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Mad Men and Images of Women Imitation, Nostalgia, and Consumerism

The award-winning AMC series *Mad Men* (Matthew Weiner, 2007-2015) continually foregrounds acts of tracing, copying, and imitating, from the use of tracing paper in the art department to the installation of the Xerox machine in the office. Indeed, the show itself is an imitation, simulating the aesthetics and culture of 1960s Manhattan. Yet, on another level, *Mad Men* has offered a critical commentary on the act of imitating that revolves around images of women. *Mad Men* draws considerable attention to images of women, especially in advertising, and it does so with a self-consciously critical tone. The series undercuts nostalgia for the images of women it presents by highlighting the sexism embedded in these images, and by showing the troubling impact of images on the lives of the characters. Yet, my interest here is not with the women who are already bound up in established images of women, like Joan (Christina Hendricks), Betty (January Jones), and Megan (Jessica Paré). What interests me is how Peggy (Elisabeth Moss), the new girl, comes to be indoctrinated into the culture of images and simulation, transforming from plain secretary to stylish copywriter. Although some critics like Sara Rogers, Kim Akass, and Janet McCabe have argued that Peggy successfully avoids selling out to the advertising culture around her, these readings of Peggy ignore the aesthetic changes Peggy undergoes which develop in

tandem with her professional advancement. As Peggy becomes further immersed in the world of images as the show progresses, she remakes herself according to those images. In this way, Peggy's fraught journey through the advertising world parallels her aesthetic journey of making herself over.

However, while *Mad Men* resists idealizing Peggy's transformation by representing the sexism she encounters even as she makes herself over, consumer products inspired by the show and marketed by recognizable brands like Banana Republic, Estée Lauder, and Mattel have not been so nuanced or critical in their adoption of the 1960s aesthetic. The modern-day consumer of these products is compelled to remake herself according to the images presented, in the same way that Peggy is compelled to transform when viewing similar images. So, while the show uses Peggy's narrative arch to criticize the sexist ways that



women are interpellated by patriarchal ideology through images, many of the major ancillary products associated with the show uncritically reassert that female consumers and spectators must identify with one of two polarized positions of womanhood. These acceptable images of women are embodied in *Mad Men* by Betty, who is coded as the angel in the home, and Joan, who is represented as a Whore of Babylon figure. Moreover, despite Peggy's centrality to the series, many of the major ancillary products associated with the show assert visually and rhetorically that Peggy is neither an acceptable position of identification for the female viewer, nor an acceptable image of a woman. This practice of copying the aesthetic but leaving behind the critique is intriguing since it provides an opportunity to consider the effectiveness of embedding social critiques in period fictions. In this paper, I will argue that nostalgia has largely overshadowed the critical aspects of *Mad Men's* treatment of women by looking at the ways in which Western consumer culture references and appropriates the show. I begin by outlining the show's critical approach to images of women through an analysis of Peggy's character and aesthetic development over the first several seasons. The second part of this paper then discusses the uncritical and nostalgic ways that the show's images have been used to sell consumer products.

Peggy and Images of Women

Peggy is central to *Mad Men*. The viewer is implicitly positioned as Peggy since we enter the world of the Sterling-Cooper advertising agency at the same time she does in the pilot episode, "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes." The pilot episode foregrounds Peggy's arrival and immersion in this world, and it highlights the criticisms she receives. As Joan gives Peggy her introductory office tour, she offers Peggy several pieces of advice, most of them pertaining to cosmetics, fashion, and body aesthetics. One of the most memorable of Joan's suggestions is to "go home, take a paper bag, and cut some eye holes out of it. Put it over your head, get undressed, and look at yourself in the mirror. Really evaluate where your strengths and weaknesses are." Further comments are made on perfume, Peggy's ankles, and the fact that "men love scarves." Peggy is also assessed by the male executives. Upon meeting her, Pete Campbell (Vincent Kartheiser) asks, "are you Amish or something?" and goes on to suggest that "it wouldn't be a sin for us to see your legs. And if you pull your waist in a little bit, you might look like a woman." Peggy's initial look is loose,

lumpy, sparse, pale, and dull. Her clothes are not form-fitting, they hang loosely off her body, concealing curves and giving her a lumpy look. This lumpiness is accentuated by her ponytail, which she wears every day in the office. Her bangs are not full and symmetrical, but sparse and thin, hanging haphazardly. Peggy's complexion is pale and her facial features are not defined by make-up, giving her a muted appearance. Moreover, in contrast to Joan's vibrant reds and purples, the colours that Peggy wears are usually dull pastel shades.

At the agency, Peggy is surrounded by images of women and she struggles to navigate the binaristic aesthetic options presented: Betty or Joan; Jackie or Marilyn; angel or whore. Peggy's struggle to embody an acceptable aesthetic is foregrounded halfway through the second season in the episode "Maidenform." In the episode, Paul Kinsey (Michael Gladis), one of the copywriters, pitches



an ad campaign for underwear manufacturer Playtex. Paul explains: "Jackie Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe: every single woman is one of them. Watch this." He opens the office door and points to passing female employees telling his companions, "Jackie...Marilyn...Jackie...Marilyn. Well, Marilyn's really a Joan, not the other way around." Peggy, the only woman on the creative team, objects, saying: "I don't know if all women are a Jackie or a Marilyn. Maybe men see them that way." Paul's reply is that "bras are for men. Women want to see themselves the way men see them." Trying to navigate both the ad rhetoric and her own place within the office, Peggy asks: "Which do you think I am?" and another of the men replies: "Gertrude Stein." Peggy recognizes that she does not fit within either aesthetic, and is in some way disadvantaged—overlooked, invisible—because of this. The male copywriters, all of whom are eager to be involved—especially when it comes time to audition models for the ad, effectively block

Peggy from working on the campaign. Frustrated, Peggy complains to Joan. However, Joan's advice has nothing to do with business and everything to do with images of women. She tells Peggy: "You want to be taken seriously? Stop dressing like a little girl." Soon after, Peggy makes an appearance at a strip club excursion where the ad men and the Playtex executives are mingling. With lips painted deep red, she appears in a sleek, shiny, vibrant blue dress with a deep v-neckline that emphasizes her cleavage. She also foregoes her usual ponytail, instead wearing her hair down. At the end of this episode, Peggy learns that she can break into the business by changing her look, although she is noticeably uncomfortable about the kind of attention she garners from the lead Playtex executive.

While Peggy changes her look briefly at the end of "Maidenform," her long-term makeover begins with a haircut that she gets near the end of the second season in "The Jet Set." Peggy tells her homosexual coworker Kurt (Edin Gali) "I don't know why I pick the wrong boys," and she asks him "what's wrong with me?" Kurt replies: "You are old style." Touching her hair, he explains that she does

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not have the appearance of the "modern office working woman." Kurt promises to "fix" Peggy, and he accomplishes this by taking her into her kitchen where he promptly cuts off her ponytail. This scene is crucial for a number of reasons. First, it is significant that Peggy's makeover happens at the hands of a man instead of a woman. Joan has offered aesthetic advice throughout the series, but it is the haircut that Kurt gives Peggy that incites her full and lasting transformation, echoing the largely male-driven ad campaigns which seek to incite aesthetic transformation in female consumers. Secondly, as a homosexual male, Kurt occupies a liminal position, which may be read as allowing him access to both male and female fantasies of beauty. Kurt's language is also extremely telling. He identifies Peggy's aesthetic problem as connected to a crisis of identity. Peggy wants to be a modern career woman, but her look, as Kurt points out, is at odds with the expected image of woman in that sphere. With his promise to fix



her, Kurt rhetorically places beauty as central to identity. According to this language, Peggy is in some way broken, flawed, or incomplete because of her look. A makeover, he promises, will solve this brokenness.

Yet Peggy's haircut at the end of the second season does not signify the end of her makeover. Her dissatisfaction with both her appearance and her treatment at the office continues into season three. "Love Among the Ruins," an early episode of the third season, shows Peggy attempting once again to negotiate her identity in terms of the ads she works on. Echoing her negotiation of the Jackie and Marilyn looks from the second season, this episode shows Peggy role-playing as Ann Margaret in front of her mirror at home. She stands in her girlish nightgown in front of her bedroom mirror and sings a few lines from the song "Bye Bye Birdie," twirling and making faces at the mirror in an attempt to imitate Ann Margaret, whom the men in her office hold up as an ideal of femininity. As in "Maidenform," Peggy feels alienated because she does not identify with the image of womanhood that is admired by her male co-workers. As Peggy herself explains, the appeal of Ann Margaret is her ability to "be 25 and act 14," in other words, to embody both innocent purity and womanly sexuality. Peggy's performance in front of her mirror is part of the thread of her transformation narrative, echoing Joan's advice in the pilot episode that she stand in front of a mirror with a bag over her head to assess herself. Her downcast gaze at her own reflection indicates the result of her assessment: Kurt's haircut is not enough. Peggy recognizes that she must make further changes to her appearance and style in order to integrate herself into the office more fully.

Throughout the third and fourth season, Peggy continues to make herself over off-screen. Her new aesthetic is characterized by vibrant, form-fitting clothes that empha-

size an hourglass silhouette, strategic cosmetics to enhance her facial features, and a sculpted hairstyle that is darker and richer than her natural colour. Simultaneously, Peggy advances at the agency, gaining more responsibility and power. The signal that Peggy's aesthetic transformation is complete appears near the end of season four during the episode "Chinese Wall," when Peggy works on a new campaign for Playtex—recalling for the viewer her experience with the earlier Jackie/Marilyn campaign in the first season. At this point, the Sterling-Cooper-Draper-Pryce agency is in a crisis and needs to solidify its relationships with clients. Consequently, Peggy's pitch to Playtex is crucial. As she stands in front of the ad mockups presenting her pitch, one easily notices how similar Peggy looks to the woman on the ad image—their face shape, hair colour, and hairstyle the same. The similarity between Peggy and the ad in this episode calls into contrast Peggy's inability to identify herself with the Jackie/Marilyn campaign. Since that experience, Peggy has transformed herself into an acceptable image of femininity. In so doing, she exemplifies what Baudrillard, in "The Precession of Simulacra," terms "hyperreality," a concept that describes a state wherein simulations—representations, imitations—become the accepted reality. The images that surround Peggy are not real women, yet they are accepted and idolized as such. Once she is in synchronicity with the idealized images of women, Peggy's ideas are well received. Yet there is still an undercutting of Peggy's look, since she has presented her



pitch to Playtex with a flaw in her own appearance. Her triumphant "well that went well" is immediately undermined by the response of Harry Crane (Rich Sommer): "You've got lipstick all over your teeth." Clearly, the project of simulation that women are compelled to undertake is a project that must be worked on constantly.

Consumers and Images of the 1960s

One of the major sites of consumable products stemming from the show is Banana Republic's clothing line, which debuted in 2011, followed by a second line in 2012, and a third line in the spring of 2013. In August 2011, *British Vogue* published an article introducing Banana Republic's *Mad Men* line, which debuted in stores later that month. In the article, Banana Republic's creative director Simon Kneen explains some of the things he finds so intriguing about the fashion of *Mad Men*: "Women were just beginning to find themselves in the workplace. I wanted to reflect that empowerment but also push the femininity with a few fun, sexy touches—leopard print heels, silk print scarves, and a leopard print trench coat" (Milligan). Noticeably, empowerment is followed by a "but" in Kneen's sentence, subordinating the idea of female empowerment to the aesthetic definitions that follow: femininity and sexiness. This presentation of the aesthetics of femininity and sexiness as the two options for women reflects the dilemma that Peggy faces throughout the series. The clothing line presents the female consumer with the same choices Peggy faces in the show: Jackie or Marilyn? Betty or Joan? The line noticeably features the looks of both Betty and Joan, but not Peggy. For example, the line featured a dress called "the Betty dress" that imitated, on a smaller scale, the fullness of Betty's New Look skirts. The collection also featured a number of close-fitting sheath dresses and leopard-print accessories evoking Joan's look, but few pastels, and no loose-fitting silhouettes reminiscent of Peggy's initial look. Moreover, the two female models used in the initial ad campaigns promoting the clothing line were blonde and redheaded, clear imitations of Betty and Joan. There was no brunette model to evoke Peggy's look. A press release for the next year's collection worked further to define the ideal aesthetics for women wanting to adopt a *Mad Men* inspired 1960s aesthetic, using terms like "ladylike" and "feminine" and emphasizing bright colours, florals, nipped-in waists, and detailed accessories ("Banana Republic").

The pressure put on female consumers to display their gender according to these particular images of women mirrors the pressure that Peggy feels to make herself over in the image of her boss's angelic wife, the sultry office manager, or the women represented in the advertisements she works on. In short, the Banana Republic clothing line positions the consumer as Peggy—forced to choose or negotiate a look from two presented options of femininity:

INTRODUCING THE LIMITED EDITION

BANANA REPUBLIC

MAD MEN
COLLECTION

Designed exclusively by Banana Republic in collaboration with *Mad Men*® costume designer Janie Bryant. Inspired by the razor-sharp tailoring and feminine silhouettes of 1960s style.

the angel and the whore. Yet where the show highlights these pressures and painstakingly shows Peggy’s self-doubt, self-loathing, and self-fashioning, the Banana Republic clothing line effaces the critical commentary on images of women, instead allowing its nostalgia for the aesthetics of femininity in the 1960s to naturalize the looks it presents. While *Mad Men* emphasizes the constructedness of images—the story revolves around an advertising agency, after all—Banana Republic’s ad campaign uncritically tells female consumers to simulate two idealized images of 1960s women: the demure housewife and the sexy, modern office woman.

Banana Republic is not the only company to embrace the aesthetic of *Mad Men*. In 2012, cosmetic brand Estée Lauder launched its own *Mad Men*-inspired collection. This line featured only two products: a lipstick and a crème blush. In an article on the debut of the collection, *The Hollywood Reporter* announced: “The cosmetics giant offers two provocative products that will bring out any woman’s inner January Jones or Christina Hendricks” (Ginsberg). Here, as in the Banana Republic line, there are two appropriate poles for viewer and consumer identification: January Jones and Christina Hendricks—Betty and Joan. Peggy, so central to the viewing experience of the show, is completely absent in both Estée Lauder’s ad

Shake. Stir. Seduce.

Introducing Estée Lauder
MAD MEN
Collection

Limited Edition Lipstick and Crème Rouge.

Estée Lauder

Exclusively at
estee-lauder.com
and Bloomingdales.

ESTÉE LAUDER

campaign and *The Hollywood Reporter* article. Peggy is the blank slate upon which Betty and Joan may be written, and thus she is unrepresented yet again. Estée Lauder’s



cious stones, and pearls” (*New American Bible*, Rev. 17.4). Mattel’s representation of Joan embraces this look in order to create the binary between the two aesthetics of femininity. The doll representing Betty is attired in white and blue—colours iconically associated with the Virgin Mary, most angelic of mothers. Furthermore, Mattel’s aesthetic choices include the excision of certain accessories that are central to the show’s representation of the 1960s. As the former senior vice president for Barbie

ad campaign presents only one image: a model who looks strikingly similar to Betty. Yet here, as in the Banana Republic clothing line, the binary between angel and whore is present. The ad copy features the tagline: “Shake, stir, seduce” (Ginsberg) conveying to the viewer that the Betty-lookalike model the consumer is meant to emulate is angelic and feminine on the surface, but underneath smoldering with sexuality. Here again, then, is the effacement of Peggy as an image of woman, and the placement instead of the viewer as Peggy—in need of a makeover to simulate Betty and/or Joan.

Finally, Peggy’s absence is solidified in Mattel’s collection of *Mad Men* dolls, which featured only four options: Joan, Roger, Betty, and Don. Mattel, like Banana Republic and Estée Lauder, implies that Peggy is not an appropriate object of identification or aesthetic pleasure. Moreover, it complicates the nostalgia of *Mad Men* even further by refashioning Joan’s silhouette so that it is slimmer and presents a perfect hourglass. Mattel thus presents the look of *Mad Men* as re-envisioned through the lens of Barbie aesthetics. Still, the two images of women presented by Mattel fall in line with the binaristic view of women espoused by Banana Republic and Estée Lauder. It is no coincidence that the Joan doll wears a purple dress. This dress is a miniaturized copy of a costume worn on the show in the episode “Babylon,” and the fact that Mattel chooses this particular purple and scarlet dress from among many of Joan’s dresses speaks to their intentional positioning of her as a Whore of Babylon figure. As described in the Book of Revelations, the Whore of Babylon is “wearing purple and scarlet and adorned with gold, pre-

marketing, Stephanie Cota, stated in a *New York Times* article, “certain things are appropriate, and certain things aren’t” (Elliott). The article goes on to note that the dolls will not come with “cigarettes, ashtrays, martini glasses or cocktail shakers.” I would go further, however, and suggest that body fat—specifically Joan’s body fat—is aligned

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with cigarettes and alcohol as inappropriate and in need of excision. Although Mattel claims to want to evoke the aesthetics of *Mad Men*, the company is only nostalgic for an idealized image of the 1960s that is both unrealistic and heavily influenced by patriarchal ideology.

Through this examination of *Mad Men*-inspired products, it becomes clear that the show’s critique of images of women does not always translate off-screen. Ancillary products embrace the nostalgia of the show and attempt to replicate the images presented, but they leave behind the show’s critical commentary on the production of images and their impact on viewers. Ultimately, the images presented in products inspired by the show reinscribe the hegemonic ideals of binaristic womanhood that the show attempts to critique and undercut. The power of nostalgia is so strong that it diminishes the potential for critique. This discrepancy ultimately points to the deeply unsettling conclusion that the sexist images of women presented on the show are not artifacts from a historical

past. Rather, the show uses a nostalgic aesthetic to displace its commentary on the enduring manner in which real women are encouraged to engage in a practice of simulating images—a practice that can be seen even in the images that are used to sell *Mad Men*-inspired merchandise in the present. The approach of ancillary markets to the women of *Mad Men* is crystallized in the introduction to a 2012 Boston Globe article titled “How to Channel Your Favorite Female ‘Mad Men’ Character.” The article advises female readers: “Want to channel your inner Joan? Try a ripe red lipstick. Or the future Mrs. Don Draper? Pick up a vintage-inspired floral shift dress that’s ready to stand the test of time. Relate most to Peggy? Read on and start prepping” (Raczka). While the television series demonstrates concern over the impact of images on real women, the message to the commercial market is clear: like Peggy, you need a makeover. Choose an acceptable image to imitate, read on, and start prepping.

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