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Article: 'Why I'm Quitting Tobacco': Lucky Strike, having your cake and eating it in AMC's *Mad Men*

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## **‘Why I’m Quitting Tobacco’: Lucky Strike, having your cake and eating it in AMC’s *Mad Men*.**

The last episode of *Mad Men* to date, ‘In Care Of’, ends with Don Draper and his three children staring up at his childhood home, a dilapidated sometime brothel.<sup>1</sup> The Drapers are played out by Judy Collins’s version of ‘Both Sides, Now’, written but at that time (1968) unreleased by Joni Mitchell. ‘Both Sides, Now’ was inspired by a passage in Saul Bellow’s 1959 novel *Henderson the Rain King*, in which Henderson, fleeing his unhappy life for a solo trip to ‘darkest Africa’, looks out of his aeroplane window. As he tells it:

I dreamed down at the clouds, and thought that when I was a kid I had dreamed up at them, and having dreamed at the clouds from both sides as no other generation of men has done, one should be able to accept his death very easily.<sup>2</sup>

Henderson is a man not unlike Don Draper (except that Don is a very nervous flier).

Bellow’s protagonist is driven by a ‘ceaseless voice in my heart that said, *I want, I want, I want, oh I want*’;<sup>3</sup> and having run out of obvious ways to fulfil that want – alcohol, sex, violent rages, two marriages – he travels to ‘darkest Africa’ to see if he can find the answer there. Meanwhile Don’s list of resolutions, when he writes a diary in season 4 of *Mad Men*, runs: ‘One: climb Mount Kilimanjaro. Go anywhere in Africa, actually. Two: gain a modicum of control over the way I feel.’<sup>4</sup> Don has a voice in his heart saying ‘I want,’ too.

Dissatisfaction, anxiety, profound estrangement from one’s own desires and how

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Weiner and Carly Wray, ‘In Care Of’ (dir. Matthew Weiner).

<sup>2</sup> Saul Bellow, *Henderson the Rain King* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 43. All further references will be to this edition.

<sup>3</sup> *Henderson the Rain King*, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Weiner, Janet Leahy, Lisa Albert, ‘The Summer Man’ (dir. Phil Abraham).

they might be satisfied, is a consistent motif in *Mad Men*. Don is the most conspicuous but not the only sufferer: the women in his life are noticeably dissatisfied too; so are colleagues like Roger Sterling, Joan Holloway, Peggy Olson, Peter Campbell, and (before he runs off to join the Hare Krishnas) Paul Kinsey. Further, these characters' professional life revolves around the identification of desires and dissatisfactions on the part of clients and consumers, which they seek to answer one way and another. The major division at *Mad Men*'s ad agency, Sterling Cooper, is between Creative and Accounts. Creative have the ideas, come up with the artwork and copy for advertisements; Accounts drum up new business, liaise with current clients, keep them happy and entertain them when they visit New York. Creative and Accounts do not always recognize each other's skills, nor the fact that despite their mutual basis, their work must remain distinct for the sake of the company. Peter Campbell yearns to be in Creative, even pitching the odd idea to clients with some success, while Don attempts to get Heinz to employ him on their Baked Beans account – only to be told, 'You're a hell of an idea man, but let the Account boys do this part.'<sup>5</sup>

Despite their differences, Creative and Accounts are really selling the same thing: reassurance. This article will consider in that light *Mad Men*'s relationship with a particular product, Lucky Strike tobacco. The first shot of Don in 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes', *Mad Men*'s pilot episode, sees him jotting down ideas in a midtown bar where everybody, but everybody, is smoking. He is unsure how to proceed now that medical research has confirmed that Luckies, along with all other cigarettes, are so carcinogenic that

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<sup>5</sup> Andre Jacquemetton and Maria Jacquemetton, 'Blowing Smoke' (dir. John Slattery).

marketing them as 'safe' is no longer permissible. Having failed to come up with any ideas before the meeting, Don, improvising, asks the client how their product is made. Lee Garner Sr, the company owner, launches into a detailed description of the tobacco growing, harvesting, and toasting process. Don stops him at 'toasting', recognizing that even though all cigarette tobacco is toasted, the average smoker won't know it. He suggests that foregrounding this element, with the slogan 'It's Toasted', will make Lucky Strike appealingly unique to the consumer.

The boss's son, Lee Garner Jr, is unconvinced, so Don pitches him what is essentially an advertisement for advertising itself. He says:

Advertising is based on one thing. Happiness. And you know what happiness is? Happiness is the smell of a new car. It's freedom from fear. It's a billboard on the side of the road that screams with reassurance that whatever you're doing, it's ok. You are ok.<sup>6</sup>

This is a strange moment, in which Don temporarily elides the distinction between Creative and Accounts by telling Sterling Cooper's clients the theory behind his ideas. The content of the speech reflects Don's practice as an ad man, by juxtaposing a particular consumer experience – 'the smell of a new car' – with an abstracted, more powerful desire, for 'freedom from fear'. Earlier in the episode Don has jettisoned a piece of research by an Austrian lady psychiatrist which suggested that people smoke because of the death-drive: he knows that suicide, packaged as such, will not reassure anyone of anything. The only option is to ignore the risk, gesturing aside to an aesthetic feature of the smoking experience, making cigarettes' harmfulness moot. This is a professional triumph for Don, yet, as Mark

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew Weiner, 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes' (dir. Alan Taylor).

Greif points out, watching this episode we do not know ‘whether... to be impressed or to feel that the whole advertising industry is unconscionable and stupid.’<sup>7</sup> The answer, I would say, is both.

*Mad Men* has been accused of complacency and hypocrisy in its rendering of the past, its representations of smoking, daytime drinking, casual sexism and racism coming under fire for constituting, as Greif calls it, ‘an unpleasant little entry in the genre of Now We Know Better.’<sup>8</sup> Even Clive James, who enjoys the programme despite noticing its smoothing-away of some of the complexities of the real 1960s, writes that ‘*Mad Men* is a marketing campaign: what it sells is a sense of superiority.’<sup>9</sup> There probably is an element of this in the pilot episode, in which a group of tobacco executives sit around a conference table, smoking and coughing their way through a discussion of how to sell more cigarettes. Naturally this strikes us as ironic, but it is not a purely pleasurable sensation; since what this plotline lets us witness, from our 21<sup>st</sup>-century vantage, is the moment fifty years ago when the knowledge of how dangerous cigarettes were first began to murder sleep for smokers. If we are ‘superior’ now, and it’s a big if, that superiority was hard-won.

What is certainly the case is that *Mad Men* has induced in its fans, among other responses, a strong nostalgic desire to partake of the smoky, liquorous atmosphere it offers

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Greif, ‘You’ll Love the Way it Makes You Feel,’ *London Review of Books*, vol. 30 no. 20 (20 October 2008), pp. 15-16.

<sup>8</sup> ‘You’ll Love the Way it Makes You Feel’, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Clive James, ‘Mad about “Mad Men”’, *Australian Weekend Review* (20 April 2009): <http://www.clivejames.com/mad-aboutmadmen>

up. According to Daniel Mendelsohn, this is even worse:

The creators of this show are indulging in a kind of dramatic having your cake and eating it, too: even as it invites us to be shocked by what it's showing us ... it keeps eroticizing what it's showing us, too. For a drama (or book, or whatever) to invite an audience to feel superior to a less enlightened era even as it teases the regressive urges behind the behaviors associated with that era strikes me as the worst possible offense that can be committed in a creative work set in the past: it's simultaneously contemptuous and pandering. Here, it cripples the show's ability to tell us anything of real substance about the world it depicts.<sup>10</sup>

There may be some truth in Mendelsohn's remarks about *Mad Men* teasing our regressive urges, or Jenny Diski's observation that the show peddles a 'false nostalgia'.<sup>11</sup> But regressive urges and false nostalgia are part of what *Mad Men* is about, its 'real substance', in fact; in no way limited by its 1960s setting. Having one's cake and eating it is a theme at the emotional centre of the programme, whose unhappy characters struggle to parse the seductive from the dangerous and make the compromises necessary for domestic or professional stability. And because *Mad Men* does not stint from representing the appeal alongside the deleteriousness of its characters' addictions, compulsions and transgressions, their self-destructive behaviour poses an interpretive challenge to the audience analogous to the challenge it poses to the characters themselves.

Diski calls Sterling Cooper's dramatis personae 'retro shadow-puppets in a stylised shadow-play':<sup>12</sup> this sounds pleasing but, like Mendelsohn's assessment, it suffers by looking at the show from only one side. Yes, the characters are retro, their world is stylised, but that is because (if it isn't too obvious to say so), they are fictional characters set in a fictionalised

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel Mendelsohn, 'The *Mad Men* Account,' *New York Review of Books* (24 February 2011): <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/feb/24/mad-men-account/>

<sup>11</sup> Jenny Diski, 'Unfaithful: the false nostalgia of *Mad Men*', *Harper's Magazine* (January 2012), pp. 75-78.

<sup>12</sup> 'Unfaithful', p. 75.

past, whose distance from us is a dramatic device, not an empirical fact. *Mad Men's* selective historicism, like its clever use of network constraints (unlike HBO, AMC forbids swearing, nudity, and graphic violence), is only unrealistic if we take the show at once too seriously, as a straight sociohistorical document, and not seriously enough, as a work of art. This show's resonance, its enjoyability, its emotional purchase, depend on its period setting only as a matter of structure, a distancing technique that lets us observe *Mad Men's* characters as we cannot yet observe ourselves.

Critics have been bothered by the myopia of Sterling Cooper's employees, hardly any of whom take more than a passing interest in the social or political events of their day, nor (as James points out), except rarely, do they interrogate the terms of their own profession.<sup>13</sup> Jeremy Varon writes that 'it would be nice, for our sake if not theirs, if [the characters] would sometimes question their circumstances, assumptions, and habits,' and pay more attention to their changeful society.<sup>14</sup> This, too, is rather one-sided as a criticism: because in one sense, it would be nice if the show gave its audience a history lesson, or a clearer moral indication that the times were a-changing and he who got hurt would be he who had stalled. In another, though, *Mad Men* achieves a different kind of accuracy by showing the period's upheavals as they might have impacted on busy, narcissistic, wealthy and not especially 'political' people. For us watching the show, retrospect makes some sense of the events of the 1960s, as it does of the tobacco industry's cynical manipulation of

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<sup>13</sup> 'Mad about "Mad Men"'.  
<sup>14</sup> Jeremy Varon, 'History Gets in Your Eyes – *Mad Men*, misrecognition, and the masculine mystique', *Mad Men, Mad World*, pp. 257-278, p. 274.

its customers, but the characters' emotional responses, and our own to them, are not so clear-cut. On occasion, the program-makers indulge in some audience-baiting dramatic irony (as when we see that Roger Sterling's daughter's wedding is scheduled for November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1963); but the real interest of events like this, as far as the show is concerned, is strictly psychological.

For sure, there is something claustrophobic at times about the closely contained world of *Mad Men*. Mendelsohn calls the show's directorial style 'static' and 'airless,' its scenes 'boxed':<sup>15</sup> he has a point; apart from the occasional trip to Los Angeles (the only time *Mad Men* can make use of its genuine location), the majority of scenes take place in the Sterling Cooper office, which the characters sometimes seem physically unable (because psychically unwilling) to leave – think of Peggy, on her 26<sup>th</sup> birthday, missing dinner with her boyfriend and family to stay behind in the office and work on a pitch with Don.<sup>16</sup> That the pitch isn't due for two weeks, that Peggy doesn't really want to attend her birthday dinner, and that Don is staying at work to avoid making a personal telephone call he knows will distress him, is exactly the point. It is not far from this observation, that the stratified drama of the workplace helps to control the characters' anxieties about their real life, to the recognition that this workplace drama fulfils a similar function for its audience. Umberto Eco writes about the cultish cachet of a 'completely furnished world',<sup>17</sup> like the one *Mad Men* provides: like any gripping serial drama, it has to make us feel along with Roger

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<sup>15</sup> 'The Mad Men Account'.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Weiner, 'The Suitcase' (dir. Jennifer Getzinger).

<sup>17</sup> Umberto Eco, 'Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage', *SubStance*, vol. 14, no. 2 (1985), pp. 3-12, p. 3.



Sterling, if only for 45 minutes at a time, that ‘this is the office, and that’s life. And this is good, and that’s life.’

So, while the audience experiences little in the way of political upheaval via these characters, we partake fully in their professional crises. Lucky Strike is the engine of much of Sterling Cooper’s instability, and Lee Garner Jr a particular menace. Knowing he has Sterling Cooper over a barrel because his company constitutes two thirds of their business, Garner routinely bullies and humiliates the agency’s employees before finally dumping them altogether. Turned away by Heinz, even by Philip Morris’s new brand of cigarettes for women, the agency fears it will never get back on its feet.<sup>18</sup> Don takes action. Cigarette in one hand and pencil in the other, he writes a letter to the *New York Times* headed, ‘Why I’m Quitting Tobacco’.

We hear the letter in full, in voiceover, accompanied by images of Don writing and rewriting it (still smoking), and taking a vigorous swim, something he has started doing recently as he tries to cut back on drinking. He writes:

Recently, my advertising agency ended a long relationship with Lucky Strike cigarettes. And I’m relieved. For over 25 years we devoted ourselves to peddling a product for which good work is irrelevant, because people can’t stop themselves from buying it. A product that never improves, causes illness, and makes people unhappy. But there was money in it. A lot of money. In fact, our entire business depended on it. We knew it wasn’t good for us, but we couldn’t stop. And then, when Lucky Strike moved their business elsewhere, I realised here was my chance to be someone who can sleep at night, because I know what I’m selling doesn’t kill my customers.

Most of Don’s colleagues are furious with him for writing this letter, which characterizes

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<sup>18</sup> Andre Jacquemetton, Maria Jacquemetton, ‘Blowing Smoke’ (dir. John Slattery).

Lucky Strike as an addiction that Sterling Cooper have heroically beaten (rather than as a boyfriend who dumped them). The only positive feedback comes from the American Cancer Society, who are looking for someone to run their anti-smoking campaign. Don's defence to his colleagues is that his letter was 'an ad for the agency'; in this way, it is ironically reminiscent of his speech to Lee Garners Jr and Sr in the pilot, an advertisement not for tobacco but for advertising itself.

Don's stunt is self-serving and sentimental; it borders on the wholly untruthful; it is hypocritical, because Sterling Cooper would have kept on working for Lucky Strike if they could. Watching it, we know all that; as in Greif's formulation, we once again do not know whether to be impressed or appalled. Once again, we have the option to be both. *Mad Men's* self-conscious self-distancing from its audience, like the best artistic effects, paradoxically brings us closer to the centre of the drama. In that regard it is *Mad Men's* audience, not its makers, who may have our cake and eat it. Encouraged to engage unjudgementally (which is not the same as uncritically) with the show's many ambivalences and uncertainties, we are permitted, like Henderson in his plane, to dream both up and down at the world of *Mad Men*.

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