad Men, and the new crop of retro sexist

TV shows," *Global Comment*, last edited September 14, 2011 <http://globalcomment.com/2011/mad-men-and-the-new-crop-of-retro-sexist-tv-shows/> last accessed November 14, 2011

13. Roger Sterling comments on Joan-Christina Hendricks's character's 'hillsides', Roger Sterling, *Sterling's gold: wit and wisdom of an ad man*, (London: Grove Press, 2010), 140

14. <http://www.ranker.com/list/top-20-sexist-roger-sterling-quotes/laura>

15. The book being *Sterling's Gold: Wit and Wisdom of an Ad Man*

16. Doyle, "Mad Men, and the new crop."

17. AMC, "Mad Men, Mad Women? A Look at Gender & Culture," *AMC Talk: Mad Men*, last edited August 31, 2010 <http://blogs.amctv.com/mad-men/talk/2010/08/mad-men-mad-wom.php>

women terribly, constantly cheating on his wife. He leaves two wonderful women in the show and ends up marrying a silly, simple secretary who is his daughter's age. Some of his most sexist quotes are:

Look, I want to tell you something because you're very dear to me, and I hope you understand it comes from the bottom of my damaged, damaged heart: you are the finest piece of ass I ever had, and I don't care who knows it. I am so glad I got to roam those hillsides.<sup>13</sup>

Or, more to the point, "Don Draper: 'Let me ask you something, what do women want?'

Roger Sterling: 'Who cares?'"<sup>14</sup>

The second quote perhaps says the most about Roger's character and his treatment of women. But here's the fun part: as far as many people are concerned, Roger Sterling is the best character on the show. His sassiest one-liners have been packaged as a book and his "greatest, most wonderfully reprehensible" sexist moments have been ranked online.<sup>15</sup> At one point, an article was published about how Roger Sterling is "secretly" what every woman wants.<sup>16</sup>

The reason why we all love Roger, the most sexist man in the show, whose quotes would be absolutely unacceptable in 2011, is because the show is set in the 60s and the sexist background of the era makes it 'okay' for us to sit back and laugh at this 'witty' and humorous character. What is criticized now was all forgiven in the 60s.

## The Women

In the show, one particular ad campaign for a woman's underwear proposes that there are two kinds of women, Marilyn's and Jackie's, referring to two iconic women of the time, Marilyn Monroe and Jacqueline Kennedy. These two women represented the Madonna/whore complex, which was seen as a plague of the American woman.<sup>17</sup> Three female characters in the series embody the change that emerged with the second wave of feminism—Joan, a Marilyn type, a woman who is aware of where her physical attributes can take her; Peggy, a career-driven girl of average looks, who tries to fit in to the man's world by taking on men at their own game and as a result is not

sure if she is a Marilyn or a Jackie (and if she is neither, then what is she?); and Betty, a woman of Grace Kelly looks, a Jacqueline, who acknowledges the fact she has a "problem with no name" but does not know what to do about it.<sup>18</sup> These women provide us with insight into the world of struggle that women had to go through, as these were problems contemporary to the women of *Mad Men*.

## Joan

Joan is the head secretary in the Sterling Cooper office. She runs a tight ship and is often more harsh to her staff of secretaries than to any of the men in the office. When a young woman (Peggy) begins her work in the agency, Joan takes her in for a talk on her first day. She looks her up and down and says: "Go home, take a paper bag, cut some eyeholes out of it. Put it over your head, get undressed and look at yourself in the mirror. Really evaluate where your strengths and weaknesses are. And be honest."<sup>19</sup>

Joan is the kind of woman who is aware of the effect her body has on men and know how to use it to her advantage. She exemplifies the self-aware woman Berger speaks of in *Ways of Seeing*.

A woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her. Her presence manifests in her gestures, voice, opinions, expressions, clothes, chosen surroundings, taste—indeed there is nothing she can do which does not contribute to her presence.<sup>20</sup>

She turns her knowledge of how men look at women into her weapon. She creates an aura of power and confidence around herself turning her into a woman you would not want to cross. Since the first episode of the series, she has not only endured the sixties sexism of that Madison Avenue advertising office, she has enforced it, wielding her looks like a cop swinging a baton. As office manager she chastens her charges, sleeps with her married boss, and cruelly mocks a white co-worker for dating a black woman.<sup>21</sup> The queen bee of the secretaries, Joan is at top of her career as a head secretary, the top position assigned to women in companies such as this one. What is the next step in fulfilment for such a woman? Marriage, of course. "She has worked hard and played hard, but she realizes the window is closing on her

18. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (London: Penguin Books, 1992)

19. Matthew Weiner, *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes, Mad Men*, Season 1 Episode 1, directed by Alan Taylor, aired September 1, 2008

20. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (London: Penguin, 2008), 40

21. Logan Hill, "Dangerous Curves," *New York* v.42, no 26 (August 10 – 17, 2009), 61 – 62

eligibility for marriage [she turns thirty], and she gets serious about finding a husband.”<sup>22</sup>

22. AMC, “Mad Men, Mad Women? A Look at Gender & Culture,” *AMC Talk: Mad Men*, last edited August 31, 2010

She finds a handsome husband, a medical student in his final year, with a promising career as a surgeon. It would seem Joan has realised her dream, the best of two worlds: she has fulfilled herself in her career and then found the perfect husband for her American Dream. However, all is not as perfect as it seems. “Joan is a story of a generation,” says Weiner [writer and creator of the series]. “Our mom had friends like her—very confident and sexy and they got punished for it. She has the confidence of a man and that’s really hurt her.”<sup>23</sup>

23. Hill, “Dangerous Curves,” 62

In what is perhaps the most shocking and horrific scene in the series, Joan’s fiancée, who is threatened by her position and relationship with men at work, rapes her in her boss’s office after hours. He treats her as an object, something that belongs to him and with which he can do whatever he wants. Her feelings remain inconsequential to him.

Greg violates and humiliates her by this act: he treats her as a piece of meat, as a physical being endowed with a mere vegetative or animated soul, and not as one possessing a rational soul or one with the same dignity as men (that is, other rational souls).<sup>24</sup>

24. Ashley Jibee Barkman, “Mad Women; Aristotle, Second-Wave Feminism, and the Women of Mad Men,” in *Mad Men and Philosophy: Nothing as it seems*, ed. by Rod Carveth and James B. South, (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 214

As a woman living in the 60s, Joan acknowledges this is her role in the world of men, an object to be seen not heard, and she chooses not to fight it.

The look on Joan’s face is haunting as it moves from horror to acceptance. She will still marry him, but a big piece of her dream dies there on the carpet.<sup>25</sup>

25. MacAaron, “TV Review: ‘Mad Men’”

The acceptance is what is most horrifying; she cannot leave him because that would mean giving up on her dream. Such rape was a crime not recognized in the 60s. It was acceptable for a husband to rape his wife.<sup>26</sup>

26. It was legal for a man to rape his wife anywhere in America until 1975; marital rape was not a criminal offence in all fifty states until 1993. Doyle, “Mad Men’s Very Modern Sexism Problem”

In an interview with Logan Hill, Christina Hendricks (Joan) expresses her shock to the public’s reaction to the rape scene.

What’s astounding is when people say things like, ‘Well, you know that episode where Joan sort of got raped?’ Or they say rape and use quotation marks with their fingers. I’m like, ‘What is that you are doing? Joan got raped!’ It illustrates how similar people are today, because we’re still questioning whether it’s a rape. It’s almost like,

‘Why didn’t you just say bad date?’<sup>27</sup>

27. Hill, “Dangerous Curves,” 62

This shows that the things that we would find outrageous these days, we find acceptable when they happen in the show because it is all in the past. In the last season, it is 1964 and the *Mad Men* set up a new company, Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce, taking their top accounts with them and starting all over again. Joan comes in to save the day, by helping the helpless men with the paper work of starting a new company.

And who is running the show? Joan, of course. The difference is, though, she is no longer a glorified typist, and none of the men dare cross her. Today she would be called a COO [Chief Operational Officer].<sup>28</sup>

28. MacAaron, “TV Review: ‘Mad Men’”

Although the journey was hard and full of pain, Joan gets the career she wanted. Joan’s character makes the female audience appreciate what they have a bit more, and although women in today’s world also have to struggle, they do not have to pay as high a price.

### Peggy

In the first episode of the series, Peggy Olsen is introduced to us as the new girl, an unturned card. She is hired as a secretary and is only learning the ropes. Perhaps it is her naivety and lack of knowledge of the men’s world that makes her such a likeable Jane in Peter Pan colours, preferable to the willing and able sometime-mistress of a snarky married account executive.<sup>29</sup>

29. MacAaron, “TV Review: ‘Mad Men’”

On her first day, she takes Joan’s advice to heart and just as advised goes to a gynaecologist to ask for the pill.<sup>30</sup> However, although the pill is prescribed to her, the doctor does not explain to her how it works or how it should be taken. She ends up getting pregnant to the first man she sleeps with, an Accounts Manager, Pete Campbell. “For Peggy, the pleasures promised by the Pill offer no real liberation—a doctor pours moralizing contempt on her, then prescribes the medication without explaining how it works.”<sup>31</sup> She hides the pregnancy from everyone, even herself, and we do not find out she was pregnant until season two. As mentioned above, Don Draper, her boss, visits her in hospital and advises her to do what a man would, put her career first and give up the baby to adoption. She follows his advice, gets back in the game and becomes the first female Mad Man

30. Contraception was still a taboo in the 60s, therefore the pill became a symbol of freedom (from motherhood and being tied to one man) and allowed sex before marriage during the second wave of feminism. However, there was no education on how to use the pill properly, thus it was a symbol with an empty promise.

31. Tyree, “No fun...”; 35

in the agency. Life is not easy for her, and neither is gaining the respect of fellow copywriters, who believe she only got the job through Draper's bed. In *Season Three* she tells Don: "I look at you and I think, I want what he has. [...] You have everything, and so much of it."<sup>32</sup> "Everything" is the perfect job, perfect family and perfect house. She envies men for having it all, while women have to choose between family and career, because she believes no man would want a career woman as a wife.

32. Matthew Weiner, "The Fog", *Mad Men*, Season 3 Episode 5, directed by Phil Abraham, written by Kater Gordon, aired September 13, 2009

Watching Peggy's tortured ascent—most of the account executives refuse to have her on their accounts and her first "office" is a corner of the copy machine room—gives me a new appreciation for the professional women a couple of decades older than me.<sup>33</sup>

33. MacAaron, "TV Review: 'Mad Men'"

From the popular new girl, Peggy becomes extremely unpopular for two reasons. Firstly, she refuses to flirt with male colleagues, and as a result never gets a husband. The second reason is her desire to climb the career ropes, which are reserved only for men. She is disliked because she plays the game like a man would, thus stepping out of line, breaking the rules assigned to women. When she finds out that a client invites her male colleagues to a strip club, she shows up at the club elegantly dressed. She struggles to have what men have, to be equal to them, and although she is continuously treated unfairly—whether with regard to her pay, unequal to a man in the same position, or to the refusal to be given a proper office like a male copywriter—she eventually gains her bosses' respect. In the episode "Shut the Door, Take A Seat" she refuses to follow Don to his new company and is outraged that he just expected her to follow him everywhere he goes. This makes Don, a man of pride, who never admits to being wrong and unfair, humbly apologize to her and tell her he will spend the rest of his life trying to hire her.<sup>34</sup> By treating Don as an equal, she takes a step closer to achieving the respect and status that a man in her position would have.

34. Barkman, 'Mad Women...', 206

Fighting like a man and acting like a man in her career life leaves her confused as to who she is.

She enjoys the creative challenges her job brings. And she enjoys the competition in which she is engaged. Nevertheless, she has nagging doubts about who she is as a woman. Will she marry? Will she have a family? Is she even attractive?<sup>35</sup>

35. AMC, "Mad Men,

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She is neither a Jacqueline nor a Marilyn, therefore she is left struggling to figure out where is her place in the era where men are the ones who provide and are active and women are to remain at home, and why it is that she cannot have both a husband and a career.

Mad Women..."

### Betty

Betty is a suburban American housewife. She is married to Don, and to an outsider she lives a perfect life—perfect husband, perfect house and perfect children. She is every man's dream—beautiful (a Grace Kelly lookalike), educated (anthropology major at Bryn Mawr), and elegant. However, we, as viewers get to see the real world of a 'perfect' housewife from the very first episode of the series. Betty is the perfect example of a housewife that Betty Friedan wrote about in her book *Feminine Mystique*, a woman who has everything she is told she should want, yet still finds herself unhappy and unfulfilled, a woman with "a problem that has no name."<sup>36</sup> If a woman had a problem in the 1950s and 1960s, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself. Other women were satisfied with their lives, she thought. What kind of a woman was she if she did not feel this mysterious fulfillment waxing the kitchen floor? She was so ashamed to admit her dissatisfaction that she never knew how many other women shared it.<sup>37</sup>

36. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*.

37. [ibid]

Betty never shares with anyone how she feels, as it would not be seen as appropriate. Even her visits to a therapist are a marital game between her and her husband, as she is aware that everything she tells her therapist will be passed on to Don. "Betty's decision to tell the good doctor wasn't Freud's talking cue but a savvy move on the chess board that is the Draper marriage game."<sup>38</sup> She is prescribed 'Mother's Little Helper,' and the flow of wine begins, the only remedy to her problems. When she attempts to make herself feel better and buys herself a swim suit, her husband is outraged. As a mother, she cannot be both Jacqueline and Marilyn.

38. Goodland, Lauren M.E. "Why We Love 'Mad Men'"; *The Chronicle Review*, *The Chronicle*, last edited August 21, 2009 <http://chronicle.com/article/Why-We-Love-Mad-Men/48234/> last accessed November 17, 2011

By appearing in the bikini, she would have been transgressing her role as Madonna and appearing, at least in Don's eye, as a whore. Her role was much too narrow to allow such breadth of expression.<sup>39</sup>

She is never allowed to feel anything but as an object that has to satisfy

39. AMC "Mad Men, Mad Women..."

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all her husband's needs and expectations. She is to be an accessory that complements her husband, always smiling and always beautiful, the better half. *Mad Men* could not truly show the struggle women went through without having a character that represents a housewife who wants to be more than she is expected to be, yet is stopped from doing so by social expectations and propriety.

Peggy and Joan represent career women who struggled to have everything that men have. The finale of season four ends with Peggy and Joan discussing Don getting engaged. To them, the fact that Don is going to marry a secretary is nothing new.

Joan: 'Happens all the time. They're all just between marriages, you know that. He'll probably make her a copywriter. He's not going to wanna be married to his secretary.'<sup>40</sup>

The two characters are like a chorus in a Greek tragedy, they lead the way of how we should react to this news—not outraged or shocked, rather just accepting of the fact that this was the social reality of the time. Men married secretaries, and that is how women climbed the ropes, through sex and marriage.

### Conclusion

*Mad Men* creates a sense of nostalgia for the days when gender roles were clearly assigned: men did not have to feel lost as to who they should be and women were allowed to feel fulfilled by staying at home and looking after their husband and children. *Mad Men* has started a new trend for everything that is retro. Retro parties, retro fashion of the 60s, retro advertising and retro shows.

[The] entertainment industry has decided that, thanks to *Mad Men*, society's past is entertainment's future, and have constructed several shows attempting to cash in on its success.<sup>41</sup>

While Doyle's criticisms that all the retro shows are cashing in on the *Mad Men's* fame is a bit harsh, there is one thing, besides the era it is set in, that links the shows together—retro sexism. There is freshness about these shows and they create a sense of nostalgia for times when men were allowed to do and say things that are not allowed anymore.<sup>42</sup> There is a

seduction at work in shows like these; one which plays on the viewer's need to feel enlightened, even as it satisfies her baser desires. Characters in these societies can do and say things that we simply would not accept in contemporary characters.

*Mad Men*, but about British journalists, and with McNulty from *The Wire*. We also have *Pan Am: Mad Men*, but about stewardesses, and with Christina Ricci. And we have *The Playboy Club: Mad Men*, but about Hugh Hefner's ardent love for himself, and with a boycott led by Gloria Steinem.

40. Matthew Weiner, "Tomorrowland," *Mad Men*, Season 4 Episode 13, directed by Matthew Weiner, written by Jonathan Igla and Mathew Weiner, aired October 17, 2010

41. Doyle, 'Mad Men, and the new crop...'

42. We have *The Hour*: