

Product Integration in *Mad Men*: Political Economy, Nostalgia and Critique

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Introduction

If this article analyzes the US hit series *Mad Men* from a political-economic perspective, it does so because I believe the series captures the cultural industries in a particular moment of transition, and offers a suggestive look at future developments. The paper starts from political economy but the main focus is on the cultural and ideological consequences of the changing business models of commercial media, and television in particular. The combination of political economy with textual analysis connects to a long tradition within cultural studies, one that explains cultural forms by connecting them to the particular social formation that gave rise to it (e.g. Williams 1974, Brown 1994, Magder 2004). The analysis presented here is therefore unapologetically materialist, in the Marxist sense of the word: cultural production inevitably uses scarce resources that are always limited - albeit this scarcity is sometimes be artificially maintained. Or, as Nick Couldry defines the materialist approach to culture “I understand cultural production (whether it is a text, a song, a film, an idea or whatever) as the result of what particular people have done at particular times and places, and under particular constraints and limitations (Couldry 2000: 11). As a consequence, the mode of production - or the (social) organisation of the productive forces - has an important influence on what cultural artefacts are being produced, what form they take, and who gets to enjoy them. Hence the importance of political economy: being the science of how scarce resources are allocated, it is the first step in understanding any particular cultural formation (be it not the only one – see the endless debates of the past on political economy and economic reductionism).

A disclaimer: if I argue that *Mad Men* embodies a particular solution to the problems that the culture industries are facing I do not intend to imply that the “*Mad Men* solution” is the only one, to the contrary: it is just one of the ways in which the culture industries are adapting themselves to the changing market context. Other strategies are already in place, strategies that have also proven successful. One can think of what marketers call “direct response TV” (see for example Evans et al. 1995, Starkey et al. 1997) as a completely different response to the same changing market conditions. But it is precisely the idiosyncrasy of *Mad Men* that will allow us to make the coming changes more tangible and concrete. Instead of an abstract generalization this paper presents a case study, with all the advantages and disadvantages that come along with it. In short, this paper proposes first and foremost a *mode of analysis*, rather than a generalised prediction for the future.

The culture industries in 2000s

Mad Men is interesting because of how it embodies a particular solution to the problem of advertising. Or, to put it more precisely, the way it proposes a solution to the problem of advertising as it has been practised during the last 60 years or so. During that period the 30-second-

advertising spot had been the remarkably stable way of funding commercial television, but in the last 20 years or so that business model has come under increasing pressure. Two developments in particular were damaging for the advertising-funded way of doing business. First of these is the increase in the amount of channels, initially extra tv channels but also increasingly other media like the internet, competing for audience attention. The result was a multi-channel environment, characterized by an increasingly fragmented audience, pressure on the prices of advertisements, pressure on income of the networks and pressure on production budgets. The second is the rise of digital technologies that give consumers more control over their media use. The analogue predecessor, the VCR, gave consumers for the first time control over the broadcasting schedule, including the skipping of commercials. But its technical limitations and difficult edits had prevented widespread use of the editing out of commercials. The advent of digital technology made this much easier. Whether people are using a digital video recorder, a Tivo or their computer, cutting out or skipping the commercials is a breeze that requires little or no technical know-how.

It is clear that these two tendencies profoundly affect the economic viability of the television sector and the attention economy (Davenport & Beck 2001) it is based upon. Many of the changes in the television industry of the last 20 years can be explained by this changing media ecology. The rapid rise of reality TV, for example, was the industry's answer to cope with the multichannel environment and the associated pressure on budgets and working costs, since most non-scripted programming dramatically cuts the above-the-line costs (Raphael 2004). It is also noteworthy that despite different regulatory traditions North-America and Europe show a similar evolution: the 1990s and 2000s were the decades in which deregulatory fervour seemed unlimited and even West-European countries that had previously cultivated and protected the monopoly of their national public broadcasters opened up their markets, gradually adding more and more channels to the broadcasting environment. The EU, with directives like *Television Without Frontiers* (1989) played an important role, just like the relaxation of the fin-syn rules in the US was an important influence in the transition from network era to multichannel environment.

The industry reacted to the situation by searching for new ways of funding television programmes. One such strategy was making viewers pay for content, be it in the form of view-on-demand, or more indirectly, by generating revenue through sms-voting. But the strategy that concerns here most is the *diversification of advertising*. Instead of relying almost exclusively on the 30 second commercial the networks and production companies turned to alternatives, most notably *sponsorship* and *product placement*. In the first case a company sponsors an entire show because its topic or theme combines well with the product or brand. This in fact represents a return to the early years of commercial television, when individual sponsorship of entire programs was common practice. Sponsorship of programs has one major disadvantage, though: unless the sponsor is integrated into the show the "few words from our sponsor" can as easily be edited out as the 30 second commercial. It is precisely the latter problem that product placement avoids. Here, a brand or product is visibly placed in the program, long enough to be identified as such. Thus we regularly see Apple laptops figuring prominently in television series, or specific brands

being used in a reality show. This is not always done in return for a fee; sometimes material support, like providing products to the production team, or free use of a location, is provided. The advantage of product placement is that it cannot be edited out, since the product is literally part of the entertainment text.

This is even more so in the case of *product integration*. Here the products or brands are not passively placed in the text: they are an integral part of the storyline, and they thus push the narrative forward (unlike the case of mere product placement, where the text does not activate the product or brand). Both product placement and product integration are zap, TIVO and computer proof. Since in a very real sense the entertainment text *is* the advertisement, both aspects cannot be separated, offering broadcasters the perfect advertising vehicle that is at once enjoyed *and* effective. Product integration is especially popular in Reality TV, for two reasons: first, as a “cheaper” genre there is more pressure on production costs, and product integration can help reducing production costs. Second, many of these programs are built around a theme of transformation, and consumer goods play a crucial role in effectuating these transformations. Thus consumer goods make the participant in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* into a fashionable being; thanks to the magic of brands the bland interior design changes into its opposite in *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*; and in *Pimp My Ride* the old second hand car is customized and made into a unique and personalised vehicle, again thanks to the use of commodities. This is not only a testimony to the extent to which commodity fetishism is an accurate term to describe our contemporary media culture; these programs first and fore mostly present brand owners with a unique opportunity to pitch their products.

***Mad Men* in a mad world**

If product integration is usually associated with non-scripted entertainment, *Mad Men* is the exception to the rule. The series can, in fact, be seen as the fiction answer to the changes in the television sector described above. The 30 second commercial no longer an effective advertisement vehicle? Well, let us create a show in which commodities and brands are an integral part of the show, and what better environment for that than Madison Avenue of the early 1960s? In the world of *Mad Men*, brands pop up unobtrusively precisely because the brands are the advertising business *raison d'être*. Not only can products be integrated into the show without it coming across as artificial; it also solves the problem of technology, in that viewers can impossibly cut out the references to the brands: the show is nothing without the brands that star in it.

Mad Men moreover makes handy use of all the opportunities a multi-channel environment has to offer. Its website (<http://www.amctv.com/originals/madmen/>) is extensively used for capturing viewers into “the world of *Mad Men*”. Viewers can not only discuss the last episode, there’s a wealth of extra behind-the-scenes information on the website: interviews with actors, writers, set designers or researchers but also overviews of 1960s fashion trends, recipes for cocktails popular in the series, or a game section. Viewers are also invited to immerse themselves in the *Mad Men* universe: you can “*Mad Men* yourself” – design, fashion and download a drawing

of yourself that can next be used in Facebook, on your iPhone or as a desktop picture. There is even a competition in which viewers are even invited to re-enact famous scenes with their webcam, with the winner earning a role in the next season. The website is also the digital hub for a number of revenue-generating activities: DVD's and CD's can be bought, there is a link to the iTunes download store where the latest episode can be bought, and there is an entire shopping guide that links to other websites selling all kinds of *Mad Men* paraphernalia, ranging from literature about Madison Avenue to the suits Don Draper is wearing or authentic Martini cocktail glasses. In short, no opportunity is wasted to replace the reduced income through commercials by alternative means, making commercials but one of the many ways through which the series generates revenue.

If we return to product integration in *Mad Men*, some extra comments are in place. In addition to combining well with the setting of the show, product integration is less obtrusive because it articulates well with an often-applauded aspect of the show, namely its obsession with historical accuracy. Whether in interviews or in the audio commentary on the DVD's, the stress is on the incredible amount of research that goes into maintaining historical accuracy: locations, costumes, props, hairdo's, historical events... all are carefully researched for historical accuracy. *Mad Men* is, in other words, a thoroughly referential show, that tries to recreate the minute details of a past world. In such a world full of references to actually-existing-things the occasional name-dropping of a brand, or a longer-than-normal shot of a model that has long ago disappeared from the market does not bother, since it adds to the authenticity, nostalgia and stylishness that characterises the show.

And there are plenty of references to brands. Take for example the haphazardly chosen episode 3 of the first season: apart from Volkswagen and Secor Laxative, who both take a role in driving forth the narrative, several other brands are mentioned: IBM, Saks, Hendri Bendel, Bonwit Teller, Lansky's, Fielding beer and Hightop, and this is only counting those that are explicitly mentioned, not those that are merely visible. Strictly speaking, the latter fall under product *placement* instead of product integration, but they are nevertheless an integral part of the advertisement world portrayed in *Mad Men*.

Apart from these occasional references there are however some brands that take central stage in the show. In what follows I want to focus on those brands that play an important role in pushing the narrative forward, like for example Heineken, Hilton, American Airlines or John Deere - brands that are not merely mentioned but integrated into the show. In the remainder of this article I want to explore the often contradictory cultural effects that are the result of this kind of product integration. Before doing so, however, a caveat: not all "integrated products" are the result of a commercial deal. This is especially so for products that play a rather morbid role, as for example when American Airlines was connected to the 1962 plane crash, in which the father of one the main characters (Pete Campbell) dies during season 2. Similarly, the hilarious accident with the John Deere tractor in season 3 was an unsolicited case of product integration, and John Deere was quick to issue a statement that the company had nothing to do with the storyline (Cowan

2009: 1). In an interview, Melissa Wasserman, vice president of advertising sales marketing for AMC, claimed that the most important for the writers is how well the brand fits with the show. “We don’t really distinguish between placed or not placed products. [...] We don’t have a distinction about how the products got on there. The most important thing for us is that they be written appropriately” (ibid: 1). In the following section we will investigate what consequences this has for both the products as well as the wider cultural and ideological constellation. For the moment it suffices to mention that in what follows I have chosen to focus on “confirmed” product integration, that is, product integration of which it is publicly recognised as such.

Heineken and Hilton as two case studies of product integration

The main advantage of integrating a product or brand into *Mad Men* is the creation of tradition. The show is set back in the early 1960s, which is often romanticised as the highpoint of American capitalism, when optimism and can-do mentality reigned supreme. (This account usually fails to mention that it was also the era of the Bomb and beginning of the Vietnam war.) Inserting your brand into such an environment lends prestige and tradition to it, since the brand is being positioned as already existing during a great but bygone era. Moreover, the often-praised stylishness of the series adds a touch of glamour to the product or brand. It also helps that not every brand that is mentioned in the show is being paid for. If the audience never knows for certain whether a product ad is being paid for or not, the brand is surrounded by a certain halo of undecidability: perhaps it was paid for, but perhaps not - and in the latter case, the brand or product gains an even stringer position as an icon of American consumer capitalism. This undecidability is not an accident but a looked-for-effect – and the mere fact that this inside knowledge is made public actually helps in obtaining that effect.

On the other hand, starring in the show can also be a risky endeavour, since the laws of political economy can come into conflict with the laws of narrative. *Mad Men* remains first and foremost dedicated to telling stories, and this means that conflict will inevitably surround the integrated product – an inherent aspect of all narrative is conflict, since this is what pushes the action forward. In other words, the wish to create an air of tradition and stylishness around your product can be complicated because of the (negative) role the brand plays in pushing the narrative forward. I will illustrate this by examining the narrative role of two quite prominent brands in the second and third season respectively.

Heineken played quite a prominent role in episode 8 of the second season: the Dutch beer brewer wants to get a foothold in the American market and turns to Sterling Cooper for an advertising campaign. Don Draper advises them to market their product to upscale housewives, but the company is not very willing to do so. The whole episode centers on the issue of convincing Heineken to agree, but it is intercut with a storyline about the deteriorating marriage of Don and Betty Draper. Heineken not only paid for the product integration, they also sponsored a highly visible end-of-season party and the finale of that second season was only interrupted by one single Heineken ad (McGinnis 2008: 1). But a closer look at the episode shows that the product also plays quite a negative role in the marriage of the Draper’s: when Don has a party with his

PREVIOUSLY ON

colleagues they chuckle that Betty has bought Heineken (proof that their marketing strategy has worked), but this leads immediately to an open conflict between Don and Betty, in which she accuses him of making fun of her in public. The episode ends with Betty calling Don that he does not need to come back home, with Don zipping on a bottle of Heineken.

It is clear that product integration like this is quite a risky advertisement strategy. While it is true that Heineken obtains an aura of stylishness the brand also literally gets caught up in the bitter relationship between Don and Betty. It does not take a lot of imagination to see how Heineken could be associated with masculine insensitivity or male smugness. On the other hand, the fact that the beer is associated in the series with an ad campaign aimed at women can seriously undermine its “male” contemporary connotations. But most importantly, the storyline creates a conflictual feeling around the brand: Heineken is literally the source of separation, and the question is to what extent this leaks down into real life attitudes towards Heineken.

Even more explicitly ambivalent is the product integration of the Hilton Hotels. In the course of the third season not only do Don and Betty go to a Hilton hotel in Italy; the former also gets to design the campaign for Hilton, and more importantly, he also befriends Conrad Hilton, the Hilton patriarch. In this example we see the full extent to which product integration can go. In the Wall Street Journal we get a glimpse of how things went:

When executives from Hilton Worldwide, the venerable hotel chain, called on “Mad Men” creator Matt Weiner last year, he thought he would be getting a pitch to use the Beverly Hilton on his show. He had no idea that the product they wanted to place was the company’s founder, Conrad Hilton himself (Meroney 2009)

Here product integration reaches its full logic, in that brand and its history are brought to life through the insertion of a (historical) character in the series. It is as if the brand becomes human. No longer a faceless and anonymous company, the brand becomes its founder’s dream. But precisely herein resides the ambivalence of this representation. Conrad Hilton is portrayed as staunchly anti-Communist, a patriot and a deeply religious man (“This country is a force of good because we have God. Communists don’t” is one of his more sanguine lines). Especially in the current moment it is not hard to see how this can create an aura of Middle-American conservatism around the Hilton brand – which will be positive for some but no so for others. It is hard to predict how the political leanings of viewers might inflect their appreciation of Hilton but it obviously is a risky strategy. Moreover, at the end of the third season the relationship between Don and Conrad Hilton goes sour, and the latter abruptly breaks all contact with Don, giving Conrad Hilton an aura of principled stubbornness combined with a willingness to make hard decisions.

Heineken and Hilton illustrate the complexities of product integration, and the ambivalent aura that can result from it, due to a conflict between the logic of narrative and the logic of political economy. But the problems for product integration in Mad Men are even more deep-seated, and this is due to the setting in which the series take place: an advertising agency. We, as viewers, get to see the manipulations, the false logics, the twisting of words for touting products, in short, we see the advertising business as it is: inauthentic, artificial, mendacious. This is especially clear

in the pilot, when the Lucky Strike story line shows the malign deceit on health issues, as well as Don Draper's "solution" to tout the fact that Lucky Strike cigarettes are "toasted" – everybody else's cigarettes are also toasted, but Lucky Strike were the first in claiming so. In short, we as viewers are invited to focus on the way the advertising business manipulates consumers, and this subtext might undercut any humanising or stylising effects of product integration in the show.

Wider cultural and ideological consequences

Until now we have focussed on the ambivalent effects of integrating *individual* products in *Mad Men*. In the last section of this paper, however, the focus is on how the show's use of product placement affects the culture at large. We will look into the *ideological* effects that follow from this type of product placement, especially vis-à-vis consumer capitalism as a whole.

The first thing of note is the above-mentioned display of how advertising misleads its consumers. This subtext contains some elements of critique of capitalism, what Boltanski and Chiapello (2000) call "the artist critique" of capitalism. It is critical of capitalism on grounds that the latter is a source of inauthenticity and disenchantment, and because it limits "the freedom, autonomy and creativity of the human beings who are subjected to it" (ibid: 37). What *Mad Men* does, then, is that it shows us how consumer capitalism, of which the advertising business is an important component, is a thoroughly manufactured and sometimes manipulated construct.

But *Mad Men* launches this critique in a rather ambivalent way. At the same moment that it displays the inauthenticity of consumer capitalism it also *naturalises* it. This is done through the reconstruction of early consumer capitalism as an era of nostalgia. The series suggests that the 1960s were an era of innocence, when life was uncomplicated because there were so many things that we did not know: smoking was just a bad habit rather than a life threatening activity; cream and butter were recommended as good preventers of ulcers, rather than a dangerous source of cholesterol; and kids could still be chastised by physical means without it being called parental abuse. Many commentators have noted *Mad Men*'s smug complacency of looking towards the past - the phrase "What Fools We Were" (Schurtz, 2010) captures the feeling perfectly. But Mark Greif (Greif 2008: 15) argues - correctly in my view - that this is supplemented by an opposite feeling: the show also presents past mistakes and errors as *desirable*, described by him as "Doesn't That Look Good". It is precisely because the 1960s are presented as an era of blithe enjoyment (ignorance is bliss) that consumer capitalism is naturalised: even the uncomplicated era of innocence that we nostalgically long for was always-already capitalist.

Mad Men therefore fits perfectly the "savvy" logic that Mark Andrejevic (2004) sees at work in reality TV. It is a logic that delights in pointing towards the artificiality of things in contemporary capitalism, but it does so from a horizon of which all sense of utopia is evacuated. When confronted with a utopian logic, the savvy viewer cries foul, and denounces those who utter it as hopelessly naive. *Mad Men* does a similar albeit milder (that is, less rabidly anti-utopian) trick: it shows us how consumer capitalism is by definition manipulative while at the same time making us long for an era that *cannot be but capitalist*. *Mad Men*'s nostalgia mode thus takes the form

of a modernist critique while functioning in a postmodern way: it evokes the past to criticize the present, but it does so in an “end of history” modus, by redirecting us towards capitalism itself - a purer, more productive and generally more wholesome form of capitalism, but capitalist nevertheless.

Conclusion

The analysis of the wider ideological implications of product integration in *Mad Men* allow us to speculate on how the increasing role of product integration will impact upon the culture as a whole. In *Paris, Capital of the 19th Century* (1969), Walter Benjamin describes the department stores as places where products were lifted out of everyday life and fused with art. The department store thus *aestheticized* use objects by *separating* them from their “natural surroundings”, that is, the practices of everyday life. With product integration in fiction we see a new commercial and cultural logic emerge. Instead of separating them from their everyday surroundings, products are explicitly *reintegrated* into the context of their use. It integrates them, however, not into the flow of everyday life but into a symbolic world, which allows for the aestheticization of the products previously associated with the department store, and of which *Mad Men* is such a prime example. The result can best be described as effectuating a triple movement: the product is made ordinary, ubiquitous, and aestheticized, and all of these three at the same time.

Moreover, the move into the world of symbolic representation allows for extra functions to emerge, for example, the narrativization and humanization of commodity products, illustrated by the Hilton and Heineken storylines. These effects are new because they were difficult (but not impossible) to achieve in previous symbolic forms like the 30 second commercial. We are, in other words, in the midst of an advertorial and commercial transition, and the effects that it will have at the culture at large are ambivalent and difficult to predict.

The analysis of *Mad Men* has illustrated some of these contradictions that are bound to emerge in the new product integrated model. For instance, the narrative logic relies heavily on conflict, and this might sit uneasily with the desire of advertisers to create positive images of their products. At a more general level, the interest of the show’s creators might enter into conflict with those of the advertisers, and the question is who is in the strongest position to reinforce its will in the new commercial context. But the most interesting question is how the culture at large will be affected by the new advertorial logic. I have tried to show in the above analysis of *Mad Men* that the new stress on product integration tends towards an increasing “commodification” of the symbolic world, by which I mean an implicit and explicit presence of commodities into the shows we watch. This makes capitalism and its workings an increasingly explicit topic of today’s fiction series, exemplified by *Mad Men* but also by the move from many sitcoms away from the home and into the workplace (e.g. *30 Rock*, *The Office*). The ideological effects that will follow from capitalism’s increased visibility are hard to predict and should not be greeted by knee-jerk optimism, because as the *Mad Men* analysis show it can also mean that capitalism is in the process of becoming the degree zero of all things human. Despite the gloomy tone of this conclusion I nevertheless think that this is an empirical question, not a logical one, and future research is needed to fully assess

the ideological implications of product integration.

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