# Mad about ‘Mad Men’



Among the growing world-wide audience for boxed sets of American television serials, the quiet but insidious craze for *Mad Men*spreads at a highly sophisticated level. People latch on who would never buy a boxed set of *Entourage*(too silly) or *Californication*(too dirty) or *Band of Brothers*(too noisy) or *The Sopranos* (too grisly) or *The Wire*(too druggy) of even *The West Wing*(too witty).  But a box of *Mad Men*they have to have, even if they haven’t seen a single episode on TV.

Transmissions of *Mad Men* on mainstream channels, in fact, draw a notably restricted audience. In its land of origin the show was a hit for the cable channel (AMC) that developed it, but a big cable audience is a small percentage of a network audience, and in other countries the show is usually a very minor event when it goes to air. It will be interesting to see if the Australian transmission of the show free to air on SBS (it has already run on Foxtel) makes a difference to this trend.

Even if it doesn’t, however, the distributors of the boxed set are likely to get happy all over again, because there is an upmarket consumer stratum out there whose hunger for the product seems to be made all the sharper by the fact that hardly anybody else knows about it. It’s like a taste for some home-made ice-cream that gets taken up by a big manufacturer: the marketing will depend on the message that somehow the product is still home made, even though it’s rolling out of a factory by the truck-load.

There’s a lesson there about advertising: a mass demand for something often begins when nobody knows about it except you and your friends. *Mad Men*is full of the lessons that were learned about advertising in its late 1950s and early 1960s boom days on Madison Avenue. (Mad Men is short-hand for Madison Avenue men. But you already knew.) Because they were boom days, people came flooding into the business whose intelligence might previously have kept them out, and one of the continuing thrills of the show is the sense of mentally energetic people breaking fresh ground and building a new city whose ethical basis they might question if they didn’t so much enjoy the lawless excitement, the sexy buzz and the view from the top floors. In this respect, the show’s closest predecessor is *Deadwood*: theMad Men are ruthless Western desperadoes in tailored suits, swearing much less but smoking a lot more. They, too, risk death. Indeed the actors playing the Mad Men might well be risking death from too many herbal cigarettes.

If the show has a weakness –and, dare I say it, it has – it lies in the fact that this thrill of contesting and tumultuous intelligence is too often damped down by a lingering emphasis on character. That could be part of the elitist appeal, however: when what sounds at first like a quick thriller by Raymond Chandler threatens to turn into a slow novel by Henry James, there will always be readers who feel flattered, and they might be right. Character studies are hard to do, and they give actors opportunities.

The central figure of *Mad Men*is a character study and almost nothing but. Tall, handsome, enigmatic and effortlessly dominant, Don Draper is the creative genius of the Sterling Cooper agency. The agency’s name is made up, and it turns out that Don Draper’s name is made up too: or at any rate he stole it. During the Korean War he switched dog-tags with a socially more privileged dying buddy and came home with a false identity. So he arrives on the avenue with at least one interior conflict already working full blast, and there are plenty more waiting for him on the road ahead.

The actor who plays him is ideal casting for a commanding figure racked by secrets. Blessed with a deep voice, an athlete’s grace, and good looks beyond cavil but not beyond the bounds of credibility, Jon Hamm is the actor with everything, except the sense to change his name. There must have been a moment, just before he hit the big time, when he still had a chance to call himself, say, Jon Hunque. His agent and every friend he had must have been trying to tell him. “Listen Jon, for God’s sake listen. You’re going to be huge, but the word “ham” means bad actor even with an extra “m”. Change it. Change it.” But he didn’t, because he didn’t have to. We’re in a new world now, when the mass market can cope with the raw facts.

In the old world, as represented in *Mad M*en, it can’t. The facts have to be cooked, by the Mad Men. Few of the Mad Men are women, but since creative intelligence is at a premium, there is a door open for talented females to push through, even though the males waiting on the other side might have the sexual ethics of wolves fuelled by alcohol. Doe-like in her shyness of eye but needle-sharp in her originality of brain, Peggy Olson (Elizabeth Moss) is determined to break through a glass ceiling that is set at floor level. Made pregnant by one of the account executives – a marvellously off-putting performance by Vincent Kartheiser – she hides the baby in case it slows her down.

One of Don Draper’s countless internal contradictions is that he can see Peggy’s potential even while he continues to repress his wife without a qualm. Betty (January Jones) was a model, a Grace Kelly look-alike, until she met Don, but now she is a full time housewife when not prostrate on the shrink’s couch. She has no idea of what her husband does in the office, or indeed, away from the office after lunch. When at work, however, even he must be on guard from detection by the all-seeing eye of office manager Joan Holloway (Christina Hendricks), she whose curvaceous behind can usefully be considered as the second most important character in the show. Most press pieces about *Mad Men*, especially if written by women, mention Joan’s salient rear end even before they get around to the sexual challenge posed by Don Draper’s brooding glance. The general assumption is that a dazzling job has been done of reproducing the way things were in those days.

It has, especially when it comes to things you can see. Right from the title sequence, which recalls the work that Saul Bass once did for Alfred Hitchcock, the look of the thing checks out in almost every detail. The men’s haircuts are exactly right, like their clothes. The women’s clothes are so right that it aches: underneath, the foundation garments must be firmly in place. Everything graphic has been reproduced from scratch, thus avoiding the usual anomaly of art direction by which people in days gone by read old-looking magazines.

Even those of us who were alive at the time will find it hard to find a fault, and those who weren’t might well be led to believe that the atmosphere of a high-powered advertising agency has indeed been captured. Pulsing below ceilings that are almost always in shot – the camera spends half its time aimed up from below eye level – the pressure cooker is practically bursting with angst, ambition and sexual tension. No hand-held shots; no Steadicam shots; even the technique is of the period. This, you are led to think, is the thing itself. But there is still more than one reason to worry about Joan’s voluptuous figure.

She’s a parody, and even at the time she would have been thought of as too much. Her conviction that the only desirable destiny of an office girl is to become a married woman is very plausible, but her incarnation of oomph is a put-up job by the shows’ creator, who wants to give us a past much more clear-cut than it actually was. Matthew Weiner  -- who is in control of *Mad Men* the way Aaron Sorkin was in control of *The West Wing*-- has devised a complex story about bright people but he has simplified them while doing so. The concept that a woman should be a brood mare was certainly still prevalent, but men who were smart at the level of advertising executives had already begun to question it. When Marilyn Monroe swivelled her butt in *Niagara*, there were already plenty of men who know it was a joke, and by the early 1960s the ideal of blatant sexiness had already given way to something far more subtle in the mind of any man who could read.

Right there, however, lies the biggest implausibility of the show. Most of the Mad Mencarry on as if they read nothing except their own advertising copy. The only intellectual among them smokes a pipe, to indicate unusual thoughtfulness. The rest of them live in a world without books. Not even the super-smart Don Draper has a book in his house. At one point in the plot he stumbles on a collection of Frank O’Hara’s poems and his swarthy attention is captured by the printed word. (This episode has done for O’Hara’s posthumous sales what*Four Weddings and a Funeral*did for W.H. Auden’s, but this time the readers are probably doomed to confusion, because very few of O’Hara’s poems get far beyond the condition of not being prose.) At all other times, the agency’s top ideas man behaves as if Gutenberg had never lived.

In *Mad Men*, the corporate world never questions its right to manipulate a captive audience. The truth of the matter was very different. Vance Packard had already published *The Hidden Persuaders*and most of the people in the upper echelons of the consumer society had read it. Social critiques were best sellers, just as movies like *Marty*won Oscars. Bob Newhart, Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce had already made their satirical records and most of the *Mad Men*had heard them. Mad Menwere part of the off-Broadway audience for Nichols and May. Some of the Mad Men -- notably David Ogilvy --were already producing successful advertisements that parodied the assumptions of their own culture. The Mad Men were much more conscious of what they were involved in than the show makes them out to have been. They would have talked about it among themselves. There would have been arguments, and, these being intelligent people, they would have been intelligent arguments about ethical purpose and legitimate method.

And that would have been the truly interesting conflict in the mind of Don Draper. He spends most of his time questioning himself but hardly any of it questioning his job. But questioning his job would have been part of his job, because one of the ways that advertising developed was by becoming more self-aware. Advertising was a medium, and that was what all the media did, on their way to generating the media world we live in now.

The media world we live in now has generated *Mad Men*, and it’s a high-end product, with a sure sense of the smart audience that would rather find it than be hit over the head with it. Even when they are hit over the head with it by an adroit international campaign of promotion, they are still convinced that they are finding it all by themselves. But what they are finding is yet another illusion, though a remarkably nuanced and fascinating one. The illusion is of a past when even the smartest people weren’t quite as smart as us. There is much talk in the press about how the secret of the show’s appeal lies in nostalgia – nostalgia for a time when a man was a man, a woman shaped like an hour glass had no ambition except to stay at home and cook, and everyone smoked like a train with no thought of ever hitting the buffers. But the show does better than that. It doesn’t make the mistake of presenting life on the avenue as a fairground.

Indeed it’s a prison, and young Peggy will have to fight her way out. But nobody will think their way out, and the awkward truth is that a lot of them, in reality, were already thinking. They just hadn’t figured out what to do next, mainly because they were involved in a paradox: it was the wealth they produced that would give them the freedom to question their lives. Stuck with the same paradox, we revel in the opportunity to look back and patronise the clever for not being quite clever enough to be living now. *Mad Men* is a marketing campaign: what it sells is a sense of superiority, and it sells it brilliantly. Personally I can t get enough of it. But then, I could never get enough of Rothman’s King Size filters in the brand-new flip-top box.

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