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COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: “MAD MEN” AND “THE GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL”

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the authors explain the intertextual relationship between Buell's notion of the “Great American Novel” and the TV-show “*Mad Men*”. Authors focus on the narrative of the show and try to capture a concrete concept of what the “Great American Novel” is though Buell's book “*The Dream of the Great American Novel*”. Author approach is an object of research with the adaptation theory of Linda Hutcheon, who explains adoptions could be anything; it's approachable on a wider scale than we think it is. For getting a concrete idea of what the “Great American Novel” is, the authors explain what the national definitions” are through comparing them to the narrative of *Man Men*: how do they appear in the narrative and what function do they have?

**Keywords:** Adaptation theory, Comparative analysis, *Great American Novel*, *Mad Men*, Intertextual relationship.

Introduction:

The field of adaptation studies

If a TV series has characteristics of a book, you can check to what extent there is an adaptation. The field of adaptation studies is an almost undiscussed topic with regard to the *Mad Men* TV series. Yet it seems to be increasingly interesting to take a closer look at the term “adaptation”. Because although book adaptations have been around since the beginning of the cinema era, the term has produced quite a few debates and has until recently been ignored in literary and film sciences. The majority of critics, up to the twenty-first century, judged adaptations based on the extent to which book and film corresponded. Later, people started to think more about the approach to adaptations and what exactly adaptations are. For example, in *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), Linda Hutcheon has confronted the aforementioned prejudices of adaptations with a critical look at the way people viewed literature, film and television. This way of looking makes us think about the development of new media these days and how this might limit or broaden the term adaptation. We used this method of analysis to find the answer to our main question.

At the beginning of our paper, We highlight the field of adaptation studies at the moment. We will argue that through the relationship drawn with the “Great American Novel”, in the “TV series, the new books”

debate is also a new way of thinking about the relationships between TV series in the field of adaptation studies, be able to propose literature and adaptation.

Besides, there is no relationship between "source text" and "adaptation" or the "book-in-film" model, but a looser variant of adaptation or intertextuality. Nowadays, television is taken more seriously than ever before, which means that little research has been done into the possibility and quality of this medium.<sup>1</sup> This appreciation is evident not only from the large number of Emmys that are dragging in specific TV series today, but also by the new reputation that TV series amass:

The series were put on the market as a work of art, with the makers leaving the anonymity of the studio and suddenly giving interviews as true authors.<sup>2</sup>

Weiner can be cited here as an example; although he has been writing for decades, he has only been in the spotlight since his TV series such as *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men*. In addition, watching TV is no longer a pastime that you did a bit ironic about, "a guilty pleasure", but a culturally responsible activity these days. For example, David Simon, creator of *The Wire*, had the goal of creating a "visual novel" in which the viewer, like the novelist, did not get everything pre-chewed, but had to connect the various plotting elements himself.

Nevertheless, We do not want to regard *Mad Men* directly as a novel, but as an adaptation, which has the characteristics of the "Great American Novel", because there is no "original" source. We do this on the basis of Monika Bednarek's term designation of television scenes in *The Language of Fictional Television*:

A scene is an extract from a television serie itself, and we can explore this with respected to scripted dialogue and its similarity/difference to 'real' language (Bednarek, Monika. (2010).

Like Bednarek in her book, we use the film emotions that Bordwell and Thompson describe to interpret all cinematic terms.

### The "Great American Novel" and how to interpret it

Although the idea of the "Great American Novel" was introduced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it continues to arouse a continuing interest for readers and writers today. Media critic Brian Stonehill suggests that "the novel might be having a great American moment. Right now" (Bednarek, 2010: 17). But it remains to be seen what this concept can tell us about how the novels in question work with regard to national culture in general and about novels as carriers of a cultural nationality.<sup>14</sup> One thing is certain: it The idea of the "Great American Novel" is not characterized by an isolated story, but it does have narrative aspects that are relevant to my analysis.

Because a great deal has been written and speculated about this concept, We conducted our research based on Lawrence Buell's *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (2014). In this book, he tries to make the concept more concrete and, by means of various ideas about national identity and the dynamics of national literature, he hopes to find an answer to the question of what the "Great American Novel" actually is. The novels discussed in Buell's book are highlighted from certain angles, which we include in our research. We take Buell's perspective on the novels that are classified as "Great American Novels". Buell discusses these books fairly globally and compares them with each other so that similarities and differences come to light. Because every aspect or characteristic of the idea of the "Great American Novel" in these books involve much larger investigation, therefore, we would like to focus on one aspect in the *Mad Men* series: the main character Don Draper. It is a logical choice to give direction to this because according to Buell there is one figure in the center of a "Great American Novel", which is clearly Don Draper in the TV series. Furthermore, this study focuses on the nationalistic aspects of *Mad Men*. The subject of nationalism is something that actually always looms up in the novels that are classified under "Great American Novel" and therefore, in our opinion, characterizes the concept. Just like James Walton states in *Mad Men*: the most literary show on TV: "Yet if there really is a single theme that is all American literature, it's certainly America itself." the "Great American Novel" is intertextually interwoven in the TV series.

## Discussion

*Mad Men*: that's what the advertising men from Madison Avenue in New York in the 1950s are called. Don Draper, an attractive, white American who holds a senior position at the fictional advertising agency Sterling Cooper, is central to this TV series. In addition to work introductions, Don's private life is also examined. In this paper will highlight the scenes and situations from *Mad Men* that take place around Don Draper. We will do this by first naming the narrative characteristics of the TV series compared to those of the "Great American Novel" according to Buell. Next, we will use the five nationalist topics that have mentioned in previous sections to perform our analysis, which is related to the idea of the "Great American Novel" by their theme. According to Buell, the American novels that we quote are regularly counted as "Great American Novels". Then we will explain how books and images interact with each other in the TV series. Eventually, we hope to find out to what extent the idea of the "Great American Novel" is intertextually interwoven in *Mad Men*.

### The narrative characteristics: Buell vs. *Mad Men*

The *Mad Men* narrative is set in New York, primarily in and around the Sterling Cooper office on Madison Avenue. This setting (Bordwell& Thompson, 2010: 86) corresponds to the guidelines that Edith Warton describes according to Buell: "The Great American Novel must always be about Main Street, geographically, socially, and intellectually." (Buell, 2014: 34) This would present modern America and refers to "the nation's rise to world." -power status after World War I. " (Buell: 33) At first glance, Don Draper seems to be the main character, because we are led through the story of the TV series from his perspective. Don also keeps diaries, which provides insight into his inner self. This corresponds to Buell's notion of the "Great American Novel", in which usually one person is central. It is not intended that the "Great American Novel" confines itself to the life of the person in question, but must at least, implicitly, reflect on both American culture and history, as the "defining institutions": democracy, individualism, capitalism, sectionalism and immigration.

Don's appearance also corresponds to the expectations that a "Great American Novel" has for the main character; this must be a white man, so that you as a reader (resident of the United States) could identify with it. (Buell: 32) This is how *Mad Men* gives a glimpse into the life of the white, rich man. At the same time, this gives a favorable, one-sided image of contemporary American life in the 60s, which may have looked less rosy for African-Americans or women. After *USA trilogy* (1938) by John Dos Passos and *Ulysses* (1922) by James Joyce (the "Great American Novel" is also influenced by non-American books), the "stream of consciousness narration" (Buell: 35) also seems to be a characteristic narrative technique for the "Great American Novel." This narrative technique could be interpreted in the latest episode of *Mad Men* Person to Person (Weiner, 2015), in which we as a viewer see an uninterrupted stream of feelings, ideas, thoughts and memories from Don. This happens in one of the last scenes, in between the telephone conversations that he conducts with the characters he says goodbye to. He expresses his emotions in this walk, he tells his interlocutors what he is up to, reminisces with them and at the same time does not know what to do with himself. Eventually, Don breaks the connection and loses consciousness. Herein comes the inner struggle that Don wages with himself about his identity; when he regains consciousness, he realizes who he is and what he needs. This form of self-reflection is also central to the "Great American Novel"; it is not about heroes, but about the normal man who stands for every citizen in the United States.

In later "Great American Novels", mass media are also frequently cited to convey the story. In Person to Person, the telephone is frequently used to bring characters into contact with each other to create a dialogue. Reference is also made to television (at Joan's home) and newspapers (scene between Roger and Marie). So a certain type of rehearsal can be recognized when looking at the narrative characteristics of the "Great American Novel" and *Mad Men*. But instead of describing things like in a book, they are conveyed in a visual way. The TV series partly succeeds in making this transposition work; feelings that the characters carry with them, in addition to the external symptoms such as crying and laughing, seem ambiguous due to missing descriptions of words.

**Democracy:** In *Mad Men*, democracy seems to have only a small role, partly because the characters are not explicitly politically involved or committed. They experience most political events for television, such as the murder of John F. Kennedy. If political choices are made, they will never be influenced by political reasons: Peggy (originally secretary) becomes a copywriter because Don Pete (Don's colleague) wants to tease; Dawn (an African-American woman) is hired because a joke got them out of her way; Joan (head of the secretaries and later also a copywriter) becomes a partner because she has slept with the Jaguar dealer. Both Peggy and Joan climb higher and have only become full-blooded feminists at the end of the series. That the characters take on a new role could be a reference to a striving for equality. In the 1960s, the women's and civil rights movement in America were two prominent examples of striving for more equality (for women and for African-Americans).

Democracy presupposes a certain equality among the citizens and that is why, in my opinion, the role of this form of government in *Mad Men* is not that great. Although more and more partners are joining, the average employee still has nothing to say. As a result, there is a clear hierarchy in the workplace; the management decides and the employees are submissive. However, the public outrage about this comes to the fore at the end of the Time and Life episode in which the management announces that the advertising agency will collaborate with another company.

None of the employees agrees or is happy with this. Most employees leave and there is not much left of Sterling Cooper. The hierarchy could be a reference to what happens in Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851). *Moby Dick* largely takes place on a ship that acts as a kind of power structure: Ahab is the dictator over the mates and harpooners. This is reflected in the fact that they are allowed to eat in services, depending on the rank in which they are placed. Ahab does build a close bond between the crewmen; a fraternity is created that rises above the hierarchy. With this the characters change their submissive roles in a community where there is no ranking.

**Individualism:** According to Buell, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) is an "auto analysis" that allows the reader to better understand the thinking of the main character Huck. The dual struggle that he fights with himself concerns his identity; at first glance he seems like a nice guy, but he is a terrible hypocrite towards the African-American culture. This struggle can be traced to the dual struggle that Don is waging with himself. During Don's military service in Korea, he took the name of a dead man. With this name, he builds a new life in New York and carries it as a secret. You could see that split identity as a kind of bow that extends over the entire series. In the second season of *Mad Men*, we find out that Don has two faces: the poor and ashamed orphan. the decorated soldier. Slowly but surely, it becomes clear that this split unravels its existence. His marriages fail and he becomes unmanageable at work. And at the end, he gradually learns to unite those two parts of his identity. For example, in the episode Tomorrow Land Sally he shows his old house, he expresses himself in In Care Of youth by presenting an advertisement for Hershey's.

It is striking that Don secrets himself in the latest episodes; he runs away and leaves for California indefinitely, without taking responsibility for his job or family. In addition, he is also rejected by others; Betty (his ex-wife) does not want him in the house; Stephanie (girlfriend and the only person he knows in California) wants nothing more to do with him. While all other characters reunite with each other In-Person to Person, Peggy increasingly finds herself alone in her successful career, but still finds someone to share her life with (Stan). Because of this Don finds out that he really needs others. Roger is going to marry Marie. Pete and Trudy reunite. And Don comes up with the Coca Cola advertisement, which overflows with harmony and the coming together of different cultures.

**Capitalism:** In *Mad Men*, capitalism is a theme that is strongly reflected in the advertisements that Sterling Cooper makes. This also applies to the brands that come along, the products that are consumed in the workplace and the money that is spent on luxury cars, dresses and technology. As the years pass in the series and we move from the fifties to the sixties, we have seen a kind of shift in consumer culture: in the *Mad Men* episode, Sterling Cooper purchases a computer on which the secretaries can work on from now on. This results

in negative reactions; panic prevails in the office because people don't know how a computer works. This can be seen as a reference to the progress thinking that the "Great American Novel" carries so strongly with it.

The series concludes in Person to Person with the Coca-Cola advertisement from 1971. This is one of the best-known commercials from the 1970s and this form of marketing also helped Coca-Cola to achieve its great success. In addition to the soft drink symbolizes the United States, this advertising shows the power of marketing and consumer culture. It embodies the American Dream in that there is a unity of people of different ages and cultures, singing hand in hand about the love for Coca-Cola and the world. Don states that commercials are about "happiness": "Through various mass media admen market manufacturers' items by positioning them as means to an end, that is, ensuring satisfaction through purchases." Although Don seems to glorify advertisements in this quote, it also says a lot about the United States, with regard to the ideas of the sixties: "*Mad Men* celebrated a time when capitalism was king and apparently satisfies a desire for re-experiencing a time and place where sex roles were clearly defined, and heroism was celebrated in a variety of untoward behaviors." you, as a viewer, have an ambiguous feeling about the advertisements that appear in *Mad Men*, because Don tries to sell products that are now considered taboo; his passion for good advertising for the cigarette brand Lucky Strike indirectly makes him a "murderer". This provides a critical look at capitalism from both the sixties and the consumer culture that we know today.

**Sectionalism:** The *Mad Men* TV series focuses on Don's life in New York. However, as a businessman he is often traveling and can be found in California on a regular basis. California embodies something of an exotic resort in the series; it is warm there, Don goes there with his children for vacation and he is far away from his work and other responsibilities. The hippies he surrounds within California provide a strong contrast to his colleagues in New York. As a result, New York and California are considered two different worlds on one continent: a kind of "spiritual East" versus the "materialistic West." In the episode Tomorrow land he falls in love with Megan in California and immediately asks her to marry him; something he hadn't done in New York, partly because they both work at Sterling Cooper and she is his secretary. It seems to be a metaphor for all the adventures with other women that Don enters when he is still married to Betty: the married woman lives in the suburbs, or suburbs, with the children and the mistresses living in the city. In the suburbs, he is the working man, who makes time for his family at the weekend while sitting out on hotel rooms and the office during the week. The way states, cities and suburbs are distinguished from each other is that Don behaves differently in every place, depending on the people he surrounds with. This shows that Don is always moving between different worlds. Another example is that Don says he doesn't like hippies in the first instance but does have sexual contact with bohemian Midge. At the end of the series, he goes back to California and gets the idea for the Coca-Cola commercial that makes him return to New York to implement the concept.

**Immigration:** Dick Whitman grows up in Pennsylvania and decides to join the army after high school, which makes him end up in the Korean War. He eventually settles in New York. At first glance, immigration seems to have little influence on the life of Don Draper, in addition to moving himself from one place to another. The main character walks around as a white man with the name of a black man; Don Draper was a fallen, burned American lieutenant who had accidentally blown up Dick in Korea. So there is a form of immigration going on concerning the identity that Don assumes. This is similar to

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* in which the main character Jimmy Gatz, born in a similar situation to Don, becomes a war hero and eventually moves to New York where he calls himself Jay Gatsby. This causes problems for both Don and Jay and their search for their true identity begins. In Analyzing *Mad Men*, Stoddard states that Don can measure himself as "the long line of classic American literary figures capable of continuous reinvention". The archetypal narrative in American literature has a character who reconstructs himself and tries to escape from his familiar environment. These recurring characteristics can also be found in the character of Jay Gatsby, which proves the recurring patterns that are reflected in the character of Don Draper.

#### **Interacting: Text and Image**

The relationship between the television audience and what the viewer sees is also counted as a "screen-to-face discourse." In this understanding, an interaction arises because the extra layers, or "embedded

levels", interact with the production team, actors and audience. This gives rise to various interpretations of a TV series, independent of the infillions made by the makers / writers. An interview was recently published in which the author of *Mad Men*, Matthew Weiner, talked about the layers of meaning he deliberately applied to the script. In this way, he discusses the writing process during the making of the TV series. Reading John Cheever: Collected Stories and Other Writings, for example, had become a ritual when he started writing a new season. He also had the character of Don keep a diary for the entire series; in this way, as a viewer, gain an insight into Don's line of thought. Weiner also admits that he read a huge number of journals (especially by John Cheever) from well-known writers for the series. By having Don write a diary, he wanted to let the influence of these books shine through.

In addition to Weiner's preference for American classics, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) is one of his favorite novels. He says that there are therefore often references in the series. What he likes about *Moby Dick's* references is the hidden symbolism that is reflected in, among other things, the thoughts of the characters. Earlier in this paper, for example, we described how the theme hierarchy was processed in both *Moby Dick* and *Mad Men*. This hierarchy is created by the way in which the characters assume a certain role, but later want to break through this power structure, partly through their new insights into emancipation. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Weiner compares himself to Melville, concerning the writing process; he wanted to write the dialogues at such an enormous speed that he asked other writers for help to write it all down for him, just like Melville did. From this comparison, one can see that he is trying to relate to a certain extent to the writer and possibly pursue him as an example.

Furthermore, Weiner says that John Cheever had a major influence on the series. According to Buell, his book *Falcon* also contains characteristics of a "Great American Novel":

Cheever holds my attention more than any other writer. He is in every aspect of *Mad Men*, starting with the fact that Don lives in Ossining on Bullet Park Road—the children are ignored, people have talents they can't capitalize on, everyone is selfish to some degree or in some kind of delusion. We have to say, Cheever's stories work like TV episodes, where you don't get to repeat information about the characters. He grabs you from the beginning. (Bednarek 2010: 15).

In addition to *Mad Men* carrying a number of literary references, the characters also like to read. It is striking that there are a number of writers mentioned earlier in this paper, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Mark Twain. Weiner says that the books provide the viewer with insight into the motives, feelings and thoughts of the characters. This is called obligatory intertextuality: Weiner deliberately calls attention to books such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by incorporating them into the mise -and-scene from *Mad Men*. In this way, a relationship is created between the two works and Weiner gives substance to Mark Twain's book. It is also regularly seen that the characters read *The New York Times*. The newspaper is not able to show the psyche of the characters, but it does provide a certain insight into their daily thoughts. This shows that, in addition to literary references, Weiner wants to emphasize the influence of literature in the series. In addition to the classics, he also wanted to include popular culture from the 60s in the series:

Don is in the pop-culture business, so he has to read *Portnoy's Complaint*, we know that he loves James Bond, but these were bestselling books at this time. You say, well, "Why were they bestselling?" Part of the story of the decade is about the kind of crudeness that pops up, the change in the language, the explicitness; you know, a movie like *Midnight Cowboy* that would be completely unacceptable by Hollywood codes and gets an X rating is an Oscar winner. So you have to really embrace all of these literary references as part of people's lives.<sup>3</sup>

This is how Don, in the episode *Tomorrowland*, reads *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* by John le Carré. He reads this because he is on vacation and this book was a bestseller in the 60s; so we have to look for nothing further according to Weiner; a reference is not hidden behind all the literature that can be seen in the series.

## Conclusion

From my research we can conclude that *Mad Men* is a TV series that can be analyzed endlessly in the field of intertextuality. In this research have sketched a global picture of the extent to which Buell's idea of the "Great American Novel" is intertextually interwoven in *Mad Men*. Yet this concept turned out not to be as well-defined as we had hoped; realizing the characteristics of the "Great American Novel" was made more difficult by this. In addition, Buell's views of the concept were not easy to distill; a more thorough investigation is needed for this. However, during the analysis above we discovered that there are indeed intertextual references to novels that are considered by Buell to be "Great American Novel", such as *The Great Gatsby* (1925), *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and *Moby Dick* (1851). The nationalistic subjects that we examined at *Mad Men* were not always easily recognizable in the narrative. Of course that have been able to cite some examples by continuing the "National definitions", but it remains ambiguous to state from my own perspective that there are indeed references to be recognized. In addition to the examples mentioned, there are many more examples could have quoted. Yet there seems to be a pattern if Don's inner and identity are examined; by analyzing one character, several themes unfold that are representative of the ideas of the 60s in the United States. This highlights the national character of Buell's "Great American Novel". At the end of study, in which we analyze how text and image interact with each other in *Mad Men*, we do get a number of confirmations through interviews and quotes from Weiner about the extent to which the idea of the "Great American Novel" was intentional is interwoven in *Mad Men*. For example, *Moby Dick* was a book that did have an influence on the TV series, just like the novel *Falcon* (1930). This requires a follow-up study in which *Falcon* and *Mad Men* are compared, since Weiner *Mad Men* is considered adaptation to the book, as the quote shows in paper. In addition, much more can be researched about *Moby Dick* compared to *Mad Men*. For example, what does Hobart, boss of the competitive, mean?

MacCan advertising agency, in the last season when he says to Don, "You are my white whale." In addition, I wonder if there is actually an adaptation between Buell's idea of the "Great American Novel" and *Mad Men*? According to Hutcheon, we can speak of a "process or reception" because there is a transposition of another recognized work; there is an adaptation that is intertextual. In my analysis it concerns multiple works, because there are references to several novels, whereby a certain type of repetition can be recognized. This makes *Mad Men* something ambiguous; it is a variation on several "Great American Novels" and at the same time a creative and interpretative work. The narrative characteristics shift from one medium to the other, so from text to image. This can be seen in this study, where we recognize a number of narrative characteristics of Buell's notion of the "Great American Novel" in *Mad Men*. There are therefore several adaptation processes in *Mad Men* as opposed to Buell's idea of the "Great American Novel". Perhaps that is what makes *Mad Men* so fascinating for theorists; see a concept from the past, the "Great American Novel", coming back to life in a new medium.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Rushdie (2011): <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booknews/8571010/TV-drama-is-the-new-literature-says-Salman-Rushdie.html>

<sup>2</sup>Rover (2015): <http://www.de-gids.nl/artikel/de-tv-serie-is-de-roman-van-nu>

<sup>3</sup> Lee (2015): <http://www.macleans.ca/culture/television/in-conversation-with-mad-mens-matthew-weiner-on-identity-and-symbolism/>

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