

GRACE TORCASIO

The University of Melbourne

‘More of an idea than a place’: Utopic spaces in AMC’s *Mad Men*.

ABSTRACT

AMC’s Mad Men (Matthew Weiner, 2007-2015) uses the repeated motif of utopic spaces to comment on the cyclical relationship between past, present and future. In Season One’s ‘Babylon’, Don Draper and Rachel Menknen discuss the concept of utopia, with Rachel telling Don, ‘They taught us at Barnard about that word. Utopia. The Greeks had two meanings for it: eu-topos, meaning “the good place”, and ou-topos, meaning “the place that cannot be”’ (‘Babylon’, 2007). Throughout the series, Don searches for a utopic ‘good place’ while the series deconstructs a vision of the 1960s as a progressive utopia, revealing it as the ‘place that cannot be’. This paper will focus on the construction of California as ethereal fantasy space in the Season Two episode ‘The Jet Set’, where Don absconds on a business trip to escape to Palm Springs with a group of mysterious Europeans (‘The Jet Set’, 2008). This paper will examine Don’s investment in California and its promise of utopic relocation in interplay with the cultural investment in contemporary extensions of the frontier narrative to draw out a dynamic between nostalgia and utopia both present within Don’s search for meaning within the series and the recurrent usage of the frontier trope within cultural mythologization.

KEYWORDS

Mad Men
utopia
nostalgia
California
quality TV

INTRODUCTION

In the Season Two episode of AMC’s *Mad Men* (Matthew Weiner, 2007-2015), ‘The Jet Set’, Don Draper and Pete Campbell travel to California for an aerospace convention in the hope of securing new clients for their advertising firm. While the episode begins with Don standing fully suited at the edge of the hotel pool, scorning the west coast sun, he soon absconds from his business plans when he meets the mysterious Vicount Montiforte (‘Willy’)

and Willy's 'friend'/daughter Joy, travelling with the 'jet set' to the luxurious Palm Springs house they have temporarily taken residence in ('The Jet Set', 2008).

Set over the course of the 1960s, *Mad Men* uses California as both a real and imagined space, a countenance to the rigidity of its Manhattan setting. This paper will analyse the representation of California in 'The Jet Set' as a utopic space. This episode is the first time the show visits California and its construction as an ethereal fantasy space is important for the establishment of the relationship between nostalgia and utopia that permeates the series.

In a similar manner to the show's multifaceted treatment of nostalgia as both aesthetic and thematic, Don's belief in California is also layered. While California is a personal utopia for Don, as a real geographical site it is infused with extra-diegetic cultural mythologies of 'the West' as a frontier space in the US cultural imaginary. Don's personal investment in California is, as is the series at large, therefore in a constant dialogue with wider cultural narratives about the intersections of personal and national identities.

MAD MEN, UTOPIA AND NOSTALGIA

In the Season One episode 'Babylon' Don discusses with his mistress Rachel Menken the idea of Israel as a utopia. Rachel tells him, 'They taught us at Barnard about that word "utopia". The Greeks had two meanings for it: *eu-topos*, meaning "the good place" and *u-topos*, meaning "the place that cannot be"' ('Babylon', 2007).

In the next episode, Don begs Rachel to travel with him to California to 'start over again like Adam and Eve' ('Red in the Face', 2007). Upon the realization that Don does not want to run away with *her* as much as he just wants to run away, Rachel rejects him ('Nixon v. Kennedy', 2007). However, the notion of California as a 'good place' continues to linger throughout the series.

Over the course of Season One, it is revealed that Don Draper was born Dick Whitman, the son of an impoverished alcoholic farmer and a sex worker who died during childbirth ('The Hobo

Code', 2007). Suffering an abusive and neglected childhood, Dick/Don ran away in his twenties and enlisted in the army. Deployed in the Korean War, he served under Lieutenant Donald Draper. During an enemy attack Dick/Don accidentally caused an explosion that killed the real Lieutenant Draper at which point Dick/Don rebirthed himself as a vision of the American dream, ripping the bloodied dogtags off the charred remains of

Lieutenant Draper (‘Nixon v. Kennedy’, 2007). Awakening in hospital *as* Don Draper, a war hero, once discharged from service he began his ascent to where he is at the time the series commences, as creative director of mid-tier advertising agency Sterling Cooper.

Don, however, is unable to leave behind the traumas of his past. Stuck in a liminal state where he is no longer Dick Whitman, but where performing Don Draper-ness entails existential anxiety, Don seeks therapeutic value in nostalgia as a means of trying to mediate these two fragmented identities. For Don, nostalgia is not a desire to literally return to the past, but rather he displays what Svetlana Boym terms “reflective nostalgia”, a form of nostalgia that does not attempt a return ‘home’, but rather “thrives in *algia*, the longing itself” (Boym 2001: xviii).

‘THE JET SET’ AND CALIFORNIA AS UTOPIA

In contrast to the show’s New York setting, many of the Californian scenes in ‘The Jet Set’ are outdoors (‘The Jet Set’, 2008). Instead of the grey and beige colour schemes of the Sterling Cooper offices that dominate the series, California is filled with exotic, beautiful people, beaming sunlight and bright colours. While California is of course a real geographical location, there are no iconic shots that confirm to the viewer that this episode is in fact set in California. With no Hollywood sign or urban Los Angeles, the mid-century modern architecture of the Palm Springs house is the only thing that tethers ‘The Jet Set’’s California to reality (‘The Jet Set’, 2008). Rather, California is presented in the episode as a dreamscape, a sun-soaked paradise that is malleable to Don’s desires.

Near the beginning of the episode Don spots a woman in the hotel lounge who from behind bears an uncanny resemblance to his wife Betty (‘The Jet Set’, 2008). As the Betty lookalike walks past Don and he stares at her, confused that he has travelled across the country only to spot a reminder of home, so too are the audience invited to linger on the image of the not-Betty double. Played out in slow motion, this scene invites us to read the dreamlike nature of ‘The Jet Set’ as we begin to question whether the events of the episode are actually taking place outside of Don’s imagination. Although the episode constantly intercuts California with scenes of the Sterling Cooper staff back in New York, ostensibly signalling that the episode is actually part of the diegesis, ‘The Jet Set’ and its exotic representation of California contain with them a sense of dislocation and removal, the episode becoming akin to a narrative pause, a moment in which the series can diverge to spend

several episodes in California exploring a side to Don's personality that he must conceal in order to successfully perform Don Draper in New York.

Prior to the Palm Springs getaway, Pete and Don attend their aerospace convention. Housed in a white, futuristic, sanitized room, rows of chairs are filled with identically-suited men, who sit smoking while watching a presentation about missile technologies ('The Jet Set', 2008). Although the presentation is delivered by 'Space Technologies Laboratory', a company that speaks of its desire to anticipate the 'challenges of the future', the scene visually recalls the past with shots of Don and Pete seated next to a slide projector recalling the Season One episode 'The Wheel' (2007), where Don delivers his magnum opus pitch to Kodak, selling a slide projector he names 'The Carousel' based on an emotionally resonant appeal to nostalgia. Whereas 'The Carousel' looks to the past, with Don using a series of family photographs in his pitch ('The Wheel', 2007), here they listen to an appeal to the future, a future of technological advances in missile technologies that signal the dystopian potential for global annihilation. At the sight of diagrams of missile explosions in the USSR, Don becomes visibly alarmed, forced to confront the possibility of the end of history and utopian possibility ('The Jet Set', 2008). It then stands as little surprise that in the next scene Don leaves town with the mysterious and enigmatic Europeans to become a nomad in Palm Springs ('The Jet Set', 2008). Coming at a point in the series in which Don's marriage to first wife Betty is in doubt, the trip to California presents Don with the opportunity for escape. With his baggage lost enroute, Don is without any remnants of his New York identity, soon losing his trademark grey suit and hat to adopt the Californian attire of shirt, pants and sunglasses and with it the amorphous possibilities that California seems to contain. Once at the Palm Springs house, Don passes out from heat exhaustion, awakening on the couch to find a strange and unknown man, apparently a doctor, measuring liquid from a vial to inject into Don. This scene visually alludes to the frequent shots of Don drunkenly passed out on his office couch yet in contrast here he awakens to a world filled with new possibilities, the Palm Springs house containing an ethereal energy that starts to transform Don as he begins to spend time with the Europeans ('The Jet Set', 2008).

The Europeans represent for Don a wish-fulfilment fantasy. They do not pressure him to reveal himself beyond their knowledge of his name and occupation, allowing Don to feel safe in his multiplicitious identities. They are happy to take Don at surface level, with Joy telling him that Willy likes having him around because, 'You're beautiful and you don't talk too much' and Don appears content to be objectified for his physical beauty with the benefit

‘More of an idea than a place’

of not having to reveal himself or strain under the fabricated life narratives he has built. The Europeans’ utopic function is thus in offering him a glimpse of an ideal way of living - they are beautiful, rich, transient, educated, cultured and mysterious.

MAD MEN AND UTOPIANISM

Alexandre Franco de Sá describes utopia as a reality not yet present, linked to a recognizable society and yet also an imaginative exercise that encapsulates a sense of potentiality (2012: 24). De Sá conceptualizes utopianism as intrinsically linked to both modernity and colonialism, arguing that with the modern world emerged the division of planetary space into a ‘here’ and a ‘there’ – a closed European system of states and an open ‘New World’ overseas (2012: 25). Understanding utopianism as an inherent feature of the idea of the United States as a modern nation-state provides a vital linkage between the American dream, the frontier and cultural mythologizations of the American West. Don’s desire for California thereby connects to nationalist ideologies, aligning with Don’s belief in the promise of rebirth out west and his performance of masculinity under the rhetoric of self-transformation as part of the ‘American dream’. In the Season Two episode ‘Three Sundays’ Don says, ‘There is no such thing as American history, only the frontier’ (‘Three Sundays’, 2008). California represents for Don the open potentiality of the American dream – in contrast to the East, this is where he can go to continually reinvent himself.

De Sá describes utopia as ‘a space without a place, a space that is nonetheless possible... [a] space in the future’ (2012: 27), indicating the open allure of utopia as a yet-to-be-determined future. In ‘The Jet Set’ California is this space – at once real and yet simultaneously imagined, possible and yet absurd, futuristically concerned with space travel and yet described by Pete Campbell as somewhere where ‘everybody is late’ (‘The Jet Set’, 2008). The sense of surrealism that lingers throughout the episode – both in terms of its relationship to other episodes in the series and in the inclusion of absurdist elements in the episode’s narrative – unhinges it from a fixity in time and space. We question whether the episode is actually just a dream, a form of utopian imagining. Lawrence Hayman writes that California is portrayed in the episode through a ‘filter of hazy, blistering sunshine’ that results in it appearing ‘more as a dream than an actual place’ (2015: 136). This sun-filled dreamscape functions in the narrative as the anti-New York, a haven for characters who go there to escape themselves.

For Don, revention of self is inexplicably linked to a denial of the past – Don cannot be both Dick Whitman and Donald Draper at once, and, in choosing Don Draper, he feels as though he must erase every trace of his former self as Dick. Yet, for Don, California is the unknown, the frontier. Whenever discomfort and malaise sets in in New York, he yearns to run away, to escape to the frontier space of California as another step in his perpetual desire for rebirth. California then simultaneously presents Don with the opportunity to be unknown, to reinvent himself once more in the West, the mythological site of US reinvention, and yet it is also a space in which he can *be* Dick Whitman.

California figures for Don as the *eu-topos* that Rachel Menken describes in Season One – a ‘good’ place where he can feel a greater cohesion between his past and present selves - and yet it is also revealed as a ‘*u-topos*’, a place that cannot be (‘Babylon’, 2007). Lawrence Heyman writes:

California of the early episodes is very much the California that lived in the imaginations of New Yorkers and midwesterners in the 1960s. Orange groves, bright sunshine [and] vast and beautiful hotels all existed alongside crisp, elegant modern homes in the collective imagination of people who hoped for the promise of another frontier. (2015: 137.)

However much like the series’ depiction of the 1960s at large the audience, by virtue of their privileged viewing positions fifty years subsequent to the show’s setting, are aware of the impossibility of this vision. At the same time that California exists narratively as utopic, the series draws this into question through the viewer’s awareness of the impossibility of California performing this function as the utopic ideal society malleable to personal desires.

Towards the end of ‘The Jet Set’ Don is confronted by the arrival of a divorced father and his two children at the Palm Springs house. Don looks at the miserable expression on the face of the young boy, Bernard, and is reminded of his own childhood and of his children back at home in New York. Looking down at the glass he is drinking from, Don notices it is cracked, a quite heavy-handed moment of symbolism suggesting Don’s recognition of the cracks in the surface veneer of life with the Europeans (‘The Jet Set’, 2008).

However, instead of this prompting Don’s return to New York, the next scene finds Don awakening on the couch, picking up a phone, dialling and then saying, “Hello, it’s Dick Whitman...” This is the first moment in the series that Don has addressed himself by his birth name and directly acknowledged that he is Dick Whitman. In the next episode we learn that Don rang Anna Draper, the wife of the ‘real’ Don Draper, and “the only person who really

‘More of an idea than a place’

knew him [Don/Dick]’ (‘The Mountain King’, 2008). Over the course of these two episodes (‘The Jet Set’, 2008; ‘The Mountain King’, 2008) is filled with an openness that is not available to him in New York. California becomes the space where Don can abandon the pressures of performing his New York identity and with this embody a sense of openness and curiosity, freeing himself to move more fluidly between his personas as Dick and Don.

THE END OF *MAD MEN* AS THE END OF UTOPIA?

Although the focus of this paper is on the representation of California as utopia in ‘The Jet Set’, such an analysis of the series is incomplete without reference to the final scenes of the series. After several episodes travelling west Don finally arrives in California, meeting up with Stephanie Draper, Anna’s daughter, who takes him to a new age spiritual retreat (‘Person to Person’, 2015). Don is seated cross-legged on the ground during a meditation session, the camera slowly zooming in on his face as a smile slowly forms. Seemingly taking the session leader’s proclamation of ‘A new day, a new you’ to heart, it appears as though Don may have found contentment at last (‘Person to Person’, 2015).

The scene then cuts to the famous 1970s Coca-Cola commercial, ‘I’d like to buy the world a Coke’ (McCann Erickson, 1971), suggesting by inference that Don’s spiritual contentment led to a return to advertising where he saw the potential to commodify the countercultural movement and its belief in communal utopias for Coca-Cola, one of the ultimate global symbols of capitalism. As Jessica Campbell notes, *Mad Men*, as a series set in an advertising agency, is filled with instances of utopian representations, scenes of potential futures to be achieved through the purchase of commodities (2012). Advertising is perhaps the utopian text *par excellence* – offering consumers a vision of a perfect world currently out of reach, and yet obtainable through the purchase of commodities.

As such the show suggests, following Luigi and Alessandra Manea, that advertisements suggests to consumers that we do not need to dream of an ideal society or challenge neoliberal capitalism – capitalism is *already* the realization of consumer utopia (2012). This scene sees Don’s ultimate realization of self in the cooption of utopia into capitalism. For Raffaella Baccolini the moment when utopia is subsumed by free market capitalism signals the end of history as there is no longer hope for the future (2003: 116).

Indeed, it is telling that it is *California* that is the site of Don’s utopia, the home of Hollywood and the US entertainment industry, bringing to mind Richard Dyer’s argument that Hollywood entertainment offers itself as utopian, providing an ‘alternative to capitalism

which will be provided by capitalism' (2002: 279). By ending on this scene, the show invites us to question our own willingness to be caught up in the illusions of Don Draper, capitalism, and the American dream. It exposes the way in which the series draws upon affective notions of nostalgia and utopianism to ultimately sell itself as a commodity to its audience.

CONCLUSION

Using 'The Jet Set' as a case study, this paper has examined *Mad Men's* usage of California as both a real and imagined space. Don invests in California as a quasi-mythical site of renewal. Aligning with his belief in the American dream and the promise of self-transformation 'out west', Don's journey to California and eventual escape to Palm Springs with the European 'jet set' provides him with a sense of escape from the confinements of New York and his assumed identity as Don Draper.

This spatialization of California as oppositional to New York and the cosmopolitan, ethereal nature of its representation throughout the episode cast California as a utopic space – a land of wish-fulfilment where Don can experience an idealized mode of living alongside the transient and glamorous Europeans. However, the show continually problematizes Don's desire to reinvent himself, casting his recreation of self as vulnerable and fracturous. The usage of California as a dream-fulfilment utopia is also revealed as ultimately leading Don back to advertising and his life in New York and with this destroying any power of Don's nostalgic yearning, coopted by the demands of capitalism.

REFERENCES

- Abraham, Phil (2007), 'The Hobo Code', *Mad Men*, Los Angeles: AMC
- (2008). 'The Jet Set', *Mad Men*, Los Angeles: AMC
- Baccolini, Raffaella (2003), "'A useful knowledge of the present is rooted in the past': memory and historical reconciliation in Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Telling*", in R. Baccolini and T. Moylan (eds.), *Dark Horizons: science fiction and the dystopian imagination*, New York, London: Routledge, pp. 113-34,
- Bernstein, Andrew (2007), 'Babylon', *Mad Men*, Los Angeles: AMC
- Boym, Svetlana (2001), *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books.
- Campbell, Jessica (2012), 'The Good Place that Cannot Be: Visual Representations of Utopia on *Mad Men*', in H. Marcovitch and N. Batty (eds.), *Mad Men, Women and Children: essays on gender and generation*, Lanham, KY: Lexington Books, pp. 91-104.
- De Sá, Alexandre Franco (2012), 'From Modern Utopias to Contemporary Uchronia', in P. Vieira and M. Marder (eds.), *Existential Utopia: new perspectives on utopian thought*, New York, London: Continuum, pp. 23-34.
- Dyer, Richard (2002), *Only Entertainment*, 2nd ed., New York, London: Routledge.

‘More of an idea than a place’

- Hayman, Lawrence (2015), ‘Appearances, Social Norms and Life in Modern America: nationalism and patriotism in *Mad Men*’, in L. Beail and L.J. Goren (eds.), *Mad Men and Politics*, London: Bloomsbury, pp. 119-46.
- Hunter, Tim (2007), ‘Red in the Face’, *Mad Men*, Los Angeles: AMC
- Manea, Luigi and Manea, Alessandra (2012), ‘The Portrayal of Utopian Spaces in Magazine Advertisements’, in J. Klous, J. Kauth, A. Zubaris and W. Scarlato (eds.), *Utopian Images and Narratives in Advertising*, Lanham, KY: Lexington Books, pp. 7-29.
- Taylor, Alan (2007), ‘Nixon v. Kennedy’, *Mad Men*, Los Angeles: AMC
- (2008), ‘The Mountain King’, *Mad Men*, Los Angeles: AMC
- Weiner, Matthew (2007), ‘The Wheel’, *Mad Men*, Los Angeles: AMC
- (2015), ‘Person to Person’, *Mad Men*, Los Angeles: AMC

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Grace Torcasio is a Ph.D. candidate and lecturer in Screen and Cultural Studies at the University of Melbourne. Her research examines masculinity and nostalgia in contemporary US quality TV dramas.

Contact: grace.torcasio@unimelb.edu.au

SUGGESTED CITATION

Torcasio, Grace (2016), “‘More of an idea than a place’: utopic spaces in AMC’s *Mad Men*”, *Peer Reviewed Proceedings of the 7th Annual Conference Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand (PopCAANZ)*, Sydney, Australia, 29 June - 1 July, 2016, P. Mountfort (ed.), Sydney: PopCAANZ, pp. 118-126. Available from <http://popcaanz.com/conference-proceedings-2016/>.