

## “Standing Out, Not Fitting In:” How *Mad Men* Made Narrative Complexity Cool

In the years since the Golden Age of Television began, television shows of unprecedented quality and complexity have graced the small screen. One of the most influential of these shows has been *Mad Men*, which premiered in July of 2007 and permanently transformed the television landscape. *Mad Men*'s impact, prestige, and genius stem from its narrative complexity. Narrative complexity is a distinct “narrational mode” in which shows combine the hallmarks of episodic and serial storytelling by “oscillating between long-term arcs and stand-alone episodes” and defy storytelling norms like “closure, resolution, and distinct storylines” (Mittell 17, 19, 21). By combining both episodic and serial conventions, narratively complex shows become cumulative, combining the satisfaction of episodic closure with the depth of serial accumulation (Mittell 23). In addition, narratively complex series embrace more unconventional modes of storytelling, such as nonlinear narration, to intrigue and challenge viewers. *Mad Men* not only conforms to this conceptualization of narrative complexity, but has solidified narratively complex storytelling as a hallmark of contemporary prestige television and as a lucrative artistic mechanism.

*Mad Men*'s operational aesthetic, or the construction and mechanics of its narrative, epitomizes that of a narratively complex series (Mittell 43, 108). The series uses many storytelling devices and “narrative special effects” that highlight its structural form as well as its content (Mittell 45). *Mad Men* combines serial and episodic conventions; the show as a whole has a “novelistic” structure in which each episode acts as “a chapter in a longer and more involved narrative” and characters “grow and change from episode to episode” (Stoddart 187). However, most episodes are also centered around a new advertising campaign that foregrounds certain themes, allowing viewers to “drop into a particular episode and understand at least some of the action” (Stoddart 187).

*Mad Men* utilizes nonlinear methods of storytelling like flashbacks and time jumps to flesh out character backstory and expedite plot, and it occasionally employs unreliable narration to create

profound fantasy sequences, like Bert Cooper's rendition of "The Best Things in Life Are Free" in Season 7 or the heartbreaking final scene of the Season 1 finale, "The Wheel" (Mittell 136, Butter 375). While this operational aesthetic makes viewing more effortful, it also makes it more rewarding. Complex TV shows require viewers' "effort and attention for ongoing comprehension" and strategically "trigger, confound, and play with viewers' memories" using the previously mentioned nonlinear narration to challenge and engage viewers; *Mad Men*, a particularly "demanding and slow-paced" narrative, may "take years to pay off long-dormant story threads" (Mittell 181). This facet of narrative complexity certainly contributes to *Mad Men's* success by catching and holding viewers' attention throughout the entirety of the narrative, as viewers become as invested in and intrigued by the show's operational aesthetic as they are by the narrative arcs.

*Mad Men* has a protagonist that is morally dubious, deeply flawed, and unsympathetic, also known as an antihero, which is a "common trait shared by many complex television series" (Mittell 142). Antiheroes are a staple of many narratively complex shows, such as *Breaking Bad*, *The Sopranos*, and *House of Cards*. Don Draper's traumatic upbringing and suppressed identity lead him to commit clearly immoral acts (emotional manipulation, womanizing, and adultery, to name a few), but viewers still find themselves invested in him, making Draper an ideal and compelling antihero that lends to the show's elevated sense of moral ambiguity and narrative complexity.

Complex television also frequently mixes genres, combining and reinterpreting existing storytelling conventions, which are elements of story and production codes that result in a distinctive style (Mittell 181). *Mad Men* combines aspects of the *prime time soap opera*, generally considered low-brow entertainment, with those of a *prestige drama*, which more serious and aesthetically developed (Mittell 246). The series combines soap operas' emphasis on familial and romantic relationships as well as moral and emotional conflicts with prestige dramas' complex characters, sophisticated visuals, and rich themes to create an original and complex serial melodrama.

*Mad Men*'s operational aesthetic also includes a central narrative enigma, or an area of uncertainty the series slowly works to resolve (Mittell 24). Narrative enigmas are a common feature of narrative complexity. At the end of *Mad Men*'s pilot, it is revealed that Don leads a double life as a womanizer and a family man. As the season progresses, it becomes clear this is not Don's only secret, and at the end of season one, we learn that 'Don Draper' is, in fact, a completely stolen identity. Throughout the season, we meet new characters and see flashbacks that help to flesh out Don's past—his relationship with Anna, his sexual assault, growing up in a brothel—, which further complicates our sympathies. As we learn that much of Don's immoral behaviors are fueled by his dysfunctional and traumatic childhood, it becomes more difficult for us to immediately judge Don's actions according to a moral binary. This elevates Don's character and the series, making them highly complex, morally ambiguous, and open to critical interpretation.

*Mad Men*, in all its complexity and ambiguity, is on the air because of a series of economic decisions. When deciding whether or not to pick up a new series, every network must weigh the show's potential profitability. In the case of *Mad Men*, its narrative complexity served as a vital economic asset. Although HBO, Showtime, USA, and FX all passed on *Mad Men*, it caught the attention of a small cable channel called the American Movie Classics Channel, which at the time showed only "uninterrupted pre-1950 motion pictures" (Edgerton 6, 7); in the words of the network's former VP of programming, the network was "like a lesser TMC... [with] a collection of shit-ass movies" (Rose). But the network was embarking on a rebranding mission, embodied by a new name—AMC—and a new thirst for original programming (Edgerton 9, Rose, Littleton).

*Mad Men*'s narrative complexity fit AMC's economic needs for many reasons. As AMC took its first foray into original programming, it was looking for a "chance to rebrand the network with an intelligent, upscale series" that would challenge and intrigue viewers with a more sophisticated operational aesthetic (Edgerton 14). Whether or not the show appealed to a broader

audience, was less important; AMC President Charles Collier explains that the network “was looking for distinction in launching its first original series... and took a bet that quality would win out over formulaic mass appeal” (Edgerton 13). Creator Matt Weiner identifies AMC’s pursuit of “quality as a commercial decision” as a key source of AMC’s support for the show’s narrative complexity (Edgerton 13).

In its first original series, AMC was also looking for “cable operator retention” (Rose). This meant AMC, in the words of network CEO Josh Sapan, “had more to gain with something that would bring us more attention than it would ratings” (Littleton). AMC makes the majority of its profits “from simply being on cable” because it receives a portion of every household’s monthly cable bill, so its first original series needed to be “a niche hit—something unique and craved by a large-enough, and enthusiastic enough audience that Comcast, TWC, and other operators would never dream of leaving the network off the bundle” (Thompson). Once again, the mass appeal of traditional serial or episodic series became irrelevant to the network’s financial decision-making; instead, a sophisticated show with a small audience that would gain attention for its experimentation became AMC’s most financially viable option.

Finally, with Matthew Weiner at the helm, AMC’s bet on *Mad Men* felt much safer. Weiner had been a writer-producer on the revolutionary series *The Sopranos*, which was a breakthrough for narrative complexity on television (Mittell 97). Having seen the economic success of such a narratively complex show like *The Sopranos*, it made financial sense for AMC to entrust Weiner with another, equally (if not more) narratively complex series in the hopes of enjoying equal economic success. AMC also used Weiner to promote *Mad Men* “via the authorial stamp of an established creator,” emphasizing Weiner’s involvement in the successful *Sopranos* to capture viewers for his new, equally experimental series (Mittell 97).

Ultimately, greenlighting *Mad Men* dramatically paid off for AMC, as the show became the

network's "most identifiable product" (Edgerton 14). *Mad Men* transformed AMC into a premiere destination for elevated drama programming, thanks to the show's endless critical acclaim, numerous Emmys, and prestigious Peabody Award (Edgerton 13). Despite universal praise from critics, the show never garnered a terribly large audience, with the finale earning the show's highest ever viewership of 4.6 million (Rice). Collier sees *Mad Men* as an asset simply for its "pop-cultural relevance" (Edgerton 13). Its cultural impact is undeniable; the series even got its own Banana Republic Collection (Elliot). With its small but devoted fan base, the series irrevocably changed what television can and should be.

In the first episode of the series' second season, Don tells his colleague that "success is related to standing out, not fitting in." *Mad Men*'s success was shaped by how it stood out among competitors across the television landscape—namely, its narrative complexity. It combined, reimagined, and subverted serial and episodic conventions and codes, creating a complex narrative style unlike any previously seen on TV. It was a sprawling, novelistic period drama with a meticulous visual aesthetic, and a nuanced meditation on identity and change, populated by captivating and dynamic male *and* female characters. It played with time, juxtaposing personal crises with national ones and triggering childhood trauma with a Hershey's bar. As a case study in contemporary TV viewing, *Mad Men*'s success paved the way for high art on TV and proved that it can be lucrative. In the years since *Mad Men* premiered, complex TV dramas like *The Leftovers*, *Breaking Bad*, and *The Americans* have captivated audiences and established cable networks as destinations for premiere TV drama. Mass appeal no longer informs TV writing and viewing; instead, devoted niche audiences are more coveted and common than ever. With its clear and enduring influence on TV drama, *Mad Men* has secured its place at the forefront of the modern television landscape.

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