Gender And Nostalgia In Period Drama: *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* and *Mad Men*

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Abstract: *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017-2023) and *Mad Men* (2007-2015) share a common genre, location, and era. Both are period dramas, set in New York City, as the waning 1950s transition into the 1960s. Additionally, both television serials address changing cultural conditions, especially surrounding gender. Yet, when analyzed through the prism of nostalgia, the two programs deviate in significant ways. This essay uses Grainge's (2000) distinction between nostalgia as mood and nostalgia as aesthetic style, applying it to the two television serials. It also incorporates concepts of nostalgia as critique (Cook, 2005), as well as imagined nostalgia as the longing "for a past that has never been" (Niemeyer, 2014: 10). Following these criteria, the more somber *Mad Men* aligns with classic nostalgia as mood, expressing loss and longing for a vanished era, even as it also critiques that past. In contrast, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel's* upbeat, playful emotional approach corresponds more closely with nostalgia as aesthetic style, leaving it open to charges of a contrived, less historically serious form of storytelling. Instead, "Gender and Nostalgia in Period Drama" argues that the program creates a strategic perspective on the era by calling attention to the ways specific groups – such as would-be, female, stand-up satirists – were implausible configurations. *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* engages its selected categories of nostalgia to emphasize, for certain contemporary viewers, a place they cannot return to and a past they cannot long for save through the fictional intervention of corrective historicity.
Keywords: Nostalgia, gender, period drama, television serials, emotional tone, 1950s/1960s.

Résumé : *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017-2023) et *Mad Men* (2007-2015) ont en commun un genre, un lieu et une époque. Il s'agit dans les deux cas de séries d'époque, qui se déroulent à New York, au point de bascule entre les années 1950 et 1960. Toutes les deux traitent de transformations socio-culturelles, en particulier en matière de genre. Pourtant, quand on les analyse au prisme de la nostalgie, ces séries présentent

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d'importantes divergences. Pour analyser ce corpus, notre article s'appuie sur la distinction établie par Paul Grainge (2000) entre la nostalgie comme sentiment et la nostalgie comme esthétique. Ce travail intègre également les concepts de nostalgie comme outil critique (Cook, 2005), ainsi que la nostalgie comme vecteur du désir « d'un passé qui n'a jamais été » (Niemeyer, 2014 : 10). Selon ces critères, *Mad Men*, la plus sombre des deux, illustre la définition classique de la nostalgie entendue comme une émotion traduisant la perte et la nostalgie d'une époque disparue, même si ce passé est aussi critiqué. En revanche, la dimension sentimentale, joyeuse et ludique de *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* correspond davantage à une forme de nostalgie esthétique, ce qui lui vaut d'être accusée de construire un récit artificiel et moins fiable historiquement. À contre-courant de cette approche, notre article intitulé « *Gender and Nostalgia in Period Drama* » (« Genre et nostalgie dans les séries d'époque ») soutient au contraire que cette série offre un point de vue pertinent sur la période en attirant l'attention, justement, sur le caractère complétement invraisemblable de certains personnages, par exemple les femmes aspirant à devenir artistes de *stand-up*. *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* embrasse différentes formes de nostalgie pour mieux montrer à certains téléspectateurs contemporains un lieu où ils ne peuvent retourner et un passé auquel ils ne peuvent aspirer, sauf par le biais de l'intervention fictive d'une historicité corrective.
Mots clés : Nostalgie, genre, série d'époque, feuilleton télévisé, sentimentalité, années 1950/1960.

Introduction

A distinction is usually made between the historical film or television series and the period drama. In the former, the narrative focuses on events or people that once materially existed or continue to exist, as in the example of *The Crown* (2016-present). Of course, historical series feature fictionalized aspects, such as the portrayal of private conversations or other interpersonal exchanges for which no documented records occur, as is also the case with the literary category of historical fiction. In contrast, although period pieces might reference a known or "publicly memorialised event or figure", they are concerned with a past era in a more general sense, using fictional characters to depict what it might have felt like for a certain group of people to live in and experience a particular time and place (Drake, 2003: 187).

In these terms, both *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017-2023) and *Mad Men* (2007-2015) are period serials, portraying aspects of the transition from the 1950s to the 1960s in the United States and, more specifically, in New York. With stories beginning in 1958 and 1960, respectively, both serials also feature main characters who, at least initially, are depicted as fish out of water in these changing times. Miriam Maisel, known as Midge (Rachel Brosnahan), leads a sheltered, privileged existence on the Upper

West Side of New York City, where she lives with her husband and two children, and as neighbors to her parents, amidst their tight-knit Jewish community. Don Draper (John Hamm) enjoys a hard-won, successful career as a Madison Avenue advertising executive, a lifestyle that supports the affluent, suburban New York home he shares with his wife and two children. Through these introductory frames, both serials attempt to pinpoint the qualities of a changing era, capturing the waning 1950s and impending 1960s, with all the associations those two decades have for the programs' 21st century audiences. Prominent among the shifting cultural conditions of that impactful era are the transformations surrounding gender status and relations, emphasized by both serials.

And yet, for all their commonalities of genre, location, and era, the two serials deviate in striking ways over their comparable subject matter. Most notably, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* conveys a sense of optimistic possibility that is conspicuously restricted for *Mad Men's* principal white, male characters. Signaled by Don Draper's insistence on his 1950s business suit, white shirt, narrow tie, and ubiquitous fedora hat, we understand that he regards the unknown, encroaching social terrain of the 1960s with suspicion, if not outright hostility. Little hope of rapprochement between changing eras exists in Don's particular narrative world.[1] In contrast, Mrs. Maisel's story as a budding stand-up satirist follows Miriam's largely effective attempts to negotiate the expectations of her familiar, comfortable world with a new context that, especially at the outset, feels frightening and alien but, often, also exhilarating. In place of the disconnection and hostility depicted by *Mad Men's* lead character towards this looming new world, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* holds out the possibility of a detente, however complicated, between otherwise disparate existences, represented by Miriam's Upper West Side home life versus the seamier environs and circumstances dictated by her burgeoning stand-up career.

Their contrasting outlooks towards the same historical period are complemented by the emotional or tonal qualities each serial adopts. Antagonism and mean-spiritedness accompany a good portion of the relationships in *Mad Men*; its characters are often unkind to others, sometimes viciously so. Theirs is a narrative world in which neither brief encounters nor prolonged interactions among characters tend to end well. In comparison, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* offers a playful, upbeat, and fanciful sensibility, arguably open to charges of feel-good naivete or lack of 'realism'. While it is possible to attribute the distinct worldviews to the fact that *Mad Men* is predominantly a drama while *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* incorporates far more comedic material, I suggest the reverse: their

1. However, it is possible to interpret *Mad Men's* series finale as Don Draper finally 'getting' the 1960s, at least in terms of commerce and consumerism, when he conceives the "I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke" campaign.

divergent worldviews determine the degree of gravity versus lightheartedness implemented by each serial. This essay argues that the markedly antithetical worldviews embraced by the two programs can be attributed, in significant part, to the principal character's gender. And, further, that those opposing perspectives are *enabled by* each serial's varying conceptualization of nostalgia, and the differing purposes to which their respective nostalgic formulations are put.

The next section provides a brief excursion through contemporary thinking on the dynamics of mediated nostalgia, including Paul Grainge's partition of nostalgia as mood from nostalgia as aesthetic style. The following sections focus in greater detail on the two television serials chosen as case studies, beginning with *Mad Men* because it exemplifies the more traditional understanding of nostalgia as mood. Subsequently, I turn to *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* to outline its alternative formulation based on nostalgia as aesthetic style, combining that with Katharina Niemeyer's notion of imagined nostalgia, the latter defined as the longing for times or circumstances that never existed.

Mediated Nostalgia

Considerable work has been undertaken on the emotional complex of nostalgia, in large part due to the discipline of memory studies (Niemeyer, 2014: 3-5). Contemporary nostalgia has been defined as "homesickness" caused by either (or both) a spatial or temporal dislocation, and as "a bittersweet longing for former times and spaces" now somehow lost (Pickering and Keightley, 2006: 922; Niemeyer 1). Stuart Tannock argues that nostalgia "invokes a positively evaluated past world in response to a deficient present world" in certain aspects (1995: 454). One need not be nostalgic for the entirety of a previous era or vanished place but for some recognized, extracted portion of it. Because nostalgia involves a "positively evaluated past" in comparison to "a deficient present", it exists as "a periodizing emotion: that was then, and this is now" (Tannock: 456). Nostalgia is a periodizing emotion in the sense that it distinguishes past and present or, in spatial terms, there versus here. But it does so by performing a comparison of the two, marking the vanished as in some way better, fuller, richer than the here and now. Nostalgia as a periodizing emotion, prevalent in so many period films and television shows, functions not simply by documenting a past, that is, implementing an historical operation to greater or lesser success, but by *comparing* the differing temporal or spatial circumstances with the evaluative purpose of finding some aspect(s) wanting. The specific range of emotions associated with nostalgia become generated through this act of comparison and the subsequent identified paucity.

In Pam Cook's summary, a nostalgia film "conjures up a golden age", for some people if not for all, "which is both celebrated and mourned" (2005: 11). Nostalgia is the celebration of an era and a set of circumstances that once existed but, simultaneously, induces mourning due to its passing. Cook also notes that, at times, nostalgia can coalesce into a process in which the past is "exorcised to enable characters (and audience members) to come to terms with the present" (*Ibid*.: 12). This potential for critical evaluation of a period taking shape as an exorcism of the past toward the goal of disentangling from it, is stressed by others writing on nostalgia in addition to Cook (Tannock; Pickering and Keightley; Pierson 2014). It is a formulation of nostalgia that enables one "to initiate critical reconsiderations of the past, to tap into previously overlooked experiences, and to reveal the processes by which histories are constructed, engaged, and challenged" (Sprengler, 2021: 36). In this respect, the goal of critical nostalgia is to explore its corrective political potential in the present and for the future, rather than existing principally as a regressive retreat into the past.

Nostalgia is such a powerful emotional matrix that it "retains enough force" to create its feelings even among those "who have not personally experienced the past or place depicted", that is, those who did not live through the times portrayed but ache for their loss anyway (Spengler, 2009: 23; Landsberg 2003). Indeed, it remains possible for people to experience nostalgia "for real and imaginary losses", that is, for what they believe they have lost as well as for what they once actually experienced (Holdsworth, 2011: 125). Importantly, nostalgia is not a singular emotion but a "composite feeling of loss, lack and longing" at its most basic, combining these several emotions towards a regretted absence (Pickering and Keightley: 921). Even more so, what nostalgia generates is seemingly emotionally paradoxical so that, for instance, we are left feeling sadness when recalling happy times. Or, even as nostalgia signals "loss, lack and longing", it does so on the basis of strong, forged ties or bonds of affection that remain in place, through a process that layers melancholy over cherished memories (Atia and Davies, 2010: 184). Nostalgia occurs as an emotional composite or complex, then, in which the nature of its experiences can vary greatly to include longing, loss, regret, fondness, affection, tenderness, admiration, yearning, grief, wistfulness, and deep pleasure. Or in Cook's terms, it holds the capacity to engender anything from celebration and mourning to critical exorcism.

An important addition to the contemporary concept of nostalgia is contributed by Paul Grainge who distinguishes nostalgia as mood from nostalgia as mode or style (2000). In his argument, nostalgia *as mood* parallels its dominant understanding, outlined above, as an emotional complex aligned with loss, lack, and longing. In its manifestation as mood,

nostalgia takes shape as "idealized remembrance" that forefronts feelings of "yearning" (Grainge: 28). In contrast, nostalgia *as mode or aesthetic style* disengages from emotions such as loss and longing. Instead, previous "periods are plundered for style", including their fashions, décor, music, and forms of technology (Grainge: 29). In this latter formulation, nostalgia can operate "quite removed from the concept of loss, as evidenced by the popularity of retro objects" (Drake: 190). Objects appropriated from the past in the manner of fashion, taste, or style take on the reverberation of being cool or retro-chic without commensurate longing for or necessarily having much knowledge about the era or context in which the object originated. This second formulation creates a form of nostalgia devoid of longing. Per Cook, nostalgia as style may be cause for celebration but it does not entail that the 'pastness' of retro objects be mourned.

Grainge's distinction between mood and style is a response to Fredric Jameson's much-heralded observations on "the nostalgia mode", as evidenced by what Jameson terms nostalgia films, such as *American Graffiti* (1973), *Chinatown* (1974), and *Body Heat* (1981) (Jameson, 1995: 20). For Jameson, these films represent a form of cultural amnesia prevalent in late modernity (his postmodernity or late capitalism) in which history appears only as commodified style, wholly lacking in critical substance. Jameson draws a distinction between *historicism* as "the random cannibalization of all styles of the past" and what he considers a more "genuine historicity" (18-19). Although set in some specified past, such as the 1950s or the 1930s, nostalgia films display only a vaguely defined relationship, if any at all, between their chosen historical period and the conditions they have led to in the contemporary moment, resulting in a superficial sense of "fashionable and glossy pastness" (Grainge: 29).

Grainge concedes that, as Jameson suggests, aesthetic nostalgia can easily become a commodified style or "consumable mode" (*Ibid*.). However, it is worth remembering that nostalgia as experienced mood can also be commodified with little difficulty, as indicated by *Mad Men's* popularity, very much including the clothing, décor, and other consumer goods, from both the 1950s and the 1960s, that the serial rendered in vogue. Grainge's concern is to preserve Jameson's stylistic nostalgia as a viable alternative, embodying a different emotional configuration and serving its own distinct cultural purposes but, nonetheless, an operative conceptualization that can be encompassed within the overall notion of nostalgia. Confirming Grainge's concern, Jameson does indeed identify the cinematic aesthetic style initiated by *American Graffiti* as "the so-called nostalgia film" (19). So-called because, for one, it is missing "the pain of

a properly modernist nostalgia", that is to say, nostalgia as experienced mood, necessarily including the pain of loss, lack and longing (*Ibid*).[2]

We are presented, here, with two different formulations of nostalgia. Nostalgia as experienced mood stresses loss and longing, while nostalgia as aesthetic style represents, in Jameson's argument, historical amnesia. In the former instance, the past has come and gone. In the latter case, because of the failure to remember or recognize it, the past never existed at all. In the context of these dual formulations, *Mad Men* conforms more to the pain of a proper nostalgia, to the felt mood of loss. In contrast, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, enveloped in its upbeat playfulness, represents a nostalgia forged by aesthetic style that celebrates its depicted past but does not seem to mourn it. Does this suggest that we ought to consider *Mad Men,* lodged in somber, nostalgic moodiness, an historical endeavor of greater depth and substance? To what alternate historical ends might a serial like *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* pursue the lighter-hearted aspects of nostalgia as aesthetic style? How do the respective choices on nostalgia taken by these two period serials shape our understanding of the historical circumstances they seek to illuminate?

Period Drama as Nostalgic Mood: *Mad Men*

Mad Men has drawn the attention of a significant number of academic commentators.[3] Widely viewed as a show steeped in nostalgia, when faced with the seismic social changes wrought by the 1960s, a number of its central characters long for the privileges that seemed rightfully theirs in the 1950s, especially the benefits attached to white, heterosexual masculinity. Contemporaneous social rules work heavily in favor of the serial's middle-and-upper class white men, in an era when 'hard' living – drinking, smoking, promiscuous sex – were thought to be signs of an authentic masculine existence rather than potential health hazards as they are largely viewed now.

2. Part of the difficulty with Jameson's argument is that he only takes into account high art forms of modernism as operative prior to the advent of postmodernism or late capitalism, which he dates from the 1960s. The result is that the "pop history" he deplores (Jameson: 25), as reflected in the aesthetic superficiality of the nostalgia film, appears to come into existence only with the era of postmodernity. Yet, as Miriam Hansen has outlined, this ignores the considerably longer history of various forms of vernacular modernism, such as popular cinema (Hansen, 2000). Surely Hollywood films, as well as other mainstream cultural forms, were formulating traditions of popular history, deplorable or otherwise, well prior to Jameson's originating date of 1973's *American Graffiti.*
3. A non-exhaustive list includes Baruah, 2017; Beail and Goren, 2015; Blanchet and Vaage, 2012; Booker and Batchelor, 2016; Carveth and South, 2010; Dill-Shackleford *et al.*, 2015; Dunn, Manning and Stern, 2015; Edgerton, 2011; MacDonald and Moore, 2016; Marcovitch and Batty, 2012; Martínez and Barnes, 2018; Pierson, 2014; Spigel, 2013; Stoddart, 2011; Vermeulen and Rustad, 2013.

Generally highly regarded by its commentators, *Mad Men's* success as television programming has been assessed, in part, on the degree to which it immerses itself in the pleasures of nostalgia, both mournful and celebratory, versus the extent to which it deploys critical nostalgia in order to exorcise that past. In striving toward either of these goals – immersion or critique – the show builds its narrative world on the emotional configurations of nostalgic *mood*, as outlined above, although its stylistic features, for both the 1950s and the 1960s, played a key role in the popularity of the series' look and sound.

Nostalgia as mood structures *Mad Men* in multi-faceted ways, beginning with story content that charts the transitions in American culture as it moves from the 1950s through the 1960s. Lead character Don Draper serves as the embodiment of 1950s values, lodged in his materially affluent existence afforded by the era's "social conformity, upward social mobility, and hopeful optimism" (Pierson, 2014: 144). Although showcasing futuristic Midcentury Modern design, the 1950s are primarily associated with the conservative values accompanying middle-class suburban life, nuclear families, and gender-specific professional and domestic roles. Following the deprivations of previous decades, from the Depression through the World War II years, the 1950s, in contrast, "represented the promise of progress and plenty in postwar America", accounting for the era's hopeful optimism (Cross, 2015: 105).

In terms of *Mad Men's* reliance on nostalgia as mood, Dana Polan points out that the series purposefully begins in 1960, thereby establishing the 1950s as a "structuring absence" (2013: 37). The decade that Don and other central characters represent is not actually present in chronological terms (except through occasional flashbacks), but nonetheless shapes everything that occurs in *Mad Men's* 1960s narrative time period. In locating its 1950s characters, values, and mindsets in the decade of the 1960s, *Mad Men* immediately becomes about change and loss, its very temporal makeup structured nostalgically. Nostalgia for the 1950s then becomes enacted through its principal male characters' resistance or maladaptation to the emerging new era.[4] Similarly, Pierson observes that the show is structured by nostalgia in portraying a main protagonist "who repeatedly longs for a home he never had as a child and probably will never attain as an adult" (139). Thus, Don is a 1950s male adult whose most notable psychological trait is a constant, thwarted longing for the imagined 1930s childhood he never experienced. His yearning for better childhood days mimics the nostalgic feel of the series' 1960s present-time events for the

4. Despite their inability to adjust to the 1960s, at the serial's conclusion several prominent male characters are given 'happy endings' defined, precisely, by them coming to terms with the changed circumstances of the decade: Don invents the era-defining I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke ad campaign; Pete Campbell is reunited with his wife and daughter; and Roger Sterling establishes a new, fulfilling romantic relationship and lifestyle.

values and lifestyle of the preceding 1950s, thereby expanding the temporal and spatial sources that serve to evoke nostalgia.

If we fail to notice structuring techniques lodged in the dynamics of nostalgia, we need only attend to Don's own words in his much-cited advertising pitch for Kodak's Carousel slide projector (Season One, episode 13, "The Wheel"). He explains to the two Kodak executives and three advertising colleagues gathered in the room – but for the benefit of the 21st century audience watching the episode – that nostalgia, "the pain from an old wound", "takes us to a place where we ache to go again…a place where we know we are loved". His lulling words to the assembled men are accompanied by a succession of his own family slides in reverse temporal order, moving backward rather than forward in time: Don and Betty (January Jones) playing with their two children, Don standing next to Betty as she holds their newborn child, the couple at their wedding.

The end of his pitch is met by moved silence on the part of the Kodak executives, while one of Don's colleagues, choked with tears, hastily leaves the room. Yet the images Don uses in his pitch are not nostalgic for the characters, either the Kodak representatives or the other ad executives listening to the pitch. The look and activities portrayed in the slides would have been contemporary for the men in the conference room, although certainly sentimental in evoking family, childhood, innocence, and fun. But in its day, the slide projector itself was cutting-edge technology, far more futuristic than evocative of the past. The Carousel, with its circular tray, "was hailed as a dazzling innovation when Kodak introduced it in the early 1960s" (Rawsthorn, 2013: n.p.).

As the act of evoking the past, Don's pitch is nostalgic for the serial's *audience members*, through images casting back to the early 1960s in fashions and hair styles, in the use of a slide projector to display family photos, and because the Kodachrome slides embody a grainy quality, amateur lighting, and color saturation that looks 'past tense'. Don, principal figurehead for *Mad Men*, tells us the show is selling nostalgia, not on behalf of Kodak but to the program's viewing audience. *Mad Men* is a prototypical, even deeply saturated, exemplification of nostalgia as mood, in Grainge's description. For this reason, the series stresses realism as verisimilitude, working diligently to make the period details feel correct and convincing. To this end, *Mad Men's* sets rely heavily on interiors, over which it can control the details, while exteriors of New York City, for example, are sparse. The show's material parameters, in wardrobe, environment, and behaviors, must establish the feel of a tangible place and time we believe once actually existed, justifying that to which a number of its characters long to return.

And yet, if the 1950s symbolize a time of "social conformity, upward social mobility, and hopeful optimism", as Pierson suggests, little of that hopeful optimism surfaces in *Mad Men*. The serial conveys a general air of unhappiness, not just for its socially marginalized or excluded characters, like Peggy Olson (Elisabeth Moss), Joan Holloway (Christina Hendricks), and Salvatore Romano (Bryan Batt), whose frustrations over far-less-than-satisfactory circumstances we comprehend. An atmosphere of discontent prevails equally, and is permitted to be manifested much more openly, on the part of its principal, privileged personae, such as Don Draper, Roger Sterling (John Slattery), and Pete Campbell (Vincent Kartheiser).

Mad Men embraces a consistently sober tone, its nostalgia embedded in the context of an overall disposition of deep dissatisfaction. Remaining less clear is the source of the disaffection that haunts the serial's socially advantaged characters. Why do they fail to feel on top of the world they are largely depicted as being on top of? One possibility is in response to the impending changes of the 1960s that will diminish, although certainly not eliminate, their prerogatives. However, white, masculine discontentment is present from the show's outset, in March 1960, before most transformations attributable to the 1960s have taken effect. Another explanation would assign the tenor of disaffection to circumstances embedded in the postwar era itself; despite the apparent rewards offered to white men, the 1950s fail to fulfill in some fundamental way. If so, those deficiencies are not delineated to the same specificity as the obstacles confronted by female, gay, or racial minority characters. A third reason for the show's dysphoric sensibility could be that the privileges offered are insufficient, that the postwar male demographic, as depicted in the serial, felt it was promised or owed more.

Polan maintains that *Mad Men* taps "into a common, even stereotypical, figure of the postwar nine-to-five male as consumed by an anomie that can render him anywhere from frustrated to cantankerous to, at times, downright angry" (38). No doubt a complex genealogy exists to account for the formulaic perception of successful, 1950s, corporate men as alienated, frustrated, cantankerousness, and angry. In *Mad Men*'s case, Lynn Spigel suggests that presenting its white male characters' discontentment means that "no matter how powerful or arrogant, the ad men are easily viewed as victims of their time", creating a sensibility of "pathos in retrospect" (2013: 271). Regardless of how successful and self-satisfied Don and his colleagues grow, the pleasures they derive from their socioeconomic upwardly mobile status as white, heterosexual, masculine beneficiaries of the era's privileges become mitigated by virtue of their ultimate emotional dissatisfactions. Despite appearances to the contrary, they are portrayed as further victims of the time period, forged in the same

false values that entrap their more overtly harmed contemporaries. In Spigel's compelling argument, the costs associated with excessive alcohol use, marital infidelity, paternal absenteeism, and so on, potentially outweigh the characters' socioeconomic advantages and attendant enjoyment, from the perspective of at least some audience members. Retrospectively, from the vantage point of the early 21st century, viewers are positioned to experience pathos borne of compassion for the principal male characters' plight, to the extent that they convincingly transmit existences enveloped in a vaguely defined but persistent unhappiness.

In addition to generating sympathy for its central male characters, Spigel's notion of retrospective pathos also facilitates the serial's ability to juggle two competing conceptualizations of nostalgia. The first is the traditional concept associated with feelings of sentimental loss, lack, and longing; the second is the more analytical version, critiquing the past in order to break from it. The serial conveys discomfort concerning the advantages bestowed upon its socially favored male personae, even as many of the nostalgic pleasures the serial offers up derive from the revelries empowered by their privileged existences. That is, a significant portion of the nostalgia of loss and longing offered up by the program is directly attributable to the masculine abuses of the era, for example, to the indulgences of alcohol consumption, marital infidelity, and sexual harassment. Yet, affluent, white men in contemporary storyworlds cannot be presented as wholly enjoying the disproportionate allotment of social entitlements they have accrued as the direct result of deep social inequities gained at the expense of women or racial, ethnic, and gay communities. Consequently, the program juggles two formulations of nostalgia to suggest that privileges of the past can be exorcised in the present, even as they are simultaneously indulged in, as long as the characters who benefit fail to arrive at a felt personal fulfillment. The narrative's negotiated position is to establish a pervasive atmosphere of unhappiness belonging to the era, that aligns rather than contrasts the fortuitous with communities which a 21st century audience recognizes as socially marginalized, and whose dissatisfactions contemporary viewers comprehend. Even as they indulge in the masculine pleasures gifted to them by the era, the male leads are frequently cranky and, sometimes, downright mad. An emotional quality of disaffection enables *Mad Men* to have its nostalgic mood (mournful, celebratory), and critique it too.

Period Drama as Nostalgic Style: *Mrs. Maisel*

The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel poses a different set of challenges. Why might the show intentionally pursue nostalgia as aesthetic style, an approach customarily associated with the superficialities of surface appearances, and what does it achieve in doing so?

No deep sense of loss or longing exists in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* for the 1950s and early 1960s it renders, at least not for the primary narrative and social terrain staked out – the experiences of an aspiring female stand-up satirist – although other kinds of aches and pains besides nostalgia are certainly portrayed. Instead, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* deploys the past for its aesthetic style, delighting in the pleasures of fashion, music, and other outward signs of the times, playing them for fun. The serial could well be accused of indulging in shallow nostalgia, except that *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* chooses this stylistically exteriorized route for specific purposes.

Niemeyer identifies an alternative form of temporal longing as "nostalgia for a past that has never been. Nostalgia becomes, consequentially, a way to transform the past by imagination" (10). She cites *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003) as a cinematic example; *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) would apply as well. Similarly, Elisabeth Anker describes *Hamilton* (2020), the filmed version of the theatrical musical, as investing "in a national vision where people of color are both central to the American story and equal participants in shaping the nation" (2020: 382). As a result of its aesthetic choices, such as a multiracial cast and the use of anachronistic rap, *Hamilton* "expands who gets to tell the story of America – and in what cadence" (*Ibid.*). In these instances, in order to critique a given past, one strategy adopted by certain films or televisions shows is to opt for aesthetic style over historical verisimilitude. Such a strategy is implemented in the service of developing an imagined nostalgia that, from the perspective of the contemporary moment, contours a past that never existed but feels as though it ought to have.

In *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel's* case, nostalgia as aesthetic style is not a means to deny or reject history through the process of delighting in an empty historicism and its accompanying amnesia. On the contrary, aesthetic nostalgia becomes the endeavor of remembering how specific groups – here, predominantly women – have been rejected by certain forms of history, leaving them with no place to return to and no past to long for, save the purely imaginary one of corrective historicity. *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* is not about losing something, as in the instance of *Mad Men*. Instead, it bemoans what it did not have in the first place, "a past that has

never been". And it does so by inventing an imaginary past that feels as if, by rights, it should have existed, explaining why its narrative is set in the context of an historical genre, rather than a futuristic one as, for instance, in the cautionary case of *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-2024). To these ends, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* fantasizes what a female, stand-up, social satirist might have been like and what circumstances she would have faced, within the rough parameters of permissible 1950s gendered behaviors.

The serial's premise is that Miriam Weissman Maisel, twenty-six years old in 1958, stays calm, cool, and collected when confronted by 'real life' crises, such as her husband leaving her (Season One, episode 1) or her in-laws repossessing the apartment she calls home (episode 2). She observes decorum and keeps up social appearances, barring her from expressing her frustrations and rage. Miriam is too 'ladylike,' too well brought up, too upper middle class, too Upper West Side to behave outside of 1950s gendered proprieties, *except* when she is on stage. Only there, where she perceives the social rules to be different, and believes they ought to be equitably different for female as well as male comedians, does she curse, make sexually explicit comments and gestures, flash her breasts and, most of all, express how she genuinely feels in response to the events occurring in her life. As a female stand-up satirist of the 1950s, Mrs. Maisel is marvelous in dual senses of the word: wonderful as well as wondrous, fantastic and fantastical, by virtue of being both exceptional and fictional.

Herein lies the significance of Lenny Bruce's character in the narrative as a well-known historical figure. *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* recurringly portrays the once-existing Lenny Bruce (Luke Kirby) among its cast of otherwise fictional personages, albeit placing him in fictionalized circumstances. The factual Lenny Bruce (1925-1966), a controversial, ground-breaking social satirist, "hailed as one of the most important critical voices of his generation", was arrested for obscenity on multiple occasions (Kercher, 2006: 409). Overwhelmed by "debilitating legal action", Bruce declared bankruptcy in 1965 and died from a drug overdose in 1966, at the age of 40 (*Ibid*.: 390, 540).

Other factual comedians of the day are registered on televisions (Bob Newhart), listened to on records (Redd Foxx, Mort Sahl), seen performing in clubs (Red Skelton, Moms Mabley), or mentioned in conversations (Mike Nichols and Elaine May). In contrast, fictional performers are developed as characters for more substantive narrative purposes, for example, comedian Sophie Lennon (Jane Lynch) or singer Shy Baldwin (LeRoy McClain). However, Lenny Bruce is woven into the story from the show's outset, the only one to appear simultaneously as historical figure and significant narrative character, establishing a prominent presence over

the course of the show's first three episodes.[5] For many comics "working in the fifties and early sixties, Bruce was the 'real deal,' the one satirist who really dared tackle the most sensitive issues extant in contemporary American life" (Kercher: 397).[6] Bruce functions as a source of comparison, allowing the program to pose the question, if a female Lenny Bruce had manifested as the 'real deal' in that era, what might she have been like? A male barometer for Miriam Maisel is more effectively enacted by a well-known historical figure rather than attempting to fashion a fictionalized male version.

Additionally, Bruce serves in the role due to the specifics of his performance style.

> Lenny Bruce by the late 1950s was an exciting, alluring presence on stage… The intensely personal, confessional approach Bruce often took onstage added significantly to his appeal. Sincere, direct, and vulnerable, Bruce won audiences over easily. (Kercher: 528-529)

A personal, sincere, direct, and vulnerable approach parallels the way we are meant to understand Miriam's technique, as she forges jokes from the events depicted as occurring in her life that are often deeply painful. Further, the frustration and rage that famously motivated Lenny Bruce's no-holds barred, controversial method duplicates the emotions and attitude that we recognize also fuel Miriam while on stage. Finally, we are meant to see resemblances in the two comedians' chosen content. Satire can be defined as humor exposing vices and follies (OED); in the case of stand-up comics, usually towards "a social purpose" (Kercher: 1). However, satire aimed at political figures, race relations, the cold war, or nuclear bombs did not lead to Bruce being regarded as outrageous or to his legal woes. It was only once satirical comedians of the 1950s and early 1960s began using "obscenities and addressed the subjects of sex and religion onstage that they encountered truly bitter and angry resistance" and earned their trademark as 'sick' comics (Kercher: 390).

The subjects Miriam tackles, like sex and the gendered inequities of marriage, along with the way she does so – in blunt, obscenity-laced terms – are far more acceptable fare for 21st century audiences. But they functioned as provocative and offensive content in the era depicted, for male comics alone, thereby providing the program with historical

5. Even before Mrs. Maisel bails him out at the end of episode 1, allowing the two characters an interpersonal encounter that continues into the beginning of episode 2, Lenny Bruce is seen in flashback when Miriam's then-boyfriend, Joel, takes her to see him perform, and he also appears as a shadowy presence in the back of the police car when Miriam is arrested.
6. Echoing similar sentiments, upon seeing Lenny Bruce in a diner but not yet knowing that he and Miriam have become friends, Susie states the following: "The best comedian – I mean, the best fucking comedian in the business – is right over there."

credibility.[7] At the same time, the content of Mrs. Maisel's humor, while continuing to resonate as important for the program's contemporary audiences, does so without creating the incendiary or shocking effects they would have done in the day, as Lenny Bruce's presence reminds us. Thus, the show's stand-up sequences do not function as distasteful or upsetting for its current potential audiences, keeping the comedy palatable for today's viewers.

The comparison between Bruce and Mrs. Maisel not only secures the show's premise in its first three episodes; it becomes reaffirmed in Season Four. In the season's final episode (8, "How Do You Get to Carnegie Hall?"), for instance, Lenny Bruce leads Miriam out to the stage of a now empty Carnegie Hall, where he has just finished performing to a full house. Miriam, in her professional persona as Mrs. Maisel, has turned down the opportunity to open for Tony Bennett at the Copacabana, a job Bruce went to considerable lengths to get her. Instead, she insists on remaining in her MC position at a strip club. The Lenny Bruce character is given the climactic moment of Season Four, laying out the challenges Miriam must confront in the show's fifth and final season.[8] In an impassioned manner, he accuses Miriam of hiding at the strip club, of lacking courage, of blowing her prospects because she is afraid of failure. In doing so, he both states and stands for what Miriam must become in order to succeed. All the above aspects of their performance styles work to link Lenny Bruce with Mrs. Maisel, at the same time as their respective gender distinguishes them.

Discussed earlier, nostalgia as mood leads to *Mad Men's* emphasis on realism as verisimilitude, working to create a tangible past whose period details feel correct and convincing. In contrast, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel's* nostalgia as aesthetic style results in considerable contrivance over verisimilitude. The look, sound, and feel of *Mrs. Maisel's* aesthetics frequently and deliberately entails artifice, relying on scenes that are clearly intended to come across as staged.[9] For instance, the morning following Miriam's first arrest and after bailing out Lenny Bruce, a remarkably well-dressed but out-of-place Miriam walks along a 'rough' street in the Village (Season One, episode 2). In quick succession, someone throws water out of a window almost hitting Miriam, two people dispose of a beat-up, filthy sofa, a drunk man has fallen asleep on a stoop, a disheveled young woman

7. Kercher cites satire in the 1950s and early 1960s as "a thoroughly masculine enterprise" in which comedians were enveloped in "notions of heroic male rebellion" (3). Female satirists of the era mentioned by him are predominantly sketch comedians, like Elaine May, The Second City's Barbara Harris, and the Premise's Joan Darling (537-538).
8. Less clear is why the show has Miriam Maisel and Lenny Bruce become sexually involved, beyond the appeal of the Bruce character as portrayed by Luke Kirby.
9. Sprengler makes a similar observation about the purposeful artifice of sets, backdrops, cinematography, and color palette in *La La Land* (2016), an aesthetically stylized tale that could be said to both celebrate and critique contrived Hollywood notions of romance (2021: 38).

conducts the walk of shame, a man urinates into the street, and two women loudly argue. With the feel of a sound stage and accompanied by the upbeat Yiddish song, "Vyoch Tyoch Tyoch," performed by the Barry Sisters, the sequence intentionally looks and sounds like something excerpted from a 1950s musical.[10] Rather than threatening, the street sequence conveys a choreographed harmlessness, producing the inverse of gritty realism. Further, through its use of staged, choreographed sequences resembling classical Hollywood musicals, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* repeatedly signals its fictionality.

The serial establishes a non-naturalized story world, its stylized aesthetic reminding us that this is a constructed version of the late 1950s and early 1960s, an imaginary past invented to stand in for the one "that has never been". This strategy complements the way gender is portrayed as constructed in the serial, for instance, when Miriam waits until husband, Joel, falls asleep before slipping into the bathroom to roll her hair in curlers, remove her makeup, wash and moisturize her face, only to reverse the process the next morning before the alarm clock awakens him (Season One, episode 1). Rather than verisimilitude as goal, the sequence is played for comedic exaggeration in service of establishing the highly produced measures that generate femininity.[11] A comparable example is the way Susie (Alex Borstein) constitutes herself as belonging at Season Two's Catskills' summer resort by virtue of carrying a toilet plunger and, in her habitual outfit of pants, suspenders, bomber jacket, and newsboy cap, routinely being mistaken for a man.

However, if Mrs. Maisel's stand-up routines are propelled by the frustrations and rage of her life experiences, if the program dwells on the many things women couldn't have or couldn't be in that era, how do we account for an amassed tonality that feels mainly upbeat and playful? While Miriam and other characters often feel frustration and rage in response to their circumstances, the show's overall sensibility does not reflect those emotions. Seemingly paradoxically, given the constraints under which women are portrayed as operating during the era, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel,* far more than *Mad Men*, expresses the "hopeful optimism" that Pierson identifies as one of the structures of feeling available in the

10. An exception to *Mad Men's* verisimilitude is the rather odd song and dance number, "The Best Things in Life Are Free," given to David Morse upon the death of his character, Bert Cooper (Season Seven, episode 7). However, this is a scene hallucinated by Don Draper, while the contrived artifice of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel's* world simply 'is.' Other examples of the latter's choreographed and stylized sequences include many of the department store scenes where Miriam works and, in Season Two, considerable portions of its Paris locations and summer resort in the Catskills.

11. And yet, no less implausible is *Mad Men's* presentation of Betty Draper as flawless 1950s homemaker or Joan Holloway standing for the era's fuller-figure ideal of female sexuality. The unwavering perfection of their self-presentation in wardrobe, hair, and makeup is made to seem largely effortless, by rendering invisible the actual time, sheer effort, and expense such incarnations would require.

postwar period (144). Despite the social restrictions represented, the show's atmosphere does not parallel the stereotypical representations of 1950s corporate men plagued by feelings ranging "from frustrated to cantankerous to, at times, downright angry", as cited by Polan (38). These are substituted, instead, by an air of exuberance and engagement with life that regularly enfolds central characters, such as Miriam and Susie, in the narrative world of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. Nostalgia as aesthetic style may well be deployed towards superficial ends, but it need not take effect in such limited fashion. Its attributes can also be shaped towards the ambitions of nostalgia as historical imagination. Merging nostalgia as aesthetic style with the concept of imagined nostalgia enables *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* to pursue a strategic historical goal. Eliminating the disaffections of past tense loss and longing, *while simultaneously* continuing to express yearnings for something more, offers an alternative to *Mad Men's* elegiac tenor resulting, in its place, with *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel's* sense of promise and pleasure.

Conclusion

Despite the retrospective pathos available due to the adversities of the day, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* does not invoke significant measures of cynicism, anger, or resentment as its prevailing narrative tonality. In contrast, such feelings suffuse *Mad Men*; most jarringly, when they emanate from the depicted circumstances of its key male personae. With its repeated refrains of loss and longing, *Mad Men* exemplifies nostalgia as mood, combining it with the aspiration to critique the era it simultaneously celebrates and mourns. The serial's measure of success in striking a balance between the often-competing intentions of immersion in the moodiness of nostalgia with the desire to exorcise the failings of the past remains open to interpretation. Although I perceive a discrepancy that tilts towards captivation with yesteryear's pleasures, affirmative assessments on the part of many commentators suggest that the judgment rests in the eyes of *Mad Men*'s beholders.

For its part, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel's* comedic and other exaggerations, in service of a narrative atmosphere that largely promulgates hopeful optimism, invites accusations of implausibility and wishful thinking. While many of the events in *Mad Men* conceivably could have occurred, Mrs. Maisel, as a matter of historical record, patently never existed. However, I have argued that *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* outlines the possibilities for an imaginary nostalgia that relies on aesthetic style in favor of certain aspects of historical verisimilitude. Because its past is imagined as much as remembered, the program embraces a level of contrivance

normally proscribed to reflective period dramas. The entwining of nostalgia as aesthetic style with an imagined nostalgia makes possible the paradoxical realization of a recuperative yet invented history. Rather than an exercise in failed historicity, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* materializes as a narratively strategic form of period drama.

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