

Cultural Studies Review  
volume 18 number 2 September 2012  
<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrij/index>  
pp. 169–87  
© Monique Rooney 2012

## Turned Back

### *Mad Men* as Intermedial Melodrama

---

MONIQUE ROONEY

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

---

In the opening, animated sequence of AMC's *Mad Men*, a silhouetted figure—a businessman—appears with his back turned towards us. In business suit, briefcase in hand, this figure is shown entering an office that, almost immediately, begins to melt. As wall pictures, a desk, chairs and office fan dissolve, the black-suited figure is now reeling through the air, having jumped or fallen from the office skyscraper. As his body drops and turns during the fall, it passes giant billboards of 1960s advertising images and slogans. Over the blonde head of a glamorous model is the promise that you will 'enjoy the best America has to offer' and that 'it's the gift that never fails'. The cartoon credit sequence ends with the falling figure, not reaching ground zero, seated on a couch—his back again turned towards us—looking into a blank, white distance with his arm outstretched in an (overly) familiar gesture of business confidence.

Discussion of *Mad Men's* falling man credit sequence tends to divide along the lines of whether it communicates something about the show's aesthetics or its politics, as if the two realms are separable. When challenged about the insensitivity

of repeatedly screening images that resemble that infamous photograph of a man falling from a burning World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, *Mad Men's* creator and executive producer, Matthew Weiner, responded that the falling man 'is a symbol that far precedes that event'.<sup>1</sup> The visually striking opening credits introduce *Mad Men's* retro look and its fascination with a relatively recent rather than far-distant past. Along with 1960s inspired graphics and visual effects, period costumes and fetishistic recreation of mid-century interiors through lovingly re-designed *mises-en-scène*, the falling man clearly references and appeals to a current desire for the previous generation's style and aesthetics. Many have noted that the opening graphics cite American cinema classics, especially Alfred Hitchcock's spy melodrama *North by Northwest* (1959), further emphasising *Mad Men's* aesthetic rather than political investment in the past. Yet, as the questioning of Weiner attests, *Mad Men's* falling man has been the subject of much controversy and is read as politically loaded. As one writer puts it, the series' creators' marketing of the falling man 'seems out to remind viewers that the show is really about the Falling Man ... that for all its American-Century trappings, it's set squarely in the age of American decline.'<sup>2</sup>

But what of that final image (or gesture?) of that silhouetted businessman who, after the fall, reclines in confident pose, with back to the viewer? What might this final gesture—of a confident turning back and away from that which 'far precedes that event'—reveal about the politics of *Mad Men's* televisual aesthetic? On one hand, this is plainly a caricature, the credit's two dimensional prefiguring of *Mad Men's* lead character, Don Draper, who acts out blind desires but then turns his back on or disavows the consequences of his various falls. Read this way, the credit's animated figure might be thought of as both a stylistic and a critical gesture. Reading the credits as both a literal and a metaphoric 'turned back', as this essay contends, might enable a reading of *Mad Men* as a series that is both nostalgic for an earlier era and critiques (however obliquely) the conflicts and powerful orders of the present.

In his essay 'Notes on Gesture', Giorgio Agamben states that 'what characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured or supported'.<sup>3</sup> Agamben argues that gesture is 'pure mediality'. In breaking with 'the false alternative between ends and means', gesture articulates a 'being-in-language', 'the communication of a communicability'.<sup>4</sup> In coming to this elusive

definition of gesture, Agamben refers to a remark from ancient Roman thinker, Varro:

The third stage of action is, they say, that in which they *faciunt* 'make' something: in this, on account of the likeness among *agere* 'to act' and *gerere* 'to carry or carry on', a certain error is committed by those who think that it is only one thing. For a person can *facere* something and not *agere* it, as a poet *facit* 'makes' a play and does not act it, and on the other hand the actor *agit* 'acts' it and does not make it, and so a play *fit* 'is made' by the poet, not acted, and *agitur* 'is acted' by the actor, not made. On the other hand, the general [*imperator*], in that he is said to *gerere* 'carry on' affairs, in this neither *facit* 'makes' nor *agit* 'acts', but *gerit* 'carries on', that is, supports, a meaning transferred from those who *gerunt* 'carry' burdens, because they support them.<sup>5</sup>

In this etymology of the word's Latin roots, gesture articulates mediality, that is the possibility of communication itself, in terms of an order of leadership. Here, gesture is understood in the context of a 'general' who *carries on affairs transferred from those who* 'carry burdens'. In the spirit of this definition of gesture, this essay explores the meaning of *Mad Men*'s literal and metaphorical 'turned back' in relation to what I am referring to as the intermedial function and nature of melodrama. It thinks about the 'turned back' as a kind of imperative gesture that, as if refusing questioning or interrogation, tacitly 'carries on' and does so in relation to an unacknowledged burden. This essay understands melodrama as a mode that has moved or has been carried across and between different mediums and technologies of communication. A drama of heightened emotion and sensational action, melodrama is less a genre than a mode that has, since its incendiary origins in late eighteenth-century theatre, proliferated and persisted, crossing from older (theatre, the novel) to newer media (cinema, television).<sup>6</sup> As Linda Williams argues, melodrama's spectacularisation of human suffering—its excessive expression of a way of being or identifying in modern, democratic life—contributes to its status as the typical rather than exceptional mode in American cinema and television.<sup>7</sup> And, as *Mad Men* demonstrates, melodrama continues to reinvent itself according to the specificities and demands of new media (cable television and other digital formats) and changing social and cultural conditions.

While proving surprisingly adaptive to technological and social change, melodrama enacts crossings that are not unidirectional. In the first part, I draw attention to gesture and catachresis as performative and linguistic signifiers of meaning in melodrama that have been linked to melodrama's mobility, its capacity to move forward and backward through time and space. In this context, *Mad Men* can be read as a series that takes hold of and (re)uses melodramatic images, words and gestures for its own intents and purposes. In the second part, I closely analyse one episode, called 'Out of Town' (episode one, season three), in order to further explore *Mad Men's* catachrestic use of words and images. This episode—which features masquerades, identity crossings and lead character Don Draper's trip to Baltimore to pitch a sale for a raincoat—is one that exemplifies *Mad Men's* creatively metaphoric tendencies and intermedial crossings (between cinema and television and between television and advertising). It also includes a flashback to Don Draper's birth, a scene that provides clues to the meaning of that gestural refusal of meaning, that opaque 'turned back', of *Mad Men's* opening credits.

—PART 1: GESTURE, CATACHRESIS AND MELODRAMA

Gesture is an important part of Peter Brooks' influential work on melodrama as a mode which, he argues, first emerged on the eighteenth-century French revolutionary stage in the wake of an interdiction against speech. Gesture is privileged, in Brooks' account, as the non-verbal form of bodily expression in theatrical communication that gets carried over into metaphorical descriptions of emotional excess and the moral occult in the late nineteenth-century fiction of novelists such as Honoré de Balzac and Henry James. Transferred from the eighteenth-century theatre and the nineteenth-century novel, gesture in this context operates in a way that is not unlike Agamben's definition. As a kind of 'pure mediality', gesture functions for Brooks as a 'supplement to the word' that enables the expression of an otherwise inexpressible sacred.<sup>8</sup> Here gesture 'is read as containing such meanings because it is postulated as the metaphorical approach to what cannot be said'.<sup>9</sup> Further demonstrating that gesture can be transferred across different media, including from theatrical to written expression, Brooks makes an analogy between gesture—the 'expressionistic means of making meaning' which has

a relation to the 'natural' world in that it re-enacts 'the original figure of language'—and the role of catachresis in language:

Gesture could then be typed as in the nature of a catachresis, the figure used when there is no 'proper' name for something. In Roland Barthes's description, catachresis 'restores the blank of the compared [the tenor], whose existence is completely given over to the word of the comparer [the vehicle]'. Yet of course it is the fullness, the pregnancy, of the blank that is significant: meaning-full though unspeakable.<sup>10</sup>

Here Brooks's definition of both gesture and catachresis evokes both as signifiers, a 'meaning-full', pregnant though unspeakable presence, that is somehow also intrinsic to melodrama's transference, its movement across different media.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in 'White Mythology', when Jacques Derrida defines catachresis as a 'forced' metaphor that 'goes against usage' yet is 'correct and natural', he also associates catachresis with movement across separate disciplines. Catachresis, writes Derrida, is 'the twisting return to the already-there of a meaning, production (of signs, or rather of values), but as revelation, unveiling, bringing to light, truth. This is why "forced metaphors" may be, must be "correct and natural"'.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, Derrida's definition of catachresis as a 'twisting return to the already-there' takes place in an essay in which he demonstrates how the discipline of philosophy borrowed tropes from the natural sciences to enunciate its meaning. This is analogous to Brooks' point about melodrama as a crossing between old and new forms of communication. In order to make it new, as Brooks and Derrida suggest, language is gesturally or catachrestically forced into a 'twisting return to the already-there' and, as this happens, crosses disciplines and mediums.

A focus on catachresis—both as a linguistic signifier and as a gestural, non-verbal signal of presence—enables analysis of *Mad Men's* simultaneous return to and departure from older melodramatic forms. It is also a useful figure for thinking about *Mad Men's* Don Draper and, in particular, the connection between his twin roles as advertising executive and as a character who melodramatically acts out primal drives in his search for lost origins. As a name that refers to an external sign, Don's name (Draper) is a 'forced metaphor' that catachrestically represents his role as an imposter and a counterfeit—like that animated figure in the credits (which resembles Draper), he is a copy of the real. Over the first two seasons, viewers have

witnessed revelations about Don's fake identity that continue to threaten his marriage and his role as 'creative' leader of the advertising firm. Having stolen the identity of a dying soldier during the Korean War, Draper's anarchic self-naming radically troubles his otherwise authoritative subjectivity.

That Don's last name (Draper) is revealed to be fraudulent speaks to the carnivalesque ways in which catachresis works, in melodrama, to articulate the presence of conflicts and power hierarchies.<sup>13</sup> Catachresis is also central to the functions Draper performs in the advertising world—a powerful role that is nevertheless based on instability, a fraudulent name. In his dominating presence as Sterling Cooper's creative director, Draper is responsible for spinning the ideas and imagining the pictures that ensure the sale of the latest client brand or commodity. But Draper's role as *Mad Men's* lead ad-man also crisscrosses with his role as a character in a search for lost (maternal) origins and in a way that points more broadly to the workings of desire in *Mad Men* and in melodrama as a mode that has, since its inception, been concerned with the unconscious drives of a desiring subject. Such primal drives are manifested in Draper's (and the other ad-men's) failure to understand, much less contain, desire in day-to-day existence. But there is also the desire evoked through *Mad Men's* business world of commercial transactions in which ad-men harness and attempt to fulfil the wishes of consumers in order to sell their goods. This mirrors *Mad Men's* metastructure, its implicit appeal to viewers whose consumption of the television series is vital to the series' survival.

The close link between desire as a theme and desire as a structuring and elusive presence in *Mad Men* speaks to the concerns and structure of melodrama more generally. As a post-enlightenment mode, melodrama's birth on the eighteenth-century stage was concomitant with the birth of the aspirational, revolutionary subject who desired a break away from older social orders. Melodrama continues to track the longings of this figure (on stage or screen) whose mirror image is the viewing subject (a spectator). The desiring spectator's interpretation of meaning, as well as his or her emotional or sensory identification with what is taking place on stage or screen, is itself a kind of social crossing that repeats the desire for recognition so often performed in melodrama itself.

In relation to melodrama in the contemporary, digital age, columnist Michael Kackman draws attention to the productive continuities between old and new

melodramatic modes and articulates the importance of the viewer's interpretive role in relation to recent melodrama. Commenting on the sophisticated branding techniques of contemporary digital television companies (such as 'It's not television it's HBO'), and on academic scholarship that has sprung up alongside this industry, Kackman also reflects on the way in which 'quality television', like earlier melodramatic forms, calls on the viewer's almost fetishistic interest in the readability of screen narrative. As Kackman argues:

Quality TV is in part based upon a set of premises about the particular indexical quality that tv narrative is presumed to have with everyday life. Definitions of quality television, both popularly and in our scholarship, depend on a basic formulation that goes something like this: narrative complexity generates representational complexity; representational complexity offers the possibility of political and cultural complexity. When we delight in Willow's witchcraft, or Number Six's agonizing over spirituality and what it means to be alive, or Omar's and Bubbles' tragic misadventures on the streets of Baltimore, we're not just appreciating narrative craft. Instead, we're embracing the dream of a more complex world. Maybe, even, a more just one.<sup>14</sup>

Our interest in narrative or aesthetic complexity is not just about aesthetics, Kackman argues, and not simply about cultural recognition, but is about the possibility of imagining (and presumably participating in) a more complex and just world. Likewise, my argument here reaffirms melodrama's importance as affective mediation that, especially given its traditional appeal to the disenfranchised, can lead to social transformation. However, I do wonder about Kackman's reading of melodrama as necessarily outward looking, or as unproblematically encouraging an altruistic engagement with everyday politics or greater cross-class or cross-racial identification. Lauren Berlant, in contrast to Kackman, emphasises melodrama's culturally mediating role as 'middlebrow sentimentality'—or, as she phrases it, the 'shared consumption of memory of someone else's pain'—that she argues has contributed little in the way of transformative political agency or collectivity.<sup>15</sup> As Berlant argues, melodrama has dominated the twentieth-century cultural landscape and has played a central role in the production of 'intimate publics'. The problem with such melodramatic transformations of personal emotion (especially, for

Berlant, pain and disappointment) into broader collective experience is that sentimentality becomes an end in itself and a cultural value that replaces other possibilities for political organisation or mobilisation.

In the light of this critique, what can be made of *Mad Men's* (melo)dramatisation of advertising itself and/or its televising of the act of television watching? Before moving into the next section of this essay, which discusses the complexities that constellate around commercial and sexual desire, I want to reflect on how *Mad Men's* scenes of television viewing might be read critically, not simply as affirming aspirational desire or shared sentiment, but in terms of what the 'turning back' of the opening credits might represent. While the following scene of television viewing is about sentimental witnessing and identification, it provides critical distance from the politically complicit processes of affective mediation that Berlant describes. For example, along with its self-referential mirroring techniques, *Mad Men* includes the perspectives of minor characters (including an African-American maid and a closeted gay man) who, although often speaking from the theatrical side-lines, provide implicit critiques of the sentimental liberal, or neoliberal, agency that the program might otherwise be seen to reinforce or consolidate.

In the penultimate episode of season three, various psychodramas culminate in a moment of collective shock and grief: the televising of John F. Kennedy's assassination. In this episode, Sterling Cooper's secretaries and other office staff abandon their desks and ringing phones and converge around a television temporarily set up in the centre of the office. Broadcasting newsreel footage from 1963, *Mad Men* here references a public event that exists in the lived or generational memory of many of its viewers. Spectators of *Mad Men* can thus readily share in the grief that they watch on screen—an act of viewing that could not be more mediated. However, this scene of witnessing is folded back on itself (it is a screen within a screen) and is also presented as a repetition of an earlier presidential death as a reporter on television announces that 'every person listening to this at this moment has flashed back to that moment in April 1945' when Franklin Roosevelt collapsed.

This televisual event, one which disrupts the organisation and flow of the office space, then crosses to the simultaneous viewing of the same event that is taking place in the home and includes, for *Mad Men*, a rare moment of sentimentalised,



cross-racial connection. Like the references to Hitchcock, this scene takes viewers back to 'maternal melodramas' of the 1930s, '40s and '50s, such as Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959), which emphasised affective bonds between black and white women. Back in the Draper residence, Don's wife Betty is watching the news report with her African-American maid, Carla. The two women cry together as they sit side by side, watching the assassination and the media frenzy that followed it. Notable here is Carla's place on the lounge, next to Betty, and her smoking of a cigarette. That this is the first (and only) time we see Carla light up differentiates her, via race and class, from Betty whose constant smoking throughout the series is a feature of the starring actress's 1960s retro-glamour. By contrast, Carla's appearances have, up until this moment, been confined to the domestic kitchen and other similarly liminal spaces (like the hallway) where she is most typically engaged in conversation about the needs of the white family she serves as viewers are again reminded of African-American roles in pre-civil rights Hollywood. A rare exception to this all too familiar typecasting of the African-American actress as domestic maid is a moment in an earlier episode in which Carla is found, by Betty, listening to the radio report news about the death of four African-American girls, which followed the Ku Klux Klan bombing of a Baptist church. The limitations of Betty's sympathies are reinforced here as she tells Carla, in response to her grief over the bombing, that it's not time for civil rights yet. Combining the image of Carla's smoking with Betty's silencing of her, *Mad Men* re-enacts those racial tensions that were so palpable in films made on the brink of the civil rights movement (such as Sirk's *Imitation of Life*).

Although Betty cries as she sits alongside Carla—in fact she cries more tears over Kennedy's death than she does over her separation from her husband—her response to Carla and her later actions suggest that she remains committed to conservative politics. In the fourth season, Betty marries a wannabe Republican senator after divorcing Don. Through this juxtaposition of Betty's and Carla's responses, whereby spectatorial feeling for their grief on the death of Kennedy can be simultaneously experienced as an implicit criticism of Betty's conservatism, *Mad Men's* dream of mediated affectivity is destabilised. While the white woman's melodrama is a moment of cathartic release that is only intensified through a scene of shared suffering with her African-American maid, the asymmetry of their grief troubles any straightforward reading of it as middlebrow sentimentality. Betty's

affect, in other words, is represented in this *Mad Men* scene as one that cannot be entirely sealed off from the subversive counter-cultural politics that are taking place alongside her starring presence, and speaks to the continued prominence of race, and racial difference, in current politics.

Such a re-enactment and reframing of earlier melodramas shows the way in which *Mad Men* looks back to previous modes but does so in terms of the politics of its own moment. Through its smooth, crosscutting between the office and the home viewings—crosscutting that creates continuities between mid-century television viewing and how communication technologies work in the present—*Mad Men* simultaneously returns to and departs from the ‘domestic’ or ‘maternal melodrama’.<sup>16</sup> While early twentieth century melodramas were set in the office as well as the home, *Mad Men*’s office space is the show’s primary theatre for staging human desire and pathos and, as such, articulates the way contemporary work spaces are structured by technologies that encourage worker intimacy.<sup>17</sup> *Mad Men*’s representation of office space via divisions of labour also depicts the role that technology continues to play in hierarchical regimes of class, gender, race and other cultural differences. For example, the revelation of the concealed pregnancy of sometime-secretary and aspirational creative, Peggy Olsen (at the end of season one), speaks to the suppression of human reproduction in a present-day office space that continues to be organised according to mechanical processes.

What I’m arguing here is that *Mad Men*’s relation to the melodramatic archive on which it draws is simultaneously nostalgic and critical of its own moment. This is represented particularly well through the figure of Don Draper whose susceptibility to uncontrollable drives and desires is thematised and whose sexism and homophobia are connected to his own relation to a past that he disavows. This illustrates more broadly *Mad Men*’s dramatisation of gendered and class-based anxieties that are centred on how the machinic routines of the office can be reconciled with more organic, and often threateningly sexual, forms of human reproduction. For example, in the opening scene, Don Draper is pictured, at home, boiling milk for his heavily pregnant wife, Betty. After he delivers the warm milk to her bedside, the couple chat about Don’s imminent business trip to Baltimore as Betty lets him know that their daughter, Sally, has broken the latch on his suitcase. ‘She’s taken to your tools like a little lesbian’, Betty tells Don. This misogynistic and

homophobic description of the active girl as an aggressive lesbian is picked up on later in the series when Don dampens Peggy's hopes for a further promotion and a pay rise, telling her that she had better go back to her 'box of tools'. But Don's authority over Peggy is not as straightforward as it looks—he visits and supports her, for instance, during the birth of her child. Living up to his name, Don is a threshold figure whose movement between private and public, past and present worlds is cognate with his tacit support of Brooklyn-born, working-class Peggy. His catachrestic role—his 'turning back' to a primal 'already-there' meaning—is felt as a forced, a jarring, metaphor but is also linked to his creativity.

This is thematised in the opening sequence of season three, when after delivering her milk he lies next to Betty and attempts to soothe her to sleep by whispering a fantasy about how she's marooned on a desert island. 'Because I'm a whale?' responds Betty. Don here, and elsewhere, is associated with childbirth as anarchic reproduction. This is reinforced in the very next scene, which takes place in Bert Cooper's office where Lane Pryce is admiring a print that hangs on his wall. The painting is Tako To Amo's *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife* in which a woman is depicted in sensual orgy with two sea creatures: a large octopus performs cunnilingus on a supine woman while another kisses her mouth and fondles her nipple. The following is Bert and Lane's exchange about the painting:

Lane Pryce: [looking at painting] 'Remarkable'

Bert Cooper: 'I picked it for its sensuality but it also, in some ways, reminds me of our business'

Lane: 'Who is the man who imagined her ecstasy?'

Bert: 'Who indeed?'

Who should enter the office, immediately following Bert's question about the unknown inventor of this female ecstasy, but Don Draper himself. Draper's entrance at this point suggests that he is 'the man who imagined her ecstasy' and, in season one, the man who knows what women want. It also points to his destabilising role as signifier of presence whose catachrestic advertising draws on a language that appeals to the senses and, in Derrida's terms, conjures a 'correct and natural' world. The following extended analysis of the episode 'Out of Town' makes further links between Draper's search for lost origins and his success as advertising creative. My

analysis here is concerned with the instability of his subjectivity and with exploring the fit between his success as agent of mechanical production (advertising) and that primal scene of sexual reproduction, his own birth.

—PART 2: 'OUT OF TOWN'

As one viewer puts it, *Mad Men* is 'driven by serialized family/professional conflicts, reflexive psychological melodrama, memory and dreams, aligned with painterly composition, restricted camera movement and ironic, multi-layered soundtracking'.<sup>18</sup> To this list, then, we should add catachresis, as a governing metaphor in *Mad Men* and a discursive figure that proliferates in the creative world of advertising. Indeed, in *Mad Men*, catachrestic product names are linked to the everyday melodramas, to the psychosexual behaviour and motivations of *Mad Men*'s creators. Just to name a few: 'Clearasil'—a word that seems to evoke that which its product promises to perform, 'Samsonite'—a material as strong as the ancient figure; 'Lucky Strike'—an action made into a noun, and, for the sake of my analysis of a *Mad Men* episode here, 'London Fog'.

'London Fog' is the name of a line of raincoats and another one of Sterling Cooper's accounts. It is to meet London Fog's business owners that Don Draper and Salvatore Romano take the trip 'Out of Town' in the title of episode one, season three. The two travel to Baltimore where they meet with London Fog's owner, and his son, who airs his concern about the possible decline of his business. Everyone already has a raincoat, says Mr London Fog to Don, why would they want to buy another one and what will happen to my business if it doesn't keep expanding? Of course, it's Don and Salvatore's job to think of a new advertising pitch that will whet consumer appetite for another raincoat but at this point Don reassures Mr London Fog with the words: 'There will be fat years. There will be lean years. But, it is going to rain.' The significance of the name, London Fog, had been alluded to the previous day when Lane Pryce (sitting in Bert Cooper's office) tells Don, Roger and Bert that London Fog is a 'ludicrous' name because it refers to something that doesn't really exist. 'London Fog' does not describe an actual fog, Pryce says, it refers, via Charles Dickens, to the smog, the coal dust, of the industrial city. Here, Pryce explicates the preposterous nature of the sales pitch which, in grasping for a name in order to sell a product, produces a catachresis or category error. As creative director, Don is the

governing figure, the lead character, who embodies misappropriation as the reigning principle of advertising. Don Draper, born Dick Whitman (a name that is itself a nested set of allusions), has as already mentioned taken on the name of a fellow soldier—a refashioning that allows him to escape his poor origins. On the trip to Baltimore he unwittingly takes on yet another name—that of his brother-in-law William Hofstadt who, having borrowed Don’s suitcase for a trip to Puerto Rico, has affixed his own name to Draper’s suitcase. When air hostess Shelley therefore addresses him as Mr Hofstadt, Don willingly responds to her misreading, taking on the name for the duration of the flight and for a brief sexual encounter with her at the Baltimore hotel.

Like the misnamed suitcase, the phrase ‘London fog’ does not accurately represent weather in London. According to Lane Pryce, it refers to a melodramatic fiction (as in the work of Charles Dickens). This tropological play, on both company product and melodramatic theme, articulates *Mad Men’s* interdisciplinary yoking of advertising language to the melodramatic format—both of which are discursively constituted through a creative error. This depiction of advertising—and by extension of melodrama—as catachresistic, or as a forced metaphor, a false creation, is played out in ‘Out of Town’s’ opening when the scene of Don Draper’s birth is visualised via flashback. In the opening of this episode, Don is shown lost in reverie while boiling milk on the stove. The words of Don’s birth-mother are heard as he gazes at the milk, as past and present scenes are blended in montage. This sequence, like many in *Mad Men*, makes use of a tracking shot that is often said to simulate a Hitchcockian cinematic style: the camera pulls away from Don’s back to picture him in the confined space of the home—a home which in this sequence morphs into that of Dick Whitman’s birth mother as Don/Dick’s past and present become one and the same thing. Dick’s mother, a prostitute, is later heard telling his biological father: ‘You get me in trouble I’m gonna cut your dick off and boil it in hog fat.’ She screams a variation of these words twice during the subsequent birth scene. The revelation is thus of a scene of castration as Dick Whitman is ‘named after a wish his mother should have lived to see’. In other words, he is here named as the counterfeit of an absence.

In this dreamlike sequence, Don’s reverie is of course a false memory (he impossibly remembers his own birth) and exemplifies melodrama’s fascination with

lost origins, its 'twisting return' to a place that is perhaps already prefigured in the opening credits in which a Don-like, cartoon figure gazes into a space of white nothingness. Operating as a plot device through which the illegitimate circumstances of his birth can be communicated, Don's flashback to Dick Whitman's childhood is like a Dickensian scene—born to a prostitute who dies while giving birth, he is delivered to the home of a childless couple and raised as their child. Don's childhood story is thus both authentically melodramatic (like a Dickens novel) and structurally preposterous. That is, Don's late imagining of his birth is preposterous, in the archaic meaning of that term, to invert something's order or position, to place last what should be first. This speaks to the fanciful, indeed the preposterous role of metaphor, or catachresis in a melodramatic mode that seeks proximity to the authentically familiar, to the natural, neither of which is recoverable, except through re-enactment, through performative reversion to a sign, a gestural language, that was already there.

On their flight home to New York, Don pitches his idea for the London Fog advertisement to Salvatore. Don's sales pitch, 'Limit your Exposure', refers back to the dream sequence detailing Don's birth, as well as to the sensuality of the *Dream of the Fisherman's Wife*, to suggest that this primal scene of recognition, or misrecognition, structures Don's narcissistic sexuality and his approach to the language of advertising. The 'Out of Town' trip, as previously mentioned, is also the scene of two sexual (mis)adventures: Don's adulterous liaison with the air hostess, Shelley, who had misnamed him Hofstadt, and Salvatore's encounter with a bellboy. Masquerading, under his brother-in-law's name, as Hofstadt, Don also pretends to pose as an accountant when he and Salvatore join Shelley and her friend for dinner and drinks in their Baltimore hotel. The word-play on mistaken identities, objects and their covers, continues later, in the elevator, when Salvatore jokes to Don and Shelley that he feels self-conscious as the only one 'not in uniform' when a bellboy appears momentarily in their midst. And Salvatore's straight cover is undone when the bellboy later arrives in his room to fix his air-conditioning and ultimately seduces him. The exchange of glances between Salvatore and Don during a forced evacuation of the building is a complicated interchange that entails the risk of Salvatore's outing—but what does it mean in terms of other metaphorical displacements, in particular the exposure of Don's sexual transgression? Might Don's

sexual disavowal also take us back to the dangerous truth represented in the opening credits—that caricatured gesture of the leading business man who blindly carries on despite his relation to an unspoken burden?

The 'Limit Your Exposure' pitch that Don comes up with for the London Fog account is delivered to Salvatore as coded advice. These are his words:

Don Draper: Let me ask you something and I want you to be completely honest with me. London Fog. It's a subway car and there's a commuter looking up. There's a girl with her back to us. She's wearing one of those short, tan ones but it's open; her legs are bare. What are you seeing? Limit your exposure.

Salvatore: That's it

Don Draper: Good

Don imagines a woman whose back is to us yet her 'short tan one' is open and her legs bare. That this woman is effectively open and closed at the same time has implications for thinking about the repeated image of Don's back. This back is pictured not only in the birth sequence, in which Don views his birth-mother's open legs, but also returns insistently in silhouetted (cartoon) form in each episode's opening credit sequence. The repeated image of Don's silhouetted back is yet another of *Mad Men's* self-referential techniques that reminds the viewer of the relation between the lead character and the commodified images that he sells. The graphic advertisement of London Fog's open/closed woman, which is pictured as well as described, resonates with the *Mad Men's* viewer's own relation to commodity, including the television series as a commodity. Such mirroring of commodity images suggests that *Mad Men's* creators recognise their melodrama's own inability to transcend its serialised status as consumer commodity. Susan Stewart identifies the consumer desire that is produced through the advertising image thus:

the image of the body as it is represented in commodity advertising—reduced through photography and then projected abstractly before us—has the effect of a generalized sexuality, or, more specifically, a generalized desire, which then becomes focused upon the commodity itself, the only 'total' image. Through this process it becomes appropriate that hazy

photographs of lovers are put on the wrappings of ironing boards or on the cardboard backings of auto parts. The relation between the photo and the commodity is not, as it first might seem, an arbitrary one, for the photo's referent is the generalized desire that is the signified of all commodity relations in late capitalism.<sup>19</sup>

In 'Out of Town', Don's late imagining of his birth is linked to the generalised desire of consumer capitalism. Here and elsewhere, Don's successful seduction of women—his canny understanding of what women want—is connected to a seemingly intuitive knowledge of consumer desire—a desire that, it turns out, is everywhere, and is 'the signified of all commodity relations'. He is also here a protector of the feminised and the vulnerable—as stated earlier, Don's protectiveness is most pronounced in relation to fellow creative, Peggy Olson. This suggests that Don's own experience somehow shapes his identification with loss. Yet, in advising Salvatore to limit his exposure (as a gay man), Don covers or conceals his own inability to control or limit his serial womanising, displacing that 'generalised' desire onto the apparently more perverse desire of a homosexual man.

Don's contradictory and sexually liminal role, which exists somewhere between his role as creative 'head' and the feminised body in the London Fog advertisement, is explored again in the final scene of the episode. This time the instability of Don's sexual agency is figured in relation to the desires of his own child. Unpacking her father's suitcase, Don's daughter Sally finds a TWA pin. While this object refers back, like a souvenir, to Don's earlier sexual conquest with the air hostess, the object takes on a different meaning in his daughter's hands. In assuming that her father has bought it as a gift for her, Sally at once misrecognises and exposes her father's adulterous desires. The pin is a reminder of Don's 'limited exposure', his inability to contain his need for sexual seduction as a promised conquest—a blind return to that primal scene. It also signifies his willingness to transfer the responsibility for that serial conquest onto the body of a feminised other, whether that body be the caricatured body of a woman in an advertising pitch, or the disgraced body of a gay man. But the pin may also signify an important turning point in Sally's self-development. As revealed in the next season, Sally will begin to act out her own sexual perversions and will also begin to resist parental authority. This resistance is prefigured in the final scene of 'Out of Town' when Sally, curious about her mother's



pregnancy, asks for the details of her own birth. Don begins to recount a story but his voice trails off and Betty jumps in instead to tell Sally the words that their daughter wants to hear—her story of Sally's birth that Don appears to have forgotten.

As figured in *Mad Men's* 'Out of Town' episode, melodrama is the domain of misrecognition, of productive category errors, of dream-memories and of twisting returns to the 'already-there' of meaning. These melodramatic features connect the affective longings of the aesthetic, fictive realm to the everyday desires and social aspirations of consumer capitalism. Don's lack of response (like the image of the back that is turned towards us) distracts from his daughter's desire for memories of *her* birth, her desire to understand her present. Similarly, Matthew Weiner's enigmatic response to what the falling man in the credit sequence evokes, or rather turns away from, begs the question of whether the most powerful meanings of the present, those that may transgress current political orthodoxies, can be spoken out loud. This 'turned back', this 'pure mediality', is a 'being in language' that can only gesture towards the catachrestic nature of his role—that of *Mad Men's* governing figure, its false creator.

—

Monique Rooney is a lecturer in the English program, School of Cultural Inquiry, Australian National University. She has published on melodrama in American literature and film and is currently researching in the areas of late twentieth-century Australian film and television melodrama and contemporary film and cable television melodrama.

---

—NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Matt Weiner, 'Mad Men is About Today' *Salon*, 19 March 2012,

<[http://www.salon.com/2012/03/18/matt\\_weiner\\_mad\\_men\\_is\\_about\\_today/](http://www.salon.com/2012/03/18/matt_weiner_mad_men_is_about_today/)>.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Junod, 'Falling (Mad) Man', *Esquire*, 30 January 2012, <<http://www.esquire.com/the-side/feature/falling-mad-man-6648672>>.

<sup>3</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2000, p. 57.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 57–9.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of melodrama, particularly its relation to genres seen as antithetical to it such as realism, see Christine Gledhill's 'Introduction' to *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill, British Film Institute, London, 1987, p. 33.

<sup>7</sup> Linda Williams, 'Melodrama Revised' in *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, ed. Nick Browne, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1998, pp. 42–88. See also Thomas Elsaesser's influential essay about the role of melodrama in Hollywood, 'Tales of Sound and Fury' in *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*, ed. Marcia Landy, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, p. 75.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, Yale University Press, New York 1995 [1976], p. 62.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>11</sup> In the preface to the 1995 edition of *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks self-reflexively points to his own role, as well as the importance of interpretation as a critical gesture that enables knowledge. He also articulates the connection between melodrama and psychoanalysis in the preface to the 1995 edition of *The Melodramatic Imagination* when he writes that 'Freud's task, from the *Studies of Hysteria* onward, is learning to read the messages inscribed on the hysterical body—a reading that is inaugural of psychoanalysis as a discipline'. This reflection on melodrama's role in articulating crossings between different media and disciplines (theatre, literature, cinema and psychoanalysis) is cognate with Brooks' self-reflexive references to his own role as a literary critic who imaginatively crosses spatial and temporal divides. Brooks, 'Preface 1995', *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. xi.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy' in his book *Margins of Philosophy*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1982, p. 207.

<sup>13</sup> David Hare's review of the first season of *Mad Men* interestingly refers to it as having 'the governing metaphor of authenticity'. This may be another way of thinking about *Mad Men*'s catachrestic signifiers. See David Hare, 'Mad Men: the Future of American Film is on Television', *Guardian*, 8 September 2010, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/tv-and-radio/2010/sep/08/mad-men-david-hare>>.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Kackman, 'Quality Television, Melodrama and Cultural Complexity', *FlowTV*, 5 March 2010, <<http://flowtv.org/2010/03/flow-favorites-quality-television-melodrama-and-cultural-complexity-michael-kackman-university-of-texas-austin/comment-page-1/>>.

<sup>15</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2008, p. 97.

<sup>16</sup> See, in particular, Laura Mulvey's essay on the home as a 'safety valve' for the expression of otherwise inexpressible social concerns. Laura Mulvey, 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama' in Gledhill (ed.), *Home is Where the Heart Is*, pp. 75–83.

<sup>17</sup> See Melissa Gregg, *Work's Intimacy*, Polity, Cambridge, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Gareth Jones, 'Some Thoughts on *Mad Men* and *The Sopranos*' in *The Best Shows You're Not Watching*, <<http://www.thebestshowsyourenotwatching.com/some-thoughts-on-mad-men-and-the-sopranos/>>.

<sup>19</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1993, p. 124.