TV/Series

1 | 2012

Les Séries télévisées américaines contemporaines :
entre la fiction, les faits, et le réel

Realism, Mimesis, and the Commodity in Season One of *Mad Men*

Beth Kowaleski Wallace

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/tvseries/1091>

DOI: 10.4000/tvseries.1091

ISSN: 2266-0909

Publisher

GRIC - Groupe de recherche Identités et Cultures

Electronic reference

Beth Kowaleski Wallace, « Realism, Mimesis, and the Commodity in Season One of *Mad Men* », *TV/Series* [Online], 1 | 2012, Online since 15 May 2012, connection on 20 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/tvseries/1091> ; DOI : 10.4000/tvseries.1091

TV/Series est mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

“Realism, Mimesis, and the Commodity in Season One of *Mad Men*”

Beth KOWALESKI WALLACE

This article focuses on one scene from the episode entitled “The Wheel”, in which a machine allows the characters to time-travel, within a series which does the same. Michael Taussig’s theories on mimesis, expressed in his book *Magic and Mimesis*, will be used here to argue that what is being faithfully rendered in *Mad Men* is a particular relationship to the commodity, and the way in which the commodity is used to recapture the past. Don Draper’s epiphany in the “Carousel” scene becomes the spectator’s, and the healing power of the object is close to the impact of the series which manages to reactivate a past era for the audience.

I start with what ought to be a simple question: if, as a realistic representation, *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-) is a mimesis, or a copy, what is it a copy of? What’s being captured in the moment that the show offers up its faithful image of “real life”? I say this is a simple question, one that seems to offer an apparently simple answer: *Mad Men* represents a slice of American life, in one specific time and place — New York, Madison Avenue, the early 1960s. Its scriptwriters, designers, actors, and even its film crew have been frequently lauded for their extraordinary attention to copying detail. Their well-documented attention to behavior, clothing, gesture, and ambiance all serve to pull the viewer into the mimesis or the copy, which offers a simulacrum of a historical past. Several articles have alluded to the obsessive attention paid to getting the copy “right”: Alex Witchel in the *New York Times* described the “fetishistically accurate sets and costumes,” and she concluded her profile with the writer, Matt Weiner, sending his crew off to research whether, in 1961, a car radio would come on the minute the key was put in the ignition¹. And indeed this level of attention to detail seems to anchor the representation, while props — cars, furniture, appliances — are crucial to the sense of historical accuracy.

In this essay, I want to further consider the role of the prop in realistic representation. I’ll argue that, above all else, what is being faithfully rendered in *Mad Men* is a particular relationship to the commodity, as best exemplified in a

¹ Alex Witchell “*Mad Men* Has Its Moment”
< http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/22/magazine/22madmen-t.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1 > Consulted May 25, 2010.

scene from the episode entitled “The Wheel” that, as many will remember, culminated Season One². I’ll be reading this scene against Michael Taussig’s theories on mimesis, expressed in his book *Magic and Mimesis*. This is a far ranging, sometimes elusive, but always intriguing exploration of the magic that once lay at the heart of mimesis — and that, as Taussig asserts, has resurfaced in the postmodern age. Taussig expands upon Benjamin’s definition of the mimetic faculty to arrive at his own definition namely: the mimetic faculty is “the nature that culture uses to create second nature³. In other words, for Taussig, the impulse to copy is an inherent human tendency to simulate or reproduce natural elements that would otherwise prove transitory. What I find interesting in this discussion is the suggestion that commodities are themselves “copies” of what exists in nature — think of the “Vibram Five Fingers line” of footwear that exactly recreates, down to the toes themselves, the physiology of the human limb. By extension, the Nike shoe also copies and improves upon the human foot. Other commodities similarly duplicate or extend something already existing in nature. The computer, for instance, could be said to “copy” the work of the human brain. In the case of *Mad Men*, the television set itself is already a magical “copy” of the human faculty to remember and recall events from the past, and what’s being duplicated in this mimesis is a very precise cultural moment mirrored back to its audience through the super sharp, and nearly hyper-real images provided by HD technology. Thus what Taussig helps us to explore in particular is the role of the commodity in mimetic “second nature”, as he argues that the commodity especially refracts the persistent magic that attends all mimetic practice.

So, to begin, what happens in the climactic scene of “The Wheel”? In this culminating episode, Don has been struggling in his marriage and other personal relations. He has recently discovered that his half-brother, whom he rebuffed in an attempt to keep his family past a secret, has committed suicide in a New York boarding house. He battles a growing sense of disconnection and it is clear that he feels both isolated from those around him and haunted by a past that has only been made clear to the viewer through occasional flashbacks. In the scene that gives the episode its title, Don faces the challenge of coming up with an ad campaign for a brand-new product: a Kodak slide projector with a circular tray. Most of us over the age of 35 will clearly remember “the Carousel”, which was introduced in 1962 and discontinued in 2004. Before the advent of power point, it was the main means of projecting images, so it was familiar to businesses, families, and academics alike. (Yet one of my own students, born in 1990, recently confessed that she didn’t know what a slide was.)

² “The Wheel”, 1.13.

³ Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: An Alternative History of the Senses*, New York: Routledge, 1993, p. xiii.

The clients have named their product “the wheel.” They admit that the metaphor lacks excitement, though the wheel was the original technology. Don responds that technology can be a glittering lure, but that, in order to engage the public, you have to make them sentimental about a new product. Don then cites “Teddy”, a Greek with whom he claims to have worked during his early days in advertising, claiming that he learned from Teddy that the most important idea in advertising is the NEW – the advertiser creates “an itch”, he says, and then you slip your product in there “like calamine lotion”. He continues, “the object is to create a deeper bond with the product – it’s delicate, but it’s potent...” He then asks for the lights to be turned off, and he begins to show slides of his own family’s past – of his children at play, of holidays, of his own wedding day, and of him and his wife. (One slide, coincidentally, apparently copies one from Matt Weiner’s own family archive⁴.) Don then recounts that Teddy told him in Greek nostalgia means the pain from an old wound (though in fact, it’s most often cited as “a longing for home”, homesickness, or a bittersweet yearning for things of the past). Nostalgia, opines Don, is a twinge “more powerful than memory alone.” Don concludes his pitch with these words: “This device is not a space ship. It’s a time machine. It goes backwards and forwards. It takes us to a place where we ache to go again. It’s not called the wheel. It’s called the Carousel. It lets us travel the way a child travels: round and round and back again to a place where we know we are loved⁵.”

Set in one of Sterling Cooper’s conference rooms, the scene frames the ad executives and the two clients positioned around a long, oblong table, with the screen at one end of the room. The camera moves around the room, shooting from different angles within the enclosed space. Everyone except Don sits, which allows him to tower over them.

⁴ See: http://www.bostonherald.com/blogs/entertainment/the_assistant/?p=2053
Accessed October 24, 2011.

⁵ See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHUUyxod7qw> Accessed January 14, 2012.

That the lights are dimmed to show the slides means that all the other characters in the scene almost disappear during Don's "pitch", which functions like a dramatic soliloquy. Don is lit to maximize the viewer's attention to his voice and his subtly changing facial expressions. The music is also extremely important in this scene: a slow, poignant melody, consisting mostly of chord changes more suitable for a church than the office of Sterling Cooper, indicates a brooding, yet wistful mood to match the expression on Don's face.

In terms of the narrative, the viewer is encouraged to think that, in viewing this set of images from his own family archive – his wife holding their new born daughter, himself carrying his new bride on their wedding day, and so on – Don makes the connection that he has failed to feel throughout the episode. The expression on his face slowly modulates from thoughtful or introspective, as he considers snapshots indicating the ordinary happiness of his family's life, to serene as he views the final image of himself and his wife locked in a passionate embrace. In other words, the scene provides satisfactory closure for the viewer who has identified with Don and who has wanted for him to find a place and to be at ease with himself. The scene also sets up the next season, which will continue to explore the darker side of Don's psychology and the nature of his identity as a husband and a father.

In this scene, Don is clearly not the only one affected – Harry Crane, also estranged from his wife at this point in the story, rushes suddenly from the

room, in a visible state of distress – and the clients themselves are clearly moved and impressed by the pitch. Of course, Don's speech works, and it would be easy to construe the scene cynically: Don has, after all, exploited some of his own most private family memories to sell a product to a prospective client. However, as I have already suggested, the *mise en scene*, the lighting, and above all the music belie this cynicism. Instead, the mood is clearly reverential. We are meant to take this scene very seriously – and we do. It works – and it works best in its celebration of a magical commodity that has successfully allowed Don to connect with his past.

To return to my opening question, I want to say that what is being copied here are indeed Don's memories – but what is also being copied is a distinct psychological response that is set into motion by a machine that was once a commonly owned possession. And this is where Taussig becomes especially useful because he would suggest that what we are seeing here is not just the image of the Carousel slide projector, but also the character's response to the ghostly presence of a technology that animates an object. That "ghost" mediates both Don's relationship to his past and also the viewers' relationship to their own past. I'll explain further: in his treatment of the commodity, Taussig says it was the Surrealists who first recognized the power of the ghosts embedded in the commodities created by yesteryear's technologies⁶. Employing Marx's account of the fetishized commodity, yet also departing from it by considering the object with an anthropological eye, Taussig writes, the commodity is "the petrified historical event where nature passed into culture, where raw material combined with human labor and technology to satisfy cultural design⁷." This statement is not particularly startling, of course, until Taussig helps us to recognize the sense of temporality uniquely held in the commodity. Like other magical objects, the commodity, he writes, stands at "the crossroad of past and future, nature and culture⁸."

The Carousel slide projector works perfectly to represent this confluence. Within the diegesis of the show, in the moment of its introduction, especially as a cultural object specifically designed to project images of fleeing human nature, it signals "the future", or a brave new world of ever expanding products serving human needs not even yet recognized. Yet Don's pitch resists this association with futurity and instead celebrates the projector's ability to capture the past: "it's not a spaceship. It's a time machine", he submits. The slide projector offers Don access to his happy memories, but (quoting Taussig again), it

⁶ Taussig, p. 232.

⁷ Taussig, p. 233.

⁸ Taussig, p. 233.

“spills over its reference and suffuses its component parts with ineffable radiance⁹...”

Hence the reverential music: what is being celebrated is the magical power of a machine to enhance human subjectivity by allowing it to “time travel”. However, this scene is obviously also self-referential because, via the magic of the image of the projector on HD TV, the viewer can also access his own past. Thus, for many viewers, the scene becomes doubly mimetic: it copies a scene of the character’s coming to fulfillment through a magical machine, while involving us in another moment of magical reckoning made possible by a machine. In other words, during this scene, we’re watching Don do what we are doing—accessing or connecting to the past through a ghostly technology. As we watch, we are meant to copy him in his moment of epiphany.

There is another way to think about what happens here: as Don makes his connection, or as he successfully links to past moments of happiness, and achieves his temporary serenity, so do we. The scene is a synecdoche for the show itself: it is a partial representation of what has been happening through the whole first season, namely the viewer has used the television as a way to “time travel” “round and round and back again to a place where we know we are loved.” Yet all through the series, it is objects in particular that have facilitated that sense of time travel. For viewers of a certain age, objects link us to the past, so that we find ourselves thinking – my mother had a coat like that, my father drove that car, our family had that toaster, I had that very toy (that Barbie doll case, that garish and weird clown doll). More than any other aspect of the *mise en scene*, the props, which are carefully selected commodities of a by-gone era, allow us to time travel and allow us to return to some moment of nearly mythical connection. The historically accurate props retain a ghostly trace of the past. How?

As Taussig would explain they carry within them both a history and an on-going signification. Confronted with the commodities of our past, we summon the time when they were new, when they thrilled and excited us with their possibility and with the future that they seemed to herald. They had that “ineffable radiance” then, and they are not “dead” now. They are still not silent. They speak to us, like the sad spectacle of an outdated computer set out among the trash cans, about a past that paradoxically once meant “the future,” reminding us, similarly that the present itself is nothing more than a future past. But it is also the nature of commodities to communicate, and in particular to indicate human transience. This episode of *Mad Men* seems to reference this idea often. The show intuitively understands the power of things to transport, to signify, and even to heal, and week after week it represents people who live in a world of signifying things through the television, itself a signifying technology that stands “at the crossroad of past and future, nature and culture.”

⁹ Taussig, p. 233.

But what about those viewers – like my student – who aren't certain what a Carousel slide projector is? What happens when an object becomes truly obsolete? Taussig suggests that it manages to speak, somehow: that commodities are never really dead, but continue to speak, however obscurely and unevenly – perhaps something like the picturesque jumble of old junk that fills Wall-e's space in the recent movie depicting his adventures¹⁰. Wall-e is often off-base in his understanding of what an item is, or what purpose it might have served, but he intuits the history recorded in our civilization's detritus, and he carefully guards all the objects accordingly. Taussig writes that "Obsolescence is where the future meets the past in the dying body of the commodity", and this idea too is conveyed in the image of the now-dead Carrousel¹¹.

But the ability of the commodity to act as a temporal signpost is best noticed in the extraordinarily eye-catching fashions for which the show is rightly famous, since as Taussig goes on to point out, fashion is "the realm in which the obsolescent character of the commodity is nourished and ritualized." The point of fashion, after all, is precisely to articulate "future and past," to herald "birth and death¹²." In her essay for the *New York Times*, Twitchell describes the effect of seeing the costumed actresses of *Mad Men* off-camera, claiming that they "cut amusing silhouettes when the full skirts of their costumes sway as they pummel their BlackBerrys¹³." It's a lovely, evocative image, one that suggests how the actresses themselves time travel through the magic of their 60s fashions, backwards to being the women they never were, and forward, through a technology whose days are surely numbered, to being the women they haven't yet become.

¹⁰ *Wall-e*, Pixar 2008. Dir. Andrew Stanton.

¹¹ Taussig, pp. 232-3.

¹² Taussig, p. 233.

¹³ Twitchell.