

Mad Men, Mad World: Sex, Politics, Style and the 1960s

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Mad Men, the AMC-produced, US drama set in a 1960s New York advertising agency, has garnered widespread praise and awards over its six series to date. With complex characterisation, slow-burning plotlines and a structure that weaves historical events into fictional narratives, it has attracted intelligent audiences and, increasingly, academic attention. *Mad Men, Mad World* is not the first publication to assess the programme; there are already at least a dozen books available, whether in the form of companion guides and readers or as appraisals of the show's distinctive design and style. Nonetheless, with its sixteen chapters covering a broad range of angles by scholars from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, this anthology undoubtedly offers the most critical and comprehensive coverage of the wider cultural implications of this popular series.

As a historical drama of the relatively recent past, there is much valuable reflection in the volume about *Mad Men's* particular temporal performance. The show's seemingly meticulous attention to period details in costume, sets and its context in the history of advertising is a distinctive feature that has been singled out for critical praise; indeed *Mad Men* is sometimes treated as quasi-documentary. While these period details are focal points of discussion in the book, contributors to *Mad Men, Mad World* cast a more scholarly eye over the interplay of mimesis and anachronism by not merely taking a fan's eye view of plausibility and error, but also analysing the show's visual and narrative constructions. In combining imagery taken from glamorous cinema and glossy magazines with literary naturalism, *Mad Men* appears faithful to a lavish period aesthetic even as it exposes aspects of life that remained out of the frame of popular film and lifestyle publishing. As the authors observe, part of *Mad Men's* complexity and appeal comes from the show's own self-referential and metatextual format where viewers are reminded throughout that they are watching a reconstruction of the 1960s that could never be confused with the original. For example, contributor Alexander Doty suggests that the show acts as 'a carefully calibrated palimpsest', overlaying selective representations of history with present day concerns. As such, its combination of 'truthiness' and revisionism offers an alluring and discomfiting 'historical uncanny' rather than straightforward nostalgic pleasure (see also Caroline Levine's chapter, 'The Shock of the Banal').

Specific episode content is deftly excavated in individual chapters for what it can reveal about historic and contemporary social and political attitudes. Notable case studies explore homosexuality, ethnicity and gender in *Mad Men*'s storylines in relation to the wider concerns of sexual liberation, civil rights and reproductive politics. At its most broad, the volume contributes to histories and theories of fashion, psychoanalysis, architecture, media and beyond. The interpretations are rarely internal to *Mad Men* as a programme; however, I would argue that it is necessary to be already closely familiar with the plot, characters and detail of the four series that the book covers in order for a reader to follow its analysis. It may even be necessary to be what television scholar Jason Mittell calls an 'acafan', that is, both an academic and a fan of the show; deeply knowledgeable of and broadly sympathetic with the subject of study. While *Mad Men, Mad World*'s authors can be strongly critical of *Mad Men* – particularly in relation to its 'postracial' handling of its few minority ethnic characters – the book as a whole functions as a riposte to those who have found the show to be 'smug' and self-congratulatory. Although contributors concede that, as a for-profit, ad-supported television show about advertising, the show can appear complicit in the cultures it sometimes critiques and thus produce the positions it addresses (see Lynn Joyrich's chapter, 'Media Madness'), all see the series as more complex and interesting than its detractors allow.

The length and depth of analysis in *Mad Men, Mad World* can be held up as a material testament to the programme's distinctive cultural value. Yet, with two further series still available for analysis, and a final series to follow, the book could be accused of reaching its conclusions rather prematurely. The editors are conscious that their readers are likely to know more of the show than they do at the time of writing; the excellent introduction and afterword helpfully and reflectively outline the parameters of the volume's aims, and explicate the broader contribution of its outcomes to cultural studies. The complex structures and long-form narrative of *Mad Men*, characteristic of so-called 'quality TV' programming, certainly gives the authors plenty to discuss; much will be of interest to *Visual Studies* readers. Given the fifty-plus hours of available programming and the evident correspondence between the show and its broader cultural contexts, however, I was a little concerned at the repetition between chapters. Several analyse the same scenes and pull out the same quotes from the script, albeit for different purposes; some more rigorous editing could have weeded this out or turned these overlaps into features. The 'acafandom' evident among the exclusively American contributors gives the volume a collective coherence but there is also room for further variety in perspective and tone. With more to come, there is more to see and more to say, and not just from *Mad Men*'s closest devotees.

References

Mittell, Jason. 2010. 'Smoke gets in my Eyes: On Disliking Mad Men.' *Just TV*. Accessed December 31, 2013. <http://justtv.wordpress.com/2010/07/29/on-disliking-mad-men/>