The Legacy of Mad Men: Cultural History, Intermediality and American Television

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In the introduction to this full and varied collection the editors acknowledge that its subject, AMC’s Emmy, Golden Globe and BAFTA winning series Mad Men, is not lacking in critical or scholarly attention. The series has been analysed “from multiple angles” (1), spanning nostalgia, fashion, gender and even its influence on food and drink culture. However, the majority of these interventions were written during the series’ original run (2007-2015), before it reached its conclusion. The editors of this collection insist that “this particular show demands analysis by scholars who see the work as a whole,” and that it “begs for the views of global scholars” (2) that these essays bring to bear. The collection stems from Mad Men the Conferenceheld at Middle Tennessee State University in 2016, and contributions are organised into four thematic sections. “Mad Men’s Status: Television, Reputation*,* Fandom” considers Mad Men’s influence, status and legacy in terms of quality television and its enduring fandom. “Mad Men’sIntermediality; Film, Music, Poetics” explores the series as it relates to --- and utilises --- other forms of media, such as the music of The BeatlesandNancy Sinatra, and the series’ engagement with “adspeak” (the language of advertising). “Endings and Legacies: The Final Season” examines that which the collection considers to be previously under-theorised: Mad Men’s seventh and final season, as well as the culmination of the series’ ostensible main character and enduring icon Don Draper’s (Jon Hamm) character arch. The sections of particular interest to scholars of feminist media studies, “Gender and Race: The Complex Management of Power,” and the concluding “Afterword; reading Mad Men in the Era of Trump,” consider the multifaceted power relationships portrayed and explored in the series, as well as its role in both constructing and challenging nostalgia for the attitudes, norms and social relationships of the period it depicts.

The first two chapters of “Gender and Race: The Complex Management of Power,” pick out the insularity of Mad Men’sdiegetic world. Rod Carveth analyses “The Depiction of the Civil Rights Movement on Mad Men*,*” (65-79) while Mimi White writes about “Mad MenWomen and the Lure of Feminism” (81-95). Both chapters discuss the series’ lack of engagement with the changing world outside of Sterling Cooper (the advertising agency featured in the series). Carveth contrasts the extreme attention to detail paid to elements of mise en scène--- fruit in the series appeared noticeably smaller to replicate the appearance of 1960s produce, for instance (65) --- with the almost entire omission of the Civil Rights Movement. Carveth suggests that by juxtaposing the racism of the series’ main characters with events such as the murders of Freedom Riders, seen in news coverage in one of the few episodes to engage with the Civil Rights Movement, Mad Men frames racism as a Southern phenomenon, far removed from their experience in the “enlightened north” (66). White’s chapter follows with a discussion of the ways in which Mad Men“focuses on individual women […] and pays scant attention to the fomenting women’s movement” (86). She argues that applying a “retro-anachronistic feminist approach ratifies certain understandings of women’s history and feminist and post-feminist politics while obscuring others” (86). The insularity of characters’, such as Peggy Olson’s (Elizabeth Moss), apparent feminism endorses what White terms “post- and neoliberal feminist revisions of mid-twentieth century working women’s lives” (86).

Maryn C. Wilkinson in “The Performativity of Labour and Femininity in Mad Men” (99-112) equates the series’ “rich and progressive” depiction of women with its conflation of “the performance of femininity with the performance of affective labour” (100, emphasis in original). Whilst acknowledging that Mad Men’s depicted division of male and female labour “does more than just underscore but actually re-validates the essentialist nature of this divide,” (104) Wilkinson ascribes feminist potential to the series’ acknowledgement of the emotional toll of female labour in both its domestic and professional manifestations.

Tracy Lucht and Jane Marcellus consider the violence done to the women under the guise of Mad Men’s corporate culture in their chapter “Mad Men, Corporate Culture, and Violence Against Women” (115-128). They suggest that by expanding the definition of violence to include violation scholars might “understand the spectrum of violence against women on television and in the work place” (116). Separating some of the series’ female characters into categories of “Token High-Level Woman” and “Corporate Wife” Lucht and Marcellus use Bourdeiu (1977) to demonstrate that in Mad Men*,* and in corporate culture more generally, “whatever women do they are disempowered by a gendered structure that reinforces symbolic violence” (120).

In the “Afterword: ReadingMad Menin the Era of Trump” McNally and Forde make a convincing case for the need to revisit historical dramas such as Mad Men and their “cultural ties to the present,” which are “not limited to the time of production but is necessarily renewed in each period of viewing” (251). This need seems particularly pressing in 2020 when nostalgia for a racist, sexist, cisnormative past is manifest and translated into acts of violence and oppression across multiple countries, including the US, the setting of the series. McNally and Forde describe Mad Men’s commentary as “almost prescient” in its depiction of America’s movement through “various stages of indifference, concealment, challenge and denial in relation to its gender and racial inequalities” (252). This collection’s engagement with the appeal and legacy of Mad Menand the past that it nostalgically recreates invites readers to consider the actual object of their nostalgia. Whether it be the nipped in waistlines, cat eye sunglasses and cutting wit of Sterling Cooper’s employees, or the power structures, inequalities and acts of symbolic violence that structured a world stratified by oppressive racial and gendered hierarchies.

References

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