

Mad Men

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In the 65-or-so year history of television as an increasingly powerful, almost hypnotic force in American culture, mainly as a vehicle for advertising to sell products through the seductive use of entertainment to capture and hold viewers, many of the shows used as bait have been so beloved that they transcended artistry and even entertainment, entering into the realm of cultural icons.

If I were so inclined, I could list many of those iconic series, but the internet has provided endless “top 100” lists for every imaginable genre, and in more depth than I ever could. Want to know where *I Love Lucy* or *Seinfeld* rank in the pantheon of television history? Finding out is only a Google search away. As a result, I won’t presume to offer up any lists here.

Suffice it to say that TV and I grew up together, but while my seniorhood (I’m now 65) is marked by the considerable diminishment of my vitality, television has morphed into an 800-lb. gorilla—a media juggernaut of immense proportions. Through the marriage of television and the internet, the death bell has tolled for newspapers, magazines, movie theaters, and most of the other vehicles for information, news, and entertainment. Poor Gutenberg must be rolling over in his grave. Literacy may not have vanished, but the written word can’t hold a candle to the immediacy and dominance of television’s moving images. Who cares if those images are only virtual rather than real? They are sugar for the human brain.

Even more than the automobile, television is probably the single biggest force in American culture—ubiquitous, omnipresent, and damn near all-powerful. The one-eyed monster is no longer tethered to a wall socket as the altar at which we worshipped in the second half of the 20th century; in 21st-century America, television lives everywhere it wants, even in the smart phones we carry in our pockets. Once a mirror of American culture, now TV **is** the culture itself. While the statement may not yet be literally true that “whatever isn’t on television doesn’t exist,” that uncomfortable assertion becomes more real with each passing decade as a truism, at least with regard to social impact and cultural consensus.

When Howard Beale, the deranged newscaster character in screenwriter Paddy Chayevsky's and director Sidney Lumet's prescient 1976 movie "Network" (which deservedly won the Academy Award for Best Picture that year) asks why he has been selected to be the Prophet, the answer is: "*Because you're on television, dummy.*" Now, through YouTube, anyone with a video camera can be on television. Andy Warhol's "15 minutes of fame for everyone" is a reality. Just roll the dice, upload a file, and you, too, might win the lottery for at least momentary fame and notoriety.

But I digress. I want to talk about **Mad Men**.

In the current line-up of popular TV shows, *Mad Men* is arguably the king of the hill. Now entering its final season after a seven-year run on cable, *Mad Men* has graduated from an interesting, provocative, and well-produced series in its early years into a cultural phenomenon as the end nears. Like *Mad Men's* contemporary series *Breaking Bad* and *The Sopranos* before them both, we are witnessing in this final season an upwelling of social commentary about the series, almost all of it characterized by gushing praise.

Which is fine with me, by the way. I've watched *Mad Men* faithfully since its first season. It may be mere entertainment, but it's quality entertainment: thoughtful, clever, well-written, beautifully acted, with an eye to historical detail of America in the 1950s and 1960s that is impressive in accuracy and scope.

But (and this is a big *but*)...

As I watch and read the virtual avalanche of praise for this most iconic of television series, one revelation seems to me to be missing from the commentary, and that is the fact that *Mad Men* has had almost nothing good to say about what America has become over the past 60 years. For me, that's the elephant in the room. If so many people love *Mad Men*, why are none of the commentators talking about what the show tells us about ourselves and our country?

From its inception, *Mad Men* has offered a devastating critique of American society. That negative appraisal is not limited to the obvious setting of the show—a Madison Avenue advertising agency. No. Going after the emptiness and dishonesty of advertising in the American consumer culture would be way too easy as a low-level target. *Mad Men* takes that meme of emptiness and dishonesty and pushes it further. *Much* further.

In essence, *Mad Men* takes every hallowed facet of The American Dream and trashes them all. Marriage, family, business, pursuit of wealth, gender inequality, and the sum total of our social relations with each other—all of these are meat to

be skewered for *Mad Men's* writers. We're not talking about mere satire or gentle sarcasm here. *Mad Men* presents Life in America as bogus—utterly inauthentic, spiritually bereft, and shot through with lies, dishonesty, and cruelty. The American culture *Mad Men* shows is fundamentally disturbed, diseased, and broken.

Cruelty is a hallmark of the interaction of *Mad Men's* characters, so commonplace as to be effectively banal, and thus invisible to the characters (although not to the audience). Actions undertaken by any of the major players are routinely self-serving, and usually at some other character's expense. I won't suggest that every action on the show is selfish and cruel—that would make *Mad Men* too painful to watch—but selfishness and cruelty are almost always elements that drive the plot forward.

Sometimes the various characters on *Mad Men* are dimly aware of or even troubled by these sad qualities in their deliberations, plans, decisions, actions, and interactions, but that is as often because of fear of social censure as any inherent regret. The issue isn't the ethical motive of playing the game fairly nor even an emotional concern for harming others, but only the ego's anxiety over being caught in the act and thus not getting what one wants. More frequently, however, the show's characters are written and performed as if they are completely aware of the meaning and repercussions of their actions.

Whether inadvertent or intentional, those dark-side qualities within the characters' motivations and aims are presented simply as *the way things are*. In other words, selfishness, dishonesty, and cruelty are the accepted status quo and normal state of affairs in society (despite kindergarten-style lip service to the contrary). By contrast, sincerity and honesty are painted as exceptional, so much so as to be almost a violation of social propriety. On some occasions in the show, sincerity and honesty are mocked, disbelieved, viewed with skepticism, or rejected outright. More often, those gentler and more loving qualities tend to confuse the characters to whom such sentiments are offered, as if they didn't know how to respond to kindness. In fairness, that's probably in part because the offerings are usually made without much grace, as if being forthcoming and honest were such rare events in individual social behavior that no skill sets had been developed for their expression. But then, kindness is not a commodity, and thus has no place in *Mad Men's* deranged universe, where money is the only value.

Although the series timeline began in the Eisenhower late-1950s and has moved through the Kennedy-Johnson-Nixon 1960s, the tones of selfishness, dishonesty, and cruelty are not specifically linked to those two decades. Nothing is presented to suggest that the show's creators feel that America was once a land of milk and honey populated by mature and loving human beings. *Mad Men* isn't unique

in this regard; many, perhaps even most television dramas are built around the idea of flawed human beings whose personalities contribute to the predicaments in which they find themselves. The historical genre of “wholesome” family-values shows may be an exception—the *Father Knows Best* and *Brady Bunch* style sitcom-cum-morality-plays aimed at inculcating appropriate social behavior—but even there the protagonists usually follow an arc from immaturity (i.e., selfishness) to the eventual realization by episode’s end of more mature ways to feel and act (i.e., with honesty and sensitivity to others).

What distinguishes *Mad Men* from the myriad dramas about overt criminality and human evil is that these characters are presented as “normal” people. They are not miscreants, killers, or thugs. And yet, the characters’ reactions to their own failings, fears, and fallibilities is almost never accompanied by any resolve toward self-improvement or more loving behavior. Instead, they continue on course, altering their styles superficially with the times, but remaining the same in their drives, desires, and motivations. Their clothes and hair may change, but not their hearts.

Perhaps this is a great and profound truth about human beings, along lines of “*the more society changes, the more we remain the same.*” If so, I’m not sure that’s a truth I want to acknowledge and affirm, even though it may be largely correct.

What does *Mad Men* have to do with astrology? Not much, perhaps, except for one salient fact: We have just passed through the final pass of the three-year Uranus-Pluto alignment, and—while the alignment itself may be waning from this point on—the chart of the USA is still being dramatically affected. I wrote a commentary in 2013 about the activation by transiting Uranus and Pluto of the Sun-Saturn square in the USA chart, resulting in a provocative Grand Cross alignment that began in 2013 and continues through 2016.

The 8th-house Cancer Sun squared to a 10th-house Libra Saturn in the USA’s July 4th, 1776 birth chart presents a revealing symbolic picture of many of the more disturbing paradoxes that reside at the heart of the American character. Basically, these boil down to conflicts between social justice, equality, and taking responsibility for one another’s welfare on the one hand, versus the ambition-driven pursuit of wealth and power at any cost on the other.

The near-simultaneous activation of the Sun-Saturn square by two outer planets is a momentous event in the astrological symbolism of America, signifying that whatever has been buried beneath our collective awareness will emerge into the clear light of day, and that this emergence will be eruptive, unexpected, and revolutionary in its repercussions. According to astrology, the status quo in

America will be challenged, if not outright disrupted, forcing us to make changes in how we live.

The many interconnected events and developments that will presumably shape that upheaval unfold over three distinct and overlapping phases. The first is from the early years of the 21st century through the spring of 2015. That's the set-up, a long period of setting the stage, metaphorically like pre-heating the oven. The middle phase is 2013-2106, when the Grand Cross configuration occurs in the chart of the USA. That's the cooking period. Last is the phase that begins in 2015 and extends all the way through the remainder of the 2010s and well into the 2020s. That period takes the cooked cake out of the oven and serves it up.

The third phase is when we will see most of the serious and consequential manifestations in real life—the full cascade of triggers that will shape the world through mid-century. The entire range of triggers cannot be precisely known in advance; many are predictable and likely candidates, however: global climate change, war and political strife, challenges in agriculture and water, possible pandemics, and a pattern of collapsing institutions, including those in finance, commerce, energy, medicine, and education. Woven around and throughout these meta-concerns are the ongoing issues of inequity in gender, race, and wealth disparity. The timing and pattern of how all the interconnected triggers manifest are likely to determine the cumulative crises that humanity will face in the 21st century. Whatever the triggers and however they cascade, however, the most important unknowns will be our collective responses to the challenges.

Let's consider just one sector of society: the commercial marketplace and financial institutions that fuel it. If the global economic system that emerged in the latter decades of the 20th century is disrupted or brought down in the 2020s from any combination of factors, "business" will not stop. No, commerce is the life-blood of society, the beating heart of civilization. End commerce and civilization dies very quickly, rather like a person who suffers a fatal heart attack.

Any disruptions to the normal state of commercial exchanges in the economic marketplace will necessitate immediate adaptations to allow business to continue. If products cannot be shipped long distances, for example, re-localization within regions will step up—initially through impromptu means, from local currencies and community exchanges, including underground black markets—to resuscitate the flow of essential goods and services. Over time, those immediate and temporary responses will grow into new institutions, reforming the economic and financial landscapes. To a limited extent, these new institutions can be discussed and theoretically planned, but most of the structures involved will be worked out on the fly, and only as they are absolutely necessary. As a result, we cannot predict how life in society will look in the 2030s, because we do not know what will be needed.

But back to *Mad Men*.

To put my thoughts into the simplest terms I can manage, I wonder if *Mad Men* might be so popular not only because it's a well-written, superbly acted, and brilliantly produced TV series, but also—and much more darkly—because it reflects a deep feeling in the zeitgeist of the American public that is now bubbling up from the depths of our collective unconscious. Despite the endless propaganda and self-aggrandizing mythology that “sells” America—especially to Americans—as “the greatest country in the world,” is it possible that we realize in our heart of hearts that something has gone dreadfully wrong with our dreams of personal wealth and social justice?

Mad Men seems to think so, or at least that's how it appears to me.

As a symbol in astrology, Pluto's function is to reveal what has been buried, ignored, overlooked, or discarded without having been cleaned up, then to bring to the surface and destroy whatever contents of that type are outmoded, used up, and no longer vital. in Capricorn—where Pluto is now—that means removing any obstacles that prevent us from doing whatever is necessary to achieve renewal, especially at the levels of institutions, government, business, and social organization in general. These Plutonian repercussions don't unfold through delicate, careful surgery. No, Pluto's symbolism is blunt and ruthless, more akin to a sledge hammer or a wrecking ball. To get at the rot that needs to be purged and cleansed, Pluto implies destruction of anything standing in the way, including our habitual comforts, unconscious expectations, and even our fondest dreams, if that's what's covering the rot.

Uranus sharpens this process to a scalpel's edge and suggests that individuals will be the key to revealing where change must occur. However obvious the necessity for certain reforms may be, we are likely to resist those renewals until lightning strikes, providing a flash point, as well as the flash of illumination. The little girl in the parable who pointed out that the Emperor had no clothes is a relevant metaphor here. Uranus tells us that social movements will arise from seemingly insignificant or unexpected beginnings, propelled into being by the experience of certain individuals that will point out to us all where the rot is in our societies. Sometimes these individuals will have great insights and work tirelessly as teachers or organizers, while at other times ordinary people will simply be chosen by fate to become symbols for a collective awakening. Most often, the torch ignited by the fated individual will then be carried by the organizers to spark the movement's growth. The rebellions that result will almost certainly cover the gamut from peaceful to violent, and from eminently practical to philosophically extreme. Such movements may not last, but they will move us from where we were to someplace very different.

The volcanic eruptions, breakdowns, and purging of Pluto do not harmonize easily or naturally with the lightning-bolt rebellious social movements of Uranus, but together they are nonetheless likely to produce a cumulatively powerful impact toward defining and re-defining the reforms that will be necessary if civilization is to evolve successfully toward even a little more balance and grace.

Through all of what is to come over the next 15 or so years, the imperative to work on ourselves as individuals will continue, as it always does. To weather these turbulent and difficult early decades of the 21st century, we will need to bring out the best in ourselves—to become as mature as we can by paying attention and learning from our experience, so that we can make the wisest decisions possible in adapting to whichever directions civilization evolves.

Security may be an illusion that is now past in America, and no insurance can be purchased to provide guaranteed safety, but the importance of work on oneself does not diminish simply because we have left the known and comfortable to face an uncertain and unpredictable future. We are all creatures of our times, as *Mad Men* so effectively illustrates, so we use whatever our epoch offers us to dig deeper into ourselves and bring out the best of whoever we find inside. The fact that some individuals may be farther along in this than others is of no consequence. We start from wherever we are, work with the resources we have, and transform ourselves into whoever we can become.