

“So Much Woman: Female Objectification, Narrative Complexity, and Feminist Temporality in AMC’s *Mad Men*”

By Fiona Cox. From *Invisible Culture*, Issue 17. <http://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/so-much-woman-female-objectification-narrative-complexity-and-feminist-temporality-in-amcs-mad-men/> Please note that I've inserted paragraph numbers for easier reference. In your essay, refer to the paragraph number -- i.e . (Cox 13) = paragraph 13.

1

In February 2011, in anticipation of the release of the fourth season of US TV drama *Mad Men* on DVD, *The New York Review of Books* published a review by Daniel Mendelsohn. In what is a predominantly scathing assessment, Mendelsohn decries AMC’s critically revered series—set in Manhattan in the early 1960s and centering on fictional advertising agency Sterling Cooper¹—for what he argues is its hypocrisy in offering up “an alluring historical fantasy of a time before the present era’s seemingly endless prohibitions against pleasures once taken for granted.”² The show’s hypocrisy, Mendelsohn feels, stems from its eroticization of that which it also seems to intend as shocking. In his words:

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.³

I would like to unpick one of the areas Mendelsohn holds up for criticism: the representation of women in *Mad Men*. The paradox he outlines with regards to pandering and contempt can be considered, in this instance, not to be hypocritical but instead to gradually but actively encourage a feminist perspective in the viewer. Taking into account the four seasons aired thus far, the teasing of “regressive urges” Mendelsohn points out is revealed as a central feature of an extended deconstruction of female objectification: a damning critique that gains momentum over the course of the series.⁴ There are certainly many occasions of this particular form of sexism both within the diegesis and the mise-en-scène of *Mad Men*. The glamour of objectified women—beautifully dressed, perfectly coiffed, and wielding sexual power over men—is a major part of the drama’s signature style. The visual appearance of these women has been celebrated in the popular press for adhering to traditionally gendered modes of dress, and has inspired a retro fashion trend in high street stores, with designs for women mimicking the tightly fitted and brightly colored outfits featured by the show.⁵ Yet the women of *Mad Men* are repeatedly shown to suffer because of their position within a gendered hierarchy that positions females primarily as the tantalizing focus of a desiring male gaze. Joan Holloway (later, Joan

Harris), played by Christina Hendricks, begins the series as the most tantalizing vision of all, achieving a form of power by deliberately offering her body up to the male gaze as erotic spectacle. However, *Mad Men* then proceeds to enact a subtle, protracted criticism of this self-objectification, steadily chipping away at its power and appeal over time. While the surface pleasures the series offers might entice audiences, the enduring nature of the show's appeal could be said to stem not from its glamorous representation of women as sexual objects but rather from the ways in which it questions female roles, complicating audience investment in the objectification for which *Mad Men* is both celebrated and reviled. This article proposes that, while Mendelsohn is correct in recognizing the ostensibly oppositional tactics within *Mad Men*'s representation of women—especially visible within the depiction of Joan—the co-existence of the dual appeals he names is neither truly hypocritical nor an “offense”. An examination of Joan's representation and narrative arc over the first four seasons reveals a complex use of the prolonged temporality of the narrative which has deeply feminist consequences.

2

Jason Mittell notes that, as opposed to feature films, serial television can make use of its extended temporal form, allowing storylines to unfold over an expanded period of time to form what he calls “narrative complexity”.⁶ “Rejecting the need for plot closure within every episode”, he writes, “narrative complexity foregrounds ongoing stories.”⁷ Such a format “encourages”, Mittell argues “and even at times necessitates, a new mode of viewer engagement”, rewarding long-term audiences.⁸ *Mad Men* creator, Matthew Weiner, who spent time prior to the production of the AMC series working on TV shows such as *Becker* (CBS, USA, 1998-2004) and *Andy Richter Controls the Universe* (Fox Network, USA, 2002-2004), has expressed personal dissatisfaction with his former engagement with the formulaic, simplified format of the 30 minute sitcom.⁹ Having later worked as a writer for HBO's greatly acclaimed drama *The Sopranos* (USA, 1999-2007), Weiner has credited the latter show—one of Mittell's primary examples of narrative complexity—with giving him “the confidence to tell subtle stories”.¹⁰ He has also been vocal about his feminist ideals, noting “the most exciting idea going on intellectually when I was in college was feminism... [T]hose were my politics”, and declaring gender roles to be “both an intellectual and personal interest of mine” when he was writing the series.¹¹ **Bearing the mark of its creator's narrative preferences and personal politics, *Mad Men* makes use of its protracted structure to question the objectification contained within its diegesis, offering nuanced storylines which gradually complicate audience pleasures surrounding female representation which are set up in the first season. Joan, the ultimate erotic spectacle when the series opens, suffers a series of humiliations, shocks and disappointments over several years as the narrative unfolds. These**

events trouble her initial positioning as fêted sexual object, providing the groundwork for a long-term critique of her inhabitation of that role. Aiding the developing critique, Joan's sexual power eventually dwindles, undermining the sexist objectification so prevalent in the show's 1960s milieu and which, as Mendelsohn complains, holds appeal for contemporary viewers. Her investment in femininity as a means of professional manipulation is contrasted with the more progressive Peggy Olsen, played by Elisabeth Moss, who has an entirely different outlook on life, preferring to use her brain rather than her body to achieve goals. As the series progresses, Peggy's successive triumphs and Joan's increasingly compromised position add to the critique of the latter's manipulative tactics. Analysis of this overall strategy within *Mad Men* reveals not only what I believe to be clear feminist intentions within the text, which steadily deconstructs the female objectification it so famously showcases, but also strongly feminist critical possibilities contained within the very format of the series.

Step one: objectifying Joan

3

In order to provide an overview of *Mad Men*'s gradual critique of Joan's objectification, we must first outline her presentation in early episodes. From the moment she is introduced, it is clear Joan is a woman of her particular era, not yet engaged in the second-wave feminist movement but embracing the precursors of the sexual revolution, reveling in the freedoms and opportunities on offer. Weiner has spoken of drawing inspiration from Helen Gurley Brown's work when writing for Hendricks' character.¹² Gurley Brown's playful and frank manuscript, *Sex and the Single Girl*, published in 1962, instructs single women on how best to navigate the public sphere. Much of the advice she proffers concerns behavior towards the opposite sex, typically revolving around exploiting sexuality for personal gain. "Sex", she declares, "is a powerful weapon for a single woman in getting what she wants from life..."¹³ While Joan could not have read the book by March of 1960, the time the pilot is set, Weiner has admitted ignoring the dates slightly. He acknowledges the influence the book had on Joan's character and remarks that Gurley Brown's—and Joan's—ethos was to "use your sexuality to get everything you can".¹⁴ There are many aspects of Gurley Brown's advice discernable within Joan's early characterization. For example, Joan regards sex as a tool of manipulation, deeming feminine sensual display necessary in the workplace. Her belief in sex appeal as professional requirement is made immediately apparent during her opening dialogue in the pilot episode. Providing a brief orientation on Peggy's first day as a secretary at Sterling Cooper, Joan's career advice to the new employee comes in the form of instructions on what to wear to appeal to men. She notes that "Men love scarves" and

suggests that Peggy place a paper bag over her own head and stand before a mirror to assess her aesthetic strengths and weaknesses, then accentuate her figure accordingly.¹⁵ This advice, while recognizably Gurley Brown's, seems to have been adapted not from *Sex and the Single Girl* but from a passage in the writer's later book *Sex and the Office*, published in 1964:

An editor of *Ladies' Home Journal*... suggests you put a sack over your head with two holes cut out for eyes when you do this figure analysis... Once you understand your figure—what you really look like—you're more apt to reach for the clothes that will flatter it.¹⁶

The use of a second book by the same author emphasizes the influence of the writer's work in Weiner's conception of the character, as well as Joan's strong investment in the particular pre-second-wave-feminist moment of sexual freedom signified by Gurley Brown's work.

4

In the pilot episode, Joan jokes that making the right moves in the office centers on finding a man to marry, ostensibly pinpointing matrimony as the pinnacle of success for a woman. Later, she appears to buy into this when she marries and leaves the firm with the intention of becoming a full time homemaker.¹⁷ However, given that the man in the office with whom Joan is occasionally sexually involved (Sterling Cooper partner Roger Sterling, played by John Slattery) is *already* married, the goal of her emphasis on sex appeal in the office does not seem to be wedded bliss. Gurley Brown saw sexuality as a tool women could use to gain power in the early 1960s professional arena, which belittled female intellectual prowess but championed their erotic potential:

In an ideal world we might move onwards and upwards by using only our brains and talent but, since this is an imperfect world, a certain amount of listening, giggling, wriggling, smiling, winking, flirting and fainting is required in our rise from the mailroom...¹⁸

Instead of chasing a husband, Joan appears to adhere to Gurley Brown's advice on utilizing sex appeal as a career enhancer, dressing well and flirting often to please men as part of a professional strategy. Her conviction that being sexually attractive to males is central to female success in the workplace remains evident in the ninth episode of the first season when she chastises Peggy for putting on weight. Asking 'Don't you want to do well here?', Joan reveals her continued belief that maintaining one's figure and career progress are inextricably linked.¹⁹

5

Early on in the narrative, *Mad Men* appears to celebrate Joan's investment in Gurley Brown's recommended methods, highlighting and rewarding moments of sensual display. She is unabashedly presented as an erotic spectacle by the script, mise-en-scène, and the character herself. In the first season, *Mad Men* frequently and prominently showcases Hendricks' curvaceous body, which is highlighted by era-appropriate foundation garments and tight dresses. Joan's signature gold pen necklace draws attention to Hendricks' sizable breasts, dangling between them on a long chain, and the actress' in-character walk makes much use of swaying hips and buttocks.

6

In addition to costume designer Janie Bryant's designs and the actress' sultry onscreen physicality, *Mad Men* capitalizes on Hendricks' appearance by eroticizing her figure via camerawork. As Mendelsohn points out, "the camera glides over Joan's gigantic bust and hourglass hips", frequently reframing to observe her retreating figure as she walks away.²⁰ Jeremy Butler notes, in his article "'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes': Historicizing Visual Style in *Mad Men*", that low camera angles highlight Joan's curves by contrasting them with the fluorescent lighting grids in the visible ceiling, "emphasizing", he argues, "how her masquerade of femininity is the source of her power".²¹ The most sexually revered of the women employees at Sterling Cooper, she is also the female with the most authority, running the administrative side of the agency with precision and aplomb: hiring and firing secretaries, holding the key to the supply closet, and instantly solving any problem. Her mastery over her appearance and her professional domain thus seem connected, so that early episodes seem to encourage audience admiration for Joan's self-objectification.

7

Hendricks' buttocks are obviously fetishized—both within the diegesis and for the audience—in her outrageously unsubtle display during a focus group for Sterling Cooper client Belle Jolie lipsticks.²² A veritable knock-out in a form-fitting, red dress, Joan bends forward over a table and pushes her hips backwards as she stubs out a cigarette, offering a hidden group of men on the other side of a two-way mirror an isolated view of her tightly-clad behind (Fig. 2.1, top image). Joan's visual offering is picked out by the camera, her generously-sized rump filling the frame as her coquettish move cues playful jazz music on the soundtrack. The scene brings to mind Laura Mulvey's writing on scopophilia ("pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight").²³ Certainly, Joan personifies Mulvey's term "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" in this scene, and in many early episodes, encouraging the audience to engage, whether consciously or not, with a form of

scopophilia.²⁴ Hendricks herself acknowledges this: “When Joan is walking somewhere,” she explains, “she wants to make sure *at least* one person’s watching her.”²⁵ In their article, “The Best of Everything: The Limits of Being a Working Girl in *Mad Men*”, Kim Akass and Janet McCabe offer an analysis of Joan as a prime example of Mulvey’s “Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look” thesis.²⁶ They cite the rear-view shot in question as exemplification of Mulvey’s “circuits of pleasure in looking, split between ‘active/male and passive/female’ ...”²⁷ As their article points out, in this moment Joan ostensibly adheres to Mulvey’s analysis of female roles as erotic spectacle, her display momentarily interrupting the narrative, working “against the development of a storyline” as we temporarily abandon the task at hand—secretaries trying on lipstick—to observe her sensual display and the reaction it provokes.²⁸ One young man, clearly reveling in the image before him, stands and salutes Joan’s posterior from behind the two-way mirror.

8

The scene is reminiscent of one Gurley Brown passage in particular, which seems to pin down Joan’s visually centered career success strategy, mirroring not only her sartorial style but also the many shots in early episodes that focus on her womanly shape:

A formfitting wool dress... hugging the figure everywhere... makes you sexy... This dress would zip all the way down the back, from which it is a great angle for your co-workers to view you. (I hope you check all of your clothes for this back intrigue.) When you walk out of his office, you know very well his eyes won’t make contact with that report you left on his desk until you’re well out of sight.²⁹

This advice is part of a list instructing women in “What to wear to be especially sexy” when it becomes necessary to use “secret weapons” (sex appeal) to “move immovable objects” (men).³⁰ It is significant here that men, and not women, are viewed as “objects”. While certainly a scopophilic moment, the *Babylon* shot in question does more than merely halt the narrative to objectify Joan’s figure, also showing her in the process of maintaining her professional power. Her actions show that she is very conscious of the effect her body can have on those who desire her, given her awareness that she is being watched by a group of men, including Roger. Flirting, she exercises erotic power over the group, and the salute—while playful—demonstrates that her technique is effective. Joan’s knowledge of her male audience, owing to her senior position in comparison with the other women, sets her apart from the secretaries in the room, who are being unwittingly observed and cruelly critiqued. Able to see only their own reflections, they lack the power and control Joan possesses at that moment. Instead of being positioned purely as a passive scopophilic

object, Joan actively takes possession of the male gaze, deliberately directing it towards herself in a bid for power and influence over them. Because her sensual display is enjoyed by the on-screen male audience, as well as glamorized by the camerawork and score accompanying the scene, audiences are encouraged to view such tactics as fun and positive: the secret of Joan's professional success.

9

Mirroring Joan's objectification, Christina Hendricks has become an international sex symbol since the series has aired. Presented to television audiences via a series that eroticizes her appearance, the actress has become renowned for her voluptuous figure, relatively unusual in a culture and industry which generally reward thin women. In September 2010, *British GQ* called her "The sexiest woman on television".³¹ Typical article titles in the popular press, punning on her generous proportions, include "Ahead of the Curves", "Dangerous Curves", and "Woman of the Hourglass"³² Her body has become a frequent object of public discussion, with much speculation over whether the actress has undergone breast augmentation, although Hendricks has denied having surgery.³³ She has complained about this focus on her body, noting:

I'm on what I think is the best TV show there is right now and everyone's always talking about my boobs... I'm definitely ready for someone to be like, "She's the most amazing actress ever!" That would be nice.³⁴

Judging from the positive reaction in the press, the appeal of Joan/Hendricks' objectification in *Mad Men* is strong, demonstrating how this particular form of sexism is still an acceptable part of mainstream western society.³⁵ *For Those Who Think Young*, the first episode of season two, seems to play on this erotic appeal so appreciated by audiences, recalling the isolated close-up rear-view shot from *Babylon*. The opening shot of the second season seems to reference the earlier scene by beginning with the camera pointed at Hendricks' rear end, panning upwards as she fastens a different—yet very similar—tight red sheath dress. The visual echo reminds the long-term viewer of the earlier outfit and the provocative antics that took place while Joan was wearing it. The upbeat music accompanying the shot invites us to 'twist again, like we did last year.' The sequence works as an inside joke for invested audiences aware of the frequent positioning of Hendricks' posterior as erotic spectacle, referencing and exploiting the fact that looking at her figure is a major pleasure offered by the show. The lyrics offer a meta-textual assurance that this pleasure will be revisited in the second season. That pleasure, however, is soon troubled, as it is within the second season that viewer enjoyment of Joan's objectification becomes highly problematic. As the series progresses, it becomes clear that the erotic spectacle of the shot in *Babylon* is, in fact, part of a feminist narrative trajectory that details the decline in Joan's sexual power, plotting her dwindling erotic

appeal against fluctuations in her career so the audience is forced to question her formerly celebrated tactics. Joan's waning ability to gain a form of power over men by utilizing sexual display retrospectively imbues the scene in *Babylon*—and occasions like it—with increasing significance, serving as a point of comparison during later moments of erotic and professional successes and failures.

Step two: undermining Joan's objectification through progressive humiliations

10

The critique of Joan's objectification happens gradually, detectable even while she is at the height of her scopophilic powers. While the lingering camera seems to be celebrating how mouth-watering Hendricks looks in her tight, bright ensembles, her character suffers a series of small humiliations that indicate her Gurley Brown tactics are flawed. For example, in the fifth episode of the second season, *The New Girl*, secretary Jane Siegel, played by Peyton List, beats Joan at her own game of erotic display. Pretending not to notice the attention she is garnering, Jane displays her chest for nearby appreciative men (another "How to be Especially Sexy" tip: "If you're small-bosomed, wear a pretty, lacy bra and leave your blouse unbuttoned one button below where it usually is."³⁶). Joan, usually very covered up despite the unsubtle nature of her *Babylon* display, admonishes the younger woman, expressing disappointment at the tactics.³⁷ In a later episode, having been fired by Joan in an unrelated incident, the younger woman uses her feminine wiles to her advantage on Roger, by now Joan's ex-lover, crying in his office in order to get herself reinstated.³⁸ Joan is humiliatingly outmaneuvered by a woman following a set of rules similar to her own and, apparently, possessing more erotic capital. Beaten at her own game, with her inferior position to her male boss reinforced and drawn to the fore, Joan must swallow her pride and remain silent.

11

However, as Bruce Handy notes in his article on the series in *Vanity Fair*, *Mad Men* is a show in which "the silences, of which there are many, speak loudest".³⁹ It is during such a moment of silence that we are invited to understand that, while Joan may well be comfortable with her position in the world—deliberately utilizing her own objectification in pursuit of personal gain—her moral comfort with that position does not necessarily translate to the physical. A shot towards the end of the season two episode *A Night to Remember* privileges us with the sight of Joan at home, seated on her bed.⁴⁰ Alone, she gently rubs her left shoulder where the straps of her brassiere dig in. The scene gains poignancy in relation to the fact that, earlier in the episode, a nervous co-worker deems her "so much woman", explicitly drawing attention to the strong scopophilic appeal of her generous proportions. Playfully showcasing Joan's

figure in early episodes, *Mad Men* revels in her curves, objectifying the character by presenting her as visual spectacle. In contrast, during this brief, quiet moment in *A Night to Remember*, the celebrated object becomes the suffering subject. *Mad Men* initially allows the audience to enjoy Joan's sensual appearance and behavior, yet by introducing scenes like this the series troubles its own light-hearted presentation of Hendricks' body as an unproblematic focus of erotic attention. The long-term viewer familiar with *Mad Men*'s previous celebratory representation of Joan is gently encouraged to gain a new perspective on the appealing image she more typically presents, invited to consider something more than surface pleasures. Being "so much woman" is physically painful, and while the appreciative co-worker—and *Mad Men* audience—might enjoy the sight of Joan's breasts, they are a very real burden to her (Fig. 3). A shift seems to be occurring in the silence, following which celebration of her erotic appeal is thwarted by the televisual text. For example, despite the visibility of Joan's underwear in this scene, it is not a moment of scopophilic spectacle. Instead, we are offered an opportunity for reflection; a brief shot in which to consider Joan as a subject for whom investment in her own objectification has negative consequences.

12

The episode in which this scene occurs marks the beginning of a turning point in *Mad Men*'s representation of Hendricks' character. Until season two, Joan appears in a position of control within the office, and when she is at home she holds power over her roommate Carol, played by Kate Norby. However, two storylines that emerge in *A Night to Remember* begin to seriously trouble the surface pleasures and apparent power of Joan's image. First, taking on additional responsibilities at Sterling Cooper, she helps the Television Department by vetting scripts for advertisers. Gently but clearly outshining Harry Crane, played by Rich Sommer, whom she is supposedly assisting, Joan notably "impresses a group of men with something other than her looks".⁴¹ However, when the episode introduces us to her fiancé, Greg Harris, played by Sam Page, he belittles her work, saying "I thought you just walked around [the office] with people staring at you." The offhand remark reveals his lack of interest in her mind, accomplishments and career and his preferred focus on her scopophilic appeal. Joan's organizational prowess and seniority in the office gives his comment the potential to rankle the long-term viewer, even though audiences often *do* see her doing this.⁴² Yes, people stare at her, and viewers have previously been encouraged to do so as well, but Greg's lazy joke dismisses that which has also been depicted: her professional excellence. By mockingly suggesting that Joan is all image and no substance, the passing comment slightly undermines—for the viewer irritated by the comment—audience focus on that image. It also suggests Greg's lack of respect for his future wife and in particular for her career. Significantly, Joan's home attire is

relaxed; wearing black pants and a sweater, she walks around barefoot, hinting at traditional notions of the barefoot, submissive housewife. Her informal clothes are indicative of her reduced status in the private sphere and in relation to her fiancé, particularly when compared with her relative high status in the office. Greg's request for a glass of water places the typically indomitable Joan in a position of immediate and unquestioned domestic servitude, increasing the contrast between her professional and personal status. We see that Joan is willing to severely compromise her power when it comes to her romantic relationship, and the vast difference between her celebrated office vixen role and her submissive domestic status highlights the latter in a negative fashion.

13

Very quickly, Joan's highly successful foray out of administration and into advertising ends when she is unceremoniously replaced by a man who knows nothing about the task at which she has excelled. As Akass and McCabe write:

It is a shocking moment. But it should be no surprise. Speaking in and through a representational type that codifies patriarchal fantasies of a feminine ideal is a precarious business; and Joan's participation in reproducing the sexist culture has deep implications.⁴³

Existing as "so much woman" in a world where the women, especially "womanly" women, did not have careers outside of marriage, Joan loses a chance at significant professional accomplishment and satisfaction. Her investment in her image as a source of power is an attempt to exploit a gendered system that disadvantages her, and the indirect result is that she remains disadvantaged. The professional storyline introduced in the episode ends in disappointment, but the personal storyline begun in the same episode ends in something much darker. The narrative arc of Joan's relationship with Greg dramatically alters the possibilities for audience perception and approval of her power and investment in self-objectification. In early episodes, particularly the first season, Joan cashes in on her pneumatic femininity to please men: deploying her figure to maintain power in a world that affords her little outside erotic exchanges. As noted above, viewers are encouraged to take pleasure in this behavior. In *The Mountain King*, the penultimate episode of the second series, Joan's overtly sexualized appearance and the conflation of this appearance with power is irrevocably shattered by a harrowing incident involving her fiancé. As Emily Nussbaum puts it: "Joan was raped and everything changed."⁴⁴ In a distressing scene, Greg forces himself on Joan on the floor of the office belonging to Sterling Cooper partner Don Draper, played by Jon Hamm. The incident is apparent payback for a moment earlier in the episode in which Joan unwittingly emasculates her fiancé by initiating sex—on top. Immediately prior to the rape, Joan good naturedly but firmly

attempts to fight off Greg's unwanted advances but is overwhelmed by his superior strength as he holds her down. The scene ends with a devastating zoom-in to close-up on her face as she stops fighting and submits to his will (Fig. 4.1). For the long-term viewer used to seeing Joan in charge and in control, it is particularly horrifying. Up to this point in the series, her utilization of female sexual desirability in a world of male privilege is a reasonably effective mode of existence, with only arguably minor humiliations. Sex typically brings Joan status and power, but the rape turns her own weapon against her. That her attack occurs at Sterling Cooper, the very space her sexuality typically allows her to dominate, makes it all the more shocking. Greg uses his masculine strength to reassert sexual and emotional dominance in the relationship but, by raping her in her boss's office, it is also suggested that he desires to have a power over his future wife that trumps her commitment to her work. "Joan is a story of a generation," creator Matt Weiner has argued. "Our moms had friends like her—very confident and sexy and they got punished for it. She has the confidence of a man and that's really hurt her".⁴⁵ Contrary to Weiner's analysis, I would offer a slightly different perspective: Joan has the confidence not of a man, but of a sexually aware woman. She employs femininity and sex as tools to achieve her aims, and Greg's attack is not only triggered by these actions but enacts a direct reversal of them. The rape is a dramatic moment in which the scopophilic object experiences a narrative event directly related to her investment in sex as her greatest weapon, directly problematizing audience enjoyment of such behavior.

14

Somehow more disturbing than the rape is that which follows: Joan goes to dinner with Greg immediately following the incident, and eventually marries him. The shock Joan's rape causes for *Mad Men's* long-term audience not only stems from the contemporary western belief that women shouldn't suffer rape silently, but is also a reaction to the seemingly sexually-indomitable character's acceptance of the violent act. The upsetting incident and its aftermath punctuate *Mad Men's* apparent complicity in Joan's objectification, which emerges in retrospect as part of a feminist criticism of both the complicity and the objectification. For almost two seasons Joan Holloway is the fun sex object in near-total command of her world: her mind is brilliant, but her body her most effective tool. Although she suffers minor setbacks she is the ever fabulous, sassy woman who has the upper hand in most situations. Following her rape and apparent submission, Joan's life loses its glamorous appeal. Ultimately, her perpetuation of culturally appropriate feminine behavior results in violent and total subjugation. Her rape and the events that follow signal a shift in the representation of Joan's character. The incident in *The Mountain King* marks the moment at which unequivocal celebration of female objectification becomes untenable for the invested audience. While the occasional viewer might

watch *Mad Men* for the camera's pleasurable fetishization of Hendricks' curves and buy into the consummate effectiveness of Joan's manipulative femininity, following her rape, long-term viewers can never see the character in the same way. For the show's consistent audience, the viewer who is invested in its serial form, such pleasures are, from this point on, highly qualified.

Step three: undermining Joan's objectification by compromising her sexual power

15

Weiner has often claimed that *Mad Men* is all about a changing world, and the way people react to it:

I'm interested in how people respond to change. Are they excited by the change, or are they terrified that they'll lose everything that they know? Do people recognize that change is going on? That's what the show's about.⁴⁶

One of the ways in which extended temporarily comes into play in deconstructing Joan's objectification is by showing the effects of change on her everyday experiences over time. Joan belongs to an old-fashioned, disappearing world, accepting the glass ceiling that keeps her in her place as an administrator in a work environment based on gender inequality. In contrast, Peggy forges a path towards greater freedom for herself via hard work and asking for what she wants, for the most part ignoring Joan's advice on dressing to please men.⁴⁷ Over time Peggy is rewarded for her tenacity and boldness: receiving promotions and landing a creative position within the agency, a job that had previously been the preserve of male colleagues.⁴⁸ This is the crucial difference between the two women: Joan clings to gender divides and relies on femininity to gain power, whereas Peggy transgresses gender and consistently irks Joan by actively disengaging with the older woman's recommended mode of behavior. Instead of relying on her appearance to get ahead, "Peggy recognizes her [intellectual] merits and isn't shy about going after what she thinks she deserves", gaining admittance to the traditionally all-male stable of copywriters in the first season despite putting on significant weight, directly proving her would-be mentor incorrect.⁴⁹ In this way, Peggy acts as a foil to Joan, progressing at the agency despite her resistance to the redhead's constant advice. A shot towards the end of the first season contrasts the two when, in an echo of many shots of Joan, Peggy is caught walking away from the camera.⁵⁰ Instead of seeking to exploit her retreating figure, however, the shot reveals Peggy's skip of glee inspired by her success at copywriting for the Belle Jolie account. Unlike early rear views of Joan that emphasize her figure as the direct object of a desiring heterosexual male gaze, Peggy's walk away from the camera reveals her happiness and links this to professional accomplishment based on

merit, not looks. Although Peggy is less than ten years older than Joan, her progress begins to make Joan's ideas seem antiquated, especially when compared with the older woman's career path over the course of the series so far.

16

While Peggy's efforts, which revolve around intellectual undertakings, are rewarded with professional progress, Joan's career-supporting sexual prowess is shown to dwindle, and is rendered virtually ineffective by the fourth season. By this point in the series, Sterling Cooper has given way to the reformed Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce (SCDP). Joan's aura of sexuality in the office has significantly abated, offering a distinct comparison—for the long-term viewer—with her earlier eroticism. The series no longer foregrounds her figure, nor does it conflate her eroticism with professional excellence or achievement. A new generation of men—significantly younger than Joan—does not take her seriously. Her sexual appeal is acknowledged but, instead of commanding reverence, even elicits a distinct lack of respect. Several incidents show this altered representation of Joan in action. For example, when there is a focus group comprised of female employees Joan is left out for being “old” and “married”.⁵¹ In a humiliating reversal of the Belle Jolie focus group in *Babylon*, she is removed from those deemed worthy of observation. Peggy, one of the unwittingly scrutinized secretaries in the earlier episode, is also removed from the observed, but this is due to her professional advancement which now allows her access to the group of observers. In contrast, Joan, still working in the administrative strand of the agency in a position equivalent to the one she held on Peggy's first day, is forced to vacate her office to allow the focus group to take place. While she has some administrative authority, Joan holds little power when it comes to influencing or advancing the creative work of the agency and is therefore excluded from both the observers and the observed. The comparison with Peggy, who has moved into the group in the position of creative power, as well as the invasion of her office space, marks Joan out as somewhat professionally hindered.

17

The focus group gives rise to a brief shot that pointedly indicates the differences between the heady sexuality Joan exuded in the first season and the way she is depicted in the fourth. Opening the curtains, she throws the drapes back from the centre so her arms are outstretched; her silhouette displayed to Don, Freddy Rumsden, played by Joel Murray, and Peggy, all seated behind her.⁵² The outstretched stance Joan momentarily adopts serves to highlight her new position on the opposing side of the one-way mirror, as well as presenting an opportunity for visual appraisal from behind as in *Babylon* (Fig. 5, second image). Yet no one in the room even glances at her. Her potential audience is uninterested: Don has always been a stickler for

respecting women (in public) and remains true to form; Freddy, an enthusiastic member of the on-screen all-male audience of Joan's display in *Babylon*, seems to have lost interest, and Peggy, who has crossed the gender divide to inhabit the gaze of the observer, is apparently heterosexual and therefore unmoved. No playful music cues us to regard Joan as seductive in this moment. Even the camera displays a marked difference in the handling of this scene in comparison with the close-up of Joan's posterior in *Babylon*. When Hendricks bends down slightly to switch on the audio in the room, there is an opportunity for episode director John Slattery to recreate the tone of *Babylon* by focusing on her buttocks. He does not. The lack of attention Joan receives in the shot highlights the waning appeal of the sensual tactics on which she has always relied.

18

There are moments of erotic spectacle involving Joan in the fourth season, but by this point they are an exception to the rule. One example occurs when she gracefully leads the conga line at the 1964 SCDP Christmas party.⁵³ When the festive gathering is required at the last minute to impress major client, Lee Garner Jr., played by Darren Pettie, it is organized with great attention to detail by the ever-competent Joan. After Roger informs his sometime mistress of Garner's potential desire for her, Joan appears to enjoy this brief return to the center of erotic attention. She smiles and laughs as she wiggles her tightly-clad figure around the office, Garner's hands placed on her hips, and ends the activity by turning to him, leaning forward and subtly but flirtatiously shaking her breasts in his direction. She wears a red dress in this scene; a visual echo of her glory days in the Belle Jolie focus group and her former scopophilic prowess. Yet during the conga line there are no close ups of Joan. The camera does not fragment her body parts in order to fetishize them, and her allure is not emphasized by sultry extra-diegetic underscoring. At one point, two men even cross her path, temporarily blocking the view of her undulating figure. Far from being the centre of visual and erotic attention as she was in *Babylon*, Joan's lack of power to command the camera's focus mirrors her dwindling ability to draw the attention of the desiring gaze. Significantly, this brief reversal of Joan's lessening erotic impact is enacted for a man who is a shadow of his former powerful self, with Garner shown at the party to be a petty, vindictive man who belittles Roger in front of the guests. Pleasing him seems rather unsavory, as though Joan is in some way prostituting herself to a seedy client for the agency's benefit rather than playfully reveling in her power over men. Although audience enjoyment of her objectification has already been severely qualified, as argued above, any temptation to celebrate Joan's attempted return to form is additionally compromised by Garner's unworthiness. It has also previously been hinted that he might be gay, with his third season attempt to seduce former Sterling Cooper employee Salvador Romano, played

by Bryan Batt.⁵⁴ For long-term viewers, awareness of Garner's possible homosexuality further undermines Joan's attempt at creating an erotic spectacle here, as her intended audience is possibly entirely uninterested. Her decreasing power over men is made especially clear in the following episode when she fails to manipulate SCDP partner Lane Pryce, played by Jared Harris, into giving her a few days off work.⁵⁵ Sashaying into his office, she offers to order him fried chicken, launching into some classic Joan innuendo:

Joan: Interested?

Lane: I am.

Joan: [Twisting her body slightly, drawing attention to her figure] Breast? Thigh?...

Assuming she has distracted Lane with thoughts of her body, she then places her request for time off. Gurley Brown would approve. However, this strategy fails spectacularly. Lane even calls Joan out on her not-so-subtle tactics, irritated by her assumption that she could persuade him in this way: "I understand that all men are dizzy and powerless to refuse you – but consider me the incorruptible exception. Fried chicken indeed!", he scoffs. Perhaps it is the British Lane's stiff-upper-lip or his work-dominated outlook that makes him impervious to Joan's manipulations, but later episodes confirm this is part of her changing reception within the diegesis. By the fourth season, she no longer holds the celebrated power over men that she was afforded within the first season.

19

Joan's old-fashioned sexual strategizing irritates more than just Lane. In *The Suitcase* young freelance artist Joey Baird, played by Matt Long, refuses her instructions to clean up his trash in the office.⁵⁶ Joey's refusal undermines Joan's authority and demonstrates her failure to have any power—sexual or otherwise—over him. In the following episode, *The Summer Man*, when Joan summons Joey into her office for disciplinary reasons, he calls her arrogant, asking "What do you do around here besides walking around like you're trying to get raped?"⁵⁷ An obviously reflexive remark that resonates with long-term viewers aware of her history, this comment not only propagates *Mad Men*'s depiction of era-appropriate cultural views (the belief that rape is the victim's fault) but draws attention to the fact that Joan's typical reliance on sexual allure is going out of style. Joey connects Joan's style with old-fashioned behavior and previous generations by informing Peggy that: "There's a Joan in every company. My Mother was a Joan... She even wore a pen around her neck so people would stare at her tits." Naming the base nature of Joan's visual appeal, Joey evidences disdain for her tactics, once again problematizing any remaining audience objectification of Joan's appearance. His damning analysis adds

to the sense that her former powers are failing, and his comparison between Joan and his mother confirms the dated appeal of Joan's office vixen act.

20

One particular incident that takes place in *The Summer Man* displays both the lack of respect Joan's behavior elicits as well as the misguided nature of her preferred methods of asserting power: Joey draws a cartoon of the redhead performing fellatio on (the rather unattractive) Lane. Peggy fires Joey in response, but Joan is unimpressed. She explains that, had she wanted the artist to be let go, she would have gone for dinner with a senior male client and gently persuaded him to remove Joey from the account. Joan clings to her belief that a woman's power stems from using feminine wiles to influence men to do her bidding rather than from directly enacting her own desires. However, at this stage in season four, by which point *Mad Men* has consistently undermined Joan's power over men, her stated plan of action is unconvincing. In contrast, Peggy wields power in the same manner a man might. She possesses the authority to fire Joey owing to her senior position and, following Don's encouragement to enact this authority, does the job herself. Joan's preferred method of handling the situation reveals her adherence to strict gender roles and desire to maintain the status quo. However, because Peggy succeeds—and because viewers have repeatedly seen Joan's favored system fail her—the old fashioned tactics seem outdated, impotent, and damaging.

21

Joan's advocacy of Gurley Brown's methods of female empowerment is also destabilized when her diminishing sexual power is accompanied by an increase in her professional accomplishments. In the third season, Joan leaves Sterling Cooper, having achieved her initial goal of quitting work for marriage. Disappointingly, her husband's incompetence as a doctor forces her to seek employment in a department store. This humiliating step down is followed by her triumphant return to the advertising fold at the end of the season. Having been off-screen for a significant portion of that year's episodes, Joan is an indispensable and integral part of making the necessary arrangements for covertly setting up SCDP. Despite being called in by old flame Roger, she is chosen not for her erotic capital but for her unsurpassed knowledge of the inner workings of the agency. Sterling Cooper's best men—hand picked and pooling their knowledge—can't even locate the necessary files, but Joan, who has been absent for months, is able to pick up exactly where she left off, making several calls to organize the clandestine operation before she even walks in the door.⁵⁸ In the fourth season, within the SDCP offices, we see Joan making phone calls, conducting interviews, chairing meeting of the partners, and discussing the agency's accounts. She not only has a desk, but her own office.⁵⁹ In the fourth season

finale, she is promoted to Director of Agency Operations.⁶⁰ Although SCDP is in a severely compromised financial position and has been forced to cut back on staff, reducing Joan to menial jobs like delivering the mail, the new position is clearly a reward for her professional skills and hard work, not her looks. Notably, it is Lane, demonstrably immune to her feminine charms, who informs her of the news. The series ultimately privileges Joan's intellectual prowess and skill over tactics of self-objectification, significantly rewarding the character in the professional arena only after her formerly powerful erotic appeal has demonstrably weakened.

Conclusion: feminism and extended narrative form

22

For the occasional viewer, it might be possible to view female representation on *Mad Men* as a series of surface pleasures and sexual thrills. That such offerings continue to appeal to audiences is evident in the use, in 2011, of Hendricks' tightly skirted rump pushed towards the camera in *Babylon* as part of UK *Mad Men* trailers.⁶¹ Alone, the clip is robbed of its context as part of an ongoing narrative that troubles the sexism contained within the shot. Non-viewers seeing the trailer are left with the objectification minus the crucial criticism that extends over a significant amount of time. Specifically televisual temporality (the long-form drama, taking place over several years) delivers feminist results. As discussed above, Joan's rape is given additional shock value by the amount of time *Mad Men* spends building up the character as an admirable, sexually powerful woman before the attack. The rape pulls the rug out from beneath viewers comfortable with her objectification. After the incident, celebration of Joan's former self-positioning as erotic spectacle is at best compromised for the long-term viewer who cares about the character. The triumphs that do eventually come to Joan take an inordinately long time to occur, so that the process of watching her failing investment in scopophilic spectacle is painful to the viewer sympathetic to her cause. The protracted nature of *Mad Men*'s critique of female objectification strengthens its effects, suggesting that the long-form drama contains within its very structure feminist possibilities in a so called post-feminist era when audiences are so willing to indulge in "regressive urges". Extended narratives pander to the emotional responses of the invested viewer, whose sympathies with characters can reach significant depth over time. *Mad Men* makes effective use of the possibilities contained within its narrative form to trouble Joan's initial presentation as successful spectacular female, her reliance on image rather than intellectual substance emerging as increasingly problematic season by season. Viewers who begin the series worshipping Joan's scopophilic presence are increasingly guided towards a more critical perspective. The overall result, building as the series progresses, is strongly feminist.

23

Perhaps there is hope for Mrs. Harris in *Mad Men*'s future. In 1970, Germaine Greer, part of the feminist second-wave, published *The Female Eunuch*, in which she argued:

Now as before, women must refuse to be meek and guileful, for truth can't be served by dissimulation. Women who fancy that they manipulate the world by pussy power and gentle cajolery are fools. It is slavery to have to adopt such tactics.⁶²

I can envisage Peggy reading Greer's book. I wonder whether she'll pass it on to Joan.

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1. Later, Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce.
 2. Daniel Mendelsohn. "The Mad Men Account." *The New York Review of Books*. 24 Feb. 2011, 1. Accessed 24 Feb. 2011.
 3. Mendelsohn, 1.
 4. So far. At the time of writing only four seasons have been aired in the US.
 5. See Sarah Tomczack, "How to Dress Like a Lady." *Glamour* Nov. 2010: 136+. In 2011, retailer Banana Republic teamed up with the show's designer, Janie Bryant, to create an official *Mad Men* fashion range.
 6. Jason Mittell, "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television." *The Velvet Light Trap* 58 (Fall 2006), 31.
 7. Mittell, *Ibid*.
 8. Mittell, 38.
 9. Matthew Weiner, interview for Archive of American Television, full interview available [here](#).
 10. See Mittell, 29, and Matthew Weiner, speaking in a clip from the above full interview available [here](#).
 11. Matthew Weiner, quoted in Kathy Lyford. "Mad Men' Q & A: I'm fascinated that people get so much out of it." *Season Pass*. 22 Oct. 2008. Accessed 21 April 2011.

12. Matthew Weiner, audio commentary on *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes* (pilot episode) (*Mad Men Season One* DVD, Lions Gate Home Entertainment, Europe, 2008) ASIN: B0014XVTIY.
13. Helen Gurley Brown. *Sex and the Single Girl* (New Jersey: Barricade Books, 2003), 267, 70.
14. Matthew Weiner. Qtd. in Lyford.
15. *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes*.
16. Gurley Brown, *Sex and the Office* (New Jersey: Barricade Books, 2004), 23.
17. *Guy Walks Into An Advertising Agency* (3.6).
18. Gurley Brown, *Sex and the Office*, 3.
19. *Shoot* (1:9).
20. See Mendelsohn, 1. Also see Maidenform (2:6) and Roger Sterling's deliberate survey of her "Valentine's Heart" in *Those Who Think Young* (2:1).
21. Jeremy G. Butler, "'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes': Historicizing Visual Style in *Mad Men*" in Gary R. Edgerton (ed.), *Mad Men: Dream Come True TV* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 63.
22. *Babylon* (1:6).
23. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*. Patricia Erens (ed.) (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 33.
24. Mulvey, 33.
25. Christina Hendricks, quoted in Logan Hill, "[Dangerous Curves: Christina Hendricks, TV's retro-sexy secretary, on living in a *Mad Men*'s world](#)", *New York Magazine*, 2 Aug. 2009, 1. Accessed 17 Nov. 2011.
26. Kim Akass & Janet McCabe, "*The Best of Everything: The Limits of Being a Working girl in *Mad Men**" in Gary R. Edgerton (ed.), *Mad Men: Dream Come True TV*, 182.
27. Akass & McCabe, 183. Also see Mulvey, 34.

28. Mulvey, 33.
29. Gurley Brown, *Sex and the Office*, 33.
30. Brown, 32.
31. Dylan Jones. "Christina Hendricks Drives Mad Men Wild!" *British GQ* Sept. 2010.
32. Brandon Voss, "[Ahead of the Curves.](#)" *The Advocate* Nov. 2009: 3; Logan Hill; Amy Larocca, 'Woman of the Hourglass'. *New York Magazine*, February 14 2010. Accessed April 21 2011.
33. See Carrie Zender, "[Christina Hendricks Breast Augmentation Looks to be Confirmed.](#)" *makemeheal.com* Feb. 4 2011 . Accessed Jan. 4 2012 and Lina Das, "[I'm learning to celebrate what I was born with': Why life is shaping up nicely for Christina Hendricks.](#)" *Daily Mail Online* May 24 2011. Accessed Jan. 4 2012.
34. Qtd. in Brandon Voss, 3.
35. Of course others have made the general point about objectification within contemporary western societies far more eloquently and with infinitely more detail. For example, see Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. New York: Free Press, 2005 and Natasha Walter. *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*. Great Britain: Virago, 2010.
36. Gurley Brown, *Sex and the Office*, 33.
37. *The New Girl* (2:5).
38. *The Gold Violin* (2:7).
39. Bruce Handy. "Don and Betty's Paradise Lost." *Vanity Fair* Sept. 2009, 134.
40. (2.8).
41. Tom & Lorenzo, "Mad Style: Joan Holloway, S2 Part 2", *Project Rungay*. Accessed 21 April 2011.
42. She doesn't appear to have her own desk and, when not swanning about amongst secretaries dispensing cutting remarks and precise instructions and looking fabulous, is frequently found drinking, smoking and/or chatting in the break room or kitchen.

43. Akass & McCabe, 186.
44. Emily Nussbaum, “[Nussbaum on *Mad Men*: How Joan’s Rape Changed Everything.](#)” *Vulture*, 24 Oct. 2008. Accessed 21 April 2011.
45. Hill, 1.
46. Matt Weiner, quoted in Fred Kaplan “[Drama Confronts a Dramatic Decade.](#)” *New York Times* 9 Aug. 2009. Accessed Nov. 17 2011. Also see Melissa Maerz, “[The Mind Behind *Mad Men*.](#)” *Rolling Stone*, 17 June 2009. Accessed 17 Nov. 2011.
47. Peggy does listen to Joan’s advice to ”stop dressing like a little girl” for one night, joining a client in a strip club in a bid to operate on the same terms as her male colleagues in *Maidenform*, but her efforts are an isolated incident.
48. See *Babylon* and *The Wheel* (1:13).
49. Ashley Jibee Barkman, “Mad Women: Aristotle, Second-wave Feminism, and the Women of *Mad Men*” in *Mad Men and Philosophy: Nothing Is As It Seems*, Rod Carveth and James B. South (eds.), 206.
50. *The Hobo Code* (1:8).
51. *The Rejected* (4:4).
52. The parallels were pointed out to me in a *Basket of Kisses* blog post, but I have not included this as a direct reference as my interpretation of the meaning was slightly different. See Therese. “[Joan Won’t Be Rejected.](#)” *Basket of Kisses*. 18 Aug. 2010. Accessed 17 Feb. 2011.
53. *Christmas Comes But Once A Year* (4:2).
54. *Wee Small Hours* (3:9).
55. *The Good News* (4:3).
56. (4:7).
57. (4:8).
58. *Shut The Door. Have a Seat* (3:13).

59. However, although she exerts a lot of organizational power in the SDCP offices, she lacks professional status. Gender differences play a part here, since although she essentially runs the agency with Lane Pryce, who has a quiet office with a secretary, Joan's professional space is taken over for other purposes, and serves as a walkway for the entire agency – much to her annoyance. 🔄

60. *Tomorrowland* (4:13).

61. On satellite channel Sky Atlantic.

62. Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1970), 328.