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# Television Style / Stylish Television: *Mad Men*, Television, and the Fashioning of the Self

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## Abstract

*Mad Men* utilises television, quotes, and contemplates and negotiates its role to the extent that the show is also about television, mediating it as diegetic and non-diegetic, within and without, deliberately returning to the medium's early days in memory and celebration of itself and its origin while making full use of the various media platforms that it has at its disposal today to promote itself and construct itself as nostalgic object of desire. Part of a television experience that fetishizes the materiality of authentic objects the show constructs a mise-en-abyme of longing and nostalgia that positions the television set at its very centre.

This article will trace the role of television in AMC's *Mad Men* (2007-15). It will examine the medium's developing role in modern life and the way it is used to integrate the show's narrative within a wider sense of history. Moreover, it will contemplate the construction of the medium both within the diegetic reality of the show and as framing it, as authentic period prop, and as fetishized nostalgia object which is itself again framed and distributed by television.

## Key Words

*Mad Men*

materiality

television

nostalgia

history

authenticity

identity

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> ‘like all technologies of “space-binding”, television poses challenges to fixed conceptions of materiality and immateriality, farness and nearness, vision and touch. It is both a thing and a conduit for electronic signals, both a piece of furniture in a room and a window to an imaged elsewhere, both a commodity and a way of looking at commodities.’ (McCarthy 2001: 93)

Anna McCarthy, in her article about space and place in relation to television and television’s materiality, addresses the way television as a medium can transcend clear notions of material and immaterial. While McCarthy’s particular concern in her article is with a philosophy of space and place and ontological and geographical place in relation to television’s materiality, her musing on television’s complex identity also has wider-reaching implications for the understanding of the medium’s impact on the construction of identity. The idea of television as a material object and as a window to imagined and therefore immaterial realities, but also its role as a conduit that allows a connection between different material realities via the immaterial, allows for a different understanding of the role of television in our lives and homes.

While this is an issue that can be considered as part of our individual and collective experience of the medium, it is also one that, on occasion, becomes the focus of a more deliberate contemplation of materialities and identities and the way they play out by taking a more active role within the narratives of specific programmes. This is perhaps particularly pronounced in a show such as AMC’s *Mad Men* (2007-15), and its interrogation of visual culture’s role as conduit in the relationship between material culture, history, memory, nostalgia, and selfhood. Television as a visual medium and as a popular medium, functions always as, to again use McCarthy’s words, a

'commodity and a way of looking at commodities' (2001: 93); it is an object of desire that showcases other objects of desire. It seems particularly apt to think about this through *Mad Men*, since it is a series that overtly contemplates the link between advertising, design, fashion, desire, identity, and nostalgia, as channelled through its particular representation of the past, and because of the complex way this is achieved through self-reflexivity, self-promotion, and negotiation of various media platforms. *Mad Men* conceptualises the past as something both far and near; the past is immaterial and removed, but also tactile and attainable, through the way it spills over into actual advertising of products that can be worn, and can be placed in the home, and through the role that television as a medium plays in this commodification, both diegetically and beyond, through the discourses surrounding it. The show's utilisation of television thus functions on several layers, the medium's desirability as a commodity and its diegetic use within the series highlighting its role as a conduit for history and culture, and as a means to aid consumerism via the distribution of adverts. Both these functions impact on the construction of selfhood, while the presence of the cathode-ray set itself within the stylised mise-en-scene of the show simultaneously showcases the iconic quality of the television set within a context that celebrates a fetishized period authenticity. In a final layer, the cathode-ray set itself becomes a commodity that can be purchased off the set to be placed in the modern home.

Multiple scholarly collections and monographs as well as a number of separate articles and chapters were produced in recent years, often analysing the show's historicity and attention to period detail, as well as a vast range of other topics, as widely ranged as philosophy, history, fashion, architecture, fandom, civil rights, feminism, consumerism, art, cinema, and the serial format, and using theoretical

frameworks such as diverse as race theory, gender and queer theory, and psychoanalysis[i]. There is also work more directly on nostalgia and technology, such as Schrey's 'Analogue Nostalgia and the Aesthetics of Digital Remediation' (2016), which contemplates the phenomenon of nostalgia for older media forms, not simply in the realm of aesthetics but through an appreciation and nostalgic longing for the material forms themselves. More specifically, in the context of *Mad Men*, Joyrich, in 'Media Madness: Multiple Identity (Dis)Orders in *Mad Men*' (2013) addresses the multi-layered significance of different forms of media and the way they impact on identity construction in *Mad Men*, while Bevan, in 'Nostalgia for Pre-Digital Media in *Mad Men*' (2012) contemplates the impact of older technologies and the way they are used in the show. Bevan's article uses an analysis of the Super 8 home movie, the Kodak slide projector, and the Polaroid photograph, to think through the significance of nostalgia and critical distance in the construction and deconstruction of the baby boomer narrative, and to question how we remember, the validity of our memories, and the experience of history in the making. Despite such work, however, the role of television on *Mad Men*, its role in the construction of nostalgia, and its situatedness as in itself an object of nostalgia, remain underrepresented.

This article will trace the role of television in *Mad Men* and the way in which the medium is used to highlight its developing role in modern life, but also, through the way the show utilises the medium to frame the notion of materiality by contemplating the deliberate construction of a fetishized object nostalgia which is itself framed and distributed by television. *Mad Men* utilises television, quotes television, and contemplates and negotiates its role to the extent that the show is also <u>about</u> television, mediating it, not as a fixed object, but as something that is both within and without,

deliberately returning to the medium's early days in memory and celebration of itself and its origin while making full use of the various media platforms that it has at its disposal today to promote itself and construct itself as nostalgic object of desire. Part of a television experience that fetishizes the materiality of authentic objects the show constructs a mise-en-abyme of longing and nostalgia that positions the television set at its very centre.

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From episode 1.2, 'Ladies Room' (2007), when Midge throws her television set out of the window to prove her counter-culture credentials to Don, the show has tracked television's growing influence over its characters' lives, and the way identity is shaped by, and around, the developing medium. It has used the box in the corner as a way of exploring the intersection between public and private spaces, office and home, large historical events and everyday domesticity, in ways that range from Midge's performance of counter-culture identity in scorning the trappings of main-stream culture, to other characters' less oppositional relationship with the medium, and it traces and contextualises their individual lives by framing them through television. One of numerous examples is the episode 'Nixon vs. Kennedy' in 1.12 (2007), where archive footage of the presidential campaign forms the backdrop to not only the office election party, with the set in the corner witnessing the party's progressive descent into drunken debauchery, but also, via the news footage, by cutting between and thereby juxtaposing the work space and the domestic space of Don's home, and Betty and Sally Draper, who are seen watching the same programme.

Cutting between the two settings emphasises the medium's ability to inhabit both the public and the private realm, the different locations here also clearly emphasised by lighting and the placement of the set within the mise-en-scene, while the use of archive footage here, and elsewhere, clearly serves to legitimise the series' own historicity. It creates a framework of authenticity for the show's narrative by emphasising its situatedness within a wider historical context and traces the impact of pivotal historical moments on the private lives of its characters, thereby intertwining factual historical realities with its own fictional narrative.

However, such footage is also used in other ways; often it comes to highlight the shared experience of watching the same programme but also simultaneously hints at an underlying isolation. Television becomes a way of exploring tensions between characters and between public and private lives, and of highlighting loneliness and disconnectedness as an inseparable element of collective experience. The repeated juxtaposition of different domestic and public spaces comments on the characters' failure to communicate with each other directly, even while the agency thinks up ever more innovative and effective means of communication to reach the public in a bid to serve a culture of consumerism. Thus, at the end of 1.12, 'Nixon vs. Kennedy', Don returns home to find Betty alone and asleep in front of the television where she was presumably waiting for him. The scene poignantly aligns Don's own isolation, the result of a personal history his family is unaware of, his private failure as head of his on the surface seemingly picture-perfect family, a family that he threatened to abandon earlier in the same episode and the agency's failure in the public sphere through Nixon's loss; all of them witnessed by the television set in the corner, which

functions as a detached and unconcerned witness to the disintegration the characters' lives[ii].

Television is used in a similar way a few episodes later in 2.1, 'For Those Who Think Young' (2008). Again, the television set has a contextualising and historicising function. When different couples are shown to watch *Tour of the White House* on Valentine's Day, the action is situated on February 14th, 1962, the original air date for the programme. Again, archive footage highlights the characters' situatedness within a wider historical context; it signals a connectedness with culture, and a sense of collective experience, but it also once again highlights individual isolation. Viewed by different characters, in different and separate spaces, the programme becomes a way of exploring the ailing romantic relationships of the couples concerned, the languid pace and the series of cuts dwelling on different characters and inviting a contemplation of their lives and relationships with each other, anchored by a historically fixed point in time. The purpose of this utilisation of television, beyond outlining and exploring diegetic concerns and rooting the narrative within a cultural and historical context, serves to engage the viewer in a process that is contemplative yet also nostalgic, triggering notions of recollection and cultural and national identity by highlighting the audience's own positioning within a timeline connecting the moment of February 14th 1962 and the present moment of viewing, but also asking viewers to critically assess and evaluate the past from their own vantage point. The image that emerges is complex and contradictory, on the one hand highlighting differences and emphasising distance but on the other hand also suggesting similarities that disrupt any simple linear understanding of history as a narrative of progress.

As the years pass for *Mad Men*'s characters and television becomes increasingly inseparable from the experience of everyday reality the show charts the rapid shift in its characters' attitudes to, and engagement with, the medium. Initially mainly experienced through big historical events, with the universal availability of television and the increase of choice in channels and programming, this collective experience becomes less frequent and makes way for an increasingly individualist use of the medium. The show's exploration of the two theorised extremes of television consumption, 'event viewing' and 'distracted viewing', are almost textbook. The TV takes on shifting roles as babysitter, as in the case of Betty, who is often seen to use the set to entertain her children, and even Peggy, who lets her neighbour's son Julio watch on her TV; as companion, a way to break up the silence when alone; as mindless distraction and background noise while occupied with other tasks. Viewing habits become more complex and diverse, shifting from initially predominantly attentive viewing of events to the continuous flow of programme provision and the distracted viewing practices discussed by critics such as Raymond Williams and John Ellis. Thus, building on Williams's notion of 'flow', Ellis, in *Visible Fictions*, explores the way what he perceives as the crudeness and low quality of the television image fosters inattentiveness and distraction, making the viewer glance at the screen rather than watch in an attentive and focussed fashion (Ellis, 164). To use the words of Richard Adler, another critic discussing the phenomenon: 'We turn on the set casually; we rarely attend to it with full concentration. It is generally permissible to talk or to carry out other activities in its presence… (activities that) preclude absorption. The inevitable commercial interruptions virtually preclude prolonged absorption' (Adler, 6).

On the other hand, television's role in the distribution of 'events' also continues to play a role, even at times combining elements of engaged viewing and 'distracted viewing', as shown in several examples from later in the series, such as in episode 6.10, 'A Tale of Two Cities' (2013), when Joan is seen folding laundry at home while watching a television broadcast about the riots during the 1968 Democrat convention. Here, the way the camera frames Joan in the foreground, folding laundry, and initially facing away from the television set, which is situated in the background, behind her. The sounds of the news broadcast carry on over the scene, but it is only when Joan becomes more fully immersed in the news report that she turns to also view the television screen. The scene emphasises the way in which the television set becomes integrated into Joan's domestic routine, with the television forming a 'soundtrack' to her domestic life. The broadcast also forms the connecting element between this scene and the next, in which Don is seen watching the same programme, as is Megan, who, scared by the images of police brutality and civic unrest, rings him from California. The way television is viewed in these examples emphasises the link between the private and domestic and larger social and political events and shows the way television connects the lives of characters who otherwise struggle to communicate with each other.

Perhaps even more interesting in this context is a scene in 5.5, 'The Floor' (2012), where people are seen reacting to Martin Luther King's assassination. Throughout this episode, television plays a pivotal role, conveying news, narratively linking spaces and creating connections between people as they first react to the event, but the role of television as link between individual and wider society is perhaps most interestingly

explored through Betty's reaction to the news. Unable to continue to face the horrors of the news, yet compelled, perhaps by a sense of civic duty, to remain informed and connected, she refuses to switch off the television set despite the fact that she has left the room and can therefore no longer see the news broadcast. The guilt that prevents her from switching off or switching over to a less distressing programme highlights television's function as window to the world and connection to the world at large; switching off becomes akin to an avoidance of reality. Television here suggests a civic duty to remain informed and to remain connected to collective social experience, but also suggests a Big Brother-like omnipresence that characters can't or won't escape.

It is this omnipresence and the corresponding symbiotic relationship between characters and television that has to be seen as at the heart of the way the series situates the medium at the intersection between history, consumerism, and identity. It remains the notion of consumption, true to US television's commercial origins that ties the different functions of the medium together. While use of archive programming and reference to historical brands allow glimpses into the complex function of television through the way events on television impact and intertwine with public and private agendas, they also allow a broader contemplation of the notion of consumerism because although not overtly positioned as 'about television', the series charts television's march to victory and uses the medium to think through questions of consumerism and identity. Television is repeatedly shown as not simply recording the world or reacting to cultural and historical events, but, also, via advertising, as commenting on and ultimately shaping the world around it. As Joyrich comments, *Mad Men* is:

> ‘a TV program that in exploring the identifications and disidentifications of consumer society also exhibits the growing significance of TV itself. For it is precisely in promoting mass-mediated images that the folks in *Mad Men* pose questions of identity, and the program treats its personal and political issues alongside its treatment of currents of communications, literally thinking through the media to think through identity’ (Joyrich 2013: 220)

In turn, the series allows an exploration of selfhood not just vis-à-vis wider historical events but as part of a consumerist ethos that constructs identity around a context of materiality and desire. Thus, the use of television allows for an illustration of the self as situated at an intersection of past and future, nostalgia and desire; it highlights identity as held in tension between a longing to return and a desire to progress. It is a tension that Svetlana Boym, in her work on nostalgia, identifies as one of the ailments of progress. If nostalgia is a ‘mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values’ (2001: 8), it is also inextricably linked to the notion of progress, of moving forward. As Boym suggests, ‘[n]ostalgia manifestations are side effects of the teleology of progress’ (2001: 10). Nostalgia, so Boym argues, is a ‘longing for that shrinking “space of experience”’ (2001: 10) and thus a direct answer to the notion of expansion.

One of the most important pitches in *Mad Men* which explores this correlation is Peggy’s campaign for Burger Chef in 7.6, ‘The Strategy’ (2014), and 7.7, ‘Waterloo’ (2014). The notion of nostalgia as anchoring the self at a nexus of consumerism, progress, and history, is key here. Both 7.6 and 7.7 focus heavily on the notion of

nostalgia and longing, and the idea of the ideal family, and the ad campaign as it develops harnesses both. Its deliberate exploration of longing and loss brings to mind earlier ad campaigns of *Mad Men* which similarly played with, and exploited, nostalgia, such as Don's pitch for Kodak in episode 1.13, 'The Wheel' (2007), which becomes a way of selling memory through the exploration of nostalgic longing for a utopian ideal family unit; Peggy's manipulation of nostalgia in her Popsicle pitch in 2.12, 'The Mountain King' (2008), which similarly builds on her own experiences and sense of loss; and Don's pitch for Hershey's in 6.13, 'In Care Of…' (2013), where once again he spins a story about an imaginary perfect childhood that links the chocolate bar with 'the place we know we are loved', but which, unlike in his initial Kodak pitch, he here immediately, and catastrophically, reveals as false. However, while these pitches all harness the power of nostalgia for the selling of fantasy, it is only in the Burger Chef ad campaign that the notion of longing for an unattainable past becomes explicitly linked to television not just through the fact that Peggy pitches for an ad campaign that will be shown on television, but through the way her pitch intertwines nostalgia for the ideal family with a longing for a pre-television past.

Television, in the US as elsewhere, has often elicited an ambiguous response and, as a domestic technology, has frequently been discussed in relation to its impact on the family. Interestingly, as Spigel points out in her account of television in 1950s America:

> 'In 1954, McCall's magazine coined the term "togetherness". … Home magazines primarily discussed family life in language organized around spatial imagery of proximity, distance, isolation, and integration. … It was

> primarily within the context of this spatial problem that television was discussed.' (Spigel, 1992: 37)

Magazines of the period often depicted the television set as the centre of family life, replacing the traditional fireplace as focal point in the living room, and allowing the family to gather together. Television, so Spigel argues, 'was said, would bring the family even closer… In its capacity as unifying agent, television fit well into the more general postwar hopes for a return to family values.' (Spigel 1992: 39)

In this context, the isolation that television emphasises in *Mad Men*, and which Peggy so deliberately references in her pitch to the Burger Chef executives, seems to contradict such optimistic and hopeful narratives of television as gelling agent for the family, yet such hopeful narratives, so Spigel explains, often went hand in hand with more pessimistic and even paranoid thoughts accompanying the new medium. Thus, in tandem with the notion of television as bringing the family together came narratives that fanned a fear of audiences' inability to control their spiralling viewing habits. Such discourses featured heavily into worries that the new medium would divide families. A dominant focus was the effect of television on children and the dissolution of traditional family life and even patriarchal power structures and authority. It is particularly interesting that Spigel identifies the family meal as one of the key points through which the threat of disruption and disintegration of the family unit was illustrated: 'Popular periodicals presented an exaggerated version of family division, often suggesting that television would send family members into separate worlds of pleasure and thus sever family ties, particularly at the dinner table' (Spigel

1992: 66). Illustrating her point, she gives the example of a cartoon from *Better Homes and Gardens*:

> '[the cartoon] shows parents seated at the dining room table while their children sat in the living room, glued to the television set. Speaking from the point of view of the exasperated mother, the caption read, "All right, that does it! Harry, call up the television store and tell them to send a truck right over!". In 1953 TV Guide suggested a humorous solution to the problem in a cartoon that showed a family seated around a dining room table with a large television set built into the middle of it' (Spigel 1992: 66).

By the time Peggy starts thinking about her Burger Chef pitch, television dinners are a long-established family staple and a recognised curse, and it is this established narrative of television's role in the dissolution of the family unit that Peggy taps into in her Burger Chef ad campaign: "What if there was a place you could go, and there was no TV, and you could break bread, and whoever you were sitting with was family?", she thinks aloud, harnessing the resentment towards television and capturing the prevailing nostalgia and longing for an idealised coming togetherness.

Historically situated as coinciding with the historical event of the first moon landing, Peggy is not unaware of the at first glance very unfavourable comparison between the national and international significance of the moon landing and the mundanity of eating at a fast-food chain: 'I have to talk to people who've just touched the face of God about Hamburgers', she quips, but it is in fact the very impact of this momentous event that fuels the impact of her pitch, which, when it is finally delivered, presents

the fast food restaurant as the new dining room, but which also knowingly weaves in the sense of connection triggered by the broadcast of the moon landing the previous evening. Peggy speaks of the achievements of technology and the sense of human connection felt by ‘all of us doing the same thing at the same time’ and the longing to retrieve this sense of connection more regularly, before identifying the technological progress that she hails as allowing audiences to share in the unifying experience of the moon landing as simultaneously the culprit for the disruption of the traditional family dinner.

Peggy’s pitch builds on elements of previous important pitches of the series by appealing for family togetherness and longing for a past that is perceived as better, more wholesome, more ‘real’ but it also acknowledges the unattainability of his utopian fantasy of family life and proposes its own compromise. This too builds on a narrative progression that again starts with Don’s imagined ideal family as constructed for Kodak in 1.13, to Peggy’s own more subdued and honest portrayal of childhood for the Popsicle campaign, to Don’s frank admittance of the falseness of his ‘memories’ of childhood during the Hershey pitch in 6.13; they all lead to this, to the compromise of a harmonious family meal at a burger joint. The ad, coming after seven seasons of broken and dysfunctional families, highlights both the unattainability of the ideal and the very real deep longing for that human connection that runs through the series and compels the characters to try again, and again, to make that dream a reality. Coming as it does, at the height of the particularly emotional moment of the moon landing and the way it amplifies feelings of national pride and community, the juxtaposition between this yearning for connection and the ideological buzz of a momentous historical achievement for mankind, and dinner at a

fast food chain is both ironic and powerful: Episode 7.6 ends with Peggy, Don, and Pete at the Burger Chef, where Peggy intends to shoot the ad. “It’s not a home”, Pete whines, but perhaps that is the point; the Burger Chef is closer to the nostalgic idea of the family dining table than an actual home with all its distractions – the facsimile here becomes more real than reality. A wide shot of the Burger Chef restaurant, invitingly lit up and filled with happy families, is the last shot of the episode, Don, Pete and Peggy a quasi-family unit, no more dysfunctional perhaps than the rest of us.

The sentimental, nostalgic tone of Peggy’s pitch harnesses the longing for a closeness and togetherness that is perceived as lost, but it also deliberately pitches such a utopian past as pre-dating television, thereby constructing television as a ‘modern evil’, as a device that has disrupted and broken the togetherness and community of times past. It thereby cleverly utilises the growing omnipresence of the medium that the series has illustrated over past seasons, and the way it has shown characters use television, to fuel a paranoia and a sense of loss for a past that it has, from the start, been presented to us as false. Television here is the scapegoat but even while it is constructed as a ‘modern evil’ it is also expected to distribute this nostalgic vision of a return to a past that predates it; it is shown, throughout the episode, to be a double-agent, on the one hand a powerful emotional tool that enables the nation to join in a rare moment of collective elation and togetherness but on the other hand simultaneously undermining this vision of togetherness through the way the omnipresence of the television set impacts and disrupts communication: ‘The average TV is not more than 6 feet from the dinner table. This is how people live, this is what the Burger chef is up against’ Peggy argues as she constructs her ad as a plea for the good old-fashioned family dinner. Yet it is via the television that her advert delivers

its vision of family life without television, once again offering up an ideal of togetherness it already undermines. Television, it seems, as omnipresent force, giveth and taketh away at the same time.

The ad campaign here mirrors *Mad Men*'s own play with television nostalgia, consumerism and identity construction. When the advert is a negotiation of nostalgia and longing for family values and togetherness and an acknowledgement of the inescapability of television and a media-constructed world it is also a meta-commentary on the show's own selling of its own brand of nostalgia. As Joyrich explains, *Mad Men*'s situatedness as a media product and the way it negotiates the medium of television means that *Mad Men*

> 'is an ad-supported TV show about advertising, branded by its retro look and airing on a channel that too is branded by a celebration of looks of the past even as it also turns toward the future of new televisualities in digital culture. (Joyrich 2013: 214)

The fact that AMC is a channel that, at least until quite recently, was dedicated to movie classics from the same era in which *Mad Men* is set, adds a further level of complexity to the interplay of nostalgia and utilisation of technological innovation which is also an aspect of the very fabric of the show and is perhaps particularly well captured in the way the show has generated an almost circular discourse through the marketing of goods via the use of its characters and iconography in other ad campaigns. Ads like the well-known Johnnie Walker ad featuring Christina Hendricks, *Mad Men*'s Joan, market the show through the marketing of other consumer goods.

'It's Classic. It's Bold. It's Johnnie Walker. And you ordered it.', the ad states, showing Christina Hendricks, wearing an elegant black dress and holding a glass of whiskey. She is identified by her own signature and labelled 'Emmy-nominated actress and whiskey enthusiast'. The ad clearly suggests a link between the Johnny Walker brand, Hendricks as a 'quality' actress, Joan as a *Mad Men* character, and *Mad Men* as a series. The words 'bold' and 'classic' suggest an enduring quality, class, and timelessness associated with each, while the words 'you ordered it' emphasise a sense of personal choice and 'being in charge', of ownership and control. You, the discerning whiskey drinker, the ad suggests, make your own choices, are in control of your own life; you take ownership of it. While such examples of advertising are not pioneered by or restricted to *Mad Men*, this is nonetheless a compelling scenario, because it taps into the complex ways in which programmes like *Mad Men* can be implicated in a modern identity construction that is negotiated around wider television discourses.

A show about the advertisement industry that showcases television as a medium for the advertisement of consumer goods, *Mad Men* goes beyond this and uses its own platform to offer itself up as consumable not just in its immaterial form by allowing viewers to immerse themselves in a fictional narrative, but through the attainability of its set design and costumes, the very materiality of its mise-en-scene a showroom of purchasable goods. The show, in a mirroring of its own diegetic concerns with identity and nostalgia also constructs and sells its own nostalgia, becomes a product in its own advertisement campaign. This is particularly evident in the extensive self-promotion of *Mad Men*, which uses the iconic period authenticity it has constructed as a virtual showroom that, to return to McCarthy here, 'poses challenges to fixed

conceptions of materiality and immateriality, farness and nearness, vision and touch' (McCarthy 2001: 93). Types of product placement have had a long-standing tradition on US television in particular but are used here in a self-reflexive and deliberate way. Their use once again points to their own history through a meditation on the origins of this practice, of television as a mass medium embodying and growing as part of consumer culture, as well as forward, through a deliberate utilisation of these practices in a way that makes full use of the multitude of media platforms available today. The focus on adverts both on and beyond the television screen frames these discourses, creating the possibility of possession of the past through material consumption. Accordingly, the AMC website doesn't just offer information on characters and episodes but recipes for 1960s cocktails and fashion advice and even offers links to affordable fashion in the *Mad Men* style. An Interactive Fashion Flipbook showcases Janie Bryant, costume designer for the show, and takes the viewer through the fashions of *Mad Men*, as does her lifestyle website, *The Fashion File*, while the feature 'Madmanyourself' gives browsers the option of creating a *Mad Man* style avatar for themselves. A range of publications such as Dyna Moe's *Mad Men: The Illustrated World* (2010), and Janie Bryant and Monica Corcoran Harel's *The Fashion File: Advice, Tips and Inspiration from the Costume Designer of Mad Men* (2011), offer anything from style advice, to decorating tips, to recipes, to handy phrases for all social situations. Beyond the immediate AMC environment there are various fashion lines associated with *Mad Men*; high street chains like Topshop are offering cheap and affordable *Mad Men*-style fashion and Banana Republic, from 2009 has staged annual 'Mad About Style' promotions and in 2011, with direct involvement from Bryant, introduced its own *Mad Men* capsule collection (Odell

2011). As Shimpach has discussed in her work on *Mad Men*, '[a]ttention to the surface styles in the program's mise en scène led to co-branding opportunities with clothing companies … and beyond… The period detail, the lavish attention (and extensive publicity of such attention) to fetishistic period accuracy of the things on display within the mise en scène ended up signifying not only a specific kind of 'quality TV,' the kind for which cable subscribers usually have to pay extra, but also one that could be readily translated into retail purchases. (Shimpach 2016: 731)

What is interesting here is the bridging of the gap between the immaterial and the material. We are encouraged to connect to this past via objects, via its material remnants. The virtual here becomes material and tactile, spilling over the confines of the screen. It is therefore perhaps only inevitable that the very fabric of the show, its mise-en-scene, should also become available for purchase. Following the success of the show, blogs sprang up which presented iconic *Mad Men* spaces such as Don Draper's and Roger Sterling's offices or Betty Draper's kitchen as showrooms and sourced similar items for purchase for anyone wanting to recreate the look of the show[iii], and the makers of *Mad Men* eventually followed suit: In 2010, hosted by Lionsgate and Auction House Cause, *Mad Men* held its first charity auction for the cancer charity *City of Hope*, to help those suffering from lung cancer[iv]. Since then the show has frequently held auctions to sell off period props. An auction quite recently sold items as diverse as kitchen cabinets to office television sets[v]. The series thereby deliberately breaches the gap between a selling of a virtual past and the selling of actual period items, turning the immaterial, the symbolic and iconic objects showcased on screen into material objects that can be purchased for the home or worn.

This ‘spilling over the edges’, of course is in itself no more new than the idea of product placement, and neither is the idea of selling props from film or television sets, all of which have longstanding traditions in the context of American film and television and beyond – after all, much of the pleasure of viewing derives from a film’s or show’s extra-textual life – it is one of the ways in which screen cultures interweave so inextricably with the fabric of everyday life – but the excessive promotion and expanding of the *Mad Men* brand, and the resulting blurring of boundaries of traditional television drama and spilling over onto different platforms and ultimately into the living room, is perhaps more reminiscent of television lifestyle genres than drama[vi]. Thus, as Medhurst has noted as the defining trait of ‘lifestyle’, ‘this kind of television is not content to stay hemmed inside the box that transmits it: these are programmes designed to lead out into the living rooms, the kitchens, and the gardens beyond’ (in O’Sullivan 2005: 33). Lifestyle enquires after the object as representative of selfhood, a fascination with the ‘look’ of things that is also markedly pronounced in *Mad Men*, which of course, via its focus on the advertisement industry, is naturally invested in lifestyle. According to Featherstone, the term ‘‘lifestyle’... connotes individuality, self-expression, and a stylistic self-consciousness. One’s body, clothes, speech, leisure pastimes, eating and drinking preferences, home, car, choice of holidays, etc. are to be regarded as indicators of the individuality of taste and sense of style of the owner/consumer’ (Featherstone 1987: 55). Lifestyles have been identified as one of the defining features of modern mass-mediated societies and have become chief markers of identity.

As Shimpach points out, at the time when *Mad Men* started in 2007, ‘reality TV was the preeminent genre on television, bringing new attention to established cable

channels and an immediate, must-see spectacle to broadcast networks. At the time the most prolific (if ultimately not enduring) sub-genre of reality TV was the makeover show.' (2016: 727). Although hesitant to label the show 'makeover television', she argues that in several ways the series performed 'makeover' functions: 'the series performed the function of a makeover for the AMC brand as well as within the ideology of the series' text: in the stories the characters lived and the writing of history the series produced. *Mad Men* thoroughly embraced the informing ideology and basic logic of the makeover on a number of levels, including institutionally, thematically and culturally. Its own history reflects its work as a makeover show in its specific institutional context, which ultimately animated the symbolic work it performed as well. *Mad Men* presented history as makeover for our entertainment. (Shimpach 2016: 727)

*Mad Men* as a series is a meditation on the moment of shifting towards modern consumer-based lifestyles and the role of the media in it. Thus, even though the term would not have been used, the boom in advertisement in the 1960s aided a move towards modern consumer-based lifestyles and the replacement of older concepts of selfhood. At the most extreme, Don becomes the embodiment of the self-made man in constructing his own identity and lifestyle, but identity is revealed as a performance and a negotiation of personal desires and public demands for all characters and the show's own selling of nostalgia is only another facet of this preoccupation with lifestyle, consumerism, and the performance of identity.

Interesting here is the intersection of lifestyle and nostalgia via the authentic period objects which are offered for visual (and material) consumption[vii]. *Mad Men*'s gallery

of ‘authentic’ period offices and living spaces leads Mabel Rosenheck to speak of the mise-en-scene of the series as an ‘archive of material history’ (161). Her description on the one hand seems to suggest a museum archive, an almost random collection of artefacts from a specific period, but on the other hand it also draws attention to the fetishistic aspect of the show’s attention to authenticity. Period objects, throughout, work as authenticating devices in the context of the show, lending legitimacy to the visual image and the narrative alike, grounding its fictional narrative within a framework of history and cultural reference, but they also have a function as fetish, as objects *per se*, that spills over into the non-diegetic realm, and the showcasing of these artefacts in picture-perfect model rooms is indeed reminiscent of a museum exhibition. Both Holdsworth’s (2011) and Huyssen’s (1995) work on the museum is interesting here. In *Twilight Memories*, Huyssen frames the museum space itself as a site ‘serves both as burial chamber of the past… and a site of possible resurrections, however mediated and contaminated, in the eyes of the beholder’ (Huyssen 1995: 15). It is, so Holdsworth explains, the shifting of objects from one to the other, ‘their re-contextualisation within the ‘spectacular mise-en-scene’ of the exhibition, which marks [the objects’] resurrection’ (Holdsworth 2011: 130). The fact that in the case of *Mad Men* these resurrected artefacts are not just viewed and admired as part of a (virtual) museum exhibit and re-assessed in that context, but can be removed, possessed, and placed in the home, arguably shifts their meaning further, and also highlights the personal dimension of the objects; they become attainable objects of desire, and as such they carry their own power.

Prown, in his work on artefacts, explains that ‘any artefact… is a historical event. … something that happened in the past, but, unlike other historical events, it continues to

exist in our own time. Artefacts constitute the only class of historical events that occurred in the past but survive into the present. They can be reexperienced; they are authentic, primary historical material available for first-hand study' (Prown 1982: 2-3). While Prown refers to period artefacts in the more usual context of a collection, shop, or archive, or as items in possession of an individual, the case here is slightly different, because here the artefact arguably has a double referent – as an authentic period object it refers back to the past but it also, as an authentic period prop, it refers to its life as part of a collection, the exhibit of the *Mad Man* production set. Susan Stewart's work is of interest here, because she clearly distinguishes between the significance of an artefact as either a souvenir or as part of a collection. Of the souvenir she says: 'The souvenir involves the displacement of attention into the past: The souvenir is not simply an object appearing out of context, an object from the past incongruously surviving in the present; rather, its function is to envelop the present within the past' (Stewart 2003: 151). In contrast, the collection, Stewart argues, 'offers example rather than sample, metaphor rather than metonymy. The collection does not displace attention to the past; rather, the past is at the service of the collection, for whereas the souvenir lends authenticity to the past, the past lends authenticity to the collection' (Stewart 2003, 151). Although, arguably, both functions are present, in the case of items from the *Mad Man* set, this clear distinction is complicated, because arguably, as indicated, these items have multiple functions. They are period artefacts, but they are also parts of a collection and a [museum] exhibit but then, in a third afterlife, become souvenirs, albeit not souvenirs in the traditional sense; they do not relate back to a personal past place or experience but instead to themselves as iconic objects, as mementoes of the show and style icons of a period that is nostalgically reconstructed.

This is where I would like to return to the cathode-ray television set as just such a memento, a relic of a different time, imbued with meaning generated in the interplay of programme and nostalgic appreciation. During the recent *Mad Men* auction, some of the props from the set that were sold were television sets. Amongst others there was the set from Don Draper's office in Season 7. It sold for $1,600. That is a high price to pay for an outmoded piece of technology, and one that the auction site clearly states is 'not in working condition'. The set is authentic, an actual 1970s television set, and it is also authentic as a prop from the set, but it has lost its primary function as an operating television set; it is no longer able to act as a 'window to the world'. The resulting blank non-functional screen is reminiscent of the 'black mirror' discussed by Boym and Holdsworth respectively. Holdsworth uses the idea of the 'black mirror' to think through the relationship of viewer and television and to explore the way the medium and our own memories and experiences can resonate with what we see on screen, reflecting our own experiences back at us. 'Like the experience of involuntary memory' she writes, 'catching one's reflection in the television screen produces a form of resonance, the flicker of reflection, the snag of recognition which illuminates that oscillating pattern of the television experience as an 'escape and return to the everyday' (Holdsworth 2011: 15-16). She uses this idea to think about text and context and the self-reflexive nature of television consumption, that glimpse of recognition of the self in the act of viewing television. While viewing the characters of *Mad Men* interact with the medium arguably contains elements of this self-reflexive recognition, what happens when the screen of the television set is forever blank? When the only thing reflected back is truly only a distorted version of the self and the here and now? What happens when a technological device achieves pure icon

status, when its utilitarian purpose is lost, and its function becomes solely its material reality itself? The resulting self-referentiality and circularity of a reflective gaze which always refers back to the self, framed by an object that in itself refers simultaneously to the past and to a self-referential reflection of it, hints again at an understanding of self and history that is not linear but rather circular. Just like the way in which *Mad Men*'s narrative denies a strictly linear understanding of history as a journey that situates the characters of *Mad Men* at one end and us on the other by encouraging a contemplation of the past that does not only highlight difference but also similarity, the self-reflective gaze into a period object situated in the here and now collapses the sense of distance; past and present merge into an understanding of self and identity in which the past is mediated and utilised by the self even as it confirms the self as part of history.

This article has examined the way *Mad Men* explores, and utilises, the medium of television in a variety of ways: its diegetic use within the series highlights the role of television as a conduit for history and culture and as a means to aid consumerism, and the way these functions impact on the construction of self-hood. At the same time the presence of the iconic cathode-ray set itself, within the stylised mise-en-scene of the show, also highlights and plays with the status of the set itself as a memory object and an object of desire. This also impacts on the final, non-diegetic layer of the show's utilisation of television, in which the cathode-ray set itself becomes a commodity to be purchased. This article has therefore traced the role of television in *Mad Men* and has also contemplated the deliberate construction of television as both utilitarian household object and as object of desire, and the way in which such objects impact on identity construction both within the show and without.

‘Television too might be discussed as a kind of time machine that goes forward and backward’ (Joyrich 2013: 217), Joyrich suggests, linking television to Don Draper’s famous Kodak pitch. In Don’s pitch, the technical device of the Kodak wheel became a carousel that took us back to a place where we ache to go again before returning us to the present; past and present become an endless circle. Television, arguably, does the same, and as with Don’s pitch, the past that television returns to is not quite what it seems. *Mad Men*, traces television as a technology and as a medium, as a commodity and a way of looking at commodities, as a window into history and a window into the self, and it does so in a way that plays with both its immaterial and material meanings and significance, from its symbolic value as a new technology to its characters, to its meanings as a tool to distribute information and advertisements, and back again, to its symbolic value, this time as a material object that has breached the gap between immaterial existence as part of television to material existence in someone else’s living room. Its meanings are never straightforward and do not unequivocally point towards the past but rather towards the here and now. After all, if the black mirror of the old television set does not reflect anything other than an alien distorted version of the self it also, because of that, offers a new perspective. If regarded in this way it is perhaps possible to see the black mirror as a kind of Brechtian device that allows for a more detached and scrutinising gaze at the self and a critical contemplation of our own situatedness as part of history and as part of the here and now.

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**Television programmes**

*Downton Abbey* (2010-15, UK: ITV)

*Mad Men* (2007-15, US: AMC)

Episodes referenced (ordered by episode number)

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'Nixon vs. Kennedy' (season one, episode twelve)

'The Wheel' (season one, episode thirteen)

'For Those Who Think Young' (season two, episode one)

‘The Mountain King’ (season two, episode twelve)

‘The Floor’ (season five, episode five)

‘A Tale of Two Cities’ (season six, episode ten)

‘In Care Of…’ (season six, episode thirteen)

‘The Strategy’ (season seven, episode six)

‘Waterloo’ (season seven, episode seven)

DVD bonus features referenced (ordered by seasons)

*Mad Men* (2007, US: AMC), Season 1 DVD special feature.

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**Endnotes**

[i] See for example Edgerton’s *Mad Men: Dream Come True TV* (2010), and Carveth and South’s *Mad Men and Philosophy: Nothing Is as It Seems* (2010), Goodlad, Kaganovsky, and Rushing’s edited collection *Mad Men, Mad World: Sex, Politics, Style and the 1960s* (2013), Dill-Shackleford, K.E., Vinney, C., Hogg, J.L. and Hopper-Losenicky, K.’s *Mad Men Unzipped: Fans on Sex, Love, and the Sixties on*

*TV* (2015), Booker and Batchelor's *Mad Men: A Cultural History* (2016), Bronfen's *Mad Men, Death and the American Dream* (2016), as well as articles such as Spigel's 'Postfeminist Nostalgia for a Prefeminist Future (2013), and Shimpach's '*Mad Men* is History'(2017).

[ii] This failure is further underlined by the flashback preceding the scene, which revealed the fraudulence of Don's own identity and its fall-out through the painful denial of his relationship with his younger brother and the resulting disastrous consequences, another example of family failed and abandoned.

[iii] See for example S. Pezeshki's blog on the *Mad Men* offices, which offers links to particular iconic items seen on the show. Similarly, *House and Home* offers a retro feature on getting the *Mad Men* look for your own home (Clery 2012).

[iv] See for example: madmanbowman, (2010) and H. Walker (2010).

[v] Screenbid *Mad Men* Auction 2018.

[vi] Although arguably there have been other drama series that have breached the gap between genres and have entered the lifestyle domain, one example being the recent *Downtown Abbey* (2010-15), which also sparked a lot of lifestyle interest, in particular in relation to costume.

[vii] While *Mad Men*'s nostalgic fixation on the beauty of its own reproduction of period design would suggest Higson's critique of the 1980s heritage film (Higson, 1993) as style overruling critical narrative content, at the same time it defies it by thematising this very issue through its focus on advertising. After all, in an advertisement world, surface is narrative function.