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## Clash of the Gazes

### The Feminist Emancipation of Megan Draper in *Mad Men* (2007–2015)

**Abstract:** Set in the turbulent 1960s USA, *Mad Men* focuses on Don Draper, a family man who successfully works in advertising. As gender dynamics are constantly redefined during this period and are central to the TV series, this article examines how *Mad Men* (2007-2015) problematizes female representation and the male gaze through the character of Megan Draper, Don Draper's wife. By employing Laura Mulvey's theory on the male gaze, I propose that the representation of Megan subverts stereotypical gender norms in her marriage and professional life, even if there are limitations in the series' approach of feminist politics. Further engaging with issues of spectatorship dynamics, I explore how Megan's emancipation from Don is visualized through a renegotiation of gender politics in 1960s culture and media. More specifically, by drawing intertextual parallels with *Vertigo* (1958), with reference to the politics of the Pygmalion myth, I examine how *Mad Men* self-reflexively comments on the representation of women on film as idealized subjects regulated by the gaze.

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## 1. Representing Gender in the 1960s: The Case of Megan Draper

Set in the turbulent USA of the 1960s, *Mad Men* (2010-2015) documents the lives of men and women who struggle to find their place in a world where gender dynamics and roles are redefined. At its core, *Mad Men* is about Don Draper, a family man who works in advertising, through whose eyes we witness the massive changes in American society from the 1960s to 1970s. Praised as a morally grey protagonist, Don Draper has joined the pantheon of great TV characters that include Tony Soprano from *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and Walter White from *Breaking Bad* (2008-13).<sup>1</sup> All three TV series have a male character as a focalizer to explore the intricacies of identity and masculinity. Thus, their subjective viewpoint filters the events represented onscreen. This raises questions regarding the role of perspective in narrative and spectatorship, making us think about how narrative events are mediated. Although *Mad Men* places a male viewpoint at its center, the question of perspective emerges in the series' exploration of 1960s gender politics. *Mad Men's* ensemble cast offers the opportunity to explore shifting gender roles through the eyes of the series' female characters, namely Betty, Peggy and Joan among others, who offer different visions of femininity regarding domesticity, professional opportunities, sexuality and representation.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the scholarship's focus on the female characters, Megan, Don's second wife, is often overlooked, despite deviating from traditional gender roles. In this paper, I propose that through Megan we can approach issues of female emancipation, sexuality and representation in the changing environment of the 1960s. More specifically, I argue that *Mad Men* problematizes the issue of gender representation in visual media by self-reflexively commenting on the "male gaze" through Don and Megan's relationship. The series represents Megan as breaking with gender norms by reclaiming herself from the male gaze and by redefining her marital relationship with Don through her independent professional career. As this analysis points out, the series engages in an intertextual dialogue with media from that era, specifically films, poetry, and music. These intertextual references to 1960s cultural texts are utilized by the series to root its own understanding of feminism, and to differentiate itself from 1960s representations. By drawing intertextual parallels to *Vertigo* (1958), I examine how *Mad Men* self-reflexively comments on the representation of women on film as idealized subjects regulated by the gaze, thus problematizing gender dynamics.

To explore Megan's representation in season five, Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze is central. In her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1974), Mulvey employs a psychoanalytic framework to explore how a male perspective is

<sup>1</sup> Beail and Goren 2015: 4–5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.: 10.

favored in classic Hollywood films at the expense of women. She argues that the cinematic gaze is gendered and structured around the hegemonic male gaze.<sup>3</sup> Denied of any distinct agency, female characters are reduced to their appearance, while “the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to [them]”.<sup>4</sup> In other words, women are seen as a blank slate that the male gaze is called to fill by projecting voyeuristic desires. Although Mulvey’s theory has been influential in outlining the gender dynamics in film, it has been criticized for having a limited application almost exclusively to classic Hollywood films and for relying on a binary understanding of gender that suggests an outdated biological essentialism.<sup>5</sup> In their book *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler argues that rather than having a biological basis, “gender proves to be performative— that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be”.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, gender is viewed as being socially constructed by the repetition of gestures associated with what each culture perceives as masculine, feminine, or gender non-conforming. This viewpoint rethinks gender as socially constructed across a spectrum, thus moving beyond the binary. This article follows Butler in viewing gender identity as fluid and unfixed. Mulvey’s terms are therefore employed as a reference to historical feminist concepts which the series itself draws attention to, including but not limited to the “male gaze”, as well as grounding the analysis of the 1960s films that are referenced both by the series and Mulvey herself.

In season five of *Mad Men*, gendered spectatorship becomes a central visual motif of the series. More specifically, the characters Don and Megan are used to portray a spectator-spectacle dynamic. An example is the season five promotional poster, which was described as cryptic upon its release, with series creator Matthew Weiner arguing that its meaning would become clear by the season’s end.<sup>7</sup> The image of the promotional poster is constantly revisited, contested and eventually deconstructed throughout the season. The poster has Don looking at a window shop where a seated male mannequin gazes at a naked female mannequin. Thus, the window display is a perfect encapsulation of the male gaze: the naked female mannequin becomes a spectacle for the male one, in line with Mulvey’s assertion that the male subject is established as “the maker of meaning”.<sup>8</sup> In this way, the poster further encapsulates the season’s main conflict: how Don (represented by the male mannequin) projects an idealized image on Megan (represented by the female mannequin). However, there is another layer: the poster also conveys a layer of self-reflexivity, with Don being put in the position of a spectator himself, observing the looking relations within the window display from the outside. Thus highlights the series’ own engagement with the dynamics of spectatorship in film and TV.

<sup>3</sup> Mulvey 1975: 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.:11.

<sup>5</sup> Arya 2012: 196

<sup>6</sup> Butler 1990: 25.

<sup>7</sup> O’Connell 2012. See O’Connell for an image of the promotional poster.

<sup>8</sup> Mulvey 1975: 7.

The dynamics of the conflicting gazes introduced in the poster are first played out in the opening episode of season five, “A Little Kiss”. In the episode, Megan throws a surprise party for Don and performs the sexually suggestive song *Zou Bisou Bisou* for Don and the guests.<sup>9</sup> At first glance, Megan is framed through the male gaze, since Don and his colleagues perceive her as a sexualized object. Mulvey argues that female characters tend to disrupt the narrative action, which is moved forward by the male character, and notes that this happens predominantly during singing and dancing numbers which are performed by women, thus reducing them to a passive role. Indeed, the scene pauses narrative action in favor of an erotically charged spectacle. Female characters, in this case Megan, function as erotic objects for the male protagonist as well as for the spectator, who identifies with the male character, and their sole function in the film is to be “looked at and [be] displayed”.<sup>10</sup> This rings especially true in *Mad Men*, since the series rarely includes musical and/or dancing numbers. Moreover, the audience’s perception of Megan’s performance is largely filtered through Don’s male perspective. The camera focuses as much (if not more) on Don’s reaction as it does on Megan’s performance, thus inviting the spectator to align their perspective with that of Don’s.

Power resides with Don, as he carefully controls how he and his wife are perceived by his colleagues. However, Megan’s performance takes him by surprise, as he is visibly frustrated by her dancing in the presence of his co-workers. This is also visualized, as Don is seated and Megan looms over him in various shots throughout the scene, rendering Don powerless. More specifically, examining this scene through Simone De Beauvoir’s claim that gender equality in sexual life can lead to freedom for both men and women, Goodson posits that Megan’s dance demonstrates that she will have an equal say in her marital life, which will not be solely regulated by Don’s desires.<sup>11</sup> Building on this, I propose that the scene serves as an introduction to Megan that subverts our expectations about her role as an obedient wife. She presents herself as a modern sexually liberated woman closer to the 1960s counterculture, an affront to conservative society who would shame her for celebrating her sexuality. Through this performance, Megan claims an equal say in her marriage as well as the personal freedom to decide her career life in later episodes.<sup>12</sup> Thus, on closer inspection, Megan’s performance of *Zou Bisou Bisou* can be also read as a transgressive act that undermines Don’s authority, since Megan chooses to present herself in a sexual way. Megan’s intentionally sexualized presentation becomes a way to reclaim power in her relationship with Don by resisting the gaze’s gendered power structures. Therefore, rather than pausing action, this scene can be seen as revealing Megan’s agency and independence from

<sup>9</sup> “A Little Kiss”: 39:50–41:35.

<sup>10</sup> Mulvey 1975: 11.

<sup>11</sup> Goodson 2016: 282.

<sup>12</sup> Goodson 2016: 282.

her husband, thus portraying the effects of the sexual and gender revolution of the 1960s in the TV series.

While *Mad Men* criticizes the sexism of the 1960s and suggests female empowerment, it is useful to take a closer look at how it understands this notion. Evoking nostalgia for the era while simultaneously criticizing the shortcomings of the 1960s, *Mad Men* critically represents the era's treatment of sexism, racism and privilege as attitudes still prevalent in contemporary USA.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the series' approach is selective and has its own historical limitations. Mimi White has demonstrated how *Mad Men* retrospectively applies post- and neo-liberal definitions of feminism to represent the experiences of working women in the 1960s.<sup>14</sup> As a product of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that looks back to the 1960s, *Mad Men* produces a retro-anachronistic approach to feminism, since it foregrounds the lives of individual female characters in the series, paying little attention to the wider developments in the women's movement during the period.<sup>15</sup> Hence, female empowerment in *Mad Men* is defined through success in terms of career, and fails to imagine empowerment outside of neo-liberal terms. It could be argued *Mad Men* falls back into an understanding of popular feminism, which envisions female empowerment as individual success. As Banet-Weiser suggests, while historical movements stressed liberation from unequal and patriarchal socio-political structures, popular feminism embraces a vague concept of 'empowerment', which shifts the focus from collective liberation to individual success or social mobility.<sup>16</sup> *Mad Men* defines empowerment along similar lines as individual success in the workplace. However, this effectively means that versions of subversive femininity that develop outside of a professional framework are often overlooked and not represented in the series.

Therefore, Megan's contestation of Don's control is mirrored in their professional lives, since Megan decides to pursue a career in acting independently of her husband in "Lady Lazarus", an act that is signaled as empowering by the series. Megan's pursuit of an acting career alienates her from Don, since he views Megan's rejection of a career in advertising as a rejection of himself. This parting of career paths is visualized with shots constantly dividing Megan and Don. Right from the start of the episode, a shot shows Don inside the conference room and Megan being outside of it, walking away.<sup>17</sup> The wall creates a sense of division between the two and the firm's meeting room can be seen as symbolizing advertising. Thus, a visual link is created between Megan's rejection of advertising and Don, who has constructed a big part of his identity around his job. This further implies a rejection of the inherent power dynamics, as Don has more control within the agency than Megan, who is a secretary.

<sup>13</sup> Beail and Goren 2015: 7, Booker and Batchelor 2016: 124.

<sup>14</sup> White 2019: 86.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Banet-Weiser 2018: 17.

<sup>17</sup> "Lady Lazarus": 02:44.

Ironically enough, in the same episode Megan and Don are asked to perform the parts of a suburban couple in a rehearsal for a commercial. This, again, is a moment where the series self-reflexively makes its dealing with gender dynamics explicit. By recourse to Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of gender, it can be argued that the series references the performative nature of gender. In this scene, Don and Megan are asked to perform traditional masculinity and femininity in the form of what another character, Stan, describes as "stupid husband" and "pushy wife".<sup>18</sup> Portraying a 1960s American suburban couple, Don and Megan unconsciously perform gender in the form of physical and verbal gestures. The series self-reflexively sets this scene up as indicative of 1960s suburban sexism, by stressing the artificiality of their dialogue. Don calls Megan "honey" and Megan performs the role of the happy housewife who prepares a dessert for her husband. In a way, they enact a stereotypical scene from the daily life of a married couple, which aligns more with Don's expectations of Megan. Narratively, the scene is juxtaposed with Megan's decision to pursue an acting career, outside of the domestic space as well as the professional space of advertising, since both are controlled by Don.

Megan's professional emancipation has a feminist subtext and is viewed as a rebirth for her, as highlighted by the title's intertextual reference to Sylvia Plath's poem "Lady Lazarus" (1965). Plath's poem features a speaker who dies multiple times and resurrects herself, a female version of the Biblical figure of Lazarus, who was risen from the dead. The speaker's ability to revive herself does not come from any external force but by her own power as an individual.<sup>19</sup> By intertextually referring to Plath's "Lady Lazarus", *Mad Men's* episode of the same name invites a comparison between the poem's themes and Megan's decision to pursue her own career. For example, a shot showing Megan meditating with her eyes shut and lying on the floor during her first acting class can be interpreted as a visualization of her rebirth as an individual woman, since she assumes a pose that evokes resurrection.<sup>20</sup> The power to symbolically reinvent herself stems from her own actions, since it is by taking her life in her hands and actively making decisions about herself that Megan manages to be "reborn" as an emancipated woman, similarly to the speaker in "Lady Lazarus".

Furthermore, in evoking Plath's poem, the episode invites the spectator to note parallels between the poem and the representation of Don and Megan's relationship. In the poem's ending stanza, the speaker announces that "out of the ash / [she] rise[s] [...] / and [she] eat[s] men like air".<sup>21</sup> The speaker uses imagery evoking a phoenix, in the sense that she is reborn out of her ashes, just like the mythical bird, and announces her strength to "eat men like air", signaling that her rebirth has made her stronger in order to defy the patriarchal status quo. In exploring the feminist

<sup>18</sup> "Lady Lazarus": 19:37–19:40.

<sup>19</sup> Sanazaro 1983: 67.

<sup>20</sup> "Lady Lazarus": 46:19.

<sup>21</sup> Plath 2017: 624, lines 82–84.

undertones of the poem, I argue that the poem's last line is indicative of Megan's choice to separate her working life from that of Don's. As Johnson argues, Don is initially attracted to Megan, because she represents a new model of an empowered woman, much different than that of Betty.<sup>22</sup> However, Megan's decision to pursue an independent acting career marks the first crack in their marriage and in a sense "the independence that initially draws him to her becomes the independence that drives him away".<sup>23</sup> The more emancipated Megan becomes, the less dependent she is on Don. Thus, the independence Megan pursues directly threatens Don, mirroring how Plath's poem comments on the threat women pose within patriarchal structures.

## 2. Screening the Male Gaze: Intertextuality in *Mad Men*

Further exploring how the gaze functions in the TV series, I argue that an intertextual link exists between the representation of the male gaze in *Vertigo* (1958) on the one hand and *Mad Men* on the other hand, illustrating how *Mad Men* turns to historical cultural texts that thematize gender dynamics in order to ground its own understanding of feminism. As a TV series produced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *Mad Men* looks back on the 1960s USA through a self-reflexive lens, commenting on how media shape representation. *Mad Men* engages with 1960s film culture by explicitly referencing specific movies and implicitly engaging with themes prominent in 1960s films as well as often re-enacting plot points from these films.<sup>24</sup>

Central to exploring the relation between *Mad Men* and the 1960s film texts is the ancient Greek myth of Pygmalion, the male sculptor who fell in love with his own creation, the sculpture of Galatea. The relevance of the Pygmalion myth to *Mad Men* is illustrated in the season's promotional poster, where the female mannequin's ghostly paleness echoes the marble-sculpted Galatea. The poster presents a scene of domestic marital bliss, with the seated male mannequin retaining control. The Pygmalion myth's gender dynamics, especially as represented in George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* (1913), inform the plot of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958).<sup>25</sup> It is no coincidence that the 1960s also saw the release of George Cukor's *My Fair Lady* (1964), the film adaptation of the musical of the same name, also based on Shaw's play. The production of films in the late 1950s and early 1960s that adapted the myth demonstrates how gender roles and power dynamics were problematized in 1960s USA. Albeit different in tone and style, both films seem to explore the attempts of men to mold real women into a fantasy, a desire to create an idealized woman. Like the sculpture of Galatea, Eliza and Judy are treated as blank canvases, where meaning is inscribed onto them by the male characters.

<sup>22</sup> Johnson 2016: 111.

<sup>23</sup> Johnson 2016: 111.

<sup>24</sup> Booker and Batchelor 2016: 89–90.

<sup>25</sup> Bär 2020: 88.

By intertextually commenting on these 1960s films, *Mad Men's* central conflict in season five is structured around the very same gender dynamics discussed in these films: the clash between how Don projects an idealized image on Megan and how she resists it. In Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, the dynamics of the Pygmalion myth are replicated through Scottie's obsessive fashioning of Judy after Madeleine, not being aware that Judy was hired by his friend to pretend to be Madeleine. Indeed, Mulvey proposes that the male gaze constitutes the subject matter of *Vertigo*.<sup>26</sup> Scottie becomes fascinated with Judy due to her uncanny resemblance to Madeleine. Thus, Judy's only function is to be the bearer of Scottie's meaning, as he tries to transform her into the ideal woman he projects upon her. His efforts come to fruition as Judy gradually disappears while Scottie's projection of Madeleine, the woman who never existed, comes to the surface. Going back to *Mad Men*, Don Draper's own self-fashioning as someone who has manufactured his identity makes the links between 1960s male film characters and Don more overt.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, it is possible to see parallels between Scottie and Don in their attempts to bring their fantasies to life, even if Don's frustration at Megan is more subtle. These efforts to reshape the women by the male protagonists in both the film and the TV series reveal how they thematize the politics of the gaze. Both characters chase after the idolized image of a non-existent woman, a phantom— something immaterial and unobtainable, in contrast to the tangibility of Judy and Megan. In *Mad Men*, the metaphor of the 'phantom' stands for Don's idealized image of Megan, an illusion that does not treat Megan as an autonomous subject. This metaphor even extends to the title of the season's final episode – "The Phantom".

In "The Phantom", Megan and Don's conflict culminates in an audition scene, when Don gives Megan her first acting job after watching her demo reel on a film screen. Here, again, spectatorship constitutes a central motif— both visually and narratively. More specifically, Megan's image is projected on a giant screen and is filtered through Don's gaze who becomes the spectator.<sup>28</sup> This creates the visual of a screen-within-a-screen and constitutes an instance of self-reflexivity about the medium. There are over-the-shoulder shots of Don watching the film screen; thus, his gaze stands between the screen and the spectator, filtering the perception of Megan's image, a metaphor for how the cinematic gaze functions. Megan's projection shares the immateriality of the idealized version of Megan, Don has created. Thus, the film screen becomes an immaterial surface, turning Megan into a phantom. At this point, it is useful to draw a parallel between how Don's gaze filters the scene and the lyrics of *Can't Take My Eyes Off You*, Frankie Valli's 1967 song. The song thematizes the gaze, as the speaker argues that the subject he sees is "too good to be true". Though the speaker and the subject are not explicitly gendered, it can be speculated that within the heteronormative politics of the 1960s the subject would have been

<sup>26</sup> Mulvey 1975: 14.

<sup>27</sup> Booker and Batchelor 2016: 100.

<sup>28</sup> "The Phantom": 42:40.

assumed to be female. The scene in *Mad Men* could intertextually also comment on this popular hit, since it expresses the idea of a man projecting his gaze on a woman that seems too good to be true, like the idealized Megan is for Don.

Through these links, it becomes evident that the historical framework of the 1960s constitutes an integral part of Megan and Don's relationship. The characters in *Mad Men* represent societal shifts, with Betty being a representative of the frustrated suburban housewife and Megan a representative of a new type of femininity that celebrates her sexuality and defines herself outside of her husband. Indeed, though Don started this season thinking Megan would be a "silent image [...] tied to her place as bearer of meaning"<sup>29</sup>, by the end Megan has proved him wrong on multiple occasions, demonstrating that she will not be limited by Don's wishes. Don's conflation of Megan with an ideal of escape renders her an archetype of happiness in his eyes and negates her personality, so Don becomes frustrated when she shows interest in having a career.<sup>30</sup> By giving her an acting part in the advertisement, Don effectively helps Megan realize her dream, even if this means that she will become more independent, since he does not want her to feel the suffocation Betty endured in her marriage with Don.<sup>31</sup> Hereby, the series references a cultural shift experienced in the 1960s, when for the first time men were expected to be supportive of their wives' wishes to follow a career, but, though Don does exactly that, for him the marriage is effectively over.<sup>32</sup>

This is reflected in Megan's last scene in season five, which also hinges on a looking relationship, commenting on the dynamics of spectatorship. Having spent an entire season framing her through his gaze, Don no longer regulates Megan. This is metaphorically visualized by the withdrawal of his gaze.<sup>33</sup> Despite the fact that Don has looked away, Megan is still at the center of the scene. The lighting is also revealing: whereas Megan is bathed in light, Don walks into the dark, thus the shot invites the viewer to focus on Megan rather than Don. Even as Don walks away, Megan is able to keep the spotlight on her, signaling her independence from him. In this way, the dynamics of the gaze are subverted, signaling Don's own frustration and Megan's ability to stay in the spotlight despite the withdrawal of his gaze.

Don and Megan's relationship has been defined by false promises of happiness even earlier in the show. Doyle highlights that this tension is foreshadowed by season four's final episode, where Don proposes to Megan to marry him.<sup>34</sup> The episode's title, "Tomorrowland", refers to a section of the Disneyland theme park, which Don and Megan visit in the episode and which was originally designed to depict an

<sup>29</sup> Mulvey 1975: 7.

<sup>30</sup> Haley 2016: 159–160.

<sup>31</sup> Johnson 2016: 112.

<sup>32</sup> Johnson 2016: 112.

<sup>33</sup> "The Phantom": 44:45.

<sup>34</sup> Doyle 2012: 174.

imagined future of the USA.<sup>35</sup> However, Tomorrowland quickly became dated and Doyle suggests that the episode's title indicates that despite Don's high hopes, this imagined future will never come to pass and that his marriage with Megan will fail.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Megan walks the line between feminist emancipation and clinging to Don's influence to succeed in her career. When Megan asks Don to give her the acting gig in the commercial, this constitutes an act that undermines her decision to pursue an independent career, as she still latches onto Don for help. Though this weakens her emancipation, asking Don for the role solidifies his realization that Megan imagines an alternative life for herself. The image of California in relation to the failure of Megan and Don's marriage returns to the later seasons. It is no coincidence that Megan eventually relocates to California, asking Don to follow her, even though the allure of the 1960s California will not last long as the following decades will see problems emerging in the state.<sup>37</sup> Much like the promise of California, Megan turns out to be an elusive fantasy that cannot become part of Don's reality. Don's projections of what Megan should be are constantly upset.

Drawing towards a conclusion, *Mad Men* thematizes gender representation in the 1960s by commenting on the 'male gaze' both on a narrative level through Megan and Don's relationship and on a thematic level through its intertextual references to 1960s media. Megan brings to the forefront conflicting models of femininity and emancipation, which are explored through the TV series' emphasis on the gaze and spectatorship. Upsetting gender dynamics, *Mad Men* frames Megan's emancipation through intertextual references to 1960s cultural landscape, which self-reflexively demonstrates how representation is defined by the gendering of the gaze.

<sup>35</sup> Doyle 2012: 174.

<sup>36</sup> Doyle 2012: 174.

<sup>37</sup> Beail and Goren 2015: 10.

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*My Fair Lady*. USA 1964, George Cukor, 173 Min.

*Vertigo*. USA, 1958, Alfred Hitchcock, 128 Min.

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*Mad Men*. USA 2007–2015, AMC/Lionsgate Television. Created by Matthew Weiner.

### Episode List

“A Little Kiss”. *Mad Men*. Season 5, Episodes 1 and 2, written by Matthew Weiner, directed by Jennifer Getzinger, AMC, (25.3.2012).

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*Can't Take My Eyes Off You*. 1967, M: Frankie Valli.

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