

Television as psychological object:

***Mad Men* and the value of psychoanalysis for television scholarship**

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Abstract:

Claims that *Mad Men* (2007-15) is an obedient postfeminist text overlook the drama's images of both women and the history of feminism and its potential to impact on contemporary understandings of gender politics. *Mad Men* can be seen as a psychological object, helping viewers to explore links between their own experience and that of characters on screen as the narrative unfolds. Making links between the social re-emergence of feminist awareness, the drama's representations of second wave feminism, and a psychoanalytic understanding of mourning, I suggest that a return to psychoanalytic methodologies has the potential to enrich television scholarship.

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With its associated opportunities for viewers to engage with television drama via a plethora of “on-demand” services, “new” television provides scope to re-visit questions about the psychodynamics of viewing experience in the context of television scholarship. This is demonstrated in debates about binge watching and its links to emerging interfaces of media consumption (Brunsdon, 2010; Jenner, 2015; Matrix, 2014; Perks, 2015). For many viewers, television provides intimate, close encounters with beloved characters and stories, offering psychological solace as well as pleasure. The intensification of such experience in the context of contemporary modes of television consumption often underpins media panics about the dangers of screen addiction (Anon., 2016; Donnelly, 2016). At the same time, however, the idea that television characters and dramatic narratives are frequently described as “relatable” suggests that the psychological dynamics of viewing experience bear closer scrutiny and invite careful theorising.

This article aims to contribute to the development of critical and theoretical approaches to understanding the complex psychological dimensions of contemporary viewing practices. It draws on object relations psychoanalysis to explore how the pleasures of television drama are entwined with shifting paradigms of identity and self-experience. Its case study focus is on *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-15), and, more specifically, on the show’s engagement with second wave feminism. The psychoanalytic idea of parallel processes offers a useful tool with which to examine how the show’s treatment of women taps into the psychological relationship of viewers to cultural and ideological moments of history. Arguing that mediated experience has the power to resonate emotionally and psychologically with viewers, I suggest that television drama can become a “mentalised” object, and as such, has the capacity to impinge on senses of identity. In this regard, *Mad Men* is an especially interesting text for analysis because of its repeated use of fictionalised re-mediations of moments of 1960s actuality – a decade that is widely acknowledged as a period of history in

which identity politics crystallised. *Mad Men*'s depiction of this era lends itself well to the exploration of the idea of "media objects of the mind" and their relationship to contemporary shifts in identity politics in the viewing context because of this thematic emphasis – although, of course, other dramas could be read in similar ways. I explore the psychodynamics of ideological fictions of history, gender, and cultural politics in a specific sub-narrative strand of *Mad Men*, a programme that plays with themes of identity, offering some viewers an opportunity to re-visit questions about the complex relationship between feminism and the postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007; 2017).

However, one of the benefits of studying *Mad Men* as an exemplar is that it not only taps into identity-themes, but that its broadcast history means that it can be seen as a transitional television text that straddled the shift from scheduled viewing slots into streaming contexts. It can therefore provide a useful barometer through which to examine the impact of streaming technologies on the unconscious processes of television viewing. In the discussion that follows, the emphasis is on the show's depictions of the experience of its key female characters over the serial's duration. It is important to keep in mind the "slow-burn" exposition of this narrative over a number of years in the initial broadcast context, regardless of the fact that streaming services now make it possible to watch the entire series over a short duration of time. In selecting a thematic case study from the array of narrative threads, my aim is to examine a limited body of textual material as a means of testing out my theoretical hypotheses and to consider how media objects take shape in the mind thanks to the entangled parallel processes of television viewing itself, and the lived emotional experience that it offers viewers through ideas of "reliability". By drawing on the broader scholarly and popular discussion of *Mad Men* and its relation to feminism and postfeminism, I also aim to explore the show's ideological and cultural signifiers and their relationship to themes of identity, pleasure, and ideology, so as to triangulate the discussion.

Shaping Mad Men as a mentalised media object

Mad Men has garnered plentiful critical commentary exploring its appeal and textual politics. The show focuses on the home and professional lives of a group of Madison Avenue advertising company employees and their families in 1960s New York, and is often lauded for both the factual accuracy of its fictional renditions of real-world events and its scrupulous attention to detail in its settings and narrative themes. Praise for the series is often concerned with its allure as an historical drama (de Groot, 2011), but its merits as either a feminist, postfeminist, 'pre feminist', or just plain misogynistic text are also widely discussed (Agirre, 2012; Blake, 2010; Coontz, 2010; de la Torre, 2012; Engoron, 2010; Ferrucci, Schoenberger and Schauster, 2014; Fuehrer Taylor, 2015; McClean, 2008; Spigel, 2013). The intersection of history with gender politics in both the drama of *Mad Men* and its reception is fascinating. The show made timely narrative use of sexual and cultural politics, chiming with a resurgent interest in popular debates around the lived experience of social inequalities.

The drama incorporates fictionalised references to many key real life events from the 1960s in its plotting and narrative arcs. Of course, *Mad Men* is not the only television drama to do this. However, as suggested above, its temporal setting in the 1960s aligns it closely with the popular politicisation of identity politics, and its play with narrativised renditions of real life events makes for an emotionally resonant experience for viewers whose lives have been inscribed through them. The narrative arcs of *Mad Men* chime with the experience of viewers familiar with events such as the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968 and the moon landing in 1969, which had global and historical reach. However, *Mad Men* also frequently depicts less well known moments of 1960s US popular cultural experience, by making reference to key moments in the evolution of the women's movement, for example, or to popular cultural events such as the music concert given by The Beatles at Madison

Square Garden in 1965. Many of these events have, of course, become clichéd signifiers of the era, conjuring up common fantasies associated with its legacies. Nevertheless, operating in tandem with the appeal to lived experience, such fantasies invite reflection on the part of viewers about the links between mediated snapshots of history and questions of both identity formation and meaningful engagement with politics.

Critical approaches to these questions can usefully be expanded through reference to the psychoanalytic concept of “the object”. Drawing on the work of psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, Roger Silverstone (1994: 19) argues that television becomes a psychological object by

extending our reach and our security in a world of information, locking us into a network of time-space relations, both local and global, domestic and national, which threaten to overwhelm us but also to provide the basis for our claims for citizenship or membership of community and neighbourhood. ... [and by] ... providing in its genres and its narratives stimulation and disturbance, peace and reassurance.

Influenced by Silverstone, I have elsewhere suggested (AUTHOR, XXXX: 35) that object relations psychoanalysis helps to illustrate ‘the ever more entrenched relationship of everyday life to processes of mediatization and emotional experience’. “Media objects of the mind” are closely entwined with the lived experience of identity in the digital era, impacting on what we understand as “selfhood” and drawing attention to its plastic qualities. Theorising the “media object of the mind” provides a framework for understanding how on-screen characters can seemingly speak so intimately to personal emotional and psychological experience. I shall argue that this approach allows a deeper understanding of the complex

intersections between lived experience, cultural memory, fantasy, and senses of identity. The longevity of some televisual experience, together with the intimacy that it fosters play an important part in shaping meaning. In the case of *Mad Men*, for example, the show's lengthy duration in the original broadcast context mimicked the slow evolution of the social and cultural shifts embedded in the dramatic storylines, allowing interested viewers to contemplate the time it had taken for such seismic changes to take root. In this essay, I aim to enrich existing debates in television studies by demonstrating how this dimension of television consumption requires interrogation if we are to understand its significance, and to show how *Mad Men*'s creative deployment of historical events opens up space for the internalisation of fictionalised experience and its re-imagination in relation to selfhood. An object relations model of psychoanalysis brings the mechanisms at work into view.

In its invitation to recall and recognise the important history of the seeming acquisition of civil rights in the US and beyond, *Mad Men* frames its stories in terms of the rise of popular, image-led culture that has become so dominant in the decades ensuing since the 1960s, when the drama is set. Themes of conflict, loss, fear, and anxiety colour the show's narrative as we watch its characters grapple with the tensions of complex emotional experience in times of rapid, unanticipated change driven by technological developments, shifting cultural values, and burgeoning resistance through activism in response to social inequities – experiences that certainly resonate for viewers who are aware of similar paradigm shifts in the contemporary viewing context, and whose capacity for internalising such resonances is therefore heightened. The show makes plentiful use of images of characters watching news unfold on television screens, revealing the role played by television in our everyday mediated relationship to the world. It also depicts the consumption of news of events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), the assassination of President John F Kennedy (1963), and the moon landing (1969). Eventually, characters also experiment with

using television as a platform for persuasion in their everyday work of advertising. For some viewers, then, the show's treatment of television in shaping a sense of being in the world and, more broadly, of being informed *about* the world, invites reflective engagement: what might our own viewing of historical drama on television say about current ideological imperatives? How does the inclusion of real world events within the fictions of *Mad Men* invite us to identify more deeply with characters on screen, and, perhaps, to therefore imagine them as our own historical antecedents?

Thinking about such questions requires an understanding of the significance of the psychological experience of watching television and its role in shaping televisual pleasure. In deploying a psychoanalytic approach, I aim specifically to avoid the pitfalls of Freudian and Lacanian approaches to screen culture in which viewing pleasures are understood simply in terms of theoretical subject-positions that provide an index of ideological meaning. Instead, I draw on object relations theory, where the theoretical focus is on the impact of experiences of and with other people and the lived environment. The emphasis here is on what we *do* with cultural artefacts, both in terms of shared experience and psychological fantasy. To this end, it is helpful to explore *Mad Men*'s mobilisation of recognisable historical events linked to second wave feminism, and the way that this shapes a sense of how shared histories provide a springboard for thinking about present day experience – an approach that also demonstrates the therapeutic potential of popular culture when we read it through a psychoanalytic lens. Taking a particular focus on the role of women in this show, this essay challenges the idea that *Mad Men* is *simply* an exemplar of postfeminist culture, suggesting that it also brings to light unspoken dimensions of certain women's history in ways that can impact on the self-experience of viewers in the contemporary moment. Psychoanalysis affords opportunities to get beneath the surface of representational politics and to think about both the messy and nuanced ideological messages that are conveyed.

I argue that *Mad Men* – and, by extension, television drama more broadly – works as a form of psychical object for its viewers – one that enables (sometimes contradictory) psychological work around identity to be carried out. I discuss the potential for emotional and political agency in relation to some of the show’s key themes, and consider how a psychoanalytic approach reconfigures understandings of *Mad Men*’s impact. By focusing on the show’s narrative treatment of women and gender politics in the 1960s, I consider its invitation to reflect on the losses of a moment in which civil rights activism was in the ascendant. Arguing that *Mad Men* offers viewers a complex opportunity through which to understand the relationship between history, loss, and identity, I explore the drama’s relationship to *contemporary* gender politics, suggesting that it contributes to renewing feminist consciousness in the domain of popular culture, despite the complex and often messy iterations of gender dynamics fostered in its narrative arcs.

Mad Men and the question of postfeminism

Questions about the underlying gender politics of *Mad Men* have led critics to claim that the show evinces a ‘slave-like adherence to patriarchy’ (Ferrucci, Schoenberger and Schauster, 2011: 100) or that it constitutes little more than ‘a new kind of postfeminist nostalgia’ in which ‘visions of prefeminism’ elide any representation of feminism itself, leading viewers into conceptualising postfeminism as ‘a form of feminist progress: a female future perfect circa 1962’ in which ‘feminism as a political struggle’ is forgotten (Spigel, 2013: 273-8). While Spigel is keen to assert that *Mad Men* is essentially a postfeminist text, then, she nevertheless concedes that it also provides ‘a rich field to mine for female narratives and even counter-narratives to the *Happy Days* versions of the 1950s’ (2013: 272).

Much of the academic work critiquing *Mad Men* for depicting retrograde gender politics was published before the show’s finale aired and, as a result, it demonstrates some of

the challenges associated with the critical analysis of long form television and its reception. *Mad Men* makes for a particularly interesting example, given its ‘slow burn’ storyline grounded in a history of women’s liberation that is accentuated in the show’s narrative arc as each season deals with around one year of a specified decade, the 1960s – a period of US history in which, as noted above, the liberal gains underpinning the subsequent development of cultural politics have their roots. Now that the show has ended, it is possible to reflect further on the extent to which *Mad Men* fosters a *purely* postfeminist sensibility, and to consider how understanding it as a psychological object might allow its feminist potential to come to light.

Many critiques of the show as postfeminist were published before the point at which season 5 of *Mad Men* had aired in 2013 – this season spans the year 1966-7. As such, they therefore predate the show’s treatment of the key political shifts underpinning the emergence of second wave of feminism in an era that saw the eventual adoption of civil rights into both legislation and forms of social practice in the workplace and beyond. Of course, the issue of women’s rights was abroad throughout the 1960s, but the gains made as a result of burgeoning social shifts in this period would not be felt in the lived experience of everyday culture until long after the decade had closed. The narrative of *Mad Men* itself draws to a close in 1970, the year that Bonnie J. Dow (2014: 2) describes as ‘*the* pivotal year in the launching of what was then called “women’s liberation” into mediated public consciousness in the United States’. Documenting the media coverage of the Women’s Liberation Movement on television, Dow (2014: 18) asserts that ‘television’s sustained attention to the movement that year [1970] performed decisive and long-lasting rhetorical and definitional work that would profoundly affect the movement’s image politics’. It therefore seems important to consider how *Mad Men*’s remediations of women’s experiences of second wave

feminism might be read in this context with an eye to the rhetorical and textual politics of the show itself.

From season 6 onwards, the show makes reference to a number of key historical moments. In ‘A Tale of Two Cities’ (*Mad Men* 2007-15. 6: 10), for example, Joan Holloway (later Harris) (Christina Hendricks) and Peggy Olsen (Elisabeth Moss) collaborate without the knowledge of their male bosses to secure a new account with Avon cosmetics, while, in ‘The Quality of Mercy’ (*Mad Men* 2007-15. 6: 12), Sally Draper (the daughter of Don and Betty) (Kiernan Shipka) begins to experiment with cigarettes and alcohol as a teenage girl. While this fits with time-hallowed visions of ‘rebellious’ experimentation as a feature of youth, it also symbolises how young middle class women would come to reject the homemaker experience of their mothers as they came of age during the 1970s, foreshadowing a more adventurous engagement with social mores, sexual identity, and political values. In this, Sally is influenced by the free spirit of her father’s new wife, Megan Draper (Jessica Paré), who, in ‘To Have and To Hold’ (*Mad Men* 2007-15. 6: 3), discusses the complex emotional experience of miscarrying a baby that she did not want, before separating from her husband to pursue a career as an actress on the more liberal west coast of the US. Season 6 also covers the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968 and sees an enhancement of the role of the show's first major African American character, Dawn Chambers (Teyonah Parris), as discussed below. In ‘Lost Horizon’ (*Mad Men* 2007-15. 7: 12), Joan makes explicit reference to figures, events, and organisations such as Betty Friedan, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission, the sit-in staged at *Ladies’ Home Journal*, the *Newsweek* sexism lawsuit, and the women’s strike for equality, all of which took place in 1970. In the same episode, Betty Draper (January Jones) is seen reading the work of Sigmund Freud as she enrolls to study for a university degree despite her diagnosis of cancer, while, in ‘Time and Life’ (*Mad Men* 2007-15. 7: 11), Peggy challenges

her work colleague, Stan Rizzo (Jay R. Ferguson), about the freedom of men to have children without necessarily knowing, and also to walk away from their responsibilities as fathers, highlighting her own painful experience of having had an unplanned baby who was adopted earlier in the series. The plotting here reveals the importance of time in allowing Peggy to express the feelings she has about this episode in her life, which took place some 8-9 years earlier in the show's chronology. For long-term viewers of the show, this is a profoundly moving moment.

The closing seasons of the show, then, bring in clear references to historical moments in the evolution of second wave feminism, putting the development of the movement on show for viewers, albeit that this history is firmly couched in a familiar, predictable teleological narrative of feminist liberalism, as well as being fictionalised. Of course, *Mad Men* does not succeed in depicting a fuller, more complex account of the development of second wave feminism, and it is clear that the show never really engages with the difficult struggles within the feminist movement around issues of class, "race", and sexual orientation. Indeed, the show also undercuts the feminist gains made by the female characters, ensuring, for example, that Peggy's career success is often entangled with her 'unlucky in love' personal life. In psychoanalytic terms, then, the messiness of women's lived experience is echoed for viewers, and becomes available to them for psychological use, through strategies of identification, disavowal and internalisation – the competing, often contradictory, and exceedingly slow shifts in gender politics are starkly put on show. Nevertheless, *Mad Men* puts on view a history of the feminist movement (albeit a limited one), helping to bring to an end to its broader silencing in popular culture.

Over the duration of its narrative, *Mad Men* offers viewers an arresting array of images of women. These encompass a diverse range of experience for different characters, charting many elements of women's everyday lives during the 1960s in metropolitan New

York, including some that are rather unedifying. The show frequently highlights the unspoken labour of white middle class women's lives, revealing, for example, Joan's day-to-day production of herself as a sex bomb, Peggy's struggle to assert her professional acumen and to gain recognition for her work by her male bosses, and Betty's stifling daily life, in which her experience is emphasised as a form of internal emotional violence, thus enunciating unspeakable aspects of women's lived and psychological experience during the 1960s. This is seen very starkly in 'Shoot' (*Mad Men* 2007-15. 1: 9): when Betty's ambition to return to a modelling career is thwarted, she tells Don (Jon Hamm) that she has changed her mind about working because she doesn't like Manhattan on her own and because her place is at home, as his wife and the children's mother. In the painful sequence that follows, we see her in a house coat, making breakfast for the children and describing to Don the day's main activity – watching the local pool being filled – in a way that connotes the tedium of her daily life. Later, she casually goes outside to shoot at the next door neighbour's pigeons with a shotgun whilst smoking a cigarette.

One of the focal points of the show, then, at least around its main female characters, is to depict the lived experience of these women in New York during the 1960s, and the inherent, unspoken psychological torpor that this implies. In *Mad Men*, this experience is inevitably linked to a particular, hegemonic socio-economic class, but there is nevertheless an interesting emphasis on interiority and unspoken aspects of identity. For viewers interested in reflecting on their own attachment to these characters, and to television drama more broadly, reflexivity and self-experience are modelled as a source of meaning and understanding. This goes some way toward accounting for the reported "relatability" quotient associated with contemporary television viewing, despite the ease with which one might associate "relatability" with neoliberal imperatives of self-improvement and self-care (Pramaggiore, 2017: 187). It also signals how prolonged exposure to the shifting socio-psychological

experiences of these characters contributes to the shaping of the drama more broadly as a media object of the mind.

In season five, *Mad Men* introduces its first major character of colour, Dawn Chambers. The introduction of a major character of colour so late in the sequence of the show's development reflects the persistence of commonplace white privilege in the contemporary television industry, as well as marking the painful slowness with which questions of "race", experience and inequality came to be acknowledged as part of the civil rights agenda in the 1960s US context – Dawn's role ought not to be overstated. Nevertheless, Dawn's storylines do shed some light on the complex relationship between diverse forms of female experience and the emergence of second wave feminism, touching on the fraught tensions produced by the movement's somewhat uneven approach to issues of intersectionality. In 'A Day's Work' (*Mad Men* 2007-15. 7: 2), for example, Dawn and Shirley (Sola Bamis), another African American character who works at the ad agency, make a joke of using each other's names as they greet one another, making sardonic reference to the everyday experience of having their names confused by their predominantly white colleagues. *Mad Men* highlights the painful reality of office life for women of colour in this period as it alludes to the experience of hegemonic blindness to racial diversity. The complexity of Dawn's workplace encounters is further developed in scenes with Peggy during 'Mystery Date' (*Mad Men* 2007-15. 5: 4), after Peggy invites Dawn to stay at her flat after discovering that she has been sleeping at the office after working late due to unrest on the streets of Harlem where she lives. Once at home, Peggy drinks too much and tries to bond with Dawn:

Peggy: We have to stick together. I know we're not really in the same situation, but I was the only one like me there for a long time.

Dawn: I appreciate that. ...

Peggy: Do you think I act like a man?

Dawn: I guess you have to a little...

Peggy: I try, but... I don't know if I have it in me. I don't know if I want to.

Moments later, when Peggy leaves Dawn to sleep on the sofa, there is an agonising scene when Peggy resists an impulse to pick up her handbag before going to bed, and there is unspoken, excruciating discomfort exchanged through mutual gazes as the characters realise that the unconscious bias on show contradicts the seemingly “sisterly” encounter shared earlier on. Eventually, Dawn’s career at the agency gradually progresses as she takes up Joan’s position as Personnel Manager in ‘A Day’s Work’ (*Mad Men* 2007-15. 7: 2).¹

Mad Men as a whole, then, succeeds in enunciating aspects of female experience, both lived and psychological, that largely went unspoken in the commonplace culture of the 1960s. At the same time, however, the serial highlights for the viewer the gradual socio-historical developments taking place through the women’s liberation movement and its growth during the time-frame of the series, presenting a timely reminder of the struggles made by some women in the 1960s for the rights that western women enjoy today. The apparently “postfeminist” context of reception is intruded upon in such gestures. The show reveals experience that eventually culminated in feminist consciousness raising, and the presence of a character such as Sally Draper is crucial here. Her experience of a complex, “modern” family life full of emotional challenges and dysfunctionality leads to her consolidation as an independent young female character, whom one can well imagine taking up the invitations of second wave feminism as it gained ground in the everyday lives of many women during the 1970s and beyond. Being able to imagine the future that Sally might live

as a result of personal memories and lived experience allows viewers to map the unscreened future of *Mad Men*'s characters, and I argue that this deepens the viewer relationship to the show as a media object in the mind.

It is worth noting that any insistence that the climate of reception is coloured only by the discursive constraints of postfeminism glosses over the intricate complexities of the evolution of feminism more broadly. As recent critical work suggests (Baumgardner, 2011; Cochrane, 2013), there is an emergent fourth wave of feminism that began in 2008 with the advent of Web 2.0, and this highlights the propensity of feminism to survive and evolve *despite* the ideological constraints of postfeminism, which, nevertheless, continues to be an influential ideological force. Beyond the context of popular culture, and despite the imperatives of the postfeminist sensibility, however, feminist culture had continued to persist throughout the early 2000s. Like long form television, feminism is a living concept, one that shifts shape over time in response to ideological imperatives and lived experience. Nevertheless, in terms of popular culture, postfeminism tended to be all encompassing during this period, with many young women disavowing the relevance of feminism to their own lives. Since 2008, such entrenched attitudes have begun to shift, so that “feminism” is now such a widely used term in western popular culture that it was selected as a “word of the year” by Merriam Webster in 2017 (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/word-of-the-year-2017-feminism/feminism>). While critics might observe that the popular usage of “feminism” is often shot through with postfeminist logic, the rise of grassroots feminist organisations and campaigns is also starkly visible, and postfeminism has gradually lost its power as the hegemonic force of the day, despite its tenacious grip rooted in the neoliberal project.

There is a curious consonance between the lifespan of *Mad Men* and the shifts in the tenor of debate around the “deathliness” of postfeminism that merits further scrutiny. While

Mad Men unmistakably offers its viewers images of female experience overwritten with tales of oppression, it also works toward a narrative resolution that is grounded in the assertion of female identity in and on its own terms. The suggestion that *Mad Men* is, in the end, trapped in its postfeminist conceits can be thrown into question by considering its role in shaping a form of cultural working through that shares much in common with mourning. The long duration of the show's run, and its "slow burn" narrative arc foster a sense of time being taken, and endured. The deeply emotive themes of the show, especially in season finale episodes, contribute to its affective impact, and thus to its instantiation as a media object of the mind. The narrative of *Mad Men* gradually (and often painfully) reveals the gains made by some (mainly white) women thanks to second wave feminism during a period in which contemporary viewers are mired in a sense of these having been lost or, at least, elided. These dimensions of the show's relationship to time and history, and its insistence on the relevance of history for the present provide scope to read the show as facilitating a form of working through, as I discuss below, once again highlighting the potential psychological uses made of television as psychical object. Before turning to this theme, it is important to consider the role of temporality in more detail.

The temporalities of Mad Men

There is an important dimension of this drama that is contingent on what Fiona Cox (2012) describes as 'the prolonged temporality of the narrative, which has deeply feminist consequences'. As Jason Mittell (2006: 31) notes, serial television enjoys an extended temporal form and the consequent narrative complexity should not be overlooked. The "slow-burn" of *Mad Men*'s narrative structure showcases (Cox, 2012) the deconstruction of female objectification, making it essential to refer to the drama as a whole to make sense of its gender political imperative. In particular, it is worth noting the role played by time in shaping

the emotional experience of viewing *Mad Men*. Time is not simply dislocated through the conceit that we are watching a period drama. It is also visually rendered for viewers, as Prudence Black and Catherine Driscoll (2012) have argued, through the inclusion of scenes from a carefully selected television archive. The relay of the passage of time is accentuated in this way, and the viewer has a keen sense of its importance for the narrative that unfolds across an extended period of years in the present moment. Drawing on Hayden White, Black and Driscoll conceptualise *Mad Men* as a form of ‘monumental history’ that is ‘future-directed’ while pointing to past events. It therefore invites analysis as a ‘story of social transformation’ (2012: 200).

It is, of course, possible to go further to suggest that some viewers internalise this mode of address, so that the drama offers cues for the avid viewer to reflect on their own relationship to time and television, and this adds to the potential of the show to enable a psychological process of working through. It is worth noting that the show first aired in 2007, a point at which critical commentary on the phenomenon of postfeminism was in the ascendant. In preceding years, third wave feminism, with its focus on queer identities and sex positive experience, emerged in the context of a renewed ideological focus on individualism, while postfeminist forces aligned with neoliberal values around choice, practices of consumption, and modes of self-production. All of this provided rich material for the development of television shows such as *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), as well as the now well-established makeover genre of reality television. Debates about the (post)feminist status of such television are documented in various critical commentaries on their pleasures and constraints for their predominantly female viewers (Akass and McCabe, 2003; Gill, 2007; Jermyn, 2009; McRobbie, 2008).

Mad Men found its way onto our screens just as the postfeminist wave was beginning to ebb as a result of increased online participation and activism facilitated by social media,

microblogging and so on. Twitter was launched in 2006, the year before *Mad Men* began to air, and the role of this microblogging platform in shaping initiatives such as Laura Bates's #everydaysexism project, which launched in 2012, is well known. By the time the drama ended in 2015, there was widespread agreement about an emergent fourth wave of feminism, and this surely inflects and re-surfaces an array of cultural sensibilities around feminism, feeding into the dynamics of emergent, dominant and residual cultural politics (Williams 1977) despite the tenacity of the postfeminist sensibility. The intervening period saw a number of key events that mark this gender political turn, including, for example, the arrival of feminist grassroots organisations such as One Billion Rising, established in 2012. Times have changed and there has been a move away from the view that the postfeminist sensibility described by Rosalind Gill (2007) and others is entrenched and irretrievably bound up with a dominant landscape coloured by a neoliberal agenda, albeit the case that, as Gill (2016: 610) later suggests, the notion of postfeminism 'still has much to offer feminist cultural critics'. Postfeminism certainly has not disappeared; however, the spread of more consciously feminist interventions into popular culture suggests that "feminism" once more exerts its own ideological pressures, so that the complex lived experience of gender in all its forms provides plentiful substance for popular debate and discussion. The psychological and emotional violence of the postfeminist neoliberal experience has started to come to light. Consequently, it seems important to think otherwise about assertions that *Mad Men* is primarily a "postfeminist" text, so as to consider its role as a media object that contributes to an important psychological shift in both mood and understanding of current ideas about feminism and its contemporary relevance.

The role of television drama as a psychical object linked to this cultural and political turn is crucial here. Viewers of *Mad Men* are presented with a narrative fiction that mobilises re-tells the story of second wave feminism, shaping an understanding of how women find

themselves in the position they occupy today. This offers a crucial window of insight into the origins of gender politics, allowing viewers who are so inclined to re-work (or to work through) their personal relationships to feminism – relationships that are often paradoxical and disavowed as significant. The model of re-visiting past experience (and, indeed, of fictionalising it) in order better to understand the present, of re-telling stories in order to explore selfhood is key to the work of psychoanalysis in the consulting room. While I do not claim that television works in exactly this way, the idea of a television show being taken into the mind to facilitate self-exploration certainly seems to be worth exploring for scholars interested in the structures of pleasure and feeling that emerge from television engagement. From this perspective, it is possible to think about how *Mad Men* as a psychological object affords opportunities for feminism, while also revealing the transformational power of television.

Mad Men as a transformational object

As we have seen, ‘the postfeminist sensibility’ (Gill, 2007, 2016) is no longer seen as the logical endpoint of second wave feminism despite the apparently widespread hegemonic incorporation of neoliberal obedience at work in the “pleasures” of fashion guides advising women on ‘How to dress like Betty, Peggy and Joan’ (Aminosharei and Joseph, no date), or online games offering viewers a chance to ‘Mad Men Yourself’.² As we see in these examples, and as is now commonplace with popular television, the promotional culture around *Mad Men* mobilises the kind of postfeminist discourse associated with magazine culture, consumerism, and self-construction, and the neoliberal, postfeminist logic of the primacy of the individual. However, there is something interesting in the appeal to the identificatory structures on show in both this fashion advice column and the online game. As Spigel (2013: 275) notes, this kind of game lends itself to future-oriented role-playing for

young viewers of the show. Building on this, I argue that such media resources offer *all* viewers (regardless of their demographic) a space of experimentation with a kind of “as if” structure, presenting an opportunity to rework ideas of selfhood by entangling these with the show’s key signifiers of femininity on the verge of feminist consciousness. In a Winnicottian sense, such playful engagement enables an unconscious shift towards “potential space”, a space that is essential to the link between one’s experience of the lived environment and the capacity for creative activity and the search for the self. For Winnicott (1971: 54), ‘It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self’. In the kind of promotional games described above, with all the pleasures of extended fandom that they offer to viewers of the show, potential space is made available when viewers consider their points of overlap with and divergence from the complex female characters they see on screen. In this way, they act as transformational objects for the viewer, permitting them unconsciously to explore what it might mean to re-configure a sense of identity through the act of play with the signs of femininity associated with a historical moment in which political awareness was burgeoning – a safe fantasy of “pre-feminist me” can be articulated. In this way, we begin to understand how a television show such as *Mad Men* can become a psychical object, available for use in terms of unconscious interrogations of one’s sense of selfhood and one’s immersion in a complex ideological environment.

At the narrative level, it is rarely the case that *Mad Men* sentimentalises or romanticises its characters’ experiences. Many of the show’s most sexist sequences are often brutal in tone, shocking viewers deeply, as in the moment when Joan is raped on the floor of her boss’s office by her fiancé in ‘The Mountain King’ (*Mad Men* 2007. 2: 12). Indeed, critics are broadly in agreement that the show offers an affective and sensory experience, with frequent references to the *mise-en-scène* as ‘sleek’ with camera-work verging on the

‘lewd’ (La Ferla, 2007), a look and feel that is ‘invigorating’ and full of ‘jangling tension’ (Kronke, 2007), ‘ugly-beautiful ... dark and complex’ (Delaney, 2008), so that the show becomes ‘a sumptuous feast ... [full of] sheer elemental attractiveness’ (Crupi, 2008) – for Matt Brennan (2015), *Mad Men* is a ‘work of art’.

The show’s critical reception lays emphasis on its sensory pleasures, and these also extend beyond the realm of the sitting room, as the identificatory structures of the show encourage viewers to enhance their own present day lives with retro soft furnishings, cocktails, vintage music and luxury clothing – the sensory appeal of the fictional world is extrapolated into the real life experience of the viewers, who frequently share these pleasures with others in their friendship groups, for example, by throwing *Mad Men* parties, or by consciously shaping their self-presentation through the accoutrements of fashion produced in homage to the show.³ Also of note is the discussion of *Mad Men* online, in fora such as Reddit (www.reddit.com), where the thread entitled ‘How *Mad Men* helped me to understand the anger in my mother’s feminism’ anticipates many of the themes that follow in my analysis below. The use of the object, then, extends beyond the lived experience of watching the drama itself. Viewers may connect to the sumptuous on-screen world that surrounds the characters of the show to such an extent that they actively work to reconstitute it in their own lived experience. The consonance of fantasy with desire and playful engagement with the psychical object is starkly on show in such examples, demonstrating the ways in which viewers not only internalise drama as an object of the mind, but also put it to work in everyday life. Echoes of the work of Christopher Bollas (1979: 98) resound here as we contemplate the transformational potential of the television object:

... when an individual feels a deep subjective rapport with an object—a painting, a poem, during an opera or symphony, before a landscape—... the person experiences

an uncanny fusion with the object, an event that recalls the kind of ego experience which constituted his earliest experiences. ... such aesthetic moments do not sponsor memories of a specific event or relationship, they evoke a total psychosomatic sense of fusion—an ego experience—that is the subject's recollection of the transformational object.

Reading *Mad Men* as a psychical object allows us to understand the transformative, feminist potential of the psychological investment made by viewers in their preferred popular cultural texts. Following Bollas (1979), it is possible to link the emotional responses of viewers to the psychical processes at work when they are watching the show. This allows us to re-configure our understanding of the role played by television as a psychical object in a highly mediated age. Popular cultural artefacts such as long-form television drama can function as transformational and evocative objects, offering an opportunity for us psychologically to free ourselves from the shackles of postfeminism and other ideological imperatives that contribute to a sense of feeling stalled, with nowhere to go. In the example of *Mad Men*, the role of temporality is crucial and our experience of the text unfolding during a period of change in popular gender political sensibilities is important. Over a period of eight years, some viewers have been able to use the show to bring to mind the experiences of women during the 1960s in ways that make the advent of second wave feminism feel urgent and necessary. The parallels evoked by the show with contemporary experience began to be apparent as social media enabled the expression of experience around sexism in everyday life and so on, and so the mythologised time frame associated with the show had the potential to resonate strongly.

In effect, then, viewers move back and forth between the dramatic time and the contemporary moment, and in doing so, a personal connection to historical and fictionalised

events can evolve. Effectively, in its narrativisation of women's experience, *Mad Men* works at a psychological level to open up space in which to dramatise and consume the timely immanence of second wave feminism at a moment in contemporary history when gender politics were beginning to shift again. There is rich potential here for the internalisation of the show as an object, permitting its use by viewers to forge new perspectives on their own lived experiences. In other words, the show can be used to measure the lived gendered experience of viewers, providing a gauge of sorts against which to quantify it and surmise its impact on identity.

The close imbrication of media with everyday experiences of identity means that media function as key objects in both our external and inner worlds, suggesting that notions of "mediatisation" urgently need to pay attention to the psychodynamics involved. As Sonia Livingstone (2009: 5) suggests, 'today's media become meaningful because of coordinated human activity and, at the same time, people understand the world and their position in it through the media'. Media provide the contemporary subject with channels for both the uptake and output of emotional experience, and thus, serve important psychological, experiential and relational functions. In other words, media become key objects in the management of ideas about selfhood and interpersonal relationships, enabling creative engagement with the world around us. *Mad Men* works as an evocative transformational object that offers a vision of second wave feminism and creates potential space in which to mourn both its losses and grievances at the very moment when they come into focus again on the contemporary scene. In this way, the TV show allows viewers to move between temporal moments in order to make sense of the complex environment of gendered experience.

In our mediatised age, then, *Mad Men's* images of women and feminism serve as psychological objects that help to shape burgeoning political awareness and agency for some viewers, overthrowing the deathliness of the postfeminist sensibility with its dead-end sense

of hopeless despair. In offering images of the birth of second wave feminism and a critique of neoliberal postfeminism respectively, the show offers a timely ‘rearticulation’ (Slack, 1996) of feminism, feeding the cultural shift into a new wave of popular gender politics. A psychoanalytic approach draws attention to how our viewing pleasures have become intricately bound up with a sense of both identity and sociality, with all the contradictions and complexities that this implies. Television drama, then, has the potential to enunciate important dimensions of political agency, as in the case of *Mad Men*, and a psychoanalytic approach to television analysis provides a rich way of understanding how such structures of enunciation and consumption are entwined. In the age of streaming and on-demand services, television scholars need to develop appropriate methodological tools with which to understand the close (and sometimes addictive) relationship enjoyed with television by many viewers, alongside the imbrication of television with ideology. Conceiving of television drama as a psychological object affords new opportunities to do exactly this, revealing the complex entanglements of popular culture and the popular psyche.

Notes

1. Of course, these scenes evoke a great deal about white liberal guilt, showing how mainstream television fiction panders to hegemonic tendencies to reduce Black experience to representations that help to ‘keep whiteness and white (bad) feeling in the center’ (Kyröla, 2017: 2). As several critics have noted, “race” is not handled well in *Mad Men* thanks to its unthinking replication of dominant racialised discourses and logics (Beail, 2015; de la Torre, 2012; Martínez Guillem and Barnes, 2018; Ono, 2013; Wallace, 2013), and this feeds off and into the broader social context in which cultural differences continue to be marginalised and disavowed. One of the values of a psychoanalytic approach to

cultural dynamics is that it allows the unconscious dimensions of the complex and unsavoury processes at work to be surfaced, exposing the denials and slippages for analysis. In the context of *Mad Men* and its easy, neat forgetting of Dawn after her promotion at work, the ways in which discourses of “race” haunt cultural politics can be accessed, even if only fleetingly. Echoing the uneven internal politics of feminist movements and their engagement with questions of intersectionality, *Mad Men* opts to take a “light touch” approach to its characters of colour, trapping itself in the logic of dominant ideology, despite its apparent intentions. The manner in which “race” can be said to haunt the show is replicated in the broader critical terrain of debate around feminism and postfeminism as well, showing how (post)feminist scholarship has a long way to go before it can be understood as inclusive (Rossie 2018).

2. This game is available at: <http://www.amc.com/shows/mad-men/exclusives>.
3. There is a wide array of online advice on how to curate a *Mad Men* party, encompassing guidelines on how to decorate one’s home, what food and cocktails to serve, and what music to play. See, for example, Veiru, 2012; Tyzack, 2010. In 2013, Banana Republic, the US fashion company, launched a capsule *Mad Men* collection, including clothing for both men and women (<http://www.bananarepublic.com/products/mad-men-collection.jsp>).

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