

“We don’t want life to look difficult, do we?”: Representations of the Fifties and Self-Reflexive Nostalgia in *Mad Men*

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Abstract: This article investigates how the TV series *Mad Men* portrays the Fifties through the lens of self-reflexive nostalgia. Focusing on a close reading of its first season, I look at how *Mad Men*’s self-awareness towards the function of images and advertising in the creation of the Fifties as a cultural construct is often complicated by its nostalgic and conservative politics.

Keywords: *Mad Men*; nostalgia; Fifties; image; advertising.

Introduction

This article investigates the representation of the Fifties in the first season of the TV series *Mad Men*, with a specific focus on the show’s use of self-reflexive nostalgia in its approach to the culture of images and advertising that helped create the Fifties as a cultural construct.¹ This construct of the Fifties has established itself in the American popular imagination through decades of films and TV series reproducing it as the ultimate time period of wealth, well-being, and hope in American history. The 1970s and 1980s in particular have been characterized by a plethora of texts fascinated with the idea of recapturing and glorifying that lost time: Shows like *Happy Days* (1974-84) and films like *American Graffiti* (1973), *Grease* (1977), and *Diner* (1982) portray the Fifties through a nostalgic lens that showcases that period as perfect.²

More recently, a renewed interest in the Fifties has led to a resurgence of representations in popular culture. Films from the last two decades have managed to engage the Fifties more critically, abandoning the nostalgia that characterized the 1970s and 1980s in favor of more ambivalent and complicated representations. Films like *The Hours* (2001), *Far from Heaven* (2002), *Revolutionary Road* (2008), and *A Single Man* (2009), among others, by directly referring to the nostalgia for the Fifties, have reevaluated the period, finally critically

¹ I use the notion of ‘the Fifties,’ not as the chronological decade from 1950 to 1959, but rather as the social and cultural construct that refers to the postwar period from 1946 to 1963, with President John F. Kennedy’s assassination symbolizing the ‘loss of innocence’ for the US and, therefore, marking its conclusion (cf. also Sprengler 39).

² The reasons behind this particular response to the Fifties in the 1970s and 1980s have been studied at length and have been traced back to a collective identity crisis, brought forth by the shattering of many certainties as caused by the events of the 1960s (Davis 421; Sprengler 47).

engaging issues of gender, race, class, and sexuality with a certain self-awareness.³ Some of these texts—films like *Pleasantville* (1998), *Down with Love* (2003), and *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005)—have also engaged the construction of the Fifties more explicitly, focusing on topics such as the rise of mass media, the role of advertising, and the thriving culture of mass consumption. Whereas the nostalgic longing of thirty years ago merely embraced the glorification of the past, this recent nostalgia for the Fifties is characterized by a conscious pleasure in dwelling in a clearly constructed past while, at the same time, critically exposing the racism, sexism, and overall sense of conformity that marked the Fifties.

Within this context, *Mad Men* represents a particularly productive text as it engages the Fifties visually, topically (with its focus on advertising) and critically through its use of self-reflexive nostalgia. In this article, I argue that, through discourses of ‘artificial images’ and advertising, *Mad Men* attempts to expose the artificiality of the Fifties as a cultural construct but the overall nostalgic politics of the series dramatically undermine this effort. To situate my reading, I will first introduce some aspects of the discourse around nostalgia, specifically the notion of self-reflexive nostalgia, and how it allows for a critique of the Fifties as a construct. Secondly, I will examine the Fifties’ culture of images and advertising with a focus on how the Fifties as a construct was created. With this frame in mind, I will then look at the TV show *Mad Men*, paying attention to how the series comments on the Fifties as a cultural construct, to the role self-reflexive nostalgia plays, and to how its textual politics are determined by the convergence of nostalgia and textual self-reflexivity.

Self-Reflexive Nostalgia

The debate around nostalgia has developed from an overall postmodern interest in memory and representations of history in film studies, cultural studies, and American studies, as it is evidenced by the amount of scholarship devoted to the topic. Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon, for example, have engaged with notions of nostalgia, linking it with the postmodern and either its incapability to deal with history (Jameson, “Postmodernism” 67), or with the function of irony and parody (Hutcheon). Both approaches read nostalgia as a

³ These texts in particular share a certain propensity for melodrama in their approach to these issues, which further complicates their representation of the past in terms of their nostalgic outlook. This article is part of my dissertation project where I further focus on melodrama’s role in the development of self-reflexive nostalgia.

conservative and retroactive tool that prevents texts from critically engaging history, having a simulation of ‘reality’ wash over the passive readers (cf. Jameson, “Nostalgia” 523-30). “When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning,” as Jean Baudrillard puts it (6). Jameson, Hutcheon, and Baudrillard, in line with a postmodern approach to the ‘real,’ argue that nostalgia’s attempt to recover the past is limited to its simulacral representations. Though this approach might be suitable for the strongly nostalgic films from the 1970s and 1980s,⁴ it is of little help when dealing with the contemporary text discussed here, as it would not take into consideration *Mad Men*’s self-referentiality.

In recent years, the debate around the concept has partially evolved nostalgia’s negative connotations, resulting in a more flexible approach towards its uses in popular culture. Pam Cook and Christine Sprengler, in particular, have rejected the notion of nostalgia as merely dehistoricizing the past in favor of a more active function that enables the viewers’ participation in the reimagination of the past on screen (Cook 3-4; Sprengler 5-6). Without insisting on the need of a precise definition, I understand nostalgia as “a dialectic between longing for something idealised that has been lost, and an acknowledgement that this idealised something can never be retrieved in actuality, and can only be accessed through image” (Cook 3). This kind of nostalgia, allowing for “the potential to reflect upon its own mechanisms” (4), is the starting point for what I refer to as self-reflexive nostalgia.⁵

Self-reflexive nostalgia can be seen at work in various popular texts released in the late 1990s and 2000s that reproduce the Fifties with a certain awareness of their nostalgic project. These texts know that the past cannot be retrieved, they nonetheless succeed in visually reproducing it and engaging history by way of explicitly commenting on the function of such a nostalgia. Through a more critical portrayal of the Fifties by dealing with issues that were unrepresented at the time, the act of reproducing the past allows these texts to reflect on the processes behind the creation of the nostalgic construct itself. Specifically, the notion of the Fifties as a glorified decade offers a particularly fertile ground for examinations of nostalgia, especially in those texts that attempt to negotiate a nostalgic view of the past with a more critical take on it. Contemporary texts that employ this kind of self-reflexive nostalgia

⁴ For an examination of nostalgia for the Fifties in the 1970s, cf. Davis.

⁵ Though the term has appeared in previous scholarship (e.g. Cook 4), it has not been used to refer to the processes I analyze in this article.

attempt to offer more ambivalent versions of the Fifties by trying to engage the past via consciously artificial images.⁶ Before moving on to a close reading of *Mad Men*, I want to outline some features intrinsic to the Fifties that enabled an emphasis on the image and the development of such nostalgic longing.

Something about the Fifties has facilitated the development of a strong nostalgic feeling in popular culture. By being the first decade to represent itself on a mass scale through a visual medium, Sprengler examines how the Fifties played a decisive role in the process of creating their own mythology (39-41). The images of products referred to as 1950s Populuxe⁷ have come to signify not only “economic prosperity, but also the social and political values that constitute the Fifties” (49). The Fifties, in fact, were also the decade that witnessed the explosion of consumerism on a mass scale. The fact that objects—cars, kitchen appliances, clothes—have become the primary images we tend to associate with the Fifties can be in part attributed to the central role that television, both through programing and advertising, played during the 1950s.

Through the centrality of the mass media, the Fifties came into existence particularly in a visual fashion, with images of happy families and an overall feeling of well-being broadcast on screen, which contributed considerably to the establishment of a nostalgic discourse of the Fifties. Even more than films, the popularity of TV shows like *I Love Lucy* (1951-57), *Father Knows Best* (1954-60), and *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-63) contributed to the crystalizing of an ideal of the perfect American family. These shows focused on middle-class, white, suburban families and “on solutions to problems encountered in the domestic sphere and resolutions to morally ambiguous situations” (Sprengler 50). Given the sociopolitical landscape of the time and their altogether melodramatic aesthetic these representations limited their scope by excluding all minorities and promoted a very specific version of the Fifties, which was in line with the ideas of a decade of happiness and prosperity.

Mad Men—mostly set in an advertising agency on Madison Avenue in New York—engages all the aspects mentioned so far. First, by having an advertising agency as its center, the

⁶ When mentioning artificial images in this text, I am referring to constructed, simulacral copies of what is ‘reality.’

⁷ The term refers to the 1950s architecture and design and it was coined by merging populism, popularity, and luxury (cf. Hine).

show is very aware of the Fifties' preoccupation with visual representations, the selling of these visual representations, and of how advertising depends on the manipulation of the masses. Secondly, *Mad Men*, in line with the texts it is inspired by and pays homage to, focuses on a white, middle-class milieu of characters which favors the same kind of melodramatic narrative choices that similar Fifties' texts preferred.⁸ After considering both these aspects in relation to the series, I will look at how, through discourses of 'artificial images' and advertising, *Mad Men* attempts to expose the artificiality of the Fifties as a cultural construct through its self-reflexive nostalgia; finally, I will look at how the overall conservative politics of the series emerge and dramatically undermine the critical effort of its nostalgia.

(M)ad Men

Mad Men,⁹ which premiered in 2007 on the cable network AMC, has been both a critical and a commercial success, rapidly becoming a cult TV show with considerable influence on American popular culture. The series focuses on Don Draper, the creative director at the Madison Avenue advertising firm Sterling/Cooper, and on his professional and personal life. At work, Don mainly deals with Pete Campbell, a young and ambitious accountant, with his boss Roger Sterling, and with his secretary Peggy Olsen, who has aspirations of becoming a copywriter. He lives in the New York suburbs with his wife Betty, a housewife, and their two children, Sally and Bobby. As the series starts, Don also has a long-term mistress, Midge, an artist who lives in Greenwich Village. The first season focuses on Don's identity and his past, as the audience discovers that his real name is Dick Whitman and that, while serving in Korea, he assumed the name and identity of a fellow soldier.

Don's meeting with the clients from Lucky Strike in the very first episode ("Smoke Gets in Your Eyes") represents a good example of *Mad Men's* emphasis on images and advertising, especially of how the show uses advertising to display its awareness of the process behind

⁸ Melodrama, as defined by Linda Williams, "seek[s] dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action" (42). Films directed by Douglas Sirk in particular—notably *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), *Written on the Wind* (1956), and *Imitation of Life* (1959)—embody a certain melodramatic Fifties sensibility that represents the decade and inspires the contemporary texts.

⁹ So far, *Mad Men* has covered the time period between 1960 and 1966 over five seasons (two more seasons are planned). For the purposes of this article, I will limit my scope to the first season and its thirteen episodes set in 1960.

the construction of the Fifties. Towards the end of the episode, the agency has to present a new idea to Lucky Strike's owners, Mr. Garner Sr. and Jr., who have been worried about an article in *Reader's Digest*, alerting the public of the potentially fatal consequences of smoking. Roger Sterling, the account manager, points out how this health issue is nothing to be concerned about and simply a "manipulation of the mass media," to which Mr. Gardner Sr. replies, "manipulation of the media? Hell, that's what I pay you for." From this brief exchange, it already becomes evident how *Mad Men* is very aware of the mechanisms of advertising and the media. Don proposes that, instead of focusing on the medical aspect and trying to deny the poisonous effects of cigarettes, they should change the conversation.

As Don points out in this first meeting, advertising is not about the product. It is about the selling of an idea, not unlike the selling of the Fifties themselves. He explicates the process even further by reiterating how

advertising is based on one thing: happiness. And you know what happiness is? Happiness is the smell of a new car. It's freedom from fear. It's a billboard on the side of the road that screams reassurance that, whatever you are doing, is okay. You are okay.

As this first pitch meeting shows, *Mad Men* is very conscious of the process of manipulation of the consumers and of the decade's focus on simulacra: Happiness is on a billboard, a visual image of some product that reassures the consumer; happiness is in the images that advertising creates. Furthermore, the examples Don provides are strictly connected with consumerism (the new car) and advertising (the billboard). Happiness—as he defines it—is embodied by material possessions and their representations, with the products Don helps to sell. Even the consumer's "fear" is placated by the 'unreal' things advertising presents them with. By equating advertising with the selling of happiness, and by putting the advertising world at its center, *Mad Men* engages in a portrayal of the Fifties that is very aware of the manufactured aspect of this 'decade.' However, this self-awareness is often undermined by the romanticization of the creative process behind it. Don, in fact, just like in the Lucky Strike pitch where he comes up with the slogan "It's toasted" on the spot, is often portrayed as having some creative epiphany, which contradicts the usually detached and calculated attitude of the advertising process as frequently presented in the show.

Mad Men is often quite conscious of its own referential project, as seen in many moments throughout the show. For example, images of pregnant women smoking and drinking abound, as well as references to impending historical events the audience knows about and the characters, naturally, do not. These strategies, on the one hand, represent playful winks to the contemporary viewers, appealing to their sense of superiority and power enabled by their knowledge of history; on the other hand, they also quite nostalgically long for an era of blissful ignorance, particularly in relation to the health concerns of smoking and drinking. Both strategies engage *Mad Men's* concern with the process that allows the viewers to indulge in the bad behavior on screen because it is set in the past while, at the same time, makes them feel smug towards those who lived in the much idealized Fifties. These strategies, by calling attention to themselves, evidence *Mad Men's* self-awareness in reproducing a consciously artificial image of the Fifties and allow the viewers to distance themselves from this 'unreal' past.

As a way of accessing the past as artificial, *Mad Men* draws quite explicitly on popular texts from the Fifties themselves, both visually and in terms of topics, which underlines the self-reflexive quality of its nostalgia. Even more than by Fifties' sitcoms, *Mad Men* is visually inspired by Fifties' films, from Doris Day's comedies to Douglas Sirk's melodramas to Alfred Hitchcock's thrillers (cf. Butler 63-67). Vera Dika, commenting on the process of borrowing from older movies, states that "the image is seen as 'returned' from the past [...] the image returns not as representational of the natural real, but as simulacral, a copy of copies whose original has been lost" (3). In this context the simulacrum embodies another manifestation of the self-reflexive nostalgia of texts that consciously refer to older images as a means of pointing to their constructedness. By evoking known fictional images and 'overperforming' some visual aspects of the Fifties, *Mad Men* refers to the past as clearly artificial, which speaks for the show's self-reflexivity; even more so, the high value that the show puts on recreating interior designs and clothes as accurately as possible is an attempt to reproduce merely what the Fifties looked like in popular culture so that today's audience is able to recognize them as nothing more than simulacra.

In another effort to visually recall older texts, *Mad Men's* opening credits feature the stylized silhouette of a man falling, with colorful advertising posters on the buildings' walls in the

background. The style of the title sequence is reminiscent of famed graphic designer Saul Bass and his work on *Vertigo* (1958), *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959), and *North by Northwest* (1959). The latter, in particular, provides an even more apt intertextual reference as the film's protagonist is an advertising executive (cf. also White 154). Besides the visual reference to Bass's style, *Mad Men* also recreates the first images of the film, showing crowds of people leaving the office at the end of the workday. In the film, Roger O. Thornhill (played by Cary Grant) leaves the office building with his secretary, frantically making their way through the New York City crowd, and he lies to another man on the street in order to get a cab. "In the world of advertising there's no such thing as a lie. There is only the expedient exaggeration," says Thornhill to his protesting secretary, which characterizes him as a typically charming but opportunistic ad man. *Mad Men* captures the same frenetic activity of Manhattan in the Fifties and the same type of advertising executive but, by referencing the earlier text, is aware of the constructedness of those Fifties in a way that *North by Northwest* is not. This intertextual strategy enables *Mad Men's* self-reflexive nostalgia by visually evoking the Fifties through a fictional text of that era, which allows the series to use it as starting point for its comment on the figure of the ad man.

Mad Men refers even more directly to another text from the Fifties, Billy Wilder's *The Apartment* (1960), as a comment on the gender politics of the office. Roger Sterling, a married man, has been having an affair with Joan, the office's chief secretary. After Joan sees *The Apartment* at the cinema, she brings it up with Roger ("Long Weekend"), pointing out how badly the protagonist of the film was treated by the men in the office, "handing her around like a tray of canapés. She tried to commit suicide." Watching Shirley MacLaine as Fran, Joan has realized Roger does not treat her any better and has grown dissatisfied with the affair. As Roger points out "that's not how it is" between them, the audience realizes that it is not that different as we see how, after Roger has a heart attack that evening, Joan is confined to her role as secretary and, in the last scene, as an elevator girl (just like Fran). At the time, *The Apartment* was perceived as an innovative and realist film (Sharrett 25-26)—Roger refers to it as "crude" and "extreme"—commenting on the social and gender realities of office relations. Despite the inherent criticism of their affair that *Mad Men* presents us with, due to the self-reflexive nostalgia at work that contains the immorality to the Fifties within the melodramatic milieu of the show, the audience is ultimately on their side as a

couple and does not condemn them. Whereas *The Apartment's* realism shows a young woman deceived by a married man, *Mad Men's* melodrama relishes in Joan's unhappiness and Roger's callousness because they belong to a nostalgic fiction that indulges this fantasy.

The self-reflexive quality of *Mad Men's* nostalgia complicates the ideal image of the Fifties whereas, at the same time, the show's carefully chosen images of the Fifties reflect its conservative politics. For example, instead of focusing on 'race' relations or homosexuality, and possibly availing itself of a more 'realist' approach, *Mad Men* rather limits the represented world to a white, middle-class, heterosexual male-dominated workplace and does so through the lens of the genre of melodrama. Even when, e.g., the show introduces Salvatore Romano—the Italian-American director of the art department and closeted homosexual—among its main characters, the show treats him and his storylines in a way that is still very much in line with the aesthetics and attitudes of a text from the Fifties. Salvatore's main role in the first season is limited to making frequent sexual comments about women and to expressing his love for musicals and gay icons (e.g. *Bye Bye Birdie* and Joan Crawford), which results in the audience noticing his homosexuality while his colleagues do not.¹⁰ Instead of openly dealing with a topic that was not dealt with at the time, *Mad Men* chooses to represent homosexuality not unlike a Fifties' film would have, namely by mostly talking around the subject.

Mad Men's focus on alluring images include its main character, Don Draper, and his life, but the show, while presenting his colleagues with an image of his seemingly perfect life, is careful to, simultaneously, make the audience aware of the superficial and artificial nature of this construct. Don is introduced as a charming, handsome, and successful ad man and his life appears to be perfect: As the creative director at the agency he has the perfect job, the perfect family, and the perfect house in the New York suburbs. Within the first couple of episodes, the audience discovers that he, not only is not as happy as he seems in his professional nor his family life, but that Don is not who he says he is. His subordinates discuss his private life, wondering if he has a mistress, and one of them says: "Draper? Who

¹⁰ Even later in the show, the few times the audience witnesses Salvatore deal with his repressed sexuality underline the impossibility of him coming out in the antagonistic environment he finds himself in. The resolution of Salvatore's arc (in season three) is also in line with a Fifties' melodrama: An important client makes a move on him and Sal rejects him, which results in Salvatore losing his job and his visibility, as he is written out of the show.

knows anything about that guy. No one's ever lifted that rock. He could be Batman for all we know" ("Marriage of Figaro"). In fact, not only does he indeed have a lover, but 'Don Draper' is also an assumed identity which he took to escape his poor background and start a new life. With a main character that embodies a lack of identity, *Mad Men* consciously promotes an image of the Fifties based on pretense and artifice, where nothing is as it appears.

Similarly, *Mad Men*, through its focus on the portrayal of Don's family, is clearly conscious of the constructedness of the ideal Fifties' suburban family. Don's wife Betty—young and beautiful—represents the image of the perfect Fifties' housewife. However, throughout the first season, the audience slowly comes to realize how lonely and unhappy Betty actually is. When she visits the city with the children to have their family portrait taken and they arrive at Sterling/Cooper, Don is not there ("5G"). He is out at lunch with his half-brother Adam, who, thinking him dead for years, has reached out to him after seeing his picture in the newspaper. Adam, who adored his older brother, is trying to reestablish a connection with the only family member he has left. Don, on the other hand, sees him as somebody from his past who is now threatening to destroy everything he has achieved, and consequently he tries to buy him off. Don rejecting his last connection to his parental family and having his picture taken with the family he has created on the same day is a telling juxtaposition. *Mad Men*, in putting these images side by side, points to the artificiality of the picture-perfect family Don has with Betty, as it merely functions as the idea of family Don has to project as part of his successful persona. The self-reflexive nostalgia allows the series to linger on beautiful images of Don, Betty, and the children as the viewers enjoy them for their Fifties' look but, at the same time, know that they are just simulacra.

In order to show *Mad Men's* self-reflexive nostalgia at work even more explicitly, I want to look at a crucial moment towards the end of the first season ("The Wheel"), in which Don presents the campaign for the new Kodak slide projector. Instead of focusing on the technological improvement of the product¹¹, as the clients suggest, Don goes a different way:

In Greek, 'nostalgia' literally means, 'the pain from an old wound.' It's a twinge in your heart, far more powerful than memory alone. This device isn't a spaceship. It's a time

¹¹ For an examination of *Mad Men's* use of old media and its connection with contemporary masculinity, cf. Bevan.

machine. It goes backwards, forwards. It takes us to a place where we ache to go again. It's not called the Wheel. It's called a Carousel. It lets us travel the way a child travels. Around and around, and back home again... to a place where we know we are loved.

During his pitch, Don shows slides of his own family life, from his pregnant wife, to their wedding day, to them playing with the kids. At this point in the series, Betty has started to suspect that Don might have been unfaithful to her, and both the audience and Don know that his family life is not as perfect and idyllic as he is trying to present it. Despite this awareness, which allows the audience to link these images to the ones of stereotypically happy Fifties' families from television and ads, the scene is quite sentimental and nostalgic. Even if Don's life is far from the image he is trying to sell to the clients, the spectators (both the viewers and the clients and colleagues at the meeting) are led to believe that his family used to be so happy, and Don seems to believe these images are 'real' as well.

Offering this nostalgic fantasy appears to be at odds with *Mad Men's* self-reflexivity while, in fact, the sequence is an example of the show's attempt to deconstruct the process behind the development of nostalgia. In the final moments of the episode, we see Don ride the train home and join Betty and the kids before they leave for Thanksgiving's dinner at her father's house, reclaiming his place within a family that he now seems anxious to return to.¹² However, the series shows us the same scene again, but this time with what 'actually' happens: Don is too late, Betty and the kids have already left, and he sits down on the stairs, in the dark and alone. His desire of finally being with his family seems to stem from the nostalgic image of his family he has presented to the clients, an image manufactured by Don himself in order to sell a product. By having Don believe his own pitch, *Mad Men* comments on both the power of manipulated images at the center of the advertising process and on the origin of his manufactured nostalgic longing for something that may as well never really existed.

The main storyline of episode nine underlines both *Mad Men's* awareness of the Fifties as artificial and its conservative project ("Shoot"). Betty, who used to work as a model before she met and married Don, is cast in the new Coca Cola ad by a competitor of Sterling/Cooper. The set is a staged family picnic scene with a young couple and their

¹² Earlier in the episode, Don has also discovered that Adam, after Don had told him he did not want to be a part of his life, has killed himself, leaving him without any family left.

children. The image of the picture perfect family imitates a typical Fifties ad: Staged and unnatural looking, characterized by bright colors, and with a family at the center, smiling excessively. The artificiality of the setup is even commented on by Betty herself when, referring to the Coca Cola bottles in her hand, she asks, “how are these open already?”, to which the art director replies, “we don’t want life to look difficult, do we?”. The artificiality of this image is meant to visually evoke old Fifties ads and simultaneously expose the artificiality of the Fifties.

In this respect, this sequence points again to *Mad Men*’s awareness of the Fifties as a product of mass media. However, the overall storyline in this episode exposes something else, too. The ad agency representing Coca Cola, McCann/Erickson, hires Betty as their model because they are trying to get Don to leave Sterling/Cooper and join them. When, after some gifts and negotiations, Don ultimately rejects their offer, McCann decides against using the photos they took of Betty, justifying it as a creative choice. Even though Don seems quite supportive of his wife going back to work as a model, he decides against leaving Sterling/Cooper after seeing Betty’s pictures. On the one hand, Don seems upset McCann involved his wife in a business situation; on the other hand, his decision is also informed by his ultimate disapproval of Betty’s working. At dinner, after being fired, Betty tells Don that she has decided not to continue working because she is happy with just being a housewife and a mother, which satisfies Don. By having Betty back in her place in their home, despite her dissatisfaction, *Mad Men* seems to recur once again to the strategies of melodrama, allowing the viewers to relish in Betty’s unhappiness as it is not 'real.'

Conclusion

In this article, I have first introduced the limitations of the postmodern take on nostalgia, the notion of self-reflexive nostalgia, and the discourses around the Fifties, images, and advertising. Within this framework, this article has argued how the TV show *Mad Men* presents a version of the Fifties as a cultural construct that is both aware of its own artificiality, but also an object of its nostalgic politics. By focusing on advertising as a main topical interest, the show takes a self-reflexive approach in dealing with the mechanisms of the media and consumerism, trying to deconstruct how this nostalgic idea of the Fifties has come to exist. In fact, *Mad Men* often comments on the artificial nature of advertising and

how it very programmatically manipulates the masses. Ultimately, though, the show's representation of the Fifties emerges as self-reflexively aware of its constructedness as well as embracing the limitations of its dominant reading of the decade as white, middle-class, and suburban.

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