

Remembering through Retro TV and Cinema: *Mad Men* as Televisual Memorial to 60s America

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ABSTRACT: This article examines ways in which some contemporary American television and cinema set in the 1950s and 1960s such as *Pleasantville* and *Mad Men* share a critical engagement with the period they represent. The engagement is through the twin processes of identification and dissonance. The article describes this way of reviewing the past as retro representation. The article further explores the idea of retros as televisual memorials for the present, as they contribute to preserving memories of the represented period. *Mad Men* is examined as such a televisual memorial of the 60s.

KEYWORDS: Retro TV & Cinema, Cultural Memory, *Mad Men*, Televisual Memorial, Post-War America

In America, the past two decades saw an unprecedented rise in television and cinema productions that are set in the past. Many of these cluster around the post-war period, particularly around the 1950s and 1960s. In this article, I explore reasons for revisiting the period in television and cinema, and the contribution of these contemporary televisual representations to remembering the period. In doing so, I use the concept of the retro¹ to describe a particular way in which some contemporary American TV and cinema engage with the post-war period, stoking generational anxiety surrounding this period in the present. I define retro as a process of re-viewing a past from the present, motivated less by nostalgia² or senti-

¹ Etymologically, “retro” has been used in English for more than five hundred years, and can be traced to the Latin preposition *retro*, which indicates “backwards” or “behind.” Perhaps “retrospect” is the most common word in this regard and was first used ca. 1602. It originates from the Latin word *retrōspectus*, past participle of *retrōspicere*, which means “to look back at”: *retro* (backward) + *specere* (to look at). Since the mid 20th century, a fresh wave of words sharing the root “retro” have surged forth in popular fashion and culture, such as the relatively modern “retrofit”. To use “retro” alone has been in vogue since the 70s to suggest a revival in art, fashion, design, or attitude inspired by an earlier style.

² Looking back nostalgically entails remembering with mixed emotions of pleasure and sadness, and a sentimental yearning to return to a past. David Lowenthal writes that, “nostalgia transcends yearnings for lost childhoods and scenes of early life, embracing imagined pasts never experienced by their devotees or perhaps by anyone” (xix). “Nostalgia is today the universal catchword for looking back. It fills the popular press, serves as advertising bait, merits sociological study; no term better expresses modern malaise” (4). The modern malaise, he explains, is the “anxieties generated by modernist amnesia. We preserve because the pace of change and development has attenuated a legacy integral to our identity and well-

mental longing for the past, and more so by an understanding that the reviewed past shares cultural proximity with the present and that a critical engagement with this contiguous past may reveal or mirror present desires and anxieties. I sharpen the concept of the retro in this article using examples from the film *Pleasantville* (1998), and the AMC television series *Mad Men* (2007-present). In the second half of the article I explore the idea of retros as televisual memorials to the period that they represent. I argue that *Mad Men* is a televisual memorial to 60s white America, wherein I use the word memorial in a broader sense of an object that preserves remembrances.

Retro Television and Cinema

Pleasantville and *Mad Men* both present uncomfortable aspects of the post-war period: 50s suburbia in the case of *Pleasantville*, and 60s Madison Avenue work culture in *Mad Men*. These contemporary televisual representations are made from the vantage point of a critical distance that allows for reviewing their historic subjects in their complexity, through a combined effect of identification and dissonance. Retro creates an unsettling effect by foregrounding the proximity of its historic subjects espousing generational anxiety within its audience. The tension is created by juxtaposing nostalgic images and stereotypes alongside discomfiting facets of the represented period. In this sense, retros destabilize earlier narratives of the period in television and cinema.

Pleasantville directed by Gary Ross is a good case in point. The film is a critical portrayal of 50s sitcoms. It retains the black and white palette of those sitcoms and many of its scenes resemble the styles of the TV ads and sitcoms of the period. The protagonists are Jennifer (Reese Witherspoon) and David (Tobey Maguire), two 90s teenagers who get transported into *Pleasantville*, David's favorite 50s suburban sitcom, where they have to assume the lives of Mary Sue and Bud Parker. The scenes from their life in Pleasantville, such as that of the smiling mother putting fresh pancakes topped with syrup and butter on the breakfast table, rely heavily on 50s stereotypical ads (*Aunt Jemima Pancakes* TV commercial) and sit-

being" (xxiv). The word nostalgia was first coined in 1688 by Johannes Hofer to describe a physical condition caused by extreme homesickness. It is a compound of Greek words *nostos* meaning homecoming and *algos* meaning suffering or pain. But as David Lowenthal shows "nostalgia" goes through a gradual transformation from being associated with a physical to a mental state: "Today rarely associated with homesickness, nostalgia has become strictly a state of mind" (11).

com settings (*Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*: “The Pancake Mix”). Jennifer feels repulsed by the breakfast served by their Pleasantville mother Betty Parker (Joan Allen), and is stifled by the pressure to consume copious amounts of a greasy, calorie-rich diet. Her reaction is in stark contrast to the response of children in the 50s sitcoms and ads. The scene at the breakfast table undercuts the romanticizing that might have ensued after viewing the old sitcoms and ads. In numerous other scenes during the film there is a conscious undermining of nostalgia in similar ways. The film brings in elements that are recognizable from the period borrowed from earlier popular representations to ironize them.

The central plot of the film *Pleasantville* is about the gradual transformation of the initially black-and-white eponymous town into color and what the transformation entails. As the story moves ahead, there is a rise of tension between progressive residents whose life has turned colorful and the rest who firmly stick to their conservative black and white lives. The colored people are perceived as a threat to the traditional sedated life of Pleasantville. This is a play on the vocabulary of post-war suburban racial politics as the colored people in the film are also white but they differ from the rest because they are open to new experiences. What the film addresses is a contemporary anxiety that ordinary and even affable people like the residents of Pleasantville may react aggressively when faced with new ideas or threats to their identities. Until the final moment of conflict, even David feels comfortable in the company of the residents of Pleasantville, and enjoys living with them as much as he enjoyed watching the 50s sitcom in his 90s suburban living room. The film ends with David’s return to the present with a more layered assessment of the simulated and controlled environment of Pleasantville. David’s disillusionment is central to the plot of the film. It is contingent on the fact that he had an idealized perception of 50s suburbia based on his familiarity with the sitcom *Pleasantville*. When a television or film representation reviews ways of remembering a familiar nostalgic past³ by presenting its audience with significant popular

³ It is worth mentioning here that the nostalgic past which retro representations attempt to subvert is popularly inscribed with ideals and markers of white America. For example, the retro television series *Mad Men* attempts to dispel nostalgia surrounding white America of the 60s. The absence of any African American characters in significant roles in *Mad Men* functions as a comment on the racist attitude of white Americans during the 60s. Conceptually, it is possible that a retro televisual production may address nostalgia of African-American or other marginal communities for times that may be imagined to be more supportive or conducive to their identity politics. However, such retro representations are difficult

cultural markers of the period but uses it to subvert existing popular narratives, I call it a retro representation.

Retro and Cultural Memory

Cultural Memories of a period are often selective public moments that commemorate a past, and the commemorated moments themselves are representational and never the entirety of the past. In their introduction to *Places of Public Memory*, Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott extrapolate from theories of space and place⁴ to understand memory and they argue that “memories are differentiated, named ‘events’ marked for recognition from amid an undifferentiated temporal succession of occurrences” (24). The central argument in their contention is that the identity of memory is hinged on its recognizability. We only remember certain moments, which stand out as unique and differentiated, from a succession of others that are forgotten. Memories can be of various types: individual, collective (M. Halbwachs), or cultural (Jan and Aleida Assmann)⁵. For a memory to have cultural significance and recognizability, it needs external embodiments that a culture can relate to and has invested in. Such memories may be transmitted from one generation to another, and are sustained by “institutions of learning, transmission and interpretation” (J. Assmann 111). Assmann writes:

[o]n the social level, with respect to groups and societies, the role of external symbols becomes even more important, because groups which, of course, do not ‘have’ a memory tend to ‘make’ themselves one by means of things meant as reminders such as monuments, museums, libraries, archives, and other mnemonic institutions. This is what we [J. Assmann and A. Assmann] call cultural memory. (J. Assmann 111)

to come across in mainstream television and cinema. As nostalgia is not exclusive to white American experience, one can contend the subjects of retros need not be restricted to the white community.

⁴ Dickinson, Blair, and Ott use Yi-Fu Tuan’s theorization which contends that “If we think of space as that which allows movement, and place as a pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into a place” (Tuan 6) and they compare memory to this idea of place as differentiated, named ‘locales’ deployed within spaces and derive at the analogical relationality of place : space :: memory : time (24).

⁵ For comprehensive understanding of these types of memory and their differences see Jan Assmann’s essay “Communicative and Cultural Memory.”

Cultural memory is “based on material contact between a remembering mind and a reminding object” (J. Assmann 111). This is where television and cinema interpose in the equation as the reminding external object; memories that find continual representation in these popular media become more culturally recognizable⁶. Television theorist Gary R. Edgerton argues in the introduction of *Television Histories* that “[t]elevision is the principal means by which most people learn about history today” (1). Television and cinema together function as the cultural institution through which cultural memories are acquired and transferred. Their popular appeal and wide networks of circulation make television and cinema important contributors to memorability of events.

Contemporary retro representations in TV and cinema seek to expand the cultural memory of its audience by adding complexity and layers to memories popularly identified with the represented period. Several such instances can be found in *Mad Men*, the AMC television series set largely in the 60s Madison Avenue and the neighboring Ossining suburb. The episode “The Grown Ups” (Season 3, Episode 12) features the assassination of John F. Kennedy and represents this recognizable historic event within a matrix of emotions which the assassination evokes in the characters of the series. The episode is concerned less with recirculating images and details of the assassination and more with delineating responses towards it within 60s upper-middle class white America. The characters of the series are shown to be affected by Kennedy’s death, but at the same time, we can see that their emotional upheavals are rooted mostly in their own personal anxieties which they project onto the public tragedy. The protagonists of the show, the Drapers, had already grown distant by the end of 1963, and in the preceding episode (“The Gypsy and the Hobo”) Betty Draper (January Jones) had sought private counsel on the possibilities of divorcing her husband, Donald Draper (Jon Hamm). She learns from her lawyer that divorce was not an option, at least not without being left broke or losing the custody of her own children. Betty’s troubles did not begin, or end, with Kennedy’s assassination. But the sudden death of the nation’s president and the immediate nationwide sense of hopelessness blends into her own, adding to her

⁶ It is important not to conflate a forgotten (individual or collective) memory in the cultural sphere to an erasure, but forgotten as characteristic of those moments whose significance in the cultural life of a people have abraded over time and which have not found representation enough to become a persistent cultural memory.

feeling of despair. The series does not project Kennedy's death as a turning point in people's lives, but it rather chooses a nuanced representation of the assassination as a public event that is received in conjunction with people's private anxieties. In doing so, the series makes an implicit comment on popular narratives of the 60s that associates the assassination of Kennedy with "the national end of innocence" (Brown 2).⁷

Though set in the 60s, the central characters of *Mad Men* embody different facets of the post-war era. While the characters of Peggy Olsen (Elisabeth Moss) and Joan Holloway (Christina Hendricks) are reminiscent of the 60s working women and their struggles in gendered offices spaces, Betty Draper, the upper class finishing school graduate, is representative of the 50s suburban housewives and their overwhelming boredom with life. The character of Betty is a revival of stay-at-home suburban women in the 50s that Betty Friedan writes about⁸ and Joan Holloway's character is shown to share the liberal approach to sexuality that Helen Gurley Brown advocates in her 1962 bestseller *Sex and the Single Girl*. Put together, these characters embody different strands of sexuality and femininity and enables the series to function as an exhaustive commentary on the popular and private memories of the post-war period.

Revisiting the Post-War Period

The post-war period invites continual revisitations in retro for a number of reasons. The period is heavily documented in sitcoms and cinema of the period and these provide an attractive canvas of iconography that contemporary televisual media can refer to. The post-war period in America is intrinsically linked to the growth of the television industry and a boom in television viewers. Already by 1954 half of the American households owned a television set⁹. The reliance on these earlier popular cultural representations such as *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* or *Father Knows Best* in the making of retros such as *Pleasantville* is on-

⁷ Winfried Fluck's essay "The Fallen Hero: John F. Kennedy in Cultural Perspective" comments on the assassination of Kennedy as a "watershed" event that symbolized the "betrayal of American ideals" (481).

⁸ In 1957, Friedan conducted a survey for her Smith College reunion and found many of her contemporary white upper-class and educated women languish in isolation and boredom in their suburban homes. The results of the survey was the genesis of her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*.

⁹ The Website *TVhistory.TV* has detailed accounts of television growth in its first 75 years including a chart on "Number of TV Households and Percentage of USA Homes with Television - 1950 to 1978". This chart shows 55.7% of American households owned a TV set by 1954.

ly to the extent of recreating 50s suburbia in ways its contemporary audience can identify with. But most of these popular representations of the period, both television and cinema, were subjected to conformity and surveillance under the politically conservative House Un-American Committee (HUAC). The committee had a highhanded approach towards television and film industry as they were fearful of communist subversions in popular media. American cultural historian Stephen J. Whitfield argues, most of popular representations on television during the post-war period were purged of ideas that may be considered even remotely disruptive to the American ideals. He comments on the oppressive atmosphere and the programs that were broadcast as, “Television programming fit—and contributed to—the proclivity to hang a giant Do Not Disturb sign over the nation” (155). In this context, it is both challenging and thrilling to represent the period with the desire to unravel its anxieties and complexities.

Additionally, the post-war period is still accessible from cultural memory, especially the music of the 60s. *Mad Men* too is invested in exploring the familiarity of contemporary audience with popular music from the period. The TV series uses popular songs from the period and inserts them into its narrative in ways characteristic of retros. Tim Anderson in his essay “Uneasy Listening: Music, Sound and Criticizing Camelot in *Mad Men*” talks about the recordings used in *Mad Men* during the closing credits of each episode and comments,

[*Mad Men*’s] use of recordings often operate as critical interlocutors that act as a counterpoint to the onscreen imagery. The result is these seemingly ‘appropriate’ recordings are used to generate both incongruities and commentary that further challenge and complicate our collective memory of early 1960s America as a time of innocence and contentment (72-73).

The Skeeter Davis country pop crossover song “The End of the World” is used in this manner in the closing credits of the episode “The Grown-Ups.” The song which has overtones of the end of innocent summer romances is used as a closure to the episode riddled with anxieties.

Jay Winter makes a compelling argument linking higher education and affluence of the baby boom generation¹⁰ with the boom in memorizing this period. As the baby boomers came of age, many went to college and got higher education. He argues that the college educated demographic has since drastically risen over the decades and this affluent class desires for cultural activities and products. The generation of baby boomers who now have a disposable income and cultural capital invest in memorializing the formative period of their lives and their perceptions of the period (375-79). The impressions of this generation of the post-war period is an important constituent of retro representing in contemporary America. “As a demographic group, many of the filmmakers, writers, and producers of these works [contemporary television and cinema set in the 1960s] can be included in the tail end of the Baby Boom. But they all experienced the decade as children, not politically awakening university students. ... These productions are remarkable for their skepticism about the liberal potential for social change” (Tyree 33). Joel Coen (born in 1954), Ethan Coen (born in 1957), Matthew Weiner (born in 1965), Tom Ford (born in 1961) are notable examples of baby boomers in American film and television industry invested in representing the post-war period.¹¹

Subversion of Nostalgia and Generational Anxiety in *Mad Men*

Mad Men presents impressions of the 60s as experienced by the baby boomer generation using the character of Sally Draper (Kiernan Shipka). *Mad Men* creator Matthew Weiner himself was born in 1965, a year late for the boom; and amongst the characters in the series, Sally arguably comes closest to representing Weiner’s generational attitude towards the 60s. Sally Draper was born in 1954 and is the oldest child of Donald and Betty Draper. As the series progresses into the late 60s, Sally is given a more central role and her character is endowed with considerable intensity. Her impressions and reactions towards her parents — an insecure and restrained suburban mother and a womanizing, alcoholic father — not in the least evoke feelings of nostalgia or sentimentalism for the period. Her attitude towards the lives of the grown-ups around her is representative of the series’ relationship with the

¹⁰ According to the US census bureau, people born between the post-war boom years of 1946 and 1964 in America are categorized as baby boomers.

¹¹ Contemporary retros made by baby boomers include *A Serious Man* and *Inside Llewyn Davis* (Coen Brothers), and *A Single Man* (Tom Ford).

past. In the episode “At the Codfish Ball” (Season 5, Episode 7), Sally is happy to be included amongst the adults as she plays pretend-date to her father’s senior colleague, Roger Sterling (John Slattery). However, the evening turns nauseating for Sally when she sees her step-grandmother performing fellatio on Roger Sterling. Sally, who is at the beginning of her adolescence, is traumatized by what she sees. At the end of the episode, when her friend Glen Bishop (Marten Holden Weiner) asks her how she liked the city, she replies in a word, “Dirty.” Sally’s experience of the ball glitter is tinged by her feelings of isolation and the depravity of the adults around her.

American audiences who belong to the baby boomer generation themselves may identify with the characters of *Mad Men* as belonging to their parents generation. The series attempts to inscribe the generational anxiety of contemporary audiences when they watch characters, whom they can still relate to, indulge in boorish or politically incorrect behavior. *Mad Men* functions as an uncomfortable reminder that gender hierarchy, sexism, homophobia, racial discrimination were common in a not so distant past. The lives and the attitudes of the characters of the series are shown to be compromised by their historical location. Even within the series, three generations are represented. Majority of the young advertising men in the series such as Pete Campbell (Vincent Kartheiser), Ken Cosgrove (Aaron Staton), Harry Crane (Rich Sommer), Paul Kinsey (Michael Gladis) and the only woman copywriter Peggy Olson are from the generation preceding the baby boomer generation. Sally, as I have mentioned, is representative of the baby boomer’s childhood, and the older members of the Sterling Cooper advertising agency, its founding members Bertram Cooper (Robert Morse) and Roger Sterling, and even Don Draper belong to a still earlier generation going back to the early decades of the 20th century. Many of the conflicts in the series arise out of generational anxiety — the failure to communicate and empathize with one another. To cite a notable scene that points at the disjunct between the generations within the series: during the Nixon-Kennedy Campaign (“Red in the Face”), Bertram Cooper comments on Kennedy, “He doesn’t even wear a hat.” Cooper finds it difficult to take seriously a man who doesn’t wear a hat. However, Pete Campbell retorts, “You know who else doesn’t wear a hat? Elvis. That’s what we are dealing with.” Campbell’s remark points at Cooper’s diminishing comprehension of people’s choices, establishing the older generation’s waning perception of the times. There are other instances in *Mad Men* where the older generation is

shown to be disinterested and suspicious of the Civil Rights and countercultural movements, hinting at their resistance to the changes of the 60s. Within its narrative *Mad Men* encompasses generational anxiety and showcases aspects of the 60s as viewed by various age groups.

In the 1980s, Jean Baudrillard expressed his suspicion of retros as cinema which “plagiarizes itself, recopies itself, remakes its classics, retroactivates its original myth”(47). He argues it provides “[c]ool, cold pleasure, not even aesthetic in the strict sense: functional pleasure, equational pleasure, pleasure of machination” (46). He points out that retros are symptomatic of society whose relationship with history has become depthless. “[W]e are entering an era of films that in themselves no longer have any meaning strictly speaking, an era of great synthesizing machines of varying geometry” (Baudrillard 46). This suspicion of retros stems from a general suspicion of pleasures provided by popular cultural media which can be traced back to the Frankfurt School theorists (who label the popular media as constituting the “culture industry”).¹² It is a criticism of the characteristics of the modern televisual media which creates verisimilitude and involvement with its characters. This aspect of televisual media is perceived as numbing or inducing passivity. I think it is unproductive to summarily criticize an entire spectrum of representations without individually analyzing their engagement with the past that they seek to represent. This is why I use the term retro to distinguish such films and TV shows which share a very specific relationship with the past that they represent. A relationship which is layered, complex and which restrains a passive indulgence in nostalgia. Rather, as I have shown in the examples from *Pleasantville* and *Mad Men*, these representations question nostalgia and sentimentalism surrounding the post-war period. Retros interact with earlier iconography of the post-war period with skepticism. The icons and images that function as “external object[s]” and act as carriers of cultural memory (J. Assmann 111), are examined and are subjected to interpretive possibilities. In this way, the interaction activates new associations and meanings to earlier images and contribute layers to the cultural memory of a period. For example, the picnic scene in the epi-

¹² Frankfurt School theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno use the term “culture industry” to criticize the mechanization and commercialization of culture. They argue that in the age of capitalism, television and cinema have become standardized, mass-produced objects for passive consumption. The culture industry functions as an instrument of social organization and control over spontaneity and individual consciousness (“The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”).

sode “The Gold Violin” of *Mad Men*, uses the imagery of the idyllic outdoor setting, suitable for romantic scenes as used in movies such as *Love in the Afternoon* (1957), but the end shot of the picnic scene where the camera lingers on the litter left carelessly by the Draper family in a park is an unlikely simulation of earlier TV or cinema. The scene is distinctly retro in its subversion of nostalgia. *Mad Men* consciously draws from popular images and iconography but has a critical engagement with them.

***Mad Men* as Televisual Memorial**

Mad Men promotes itself as a series, with claims that each episode has a thematic unity and narrative coherence. Each episode has a title which also echoes the theme that runs through the episode and each episode ends with a relative narrative closure. At the same time, *Mad Men* extensively relies on the serial formula because of which its drama unfolds over the course of several episodes. The latter enables the characters to accumulate depth and for the audience to get familiarized with them. *Mad Men* employs this hybrid format as it suits its layered association with the 60s. The series format accommodates the time leaps that the story takes, with the six seasons aired so far covering almost the entire decade of the 60s. Historic events such as the Nixon vs. Kennedy elections, the Cuban missile crisis, the Kennedy assassination, the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War are used as frames for its audience to locate the seasons of the series. In this way, *Mad Men* invokes important cultural moments that define the period, but the serial format allows it to retain a continual engagement with the everyday lives of its white upper-middle class characters and their responses to these events. Both these formats facilitate *Mad Men*'s contribution to the cultural memory of the period. In this sense, *Mad Men* is comparable to a televisual memorial to the period, at least to a section of white America.

Andreas Huyssen has written extensively on the “memory boom” that he has observed since the 1990s and explains the rise in “cultures of memory” as a “contemporary incarnation” of nostalgia for a secure and permanent past, and claims that this is a concomitant effect of modernity on people’s lives. He observes: endowing our lives with memories is “the attempt, as we face the very real process of time-space compression, to secure some continuity within time to provide some extension of lived space within which we can breathe and move” (*Present Pasts* 24). According to Huyssen, memorial building is a significant part of

these cultures of memory and since the 90s we have witnessed a “triumphant return” of building memorials (“Monumental Seduction” 182). Erika Doss corroborates Huyssen’s observation of the increasing enthusiasm around commemorating and building memorials. In the American context, she comments on the “protean” nature of American memorials today, citing a range of memorials: the permanent and “timeless national fixtures” such as monuments and museums, the “temporary shrines” erected immediately “at the sites of school shootings and car accidents”, and other contemporary memorials that “include plaques, parks, cairns, quilts, trees and Websites” (19).¹³ “This dramatic increase in memorial numbers is explained in part by the expanded understanding of commemoration itself” (Doss 19). She calls this phenomena as “memorial mania: an obsession with issues of memory and history and an urgent desire to express and claim those in visibly public places” (2). I want to expand the idea of memorials to accommodate further forms such as the televisual memorial. If, as Doss explains, “[a]t the most basic level, memorials are designed to recognize and preserve memories”, then *Mad Men* can contend to be a memorial of the 60s. In fact, definitive aspects of memorials that she specifies such as, “memorials, like most things in capitalist and commercial economies, are informed by systems of production and reception, by expectations of exchange and reciprocity” is applicable even to *Mad Men* (7). As a television production, the series is informed by production costs and ratings, and the reciprocity for the series would be in the form of renewal contracts, awards for excellence, and DVD box-set sales. If we subscribe to the propositions of memory theorists such as Andreas Huyssen, Erika Doss, and Jay Winter¹⁴ who endorse the memory boom at the turn of the century and the unfolding of a cultural and political climate that is invested in commemorating, *Mad Men* fits in as a cultural production which is inscribed with and reflects the desires of retrospection that mark contemporary America.

¹³ Erika Doss gives examples of each of these forms of commemorations in “Statue Mania to Memorial Mania” (*Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* 19).

¹⁴ “We are evidently witnessing what Jay Winter has aptly labeled a ‘memory boom’ (2000). The number of publications is overwhelming. The ISI Web of Knowledge, which combines citation indexes in the social and in the arts and humanities, yields over 11,800 references to collective/cultural/social/public/popular memory, of which some 9,500 appeared during the last decade (1998-2008)...Google Scholar lists over 41,000 items with titles that include one or more of these terms” (Beiner). The bibliographies of any of the anthologies such as Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott’s *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials* should also provide an exhaustive list of works on the topic of the memory boom.

Mad Men like any other form of memorial is a product of the present. Through its representation of the past, it attempts to address desires and anxieties of the present. Its creator Matthew Weiner in an interview with Hanna Rosin explains that even though *Mad Men* looks back at the 60s, his series always makes an attempt to respond to the present. “I am always writing about the period we’re in, and sometimes I’m telling people things they don’t want to hear. ... The economy, the Internet—all these things are isolating us and making us feel defeated. Our national culture feels defeated, our exceptionalism”. However, he stresses in the interview that he resists easy solutions or “instant justice”. *Mad Men* is not a memorial to a period in America that was exceptional. In fact, it is a conscious ironizing of the idea of exceptionalism.¹⁵ The incorrigible nature of its characters, its entry point into 60s America through an advertising agency in Madison Avenue, the ostensive absence of African Americans, apart from the other range of issues that the series depicts such as blatant sexism, gender hierarchy in work as well as domestic spaces, homophobia, anti-semitism, alcoholism and neglect for the environment, all point towards intentions of the series to destabilize any moorings that the present might seek to nostalgically project on the past. Without doubt, the series operates within limitations of its media, format, genre, to say the least of consumer logic guiding such big productions. But as a retro representation *Mad Men* occupies a unique position wherefrom through the significant gaps and silences of the text, to borrow from Pierre Macherey, it reveals the political conservatism of the post-war period, and at an implicit level, it hints at contemporary anxieties and apprehensions.

Andreas Huyssen mentions two important factors that has motivated the memory boom at the turn of the century: “generational memories on the wane due to the passing of time”, and “the continuing speed of technological modernization” (*Twilight Memories* 3). *Mad Men* addresses these factors that motivate looking back at the past. As mentioned earlier, *Mad Men* is definitely invested in two-fold generational relations: first its engagement with

¹⁵ American exceptionalism is a political idea that can be traced back to the writings of 19th century political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville. He describes the American political climate as suitable for democracy distinguishing America from the Old World. In the 20th century, the term has been used to validate American ideals of liberty, egalitarianism, individualism and promote free economy. The idea has also been criticized as a necessary myth used to popularize the narrative of the American Dream in the post-war era. Seymour Martin Lipset’s book *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* and Donald E. Pease’s book *The New American Exceptionalism* provide exhaustive commentaries on the concept and its political significance in contemporary America.

the multiple generations living in the 60s, second their relation to the present-day audience. The series embodies the turn of the century mood for retrospection emanating from anxieties of locating the present in the continual narrative of progress. The question that it confronts its audience with is — are we really any different or better than them? *Mad Men* has been written off by critics such as Mark Greif as “an unpleasant little entry in the genre of Now We Know Better” and “beneath the Now We Know Better is a whiff of Doesn’t that Look Good. The drinking, the cigarettes, the opportunity to slap your children!” I suspect both these contentions to be simplistic formulations. To contend that *Mad Men*’s only motivation is to flatter its contemporary audience by presenting them with degrading instances from the past and then to say that the audience may find pleasure in their moral superiority is depriving the series of any complexity or critical engagement. Take for instance the scene in which Joan is raped by her fiancé in Draper’s office (“The Mountain King”). It is difficult to conceive that this scene could be pleasurable to present audiences and that it could produce a sense of moral superiority. Rather, it primarily gives rise to discomfort resulting from a level of identification with Joan’s character, and added to this are feelings of anger and desolation. The temporal distance between Joan and the contemporary audience of the series may provide interim relief, but if distance is understood in this context as changes in society since the 60s, then Joan’s plight raises the question — is contemporary America free of violence against women? *Mad Men* acts as a memorial that preserves the waning memory of a preceding generation. It is also a response to contemporary anxieties that arise from attempts to assess progress. These anxieties precipitate the necessity of preserving memories of the post-war period in contemporary America.

Contemporary Memorials and Retro

Erika Doss talks about the protean and evolving nature of memorials in America today. Indeed, there has been an expansion in the range and nature of commemorative practices, a more recent example of which are online memorials such as the Voices of September 11th, 9/11 Memorial, The Living Memorial. These memorials are promoted as interactive projects that aim at “preserving the stories” (Voices of September 11th), and remembering through

“digital storytelling” (The Living Memorial). After 9/11 these “living memorials”¹⁶ have emerged as a popular form of commemoration. This is a practice in continual engagement in preserving memories, and in communal participation. It is a space where friends and family upload images and videos of people who lost their lives in tragedies (Voices of September 11th), natural calamities (Hurricane Digital Memory Bank), and even natural death (The Living Memorial). The exposure to their lives give them individuality beyond their generic identity as a victim. These memorials do not simply retain the remembrance of their primary subject — someone’s death or a catastrophic event — but they also attempt to create a larger context around the subject of remembrance that can engage their visitors. In a similar way, the audiences of *Mad Men* revisit historic moments while participating in the everyday lives of its characters, experiencing their fears and anxieties as the characters cope with the social changes of the 60s. In the context of evolving forms of memorials in contemporary America, where progressively boundaries of memorials are being pushed, I contend that retros such as *Mad Men* which activate a sustained interest in their represented past, should be accommodated as televisual memorials. They embody current desires of involved and intimate engagement with the commemorated object.

Televisual memorials are different from traditional memorials such as monuments and museums. One critical difference is the way in which they are experienced. *Mad Men* can be watched at home, while a planned visit is required to experience a traditional memorial. Audiences of *Mad Men* have to temporarily step out of their everyday time to remember the 60s when watching the series, but a visit to a memorial, say the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, would entail a stepping out of the everyday, both in terms of space and time. Memorials differ from one another depending on the ways in which they preserve memories. For example, a public monument gives people a sense of place, if the monument is constructed at the site of tragedy, it gives people a sense of connection to the

¹⁶ Andrew M. Shanken describes how the concept of the living memorial was perceived during the World War II debates on memorial building. Living memorials, he says, are “positive alternatives to traditional memorials, in which memorial practice [is] blended with civic projects.” These are “useful projects such as community centers, libraries, forests, and even highways that [are] marked in some fashion, usually with plaques, as memorials” (130). The online memorials are certainly different from this architectural idea of a living memorial. But they are labeled as “living” because they perform functions of creating a sense of community for the griever.

consecrated place. Museums, libraries, and archives preserves memories in a more didactic and institutionalized form. Televisual memorials preserve memories by attempting at a more personalized connection with the past that it commemorates. It does so by representing and enacting.

Memorials arguably function as reminders for the living, offering spaces in which political ideas can be inscribed. In their defense of the Civil Rights Memorial, Carole Blair, and Neil Michel assert that “the Memorial shifts attention from the past and even seems to argue for a break with the past” (47). The memorial through its design and “performative rhetoric” conveys the political message of a “break” in terms of a continuous linear narrative of progress, “as the goal of racial justice has not been achieved” (47). They quote John Hope Franklin in their epigraph to suggest possibilities of a memorial as a space that offers resistance towards an easy looking back at the past.

Perhaps the very first thing we need to do as a nation and as individual members of society is to confront our past and see it for what it is. It is a past that is filled with the ugliest possible examples of racial brutality and degradation in human history. We need to recognize it for what it was and is and not explain it away, excuse it, or justify it. Having done that, we should then make a good-faith effort to turn our history around so that we can see it in front of us, so that we can avoid doing what we have done for so long. (74)

Retros, with their complex relationship with nostalgia and the past they represent, embody this dialectic of inhabiting the past and at the same time distancing from it. As televisual memorials, retros refrain from indulging in nostalgia and enable their audience to assess the past for what it is. *Mad Men* is a televisual memorial to 60s white America in this sense. It looks at the period from a critical distance with the combined effects of identification and dissonance.

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