

Welcome to America! Mad Men, Media, Masculinities, and the American Imaginary¹

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Welcome to America! Mad Men, medios de comunicación, masculinidades y el imaginario estadounidense

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze how the narrative of *Mad Men* is committed to the imagery of Americanism, grounded in the myth of the self-made man and the American way of life. The object of study was the *Mad Men* TV series, interpreted through the myth criticism of Gilbert Durand in dialogue with the theoretical assumptions of Edgar Morin. The results indicate a feedback loop of conservative imagery in pursuit of a golden age marked by misogyny, male dominance, and mass consumption.

Keywords: mad men; masculinities; mass consumption; advertising; imaginary.

Introduction

When we create audiovisual narratives, we inevitably construct imaginaries that resonate with us and touch others who will be watching. In this way, the image forms a chain of social interaction between the produced, viewed, accepted, and reproduced image by some or all people. As Morin (1989, p. 67¹) reminds us, “men have always projected their desires and fears onto images. And they have always projected them onto their own image.”

This idealization of the image is permeated by the construction of signs, resulting in iconographies. The convention of what we call the “60s” is conceptually in what we idealize as the “60s” – in the case of the *Mad Men* series, what its producers considered the “60s.” This does not mean that the 60s did not exist, but that the iconographic material is the result of the fashion defining the time, the images of advertisements selling products of the time, and that this is the reference that influenced the narrative aesthetics of the series.

Mad Men, in its imagistic construction, underwent exhaustive research for scenic execution to function as a faithful portrayal of what is called the 60s, produced during the 21st century, post-9/11, and at a time when conservatism seeks legitimacy in media spaces with greater force. The series is a revisit to what is considered the golden age of Americanism, a consecration of the American way of life.

Just as advertising was essential for the economic boom of families during the 50s/60s in the USA (Tota, 2017), *Mad Men* appropriates advertising as the backdrop narrative image to highlight the imaginaries that permeate American culture since the formation of the country. The focus of interest in the narrative is not on advertising but on the sociocultural characteristics presented, namely, male hegemony, denial of social rights to considered subordinate classes, and female emancipation in a highly conditioned manner, still requiring male support to occur, in fact.

In this paper, we aim to analyze how the narrative of *Mad Men* is committed to the imagery of Americanism, based on the myth of the self-made man and the American way of life. For this analysis, we use Durand’s myth criticism as a method of interpretation, which is part of the Imaginary methodology proposed by him. Operating through myth criticism means understanding how myths and their mythemes act in the selected works, as well as how they present themselves and are absorbed in a particular time or culture.

¹ All references originally written in Portuguese have been freely translated.

“Mitocrítica” [myth criticism] immediately addresses the very being of the “work” in the confrontation between the mythical universe that shapes the “taste” or understanding of the reader and the mythical universe that emerges from reading a specific work. It is at the confluence between what is read and the one who reads that the center of gravity of this method is situated, intending to respect the contributions of different approaches that will delimit the “triad” of critical knowledge (Durand, 1985, p. 252).

Drawing from the narrative of *Mad Men*, we establish a dialogue with advertising pieces from the 60s and other audiovisual productions, based on Edgar Morin’s perspective on mass consumption and film production. *Mad Men* is a part and creation that feeds back into the imaginary. It is one of the possibilities for understanding what history characterized as the “American 60s.” The glamour, intrigues, whiskey-soaked lunches, the self-made man, the Western pioneer, domination, and the American dream. *Mad Men* was an American TV series produced by the AMC channel and aired from 2007 to 2015. It received 29 awards over its 7 seasons (including the Best Series award) and served as the basis for the writing of several books. Currently, it can be found on the Netflix streaming service.

Self-made Man: From western movies to Madison Avenue executives

The relationship with images is fundamental in our interaction with the world. The emergence of these images causes certain signs to perpetuate, solidify, or fall, establishing imaginaries. Among the various spaces where we find these processes, cinema (as well as other audiovisual productions) is one of the most recurring. Cinematic narratives are surrounded by a kind of enchantment, the magic of cinema, as if it operates in another space-time where anything is possible. Signs, myths, and new (or revisited old) stories are created.

However, beyond its enchanting ability, cinema also creates and feeds back into various imaginaries, as it is seen as the representation of what is outside the screen. When the viewer identifies with the stories told, this interaction legitimizes the narratives addressed because it is the result of what Edgar Morin (1997) refers to as the double.

The double is, effectively, the fundamental image of man, preceding the intimate self-awareness, an image recognized in reflection and shadow, projected in dreams, hallucinations, as well as in painted or sculpted representation, fetishized and magnified in beliefs in another life, cults, and religions (Morin, 1997, p. 44).

Cinema, especially American cinema, fetishizes man through its narratives according to the ideals it chooses to commit to, using art to reinforce the myths that permeate the social imaginary about Americanism. Films are presented as if there were no point of view but only faithful records of events (Thomé, 2010).

In this sense, in the 1930s, when American cinema was consolidating, the Hays Code was created, a set of moral standards created by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, outlining guidelines on how America should be portrayed: little sex, violence or drug use, respect for religion, and ignoring interracial issues, such as not displaying couples of different ethnicities (Pereira apud Azevedo Junior; Gonçalves, 2015).

Probably, the creation of this code was one way to overcome the economic recession that plagued the country post-1929 Crisis. It was necessary not only for billboards to sell happiness but also to reinforce the ideology wherever Americans were, boost self-esteem, stimulate consumption, and create a national identity. With these assumptions, cinema would directly contribute to the consolidation of the American way of life.

Just to illustrate how strong the interaction of American cinema with national politics is, serving as a space for ideological propaganda, Žižek (2003) reminds us of the summoning of producers to create disaster films after the 9/11 attacks, imagining possible “terror” scenarios aiding in the “war on terrorism” in a reciprocal relationship of help between Hollywood and the Pentagon.

If in the early last century Hollywood was thought of as a propaganda machine that would ensure Americans recognized themselves as founders of a country in economic prosperity, expanding territorially on a productive level, in the early 21st century, it served to consolidate the country’s warlike expansion. Among the various genres produced by American cinema, one stood out in terms of consolidating the imaginary of pioneers and creators of a strong nation – the popular western genre.

If the conquest of the West marked the social and economic dynamics after independence, the imaginary that emerged was not limited to the warlike dimension of the conquest, the domination

of nature, and the appropriation of its wealth. It also included a symbolic reverberation that gave a new inflection to a nationalism of unique character forged in the construction of the “new man” revitalized by such challenges (Xavier, 2014, p. 172).

Not surprisingly, Western films became a trademark of Hollywood; the West, the promised land, was a place where strength prevailed, strength over others, strength over nature, strength over women. If something needed to be resolved, why not a duel between cowboys? Guns in hand, barrels in the city, and a hail of bullets that made everyone hide, waiting for the winner who, in addition to victory over his opponent, would also win the innocent maiden as a prize for his bravery.

At the same time, the construction of cities progressed on the American coast, and the landscapes of cinema also had them as a backdrop. However, the displacement of the landscape did not mean the displacement of the imaginary of masculinity. Let’s take the movie “North by Northwest”² (1959) as an example. Here, Roger Thornhill, an advertising executive, is mistaken for a secret agent, leading him into a race against a plot of spies who want to kill him. Roger is a middle-aged advertising executive, yet he is a man capable of fighting alone against a network of government-trained spies, survive, and even make the woman sent to kill him fall in love with him, complete with scenes of gunfire, physical clashes, and an audience nearby. Does this narrative sound familiar?

This is the American “happily ever after,” from Western movies to action films. Here, the hero does not use a sword, a white horse, and is not the king’s son; he is an “ordinary man” who, through his own effort, achieved success and can defeat any opponent with his strength alone, be it a gunslinger from the old West or a KGB agent.

Positioning the camera: framing in service of masculinity in american audiovisuals

The construction of the image is crucial for audiovisual narrative, as the power of the image characterizes the final result of the developed work. Factors such as light, set, characters, plot, and sound dominate a significant part of the imagistic discourse. It is the imagination of the production team that will command what will be displayed on the screen, along with the research work carried out by art directors, costume designers, and other professionals, culminating in the audiovisual narrative presented to the viewer. Part of the image construction process is linked to this research, which is essential to weave into our own imagination what we want to be enacted.

An important aspect in this construction is framing, which refers to the combination of the shot and the camera angle. Regarding American audiovisuals, three shots are commonly used: the long shot, medium shot, and close-up (Prana Filmes, n.d.). In the first, the camera is positioned far from the central object of the image, it is a shot for setting the scene, where we enter the space where the narrative unfolds. In the second, the camera is closer to the object while capturing other aspects of the environment. In the close-up shot, the camera is entirely close to the object, focusing attention solely on the object the lens is focused on. This camera positioning also considers the angle used, which can be normal, plongée, and contre-plongée. In the normal angle, the camera is positioned at the eye level of the viewer; in the plongée, the camera is above the object, slightly reducing the object in relation to the viewer’s perception. Finally, the contre-plongée refers to the camera positioned below the object and facing upward, where the object appears larger compared to other frames.

Concerning the masculinity imaginary, framings have contributed (and still contribute) to the legitimization of virility. Images are framed to emphasize broad shoulders, a distant gaze, a secure posture while conveying some form of action. Men are always portrayed as ready to act in the face of action. This is one of the models that the imaginary has reached regarding the construction of hegemonic masculinity through media narratives. Let’s take the images 1 and 2 as examples.

In both the first and second framing, the camera positioning presents the characters from a perspective that appears to convey a slight air of superiority and control. In the first frame, we have Django [Film: Django. Director: Sergio Corbucci. Release Date: April 6, 1966. It is a Spaghetti Western, a subgenre of the American Western shot outside the United States with lower budgets, but as successful as John Ford’s productions in American cinema.], handling two guns simultaneously, in opposite directions, managing to stay alert and seemingly relaxed, showing control of the situation. Similar to other Western films, the use of contre-plongée along with large and medium shots works to exalt masculine strength and coldness.

In the second frame, we have Don in a close-up shot with a slight contre-plongée, a framing technique recurrent when it comes to this character throughout the series. Even when using wider shots, the perspective always presents Don in contre-plongée, so the character is always in a superimposed position in relation to the entire scene.

² Director: Hitchcock, Alfred. Release Year: 1959.

It is important to consider that Don is the main character of the series, but what matters to point out is that this superimposition of his position in relation to the scenic construction reflects the dominant character he is constantly trying to convey in his actions. Even if he is not literally in confrontation with others, Don's gaze is continuously distant, and in few cases, as above, he shows any type of emotion.

Figure 1 - Django (1966)



Source: Django (1966)- direção:Sergio Corbucci

Figure 2 - Episode 13 (The Wheel)



Source: Episode 13 (The Wheel)

Beautiful, modest, and homemaker: the role of women in the american way of life

In a binary space where male strength was the gateway to virility and world creation, what role did women play in this society? If public spaces were the common habitat of men, where did the female habitat exist? Let's revisit the narrative of North by Northwest. Eve is a woman hired to kill Roger, and she approaches him using her femininity as the main weapon to establish trust. There is no overlapping of strength between them, no power struggle for domination: there is a woman, seemingly independent, enchanted by the charm of the "outlaw." She hides him from the police, has lunch with him, they sleep together, and in a somewhat recurrent scene in 20th-century audiovisual constructions, she puts a cigarette in her mouth, waiting for Roger to light it. Her femininity is found in her corporeality, in the expression of a feminine attitude that, even in its apparent independence, is submissive to male acceptance of the performance (Passos, 2006).

Beyond audiovisual narratives, advertisements for various products also contributed to the imagistic constructions that fed the discourse of the imaginary of female submission, especially regarding the attitudes of wives at home. If the future reserved perfect marriages for women, it was their actions in front of their husbands

that made the American family dynamic a space of perfection. The good wife was the excellent homemaker who performed all tasks masterfully while remaining beautiful, with the house impeccable, and dinner ready for the entire family.

An article from the Hypheness website (Viegas, 2013) found some ads from the 1950s/60s in the USA. In these ads, we have the following slogans: “show her it’s a man’s world” (Figure 3), “so the harder a wife works, the cuter she looks” (Figure 4), “don’t worry, darling, you didn’t burn the beer” (Figure 5). In all of them, wives are in a lower position or even kneeling before their husbands. In the last one, the wife cries for burning dinner, while in the second, her beauty is a direct result of her dedication to cleaning and maintaining the house. For men, the advertising correlates professional success with the ability to dominate the wife at home. The devoted, dedicated, passionate woman, content to fulfill her husband’s wishes, is the theme of these and many other ads aired over time, presenting feminine fragility as something natural and necessary for family harmony (Passos, 2006).

In *Mad Men*, when Joan is introducing Peggy to the intricacies of Sterling Cooper, she makes it clear what her position is regarding working as a secretary in an agency in the city: “Of course, if you make the right moves, you’ll end up in the suburbs and won’t have to work at all” (Season 01 - Episode 01). As important as being good at her job, Joan wants to teach Peggy to be good at winning men. She gives her tips on how to dress, how to talk, and recommends a gynecologist to prescribe birth control pills. At no point does Joan question Peggy’s goal; she simply assumes that this was the common goal of all women.

Figure 3 - Van Heusen Ties



Figure 4 - PEP Vitamins



Figure 5 - Schlieff Beer



If advertising was a field determined by the representation of women from the perspective of submission, cinema operated to contribute to the consolidation of this imaginary by bringing aspects of docility, unconditional love, and a dedicated housewife both within and outside the audiovisual narrative. This is what Edgar Morin discusses when analyzing the star system³.

Female predominance gives the star system a feminine character. The “mythification” occurs primarily with female stars. They are the most manufactured, the most idealized, the most unreal, the most adored. Women are a subject and an object more mythical than men (Morin, 1989, p. 69).

Thus, audiovisual productions developed three female representations: the virgin, the femme fatale, and the divine woman, flowing from the Hollywoodian triad of beauty, youth, and sex appeal. These representations served as polarization: the virgin could not be the femme fatale, while the divine woman, represented by Greta Garbo, possessed characteristics of both. She was the incarnation of self-sacrifice, suffering, and love, while remaining mysterious and sovereign like the femme fatale (Morin, 1989).

These female representations met what Mulvey (1983, p. 440) points out as a “skillful and satisfying manipulation of sexual pleasure,” as mentioned earlier, due to the Hays Code. Hollywood representations had to comply with conservative assumptions, placing the erotic “within the dominant patriarchal order” (Mulvey, 1983, p. 440). The representation of women in Hollywood cinema was (and still is) an image designed for male consumption, combining spectacle and narrative with the body. Proof of this is the attire worn by current heroines in Marvel and DC Comics action movies. Unlike male heroes, whose costumes exalt masculine strength and beauty, the costumes worn by women function as objectification of the female body.

Considering once again how the 1929 crisis shaped the American imaginary, the “happy ending” becomes fundamental in narratives, a recurring spectrum of happiness to idealize that all effort and self-sacrifice would be worthwhile; a happy ending awaited everyone in America.

Regarding women, if the star system once presented them as goddesses in a pantheon accessible only to men of the same caste, during the New Deal, the set of economic and social measures by the government to solve the problems caused by the 1929 crisis, women came to represent simple housewives, as treated in the ads presented above. Their desires revolved around bourgeois life in the suburbs, raising children, and marriage (Morin, 1989).

In this sense, the relationship between Don and Megan represents this dynamic. A mature and successful man, capable of boosting the career of his young wife, influencing her contracts, characters, and ensuring that by the end of the shooting day, she will be at home fulfilling her role as a woman. Age reflects Don’s experience, which, like Gary Cooper or Clark Gable, had the increase in age associated with their ability to seduce.

This projective capacity resulting from the use of the image was fundamental for the construction of the imaginary that characterized the dynamics of femininity reproduced in the discursive level of advertising, cinema, and American TV. Other ways of representation capable of addressing female independence or a mixture of the presented stereotypes were ignored (probably intentionally).

Culture of mass: cinema and tv as tools of propaganda for the american government

If we recall Don’s words in the episode “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” (Season 01 - Episode 01): “Happiness is the smell of a new car, a billboard on the side of the road with bold letters saying that everything you’re doing is perfect, that you’ll be fine.” Throughout *Mad Men*, advertising is not just the backdrop; it is the driving force of the narrative. All characters are models of themselves in a world where it is necessary to know what kind of product you want to be, to subsequently know how to sell yourself. For this reason, happiness is the smell of a new car, it is the billboard on the road; it is the wisdom that points out that what you have in your pocket is the amount of happiness you can acquire, “from the supermarket cart to the trunk of a Chevrolet, prosperity was bought in sealed packages” (Tota, 2017, p. 190). With the advance of industrial society in the early 20th century, Morin (1997) points out that there was a new industrialization: that of dreams and images. It is through advertising, cinema, radio, and TV that the industrialization of the spirit takes place.

³ Translated roughly, the star system, or simply stars, refers to the commercial and adoration relationship related to the lives of Hollywood actors, creating cultural icons that go beyond being simple actors and become reference points to guide an entire generation. “As the performer’s name becomes as strong as or stronger than that of the character, the dialectic between the actor and the role finally begins to operate, giving rise to the star” (Morin, 1989, p. 6).

There is no doubt that books and newspapers were already commodities, but culture and private life had never entered so deeply into the commercial and industrial circuit. The murmurs of the world – formerly sighs of ghosts, whispers of fairies, dwarfs and elves, words of genies and gods, nowadays music, words, films carried through waves – had never been both industrially manufactured and commercially sold. These new commodities are the most human of all, as they retail the ectoplasms of humanity, the romanticized loves and fears, the varied facts of the heart and soul (Morin, 1997, p. 13).

These commodities, these ectoplasms of humanity produced on an industrial scale, will be aggregators of mass culture, manufacturing symbols, myths, and images that will also be disseminated on an industrial scale.

Mass culture, that is, produced according to the massive norms of industrial manufacturing; propagated by massive diffusion techniques (which a strange Anglo-Latin neologism calls mass media); destined for a social mass, that is, a gigantic agglomeration of individuals understood below and beyond the internal structures of society (class, family, etc.) (Morin, 1997, p. 14).

Thus, there is no need to hierarchize cultural productions but to understand which values, plots, concepts, behaviors, and ideologies are disseminated in this consumption game. Since these contents were produced to reach the largest number of people, they influenced the culture and consumption of those who came into contact. Taking, for example, Hobsbawn (1995), he reminds us how blue jeans and rock became global through their imagistic diffusion associated with youth, resulting in a crystallization of youthful identity with the consumption of these products.

An important character for the consolidation of mass culture and for *Mad Men* is television. It is part of the series as much as Don or Peggy, as various socio-cultural events presented are narrated. We also learn the perspective of the recordings broadcast at the time, especially in the news programs. Another interesting aspect of the inclusion of TV in the narrative is how it dominated the domestic space. Sally and Bobby appear recurrently in front of the TV, accompanied or not by Betty, seemingly making it their favorite pastime, even when doing drawings or other activities, it is on. Kevin, Joan's son, also appears in a good part of the scenes watching the TV from an early age.

Replacing the radio, television began to occupy a privileged space at home. There were less than 17 thousand television sets installed in American homes in 1946. In 1949, 250 thousand sets were sold monthly. By 1953, two-thirds of families had a TV. If the church was the temple of the spirit, television was the new altar of Americanism. Combining entertainment, faith, patriotism, and adding new meanings. Through television, leaders spoke to the nation. Through television, Americans dreamed of the past and imagined the future. Through television, they were taught why communists were so dangerous (Tota, 2017, p. 185).

With TV, advertising enters the private space of domestic life without interference. The household black box became one of the symbols of Americanism, as Peter Campbell reminds us, “the idea is that everyone should have a house, a car, a TV, the American dream” (Season 03 - Episode 5). In this episode, Peter is trying to understand why the Admiral TV company is concerned about sales. He analyzes consumption and notices an increase in areas where there is a majority of black people. He brings up this phrase when questioning the elevator operator Hollis, and he says, “We have bigger problems than the TV brand.” Peter seems surprised and to some extent shocked, not understanding what could be more important than consumption. For him, object consumption should be the trademark of American families, whether they are white or black. He also ends up having difficulty understanding why the company does not accept the strategy of taking its advertising to magazines read by black people.

When Hollis informs that they have bigger problems, Peter doesn't pay attention, not because he doesn't believe in equal rights but because, for him, equal rights mean equal consumption. However, ensuring that everyone could buy a TV did not mean equality of rights. At that moment, the Civil Rights Movement led by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. erupted (Tota, 2017).

There are still other moments during the series where TV takes center stage in the narrative. In the final episode of the second season, the main character is the Cuban Missile Crisis, an event in which the US threatened to go to war against the Soviet Union because of medium-range missiles found on the island. In *Mad Men*, everyone watches the president's announcement, whether in business, at mass, or even at the hair salon; everyone is attentive to the issue, and their actions are based on what is announced on TV.

Another moment occurs at the end of the third season due to the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The episode begins, and the TV is shown little, but as soon as one of the agency executives hears the commotion, he

rushes to Harry Crane's room (the only place with a TV). When he turns it on, all scenes show other characters watching the news that the president was shot, in a kind of collective catharsis. From that moment on, the device becomes central to the narrative. It informs the facts about the president, and as the episode comes to an end, Betty is watching at the exact moment when the suspect in the president's assassination is shot, and this moment is broadcast live.

The relationship with the device was fundamental to the construction of national identity, as through it, the US government was able to introduce its ideological propaganda without much effort, combining words like "nation," "victory," "future," and "people" with another: consumption. This created a model in which men were endowed with individual abilities, faithful to their communities, and for this reason, they should only consume products produced and promoted by their people. It wasn't simple parochialism; it was pro-war propaganda that created the national sentiment of "us against them," where they, by the way, were the communist nations, which by stimulating consumption consequently increased the revenue of public coffers, providing justification and money for all governmental actions (Tota, 2017).

If TV was the mechanism used to speak directly to American homes, around the world, the US used cinema to solidify its cultural hegemony. The behavioral and ideological advertising reproduced in Hollywood narratives shown around the globe aligned cultural identity with material symbols (Hobsbawn, 1995).

Cinema, TV, and the propaganda perpetrated within and outside these two screens consolidated American myths of the self-made man, national superiority, and consumption as a registered trademark. The American family should be patriotic and respond to the compulsory order of sex/gender/desire (Butler, 2003), consumers of happiness in Coca-Cola bottles, worshipers of James Dean and Greta Garbo, making the myth of the American dream a product envied around the world, thus making mass consumption part of its cultural identity.

Final considerations

Considering American media production, we can see that advertising acted as the driving force behind the consolidation of the American way of life, whether in advertisements for everyday products, cinema, or television. This propaganda allowed for the characterization of the foundational myths of American society, spanning gender dynamics, cultural production, and mass consumption.

Bringing *Mad Men* into the debate (since this is also a product resulting from this conception of Americanism) serves us to reflect on the identity concepts that we export to our experiences. Even though the series did not have the same impact in Brazil as it did in the USA, we still persist as a society in seeking solutions to our problems in American models, ignoring specificities and adapting the American way of life to Brazilian culture. Consumption functions as a mark of social ascent, and a middle class that incessantly repeats the discourse of meritocracy as the legitimate mark of its existence.

We were and continue to be consumers of media production made for Americans, even trying to import the foundational myth of the self-made man and recreate it in our reality from a meritocratic perspective. It is important to question why such narratives continue to emerge and gain the visibility they have. Yes, without a doubt, *Mad Men* is a masterpiece of audiovisuals, deserving a place in the pantheon of the greatest series of all time. The meticulous production in recreating the imagery of the 1960s has made it a reference for television creations. What we point out here is the care not to return to a nostalgia for a pre-1960s world, giving ammunition to the reactionary wave that establishes itself around the globe.

May we continue to consume different products that address different perspectives, but aware of where their productions and possible meanings are established, so that we do not continue to legitimize identities to subjugate different experiences.

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