Write a critical analysis of the American mini-series. Your analysis should take account of both textual and contextual features. You should include close reference to at least two separate series from the genre of your choice.

# To what extent can *Mad Men* be said to redefine the American Mini-Series: A comparison with *Rich Man, Poor Man*

There is rarely agreement about the taxonomy of genres in any discipline. One does not need to read Borges (1973) or Foucault (1974) to realise that ‘a genre is ultimately an abstract conception rather than something that exists empirically in the world ' (Feuer, 1992, p.144), or what Mittell refers to as the 'textualist assumption', the idea that there is a ‘causal mechanism or active process of generic continuity in the programs themselves' (2001, p.6). In both film and television history however, the term 'genre' has broadened beyond a way of categorising content to the method of delivery, regardless of subject matter, although it is also part of a process of ‘sharing of expectations between audience and programme makers’ that serves to 'relate … production to the expectation of … customers ' (McQuail, 1987, p.200) and thereby 'permit the creation and maintenance of a loyal audience' (Abercrombie, 1996, p.43). According to Edgar (2000, p.75), it involves a transfer of power – ‘it is the viewer saying to the producer, I possess key elements of this event before it’s begun’.

Both Bordwell (1989, p.148) and Stam (2000, p.14) refer to the ways films are variously categorised by content, country, purpose, performer(s) and budget. In television, a crucial distinction is that between a series and a serial, irrespective of subject matter. A series consists of self-contained episodes, any one of which can stand on its own, while a serial is a group of interconnected episodes, where 'the storyline is usually carried over from one instalment to another' (Creeber, 2001b, p.35), assuming that viewers will know what went before and will want to see what happens next. The soap opera, which begins at no particular point in time and is usually 'commissioned to run indefinitely' (ibid) is the archetypal serial; it ‘may be cancelled but never reach a conclusion, a new equilibrium’ (Kozloff, 1992, p.90-91).

Given these definitions, the (American) mini-series is, as Montgomerie (1997) notes, an 'acknowledged misnomer' in that the term usually refers to the serialisation of a novel or a historical sequence of events that do follow chronologically. Coyne (2003) defines it as 'a production of finite length that traces a continuing narrative over several episodes [and] focuses on the lives and

fortunes of a core group of characters or on a particular historical event, background or era'. Described as 'one of the unsung glories in the history of television' (Coyne, 2002, p. 103) it originated in the 1970's, inspired by the BBC serialisation of *The Forsyth Saga* a few years earlier (Wheen, 1985). It was qualitatively different from US television of the time, but essentially 'middle-brow entertainment for Middle America' (ibid, p.118).

In this assignment, I will be looking at one of the earliest mini-series, *Rich Man, Poor Man* (RMPM) from 1976 and comparing it to one of the most recent, *Mad Men (*MM)*,* which first appeared in 2007. Both deal with the relatively recent past, but the differences in both text and context over the thirty years are significant. RMPM cost $6 million for twelve episodes (Coyne, 2002, p.132), while MM costs around $2.3 million per episode (Witchel, 2008) – although other series cost far more. MM does not fit some aspects of mini-series genre, in that it has run for four seasons, with at least three more planned, but I will focus most of my argument on the first season of 13 episodes. I will argue that in style, subject matter, and a variety of ways it has more in common with the mini-series than other genres as defined in the course, and that it serves as an illustration of the argument that 'genre is not .. simply given … it is in a constant process of negotiation and change' (Buckingham 1993, p.137), or that modern television is engaged in 'a steady dismantling of genre' (Abercrombie 1996, p.45), attributed in part to economic pressure to attract new audiences. It is also important to remember that other long-running series, such as *Dallas* (Jacobs, 2005, p.xi) and *Coronation St* were originally 'mini-series' of only a few episodes.

While not confusing format with genre (Orlebar, 2011, p.59), it is important to note that both series owe much to melodrama, in particular to films from the 1950s focussing on the 'constraints of conformity' (Coyne, 2002 p.81) and the changing fortunes of women, which found a new home on American television with *Peyton Place* (Coyne, 2002, p.117). Both series feature significant scenes and storylines that are based in homes, although both also feature the workplace to a far greater extent than, for example, the films of Douglas Sirk; but the role of the middle class American home is significant at various points in both series, and for both Julie Prescott and Betty Draper, 'the family home becomes almost a mental state rather than a physical structure' (McNiven, 1982, p.40).

Although not its first drama series, RMPM is generally recognised as the first 'multi-episode yet finite American TV serial (sic)' (Coyne, 2003, p.105). It was produced by ABC, one of the big three American television companies, and the first to recognise the value of 'melodramatic sagas' (ibid p.106). Unlike its precursors on British television from the 1960s and early 1970s, based

predominantly on ‘the history of royalty … the lives of upper-class English families and great works of … literature’ (ibid, p.117), the American mini-series were ‘implicitly more egalitarian’ and based largely on ‘fictitious success stories’ from contemporary novels. As such, it can be seen as a ‘hybrid of a British format and an American genre’ (ibid).

Based on the eponymous novel by Irving Shaw, and divided in to chapters rather than episodes, RMPM opens at the end of the Second World War, and ends in the early 1960s, at the same time as the first series of MM begins. The opening chapter features a number of set piece scenes closely associated with films from the 1950s - the fight outside the cinema (C1) has stylistic similarities to *West Side Story* and the films of James Dean, while the car ride scenes, which also feature elsewhere in the series are clearly filmed in a studio with a projected backdrop. The origins of the split that forms the series title are evident in the character of the two boys, and the different ways they react to their domineering father. Their background, and the problems of assimilation faced by German immigrants to the USA after the war are touched on, as is the threat to the family bakery from new supermarkets - the fear of modernity, as opposed to its celebration in MM. At the end of the first chapter, Rudy is given money to go to College, and Tom is sent to stay with relatives in Chicago, and their paths for life are set. The implication is that the American dream of social mobility can overcome the accident of birth.

At various points in the series, the polarisation is stressed by geography, with the East Coast representing immigration, tradition and the old order while California represents escape, the new world and wider opportunities. Transport and distance are represented by rather unimaginative aeroplane shots (C2), and more realistically, the motor coaches without air conditioning in which Tom travels, or the cab of a lorry in pouring rain with ineffective windscreen wipers (C4). In C9 both distance and travel, and space and confinement are represented by cuts from Tom on board a cramped merchant ship in the Mediterranean to Rudy on a golf course.

The speed of change during the 1950s is evidenced alongside the changes in the brothers' fortunes. Each chapter advances by a few years, whereas in MM, there is a gap of a year or two between series. However, despite the generally high quality cinematography, RMPM is careless with period details - the clothes and the haircuts are often from the 1960s rather than the 1950s, and the World Trade Centre appears clearly in a shot of New York (C10). The growing importance of television is represented, but the TV pictures are fabricated, whereas in MM, they are shown as they would have been seen at the time, with poor focus and flickering screens.

The role of advertising in the American dream also becomes more apparent in the later chapters, as Rudy progresses into marketing. When he considers standing for Senate in 1962, his mentors enthuse about ‘a whole new thing in politics – selling tools, demographics, market research, television’ (C9), while Rudy resents being presented as ‘a product … some new brand’. The role of advertising however is presented with little of the sense of irony and double meaning that it acquires in MM; it is simply a background commentary on economic and social progress.

In describing the growth and success of the HBO cable channel in the USA, Auster (2005, pp. 237-8) suggests that, once 'freed from the constraints of network television', which allowed restrictive boundaries of sexual content and language to be breached it was possible to escape from 'the routine of family-cop-doc-lawyer shows' and move into new areas which he defines as the 'dramatic series'. As examples he cites *The Sopranos* and *Sex and the City*, although one might add *Twin Peaks* which introduced postmodernist reflexivity (Dolan, 1995), and *West Wing* which added high quality writing; it is arguable that MM*,* produced by Lionsgate and also broadcast on a cable channel (AMC), is following directly in this line. It has even been said that ‘American fictional television is now better than the movies’ (Kramer 2003) and that ‘TV drama now is caught up in a startling and exciting moment of innovation and transition’. (Jermyn and Holmes , 2006, p.54)

MM, the conception of writer and director Matthew Weiner is set in a New York advertising agency on Madison Avenue, Sterling Cooper, founded by Bert Cooper and the father of the other present senior partner, Roger Sterling in the 1920s.The Creative Director, ‘Don Draper’ (aka Dick Whitman) is the central character, married to Betty, with two children, but with a dark past, as the real Don Draper died in the Korean War. Other central characters include Peggy Olson, a secretary who becomes a copywriter, Joan Holloway, the office manager and Pete Campbell, an ambitious young executive from a privileged background.

While RMPM uses the cinematographic techniques of melodrama to recreate the atmosphere of the 1950s for the small screen, MM uses more contemporary technical approaches to achieve a different level of authenticity, creating an effect which 'looks like nothing else on television' (Field et al, 2008, p.46), a 'somewhat mannered, classic visual style that is influenced more by cinema than TV' (ibid). Weiner and his designers wanted to do more than 'simply referencing the period' (ibid), and both domestic and office architecture of the time were seen as important. Cinematographers paid particular attention to the strong graphic effect created by overhead grids of fluorescent ceiling lights, the 'wide lighting ranges that Technicolor never committed to film' (ibid). As Greif (2008)

observes, ‘new work spaces [were] sleek, not stuffy', and the ceiling itself is frequently in shot as characters move around the office. The unusually low camera position and angles that this involves are also part of the show's ‘look and feel’ - the wide open spaces in the open plan central office were designed to be dolly friendly, as 'hand held camera work didn't feel appropriate to the visual grammar of that time' (Field et al, 2008, p.50).

The mystery that surrounds ‘Don Draper’ began with two men lighting cigarettes in a trench in Korea while smothered in petrol (Elia, 2010, p.172). Draper is killed in the explosion, allowing Whitman to swap their identity tags and assume a new identity (S01E12). The series also opens with cigarettes, as Don makes notes for a new advertising campaign in a bar, starting a conversation with a black waiter about his favourite brand, and trying to convert him to Lucky Strike at a time when the first *Readers' Digest* article on the dangers of smoking had just appeared. Much of the opening episode concerns ways of fighting or undermining these claims. Elsewhere, a doctor smokes while inserting a contraceptive, Betty smokes incongruously in rubber gloves while washing up, and Francine, six months pregnant smokes while preparing food for a birthday party. Other references to contemporary attitudes to health abound – after a heart attack, Roger Sterling moans ‘I thought it would be the ulcer. I did everything they told me, I drank the cream, ate the butter’ (S01E10).

In RMPM, marriage and romance follow conventional melodramatic paths. Rudy loses his childhood sweetheart Julie to pursue his business career – when they do eventually marry (C9), his election as Senator leaves her isolated and she turns to drink. Meanwhile, Tom first becomes involved with Clothilde, a young Irish chambermaid and then with Teresa, a minor and is arrested for statutory rape, although they marry and raise the child. Later, as a successful boxer, a brief dalliance with another fighter’s wife in Las Vegas and the involvement of the mafia force him to flee abroad. The rest of the series concerns his efforts to return to his wife and child – when he eventually finds happiness in Europe with his second wife (on a boat named Clothilde) he is murdered by another rival.

There are relatively few women in RMPM in key roles, and those that are follow traditional, stereotypical paths – the flawed heroine (Julie Prescott), the long-suffering mother (Mary Jordache), or Rudy’s jealous ex-fiancée (Virginia Calderwood). There is no suggestion that women can break out of these roles other than through marriage. By contrast, the role of both married and unmarried women in the USA in the early 1960s is central to MM, from the vacuous drudgery of the housewife the mistress and the aspiring career woman, with several fulfilling several roles at once.

**Figure 1 Wife, Mistress or Career Woman? Joan Holloway, Peggy Olsen, Faye Miller**

The impossibility of divorce and the problems of obtaining either contraception or abortion are subtly woven into the narrative rather than being central storylines as they might be in a more conventional series or soap opera. Although derided as a female fad, 'just this year's candy pink stove' (S01E08), interest in and acceptance of psychiatry is significant both for its role in the subjugation of women and the effectiveness of advertising. Betty Draper is encouraged to undergo psychiatry, paid for by Don, who naturally then has the right to phone the psychiatrist late at night for feedback (S01E02). She appears as 'a little girl caught in a state of arrested development' (Carew, 2011, p.128), whose most meaningful interactions are with 9 year old Glen Bishop, intriguingly played by Weiner's son. In RMPM, Rudy advises Brad, about to marry his former sweetheart Virginia Collard that 'she needs the attention of a good psychiatrist … she used to call me late at night' (C10), but as in other areas, this is presented uncritically, not as a commentary on values of the time.

With the exception of Bert Cooper, almost all characters in MM are at some point involved in extra-marital relationships. The issues are highlighted in two episodes that are worth considering in more detail. *The Marriage of Figaro* (S01E03) begins with Pete Campbell's return from honeymoon to meet Peggy with whom he had a brief encounter before leaving, and the revelation, through a chance meeting on a train, that Don is in fact Dick Whitman. At the office, the women read *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, at the same time as the trial in the UK. At a birthday party for Sally Draper, a selection of married couples gather at the house, and while the men discuss cars, the women talk

about their honeymoons in the kitchen, and the single status of Helen, a new arrival. At Betty's instigation, Don begins using his new 8mm cine camera to film the gathering, before which he tunes the stereogram to a rendition of Mozart's overture to the eponymous opera on deception and sexual infidelity in marriage. The film, reproduced on screen as it would have appeared in garish and slightly out of focus colour captures several guests in compromising situations. Don leaves to collect a dog to run alongside the white picket fence and complete the dream American household, but tensions are clearly apparent (McLean, 2009, p.55). The final scene of S01E013, where Don returns to an empty home after a successful sales pitch to Kodak extolling the virtues of family memories on the Carousel of a new slide projector echoes this scene.

*Babylon (*S01E06), referencing the 19th century myth of cultic prostitution based on Herodotus (Beard and Henderson 1997) deals with other aspects of infidelity. Don reads Rona Jaffes', *The Best of Everything*, before beginning his second affair of the series with Rachel Menken, a rich Jewish department store owner later in the episode. The women in the office are dragooned into a lipstick trial while the men watch behind two way mirrors - Peggy launches her copywriting career with the line, "a basket of kisses", seized on by copywriter Freddie Rumsden as "like watching a dog play the piano". Joan dismisses Peggy's prospects with the line, "you know what they say, the Medium is the Message" – although McLuhan did not actually create the phrase until 1964 (Witchel, 2008). Later, Joan is revealed to be having an affair with Roger Sterling, meeting regularly at an upmarket hotel, despite his offers to get a flat; "I know the sneaking around is your favourite part". Instead, he buys her a caged bird, a potent symbol of her kept status. Birds are a constant metaphor in MM – in S01E09, Betty shoots at them from the bedroom window with Don's air rifle in frustration. At the end of the episode, Don tries to return to his first mistress, Midge, only to end up out of place in a Greenwich Village café, where a guitarist plays 'By the Rivers of Babylon'.

Although not central to either series, race inevitably features at the beginnings of the Civil Rights movement; as Coyne observes, heroes are immediately identifiable through their sympathetic attitude to racial minorities (2002, p.129). In RMPM it is presented in a manner typical of film melodrama, Tom protecting a black sailor, Roy, from racist abuse in a relationship similar to that between Lora Meredith and Annie Johnson in Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life*. Race is introduced more elliptically in MM, through the notion that black Americans were both present and invisible everywhere; they are waiters (S01E01), washroom attendants (S01E02), or home helps (S01E12). Pete Campbell tries to get some insight into the black American market by talking to a lift operator, who knows that conversation with a white businessman is fraught with problems, and so, like the

waiter in S01E01, appears respectful without actually saying anything. Criticism of MM that bemoan the all-white, male dominance (Greif 2008, Mendelsohn 2011) miss the point – Sterling Cooper is intended to be a WASP agency struggling to adapt to the 1960s (Witchel 2008), evidenced in anti-Semitism as much as racism. Homosexuality is even more supressed – Salvatore Romano's sexuality is alluded to throughout the first series, but does not come to the fore until the third series, and it is Don's reactions to it (a sotto voce 'you people') that is perhaps more telling (S03E01).

RMPM is an adaptation of a novel, with the usual minor deviations from plot and storyline that feature in any adaptation. MM however is written specifically for television, although it was inspired by several sources. The 1955 novel by Sloan Wilson is often cited - in one of many inter-textual references in the series, the comedian Jimmy Barrett derides Don as 'the Man in the Grey Flannel Suit' (S02E03) - as are Della Femina's memoirs (1970) of the New York advertising scene in the early 1960s. Both the story and the style of the series borrow from films and shows of the era, such as *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying,* the 1967 film version of which starred a young Robert Morse (the agency patriarch Bert Cooper in *Mad Men).*

Music is prominent in both series, although in very different ways. RMPM uses its Alex North score in the manner of 1950s filmed melodramas, 'to lead the audience into a change or heightening of mood' (Hibberd & Nielsen, 2003), with soaring strings at times of high drama, and jaunty calypsos for Tom's arrival in South America. In MM by contrast, music is used more diagetically, although several episodes fade to a particularly poignant contemporary song, such as Dylans' *Don't Think Twice, It's All Right* at the end of S01E13.

There are also significant differences between the periods when the two series were produced. In the late 1970s, the academic study of television was still in its infancy - 'everyone watches [television], but no-one really likes it' (Miller, 1988, p.228). As Laurie Taylor once observed, no-one ever resolves to 'watch more television' in the way they might with any other art form. In the UK, there was a choice of only three television channels, and few people had video recorders. Although both series have won awards, and RMPM is rightly praised for its role in the development of high quality television (Coyne, 2003, p.105, Trevino, 1997), there were no academic articles written about RMPM, and no products associated with the series apart from the original book. By contrast, the first series of MM was produced for the AMC channel, (having been rejected by the larger and more innovative HBO) and shown on digital TV in the UK on BBC4. All series are available on DVD, via iTunes and (illicitly) via YouTube and elsewhere. Williams' (1975) notion of the 'flow' of television

scheduling and the 'vision of the family gathered regularly around the communal set' (Jermyn and Holmes, 2006, p.49) are now relatively meaningless concepts in the context of the contemporary 'multi-set, multi-channel and multi-media home' (ibid). There have been several books and academic articles about the series, and there are websites and FaceBook pages devoted to it. As Lavery (2006, p.100) observes, tie-in books have become 'de rigeur commodity intertexts' for almost every current television series, and viewers are 'empowered and encouraged to become television connoisseurs' through 'ownership of the text' in the form of DVD collections (Jermyn and Holmes, 2006, p.55). At another level, the opening episode of recent series has been shown live in Times Square, New York, and giant size images of the stars appear on billboards across the city.

RMPM was a mini-series in and of the 1970s. Although based on a novel, the series format allowed for a more detailed treatment of both character and plot than a feature film, while at the same time having ‘a beginning, a middle and an end' (Wheen 1985). The textual values however are largely those of the time – issues are presented as stark contrasts between good and bad, and the unexpected death of Tom in the final episode is perhaps the only departure from the standard melodrama formula. Contextual issues – class, race and gender – are presented largely uncritically, and the series employed very few, if any technical or marketing innovations. By contrast, MM is very much a creature of the multimedia era, linked with fashion, games, and cross-platform marketing across a wide variety of media channels, while at the same time maintaining original, high quality writing and production values. Although mini-series in the RMPM mould are still being produced, *John Adams* and *Mildred Pierce* being recent examples, it is the multi-season, multi-platform production made specifically for television, and that uses the textual and technical strengths of that medium to best advantage that now deserves to be seen as its foremost genre. Boundaries between genres have never been fixed, and as in nature, hybrids are often stronger than the sum of their parts. Hence, although it is likely to run to almost one hundred episodes before Don finally hangs up his hat, MM can legitimately be seen as part of the mini-series heritage. It has, quite simply ‘found a strange and lovely space between nostalgia and political correctness and filled it with interesting people’ (McNamara, 2007).

*4,027 words*

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# Films

*West Side Story (USA, Robert Wise and Jerome Robbin, 1961)*

*How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying (USA, David Swift, 1967)*

*Imitation of Life (USA, Douglas Sirk, 1959)*

# Television Series / Serials

*Coronation St (UK, Granada Television, 1960 - date)*

*Dallas (USA, CBS, 1978 - 1991)*

*John Adams (USA, HBO / Playtone, 2008)*

*Mad Men (USA, AMC / Lionsgate, 2007 – date)*

*Mildred Pierce (USA, HBO / MGM, 2011)*

*Peyton Place (USA, ABC, 1964 – 69)*

*Rich Man, Poor Man (USA, ABC / Universal Television, 1975)*

*Sex and the City (USA, HBO, 1998 – 2004)*

*The Forsyth Saga (UK, BBC, 1967)*

*The Sopranos (USA, HBO, 1999 - 2007)*

*Twin Peaks (USA, ABC / Lynch Frost Productions, 1990 - 91*

*West Wing (USA, Warner Bros, 1999 – 2006)*

# Rich Man Poor Man

## *Cast List – Main Characters*

| | |
|---|---|
| *Peter Strauss* | **Rudy Jordache** |
| *Nick Nolte* | **Tom Jordache** |
| *Susan Blakely* | **Julie Prescott** |
| *Edward Asner* | **Axel Jordache** |
| *Dorothy McGuire* | **Mary Jordache** |
| *Robert Reed* | **Teddy Boylan** |
| *Gloria Grahame* | **Sue Prescott** |
| *Kim Darby* | **Virginia Calderwood** |
| *Bill Bixby* | **Willie Abbott** |
| *Fionnula Flanagan* | **Clothilde** |
| *Tim McIntire* | **Brad Knight** |
| *Ray Milland* | **Duncan Calderwood** |
| *Lawrence Pressman* | **Bill Denton** |
| *Talia Shire* | **Teresa Santoro** |

There are no titles to the Chapters 1-12, which are referenced in the text C1, C2 etc

# Mad Men Series 1

## *Cast List – Main Characters*

| | |
|---|---|
| *John Hamm* | **Don Draper** |
| *Elisabeth Moss* | **Peggy Olson** |
| *Vincent Kartheiser* | **Pete Campbell** |
| *January Jones* | **Betty Draper** |
| *Christina Hendricks* | **Joan Holloway** |
| *Maggie Siff* | **Rachel Menken** |
| *John Slattery* | **Roger Sterling** |
| *Bryan Batt* | **Salvatore Romano** |
| *Michael Gladis* | **Paul Kinsey** |
| *Aaron Staton* | **Ken Cosgrove** |
| *Rich Sommer* | **Harry Crane** |
| *Robert Morse* | **Bertram Cooper** |
| *Kiernan Shipka* | **Sally Draper** |
| *Alison Brie* | **Trudy Campbell** |
| *Faye Miller* | **Cara Buono** |

# Mad Men Series 1

## *Episodes*

| Reference | Title | Director | Author |
|---|---|---|---|
| S01E01 | **Smoke Gets in Your Eyes** | Alan Taylor | Matthew Weiner |
| S01E02 | **Ladies' Room** | Alan Taylor | Matthew Weiner |
| S01E03 | **Marriage of Figaro** | Ed Bianchi | Tom Palmer |
| S01E04 | **New Amsterdam** | Tim Hunter | Lisa Albert |
| S01E05 | **5G** | Lesli Linka Glatter | Matthew Weiner |
| S01E06 | **Babylon** | Andrew Bernstein | Andre Jacquemetton & Maria Jacquemetton |
| S01E07 | **Red in the Face** | Tim Hunter | Bridget Bedard |
| S01E08 | **The Hobo Code** | Phil Abraham | Chris Provenzano |
| S01E09 | **Shoot** | Paul Feig | Chris Provenzano and Matthew Weiner |
| S01E10 | **Long Weekend** | Tim Hunter | Bridget Bedard and Andre Jacquemetton & Maria Jacquemetton and Matthew Weiner |
| S01E 11 | **Indian Summer** | Tim Hunter | Tom Palmer and Matthew Weiner |
| S01E 12 | **Nixon vs. Kennedy** | Alan Taylor | Lisa Albert and Andre Jacquemetton & Maria Jacquemetton |
| S01E 13 | **The Wheel** | Matthew Weiner | Matthew Weiner and Robin Veith |