Women at Home and Women in the Workplace in Matthew Weiner´s *Mad Men*

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ABSTRACT
Matthew Weiner´s successful American TV series, *Mad Men* (2007), set in the 1960s in New York, unmasks the private and the public spaces of the home and the office. In these spaces, not only do the masculine protagonists interact, but also several feminine characters do as well. The three female characters (Betty, Peggy and Joan), who will be analyzed, represent the female stereotypes of this period: the idyllic housewife, the Sandra Dee prototype and the bombshell Marilyn Monroe archetype. In comparing the private and public spaces of the home and the office, these women´s sexuality and submission will be affected and influenced by the spaces they inhabit.

Keywords: *Mad Men,* female stereotypes, public space, private space.

Mujeres en el hogar y mujeres en el lugar de trabajo en *Mad Men* de Matthew Weiner

RESUMEN
La serie norteamericana de televisión *Mad Men* (Matthew Weiner, 2007), ambientada en la década de los 60 en Nueva York, desenmascara el escenario privado del hogar así como el espacio público de la oficina. En ellos, no sólo interactúan personajes masculinos, los Mad Men protagonistas de la serie, sino también algunos personajes femeninos que nos acercan a los estereotipos propios de la época, tales como la idílica ama de casa, la Sandra Dee y la explosiva Marilyn Monroe. En la comparación de los espacios de la casa y la oficina, se analizará a tres mujeres (Betty, Peggy y Joan), quienes representando tres estereotipos distintos, su sexualidad y sumisión se verán afectadas e influidas por los espacios en los que éstas se desenvuelven.

Palabras clave: *Mad Men,* estereotipos femeninos, espacio público, espacio privado.

In 2007, Matthew Weiner´s TV series *Mad Men* was first broadcast in The United States. Although it is a TV series about the advertising business "advertising is used solely as a prism through which we can look at the world, in this case the axis-shifting of the early 1960s" (Dean, 2010: 7).

There are many themes that could be examined through this series related to the history and popular culture of the United States in the early 1960s. This paper will focus on the female characters and their relationship with the spaces they inhabit. It

should be mentioned that the paper will focus on the season of the first series, although sometimes other seasons´ episodes will be mention. Since the series has not ended, some of the assertions made might change as the series seasons continue.

According to the series title, the Mad Men (executives who worked in the advertising business at the Madison Avenue in New York), are the real protagonists. However, the female characters in their lives seem to overshadow their prominence. This is the case for Peggy Olson (Draper´s new secretary), Joan Holloway (the manager of the secretaries) and Betty Draper (Don Draper´s wife). Each woman represents, with more or less skill, a different female stereotype. The analysis of of these women presents a panoramic view of the multiple feminine profiles in the America of the 1960s.

The three women to be analyzed can be considered feminine stereotypes. However, as the series goes on, this preconception changes in the spectator´s mind due to the development of the characters. The characters and their lives are not what they seemed to be at first. In her article "Feminism and Film", Sue Thornham (2010: 96) addresses female stereotypes presented in films and series:

> "It is therefore unproductive to compare film stereotypes of women with the reality of women´s lives: that `reality´ is lived within the same ideological structure. What should be examined is *how* the sign `woman´ operates within the specific film text –*what* meanings it is made to bear and what desires and fantasies it carries".

Therefore, what really matters in this study is to analyze how these women operate inside two specific spatial "film texts": the house and the office. When analyzing Peggy, Joan and Betty it is important to recognize the private and the public domains. This paper identifies how these spaces have an effect on these women´s sexuality and submission. Keeping the spaces of the home and the office in mind, how are these three women incorporated in both places? Could a setting influence and even create a female stereotype? What about in terms of sexuality and submission?

The first clash between the office (where Joan and Peggy work as secretaries) and home (where Betty spends most of the day) is what Gillis and Hollows (2009: 4) emphasize in the introduction of their work *Feminism, Domesticity and Popular Culture.* They propose that both places are two opposite spheres, at least, from the functional viewpoint:

> "Home and work were reimagined as distinct and separate spheres associated with specific values and functions: the private sphere was the site of home, family life and consumption and the public sphere was identified with work, industry, commerce, politics and production".

In *Mad Men,* differentiating between both spaces occurs in terms of functionality, because as Gillis and Hollows have pointed out, the private sphere (home) is related to the caring of the family while the public sphere (office) is related to working and commercializing. In this series the element of consumption brings both spheres closer together. Sterling Cooper is an ad company whose aim is to sell products through their advertisements. Betty, who belongs to the domestic domain and so, to the consumer sphere, reveals how women were quite obsessed with advertisements, magazines and television. As Betty Friedan (1963: 35) confesses in her well-known work *The Feminine Mystique:* "the new young housewives, who leave high school or college to marry, do not read books . . . They only read magazines."

For his part, Don Draper is the bridge who links the two spheres, the public and the private. In fact, he acts as a boss in both spaces: in his house he is the breadwinner, and hardly ever gives his wife any explanation about what he does during the day or during the night. At work, he is the creative head, so many people work for him, above all his secretaries. In this sense, female submission and male empowerment are not only a home, but also a workplace matter.

Most of the Sterling Cooper Company members are men; women work in the agency only as their secretaries. Only men hold powerful positions, at least during the first series season. In the case of Peggy and Joan, they not only share a physical space (they both work in the Sterling Cooper agency) but they also share their positions as secretaries, although Joan is actually the head secretary.

Being a secretary was one of the few jobs women could aspire to in those years. Although the office seems to be a place of empowerment for women, the spectator realizes that it can also be a place of competitiveness, conflicts of interest, prejudices and injustices towards women. In this sense, in her work *A Strange Stirring,* Stephanie Coontz states that being a secretary was not as utopian as it appeared:

> "Once hired, working women, single or married, were discriminated against in pay, promotion, and daily treatment on the job . . . On average, a woman with four years of college still earned less than a male high school graduate" (Coontz, 2011: 9-10).

Despite these injustices towards women, working outside their homes was worth it for most of them. Achieving economic independence made them feel freer and less dependent on men. Nevertheless, many women acquired the submissive role even in the workplace. In the case of Peggy, she finally leaves her submissive role behind, not feeling scared about disappointing her bosses or workmates. She begins to acquire incredible self confidence allows her to progress in her job, reaching a position of creativity. Due to her work ethic she achieves all of her professional goals. Peggy quickly realizes that the role women have in their homes must be separated from the one they have in their offices. On the contrary, despite her ability to get along on well

with people, Joan remains the manager´s secretary throughout several seasons. She feels unable to make people understand she could do more things than her bosses´ errands.

In the first series episode, Peggy appears as a candid, sweet and innocent girl, *a Sandra Dee*. She arrives at the Sterling Cooper agency full of enthusiasm and good intentions, as Don Draper´s new secretary (although throughout the series the spectator will meet more than one new secretary). Draper is the company's creative head, Betty´s husband, and the series protagonist.

In one of the scenes of the first chapter "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes", Joan advises the newcomer Peggy how to be a good secretary in a discourse full of irony and double meaning. At the same time it is a excellent example of the pattern all secretaries are expected to follow in order to keep their jobs. Joan´s discourse is centered around physical appearance –how Peggy should be dressed in order to be liked by the company's men (wearing shorter skirts and scarves, etc.). When Joan explained her responsibilities to Peggy, she left out the tasks related to work: these things seem to be insignificant details to work in the agency ("Smoke Gets in Your Eyes", *Mad Men*).

This scene is an accurate example of the deceit in feeling freer and more fulfilled just because of being a working woman. It is true that the women in the office women might seem freer than Betty Draper, who spends her whole day inside a house that occasionally suffocates her, but sometimes this freedom is just related to a physical space. In both spaces, the house and the office, women must submit to men.

Both spaces are male dominated stages where men are powerful bosses or husbands and their women acquire the role of secretaries, mothers or waitresses. Nevertheless, most of the *Mad Men* secretaries seem to be happy and proud of their jobs although most of the time, their work is valued as much as their legs and breasts are. If the new secretaries look too innocent (as in the case of Peggy) Joan will remind them through her manager´s discourse, their real role in Sterling Cooper in order to keep their jobs.

Peggy embodies the film prototype of Sandra Dee. As mentioned before, on the one hand Peggy appears as a candid girl, a virginal and naïve person. Apart from the similarity to Dee, she is also described as being like other women. For instance, in the second season episode "Maidenform", men are dealing with a new campaign for *Playtex* (an undergarment brand) and when referring to Peggy´s figure and clothes, the boys say: "she´s not a Jackie or Marilyn but a Gertrude Stein" (Dean, 2010: 104). On the other hand, Joan comes closer to the Marilyn Monroe archetype (that is, she comes closer to the myth, not to Monroe's real persona). In fact, Joan is quite affected

in the second season episode "Six Month´s Leave" when Marilyn dies: "Apart from Peggy . . . most of the office girls are in tears –even cool Joan had to take a lie down" (Dean, 2010: 128).

In Dean´s analysis, Joan is portrayed as "a well-proportioned office manager who, seemingly, is the only one to have the boys under control" (Dean, 2010: 9-10). In truth, this is just a superficial and incomplete description of Joan; her self-confidence is just made up. She controls men through her sex-appeal and through her unquestionable good looks. She is always playing with men: she flirts with several workmates and acts as if she is interested in them when actually she is not. Joan´s character is perceived by many spectators and many of her workmates as nothing more than two legs and two breasts.

But the spectator will discover a different Joan when she meets a successful and quite sexist surgeon, Dr. Greg Harris. In her domestic domain Joan is a very insecure and fragile woman whose only interest is to fulfill her boyfriend's desires. She is obsessed with being a perfect girlfriend and frequently one suspects that she feels guilty about working outside her house, not being able to take charge of her own home as Dr. Harris would expect. As a consequence, this guilt leads Joan to several dangerous and tense situations.

The most surprising one is the scene in which Dr. Harris, Joan´s fiancé, rapes her inside Draper´s office. They go to the office at night so he can visit the place where Joan works while she gets something she forgot. There is no one in the office, it is very late at night, and when they are inside Draper´s office, because Dr. Harris wants to drink something in the office of his wife´s boss. Joan and Greg begin to fool around. Unfortunately, Dr. Harris does not seem to know when to stop. He wants to have sex with Joan but she refuses because she is conscious she is in her boss´ office and she feels ashamed of being caught there. She finally finds herself on the floor with her boyfriend's hand on her face, pushing her against the bear floor. Several times she repeated the words: "no", "stop", ("The Mountain King" *Mad Men*) but her boyfriend did not listen to her. "This sexual loathing seemed reveal itself in that compulsive sexual assault. Marital rape wasn´t a crime at that point –but they weren´t married yet. Even so, there´ll be no repercussions for Greg" (Dean, 2010:152). In fact, several minutes after this horrible scene, they both go out to have dinner at a romantic restaurant.

In this sense, both women, Joan and Peggy are not always what they seemed to be in the same way Sandra Dee and Monroe were not either. Georganne Scheiner (2001: 91), in her article "Look at Me, I´m Sandra Dee: Beyond a White, Teen Icon", analyzes Monroe and Dee as the two sides of the same female coin:

> "Both stars can be read as a metaphor for the cultural schizophrenia surrounding female sexuality in the fifties. Dee's star persona is made up of oppositional qualities much like Monroe: She is both sexy and innocent, demure yet vivacious, fearful yet sensual. Dee thus embodies the cultural dichotomy of the fifties, the contradictory qualities existing simultaneously in one person that personify the sexual tensions that ran through the ideological life of the decade".

In terms of sexuality, the "cultural schizophrenia" Scheiner examines is found in Peggy and Joan as if they both represented "the contradictory qualities [that exist] simultaneously in one person" (Scheiner, 2001: 91), although this time, these qualities are depicted by two different characters. Scheiner (2010: 91) continues: "*Grease* requires two characters, Rizzo and Sandy, to portray the oppositional characterizations of good girl and bad girl." In this sense, Peggy and Joan are both necessary in order to complete the different female profiles of the sixties, although sometimes they interchange their profiles or at least, pretend to do it.

When Peggy arrives at Sterling Cooper she starts behaving like some of the secretaries she works with, in the hopes that if she gets closer to Draper, her position within the company will be saved. There is a scene in which Peggy enters Draper´s office, and after a conversation between the two, Peggy tries to put her hand on Draper´s. He instantly moves his hand away and tells her: "Peggy, I´m your boss, not your boyfriend". Peggy, feeling absolutely ashamed says: "I hope you don't think I´m that kind of girl". Draper, without doubt answers: "Of course not" ("Smoke Gets in your Eyes", *Mad Men*).

Starting from this short dialogue the spectator comes to some conclusions: on the one hand, Peggy is not Draper´s type. Being what he is, if Draper really likes a woman he will not reject her, disregarding his wife and his children. On the other hand, Peggy feels she has made a mistake following Joan´s advice. She understands that she can work in the ad company by herself, without the necessity of flirting with her boss and pretending to be "that kind of girl". On the contrary, Joan decides to acquire the sex bomb role within Sterling Cooper but in her private and personal life, she behaves just the opposite.

In reference to sexuality, the office space seems to promote sexual promiscuity being a kind of endogamic group (in this case, a business group) in which everyone has sex with their bosses, secretaries and workmates, especially men, most of whom are married. As Barkman (2010: 203) states in her article "Mad Women: Aristotle, Second-Wave Feminism, and the Women of *Mad Men*": "these women tolerate sexual harassment in the workplaces, adulterous husbands, and even nonconsensual sex."

In terms of sexual promiscuity, life at home is the opposite. For instance, Betty, who represents this domestic domain, is a victim of her adulterous husband. She spends most of the day alone, waiting for her husband to come back from work. She does not have the same opportunities to be promiscuous as her husband does due to his job. Don is mostly surrounded by beautiful women while Betty hardly ever meets anyone except her neighbors.

In the case of these three women –Betty, Joan, and Peggy, the space and the environment where they should be in charge seem to have an effect on their sexual lives. In Betty´s case, she confesses that when having sex with Don, she feels as if he wants her to do things she actually does not do. He probably demands the kind of things he does with his young secretaries and lovers. Betty feels that her husband has control over their sexual relations. As a result, in her case, sexuality and submission seem to go hand in hand. Barkman (2010: 208) defines Betty in these terms:

> "Betty . . . is the kind of woman every man would want to marry. Beautiful, educated, and elegant, she also happens to be a doting wife. Or that´s how the story begins. An idyllic house in a suburbia, a housekeeper, financial stability, a daughter and a son (and later another son), and a pairing of two unbelievable attractive individuals –could life be more perfect? Apparently, it could".

Undoubtedly, the female dissatisfaction hidden in Barkman´s words reminds us of Friedan´s "problem without a name" (Friedan, 1963: 5), but it goes further in Betty´s case because she is not a typical housewife. Although she spends most of the day alone at home, she has no housework to do. Due to her husband´s job and their middle-class position, they can afford having a black maid who takes care of their children and does the housework for the Draper´s family. Consequently, it can be claimed that generally, Betty spends the whole day doing nothing except smoking and thinking. This is why her dissatisfaction has nothing to do with the feeling of being a waitress or a maid for her husband as many of Friedan´s work female protagonists have confessed.

Draper does not understand what Betty´s problem is, and to some extent, neither does the audience nor Betty herself. She hardly ever smiles and she seems to be unhappy about everything she does. Occasionally, her role as mother is put into doubt. Betty begins having physical symptoms: she feels that her hands are stiffening up: she cannot wash the dishes and she hardly can drive (she even has a car accident with her children). Therefore, this physical detail triggers Draper to send his wife to the psychiatrist. As might be expected in those years, the diagnosis was nervous disorder.

Connecting Betty´s loneliness with the scene mentioned above, in the conversation between the two secretaries, Joan tells Peggy: "In a couple of years, with the right

moves, you´ll be in the city with the rest of us. Of course if you really make the right moves, you´ll be out in the country and won´t be going to work" ("Smoke Gets in Your Eyes", *Mad Men)*. It is true that analyzing Betty means examining the well-known suburbs: those quiet areas where middle class people live, far away from the noisy and stressful city.

These suburban areas have been the setting of several novels and films set in the 1950s and 1960s America. This is the case of Tim Burton´s *Edward Scissorshands* or Richard Yates´ *Revolutionary Road* in which Frank and April Wheeler´s house description can be used for depicting the Draper family house: "it´s really rather a sweet little house and a sweet little setting. Simple, clean lines, good lawns, marvelous for children" (Yates, 1961: 39). Living in a suburban area meant living far away from the city and its life and its people. Betty spends her whole day far away from her husband, feeling unprotected in her big house.

But Betty´s solitude is not only a matter of setting, but a sexual matter. There is an episode in which she masturbates with the washing machine. She also imagines herself with other men inside her bed. At the same time Draper moves further from her, her sexual appetite explodes. She finally leaves Don in order to marry another man, but in the period inbetween, the spectator meets the sexually active Betty, who on one occasion enters in a bar, talks to a man she has just met and after a while, they have sex in the bar bathroom.

Before she fully abandons her domestic domain, her sexual promiscuity and social network begin to increase. She begins taking horse-riding classes, where she meets a charming rider, and also some politicians from her charitable dinners and meetings: "Betty wants to be an intimate part of Don´s life, not just a prized pony to show off when the occasion arises" (Barkman, 2010: 208).

Betty demystifies the happy housewife character, but paradoxically, she cannot be considered a victim as a housewife. Her case is more complicated. She reacts against this unnamed situation and asks her husband for divorce. She marries a politician and he and Betty go to live in the Draper´s house.

When Betty returns to her domestic and previously hated private domain, she becomes the Betty that the audience met in the first episodes. In feminist terms, her reaction does not mean a *blacklash* which changes her female situation, as is true in the case of Peggy. Betty´s new marriage does not change her previous situation. She is still a housewife who spends most of the time smoking cigarettes and thinking. In her article "'I am not a housewife but…´ Postfeminism and the Revival of Domesticity", Stephanie Genz (2009: 50) brilliantly explains the postfeminist stance:

> "It contends that postfeminism offers a new mode of conceptualizing the domestic as a contested space of female subjectivity where women/feminists actively grapple with opposing cultural constructions of the housewife. In particular, a postfeminist lens allows us to transcend a critical impasse (trapped by a dualistic logic) and reinterpret the homemaker as a polysemic character caught in a struggle between tradition and modernity, past and present. The postfeminist housewife is no longer easily categorized as an emblem of female oppression but she renegotiates and resignifies her domestic/feminine position".

This *resignification* is what Betty and Joan reflect: two women who apparently cannot change their situations. They are trapped and interested in several ways of living, some of them incompatible within that period.

In Peggy´s case, she has no family apart from her mother and sister and a secret son she has given up for adoption. Therefore it is easier for her to achieve her dreams and desires. She can readily find herself fulfilled at work although sometimes work appears as the place where she hides her personal frustrations. To some extent, it can be claimed that Peggy senses how she could be happy. In fact, Jon Hamm (the actor who plays Don´s character), in one of his interviews for a cinema magazine, claims that one theme of the series is the exploration of what happiness is and what it entails when it is achieved.

To conclude, it should be taken into account that these women are clearly determined in terms of sexuality and submission by the public and the private domains where they are in charge (in their case, by the home and the office). In fact, the words *sexuality* and *submission* seem to go hand in hand in these women´s reality. Both terms appear as analogous and almost inseparable. Spaces influence people´s personalities, aspirations and goals, and in the case of Peggy, Joan and Betty, the home and the office clearly determine their lives.

Peggy Olson has apparently found the beginning of her path to happiness in Sterling Cooper. On the contrary, Joan and Betty are still looking for it. Weiner´s series require us to reflect on what constitutes happiness and whether it can be found at home, in the workplace, in both, or in neither of them.

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