

FROM *DOWNTON ABBEY* TO *MAD MEN*: TV SERIES AS THE PRIVILEGED FORMAT FOR TRANSITION ERAS

MARIE MAILLOS

Name Marie Maillos

Academic centre LARA-SEPIA Laboratory, Université de Toulouse, UT2J, France

E-mail address marie.maillos@gmail.com

KEYWORDS

Transition eras; *Downton Abbey*; *Mad Men*; period drama; costume drama.

ABSTRACT

On each side of the Atlantic, the *Downton Abbey* and *Mad Men* shows have contributed to the transformation of the period drama genre on television: instead of being set in a single precise era, they take place over periods of historical

transition, genuine intervals that are full of contrasts and confrontations and even propel the narrative forward.

This new approach to time periods results as much from the TV series format as from its mass medium nature: on the one hand, these shows use the apparent invariability required by the serial form to reveal by contrast the transition at work and provide the narrative with the necessary conflict; on the other hand, through their depictions of transitional eras, they offer a commentary on our contemporary period, a characteristic device of television series.

Therefore, both shows, notwithstanding their differences in themes, locations and craftsmanship, play a part in making the transition period drama become a serial genre in its own right.

In the collective imagination, the “Period Drama” genre in cinema is mostly associated with the adaptations of the Brontës’ or Jane Austen’s romances. But whether in a costume romance –*Pride and Prejudice* (2005)–, thriller –*Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (2012)–, war movie –*War Horse* (2012)–, or horror film –*The Woman in Black* (2012)–, the period during which the narrative takes place is always given a purely decorative expression and an immutable quality. The manor from *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) is just like a Walt Disney prince’s castle: it only sets the story in a past era so as to make it timeless in return.

Naturally, the same generally applies to “Period Drama TV series”, although nowadays, shows such as *Downton Abbey* (2010-) or *Mad Men* (2007-2015) depict the past in a very different manner. They focus on periods that could be defined as “transition eras”, that is times of uncertainty intervening between highly characterized or even iconic historical epochs, and they do not use such periods as simple settings anymore but as a narrative tool in their own right, as a part of the story. *Mad Men* neither paints the portrait of the Hitchcockian gentleman from the 1950s nor that of the hippie he became in the late 1960s. Likewise, *Downton Abbey* or *Parade’s End* (2012) do not portray either the proud aristocracy from the late 19th century or the post-war bourgeoisie that succeeded it: these shows are rather set in periods of transformation. Yet, at first glance, the serial format was not the most advantageous frame to produce such a representation.

We will first define what in TV series makes the depiction of an evolution possible, and thereby more specifically these transition eras, by drawing first on an analysis of the narrative structure of the TV series in general –and *Downton Abbey* and *Mad Men* in particular– and secondly on the rules proposed by the screenwriting specialists. This will bring us to look at the evolution of the characters and at the way they are used to reveal the transition.

We will then see how the temporality of a series defines it, and how these series are not only able to stay true to their nature despite the passage of time, but also take advantage of these liminal eras to give impetus to their narration.

Finally, we will consider the creative ensemble of the TV series, not as a serial construct, but as a televisual piece of work: building on the research done in media studies on the question of the representation of history in television, and on those of nostalgia in media, we will analyze what brings shows like *Downton Abbey* and *Mad Men* to depict these particular historical transition eras.

REPRESENTATION OF EVOLUTION AND CHANGE

a) Format matters

Interim periods being transitional by nature, their representation requires a format that is capable of portraying an evolution over time. But at first glance it is not immediately obvious that the series would be the ideal medium for such a task. The handling of time and length, which is crucial in this format, is varied in TV shows. In fact, not all serial forms enable the depiction of such transition periods as mentioned above. Though a show can be episodic, semi-serialized or serialized, transition era series themselves can only be serialized.

Indeed, the episodic show, which is the privileged format of sitcoms and many crime series, is a sequence of stand-alones: each of its episodes comes more or less full circle, thus setting the show in immutable times. Stéphane Benassi argues that this format “offers to the viewers heroes that are familiar to them, but whose every adventures are independent from the ones that precede or follow.” (Benassi, 2000: 29, translated by myself) Naturally, such a format, defined by its fixity, makes it impossible to depict a transition. Umberto Eco expresses this idea in *Innovation and repetition*:

They derive pleasure from the non-story (if indeed a story is a development of events which should bring us from the point of departure to a point of arrival where we would never have dreamed of arriving); the distraction consists in the refutation of a development of events, in a withdrawal from the tension of past-present-future to the focus on an *instant*, which is loved precisely because it is recurrent. (Eco, 1997 : 17)

If there is no past-present-future anymore, by definition there cannot be transition eras.

As for the semi-serialized show, it is made up of both episodic narrative arcs –closure happens at the end of the episode, as it is true, for example, of the various medical cases that House M.D. diagnoses in the eponymous series (2004-2012)– and arcs that last for a whole season, or even the whole series –such as the friendships and love relationships of House M.D. and his colleagues. Here again, the emphasis is on the world’s immutability, leaving barely any room –and generally only in the intimate realm– for change.

Therefore, series set in transition eras can only fully unfold within the serialized format. In serialized shows, arcs go on indefinitely and episodes simply serve as chapters –or punctuation devices– of a whole truly unified story, thus “the diegetic unity of the story only exists within the totality of the fully assembled episodes” (Benassi, 2000). Nothing surprising then that both *Downton Abbey* and *Mad Men* are serialized shows.

b) Character evolution

Provided that it is serialized, the series thus appears appropriate to depict a transitional period, since it has the right tools: its span gives it the space and duration necessary to represent the evolution –which can take several years– from one historical time to another. But even if it has enough *time*, the series does not necessarily have the *means* for such representations. Actually the concept of evolution, especially the characters’ evolution, is usually considered antithetical to the series. In cinema though, the character shows indeed an evolution, to the point that Lajos Egri, in 1946, asserted that “any character, in any type of literature, which does not undergo a basic change is a badly drawn character.” (Egri, 1960: 61) This idea will be taken up by most screenwriting academics. This change can be very superficial, as Bordwell describes it:

This dynamic takes on a particular shape in mass-art storytelling, whereby the character faces up to a mistaken judgment. Hollywood screenwriting manuals strongly suggest that there be a “character arc,” whereby a basically good person comes to recognize that they have erred and try to improve. (Bordwell, 2012: 118)

But it can also be essential:

The sort of change that many consider the essence of a high-quality narrative is more radical, involving a change in fundamental traits. Epistemic change can fuel some changes in personality, but to alter a trait is to become a different person.” (Bordwell, 2012: 118)

So, in the case of films, an evolution is possible; however that is usually done at the very end, during the climax. But when, in *The Sopranos* episode “D-Girl” (2.07), Christopher asks, angrily, “Where’s my arc?”, meaning “character arc” he

also comments the fact that the series’ characters are not likely to evolve, precisely because it is not a “different person” that the viewer wants to discover in every episode but, instead, an “old friend” as explained by Umberto Eco in *The Myth of Superman*, where he holds characterization elements to be “*vices, gestures, nervous tics permit us to find an old friend in the character portrayed, and they are the principal condition which allows us to ‘enter’ into the event.*” (Eco, 1984: 118). Pamela Douglas, in *Writing the TV Drama Series*, advises scriptwriters and showrunners to follow such a rule, suggesting that they work on in-depth characterization rather than let their characters evolve:

Characters who are not transformed by the plot need something instead: dimension. Think of it like this: instead of developing horizontally toward a goal, the character develops vertically, exploring internal conflicts that create tension. (Douglas, 2005: 8)

This is what makes the complexity and density of characters in series according to Maria E. Reicher:

Sequels and episodes of a series are to be treated like chapters of a novel: that the descriptions given of a character in chapter two are different from those given in chapter one, does, of course, not imply that the character from chapter one cannot be identical with the character in chapter two. Rather, it is the same character that is described ‘from different angles’, as it were. Therefore, it is possible to ‘enrich’ a character, to make it less indeterminate, in the course of a novel as well as in the course of a series. (Reicher, 2010: 131)

This rule perfectly applies to the series under study here, particularly with regard to the main characters: though less successfully than his mother, Robert Crawley, Earl of Grantham, devotes himself body and soul to resisting any of the changes that his relatives and entourage in *Downton Abbey* suggest to him, and later demand from him. In the series’ seven-season run, *Mad Men*’s Don Draper hardly changed his neck tie (Figure 1, Figure 2).

Nonetheless, secondary characters can easily disregard this rule or, in longer-running shows, even change radically. Peggy Olson from *Mad Men* exemplifies this type of evolution most efficiently: a clumsy and reserved secretary at the beginning (Figure 3), she fashions herself, over the course of the



FIGURE 1. DON DRAPER, *MAD MEN*, “SMOKE GETS IN YOUR EYES” (1.01)



FIGURE 2. DON DRAPER, *MAD MEN*, “WATERLOO” (7.07)



FIGURE 3. PEGGY OLSON, *MAD MEN*, “SMOKE GETS IN YOUR EYES” (1.01)



FIGURE 4. PEGGY OLSON, *MAD MEN*, “PERSON TO PERSON” (7.14)

series, into an independent and self-assured business woman (Figure 4). The stability of Don Draper’s characterization therein serves as a guarantee for the possibility of other characters to evolve -or, like Peggy, to become completely new people.

However, the series we study here do not seek to challenge this lack of evolution of the protagonists. On the contrary, *Downton Abbey* is very close to the genre of soap opera, which is as characterized by its serialized format as it is by:

An emphasis on family life, personal relationships, sexual dramas, emotional and moral conflicts; some coverage of topical issues; [and by being] set in familiar domestic interiors with only occasional excursions into new locations” (Bowles, 2000: 119)

But, in this particular genre, Ien Ang claims that:

The viewer is manoeuvred into a position of permanent expectation which [...] “creates a feeling that things are constantly happening (becoming more complicated) in the narrative but that, at the same time, nothing ever really happens” [Seiter, 1982].” (Ang, 1985 : 74-75)

Thus, not only do the characters not evolve, but the exploding and non-linear narration even prevents a true evolution of the story itself.

It may seem paradoxical that a part of these series’ main characters lack evolution: the idea is to depict a transition era but not a transition or transformation of the protagonist, or even of the narration. Indeed, an evolution can only be shown by comparison with a fixed point: the future or the past.

c) Fixity as an anchor point

These series rely on dramatic irony to provide a contrast between the period during which their narratives take place and the future. This technique consists of giving the audience a head start on the story, often –but not exclusively– to comic purposes. But in the shows we study here, the narratives follow the course of history, so that their audiences naturally have a head start on the characters: the viewers know the future, at least insofar as they are aware of the historical events following the depicted eras. In *Downton Abbey* for instance, when Mr. Carson, with a charming mix of touchiness and clumsiness, uses a telephone for the first time (“Episode Seven”, 1.07), the scene is amusing to us because we, as an audience from the 21st century, know that telephones will grow commonplace and invade everyone’s daily life. Thus, dramatic irony here becomes a way to show the transformation of a world devoid of telephones into one that could not live without them. In *Mad Men*, similarly, Bertram Cooper reacts with a “Bravo!” to Neil Armstrong’s famous moon-landing words “That’s one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind” (“Waterloo”, 7.07). The series’ viewers are aware of how prevalent this quote will become in popular culture, and that it will also grow into an adman’s dream. The character appears to be significantly ahead of his contemporaries, which helps to define him as a visionary.

However, dramatic irony inevitably brings a metatextual quality to the programs: when referring to extra-diegetic elements, namely the viewers’ knowledge of the world around them, shows do not pose as self-contained and self-sufficient worlds anymore but reveal themselves as the works of fiction that they truly are. Because of this metafilmic aspect of dramatic irony, the latter cannot be the sole device used to bring out the transitional nature of the chosen time frames, not

without risking to repeatedly “pull” the audience out of the series and create exhausting and sometimes superficial back and forths between the extra- and intra-filmic levels. This is why the shows’ inflexible, utterly conservative characters actually serve as fixed points of reference in the past. It is against the backdrop of the Dowager Countess of Grantham’s conservatism that the progressive ideas of Isobel Crawley, her friend and rival, appear to be so striking. Likewise, it is because Don Draper’s and his peers’ machismo is so ardently reactionary that Peggy’s breakthroughs in the advertising milieu stand out so visibly. The characters’ immutability, which is first of all dictated by the serial format, consequently becomes a narrative tool whose purpose is to highlight the changes in society. In parallel, it justifies and organizes the construction of the characters concerned: they are characterized as reactionary and conservative in their daily habits and in matters of propriety as much as in their political and social views.

But their lack of evolution and the choice to place them amid great historical changes makes the characters from TV shows depicting transition eras appear more likeable to us because of their helplessness. They are all trapped in a world that changes in spite of them, which they do not comprehend and over which they gradually lose all control. Maggie Smith for example interprets two Countesses of nearly identical characterization, in two different works: the Countess of Trentham in Robert Altman’s movie *Gosford Park*, and subsequently, the Countess of Grantham in the series *Downton Abbey* that the film inspired (both works having been created and written by Julian Fellowes). They have in common a talent for remarkably witty and acerbic comments. The Dowager Countess of Grantham has become famous on social networks for well-chosen retorts such as: “Don’t be defeatist, dear. It’s very middle class” (“Episode Eight”, 2.08), while the Countess of Trentham would exclaim, upon learning in the aftermath of a murder that the victim’s mistress had vacated the premises: “Aw, it’s a pity, really. I thought it was a good idea to have someone in the house who is actually sorry he’s dead.” In *Downton Abbey*, the Dowager Countess of Grantham’s lines lead us to see her as this last stubborn rock which the tide of change has still not taken away. Quite the opposite, *Gosford Park* does not depict a historical transition, but a fixed point in History. Incidentally, the movie takes place much later, in 1932, whereas *Downton Abbey* spans 1912 to 1925. In fact the countess from *Gosford Park* speaks up for a class division in complete opposition with the world around her, yet this guarantees her a semblance of stability. Even though she is dependent on a small allowance and has hired a novice lady’s

maid to save money, Lady Trentham’s aristocratic loftiness remains unchanged: she is still a countess. This categorization, albeit preventing the expression of singularity, enables her to maintain her *social class* superiority (for want of *actual* superiority) in a fossilized environment. Made from such a position of superiority, her remarks seem more spiteful and have a stronger effect on the people around her.

Additionally, as we have seen, the length of the show allows a more in-depth study of the characters and makes it possible to separate them little by little from the archetypes on which they are based. The Dowager Countess of Grantham’s old story of thwarted love gets unveiled and she is granted a depth which her *Gosford Park*’s counterpart cannot claim. This lack of depth, ergo humanity, accounts for slightly more archetypal or even stereotypical characters, contributing to the film’s comic dimension, one that is mostly absent from the series.

Because the characters from *Downton Abbey*, whose story takes place in a transition era, appear to us both more likeable and less comical than those from *Gosford Park*, the irony is that the viewers become inclined to resist change with them, to embrace their reactionary wishes, or at least recognize the ambivalence at work, as Tom Branson does. The show’s audience, while witnessing the transition, is led to adopt an anti-progressive attitude and swim against the tide of history. On the contrary, *Gosford Park*’s audience, not being a witness of the transition but only its distant judge, and knowing what the future is made of and what will or should change, is placed in history’s camp and in the comfortable role of the enlightened progressive. It follows that *Gosford Park*’s audience, the film’s moral fairness made indubitable, is put in a gratifying position: it is placed on the side of Christian Metz’s “Grand Imagier” (1974), the “great image-maker”, and shares the omniscient point of view granted by the latter. By contrast, *Downton Abbey*’s viewers are put in a compromising position: they know what morality they should endorse, yet, they are enticed by the characters themselves into challenging it. Yet *Mad Men* has often been criticized for placing its audience in a comfortable situation: some say that “*Mad Men* is an unpleasant little entry in the genre of Now We Know Better” (Goodlad et al., 2013) because:

According to Sady Doyle in the “Atlantic”, *Mad Men* “affords viewers an illusion of moral superiority”; and for Benjamin Schwarz, also writing in the “Atlantic”, the show “encourages the condescension of posterity” by inviting its audience “to indulge in a

most unlovely—because wholly unearned—smugness. (Goodlad et al., 2013: 8).

But as we have seen, the length of the series and its nature of transition-era drama is supposed to free us from this opinion, provided we are receptive to the pain and loneliness of the paradoxical Don Draper—developed in the series via a war trauma, that of a violent and unloving family during his childhood, or even around an unusual friendship with a surrogate mother—our desire to see him change and approaching a form of serenity goes against what he represents and the historical choices that we know to be the right ones. This effect is only permitted by these long explanations and the intimacy that the series takes the time to create between the viewer and the character, notably using the very visionary Peggy who acts to this end as a relay between the audience and Don Draper.

TEMPORALITY AS A DECISIVE SETTING

a) Comparing the duration of TV shows to that of the transitions represented

It is interesting to note that *Downton Abbey*'s first two seasons span over several years (April 1912 to August 1914 for the one, July 1916 to early 1920 for the other), whereas the third and fourth seasons take place over approximately one year each (1920 to 1921 for the third season, 1922 to 1923 for the fourth) and the fifth and sixth over only a few months (February to December 1924, then April to December 1925). Yet, every season is comprised of no more than seven or eight episodes. So the series expands time by covering always shorter periods over same-length narratives, thus favoring story over history. By contrast, "*Mad Men*'s pattern so far has been to slightly outpace the real time between seasons: from its debut in July 2007 to the fourth-season finale in October 2010, the show's calendar advanced from March 1960 to October 1965" (Goodlad et al., 2013: 26), but each season itself lasts a little less than a year. Thus *Downton Abbey* must have had to decelerate its narrative rhythm, whereas *Mad Men* wanted to speed it up.

Downton Abbey, contrary to *Mad Men*, has "slowed down time" to stay within the boundaries of the transition era it wishes to depict, rather than risk stepping out of the liminal time between eras and into a known historical time, which would clash with what the audience expects to see when they

switch on their TV set to watch the show. Because if a narrative takes place in intervening times, its temporality is, by definition, subject to transience: the series have a duration which may even exceed that of the transition they represent. Yet, the periods in which these shows are set determine them absolutely.

b) The Period Dramas, defined by their temporal arena

In order to be sure if a particular period is important in establishing the setting of a show, first we must find all of what defines a show, what makes it unique and distinguishes it from any other; and then see if temporality is, or may be part of these constituent elements that the series cannot override, at the risk of losing some of its specificity and, at the same time, its coherence and its audience.

But the definition of a production bible by the French SACD (society for the protection of the rights of authors and composers) is as follows:

The bible must give all the permanent elements essential to the development of the TV series. It is the written document that describes in detail the general framework in which the main characters of the series will evolve. (SACD, 1998: 1).

These decisive "permanent elements" are specified in the TV series screenwriting manuals, including that of Richard A. Blum, who notes:

A written series presentation details these elements: (1) concept (arena/setting), (2) characters, (3) pilot story, and (4) sample storylines. [...] The first section of a written series presentation provides a description of the basic arena or setting for the series. (Blum, 2013: 273)

If the setting is most often understood as the "geographical arena" of the scenario, "the temporal arena" is equally a constituent. The Cambridge Dictionary also defines the setting as "the time and the place in which the action of a book, film, play, etc. happens." (Setting, Cambridge Online Dictionary) However, if the production bibles of *Mad Men* and *Downton Abbey* are difficult to obtain, it is safe to assume that they identify the era the shows take place in on the very first line, as is the case in the shooting script of the *Mad Men*

pilot in which the 2nd sequence is a Title Card: “Manhattan 1960” (Weiner, 2006: 3). The temporal and geographical arenas are the two major components of the period drama settings. Since the temporal arena is key in a period drama, the latter cannot shift towards another age without losing its essence, a clear risk for transition era shows.

This is why most of the series that focus on the transformation of a world into another are generally not set at the very time of this transition. For example, the mafiosi from *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) prompt extensive comparisons between the Mafia from the 1940s, as depicted in *The Godfather* (1972), and the one, much less remarkable, from their own time. The contrast comes more from the gap between reality and representation than that between one era’s reality and another’s. But what it engenders for Tony Soprano is truly a feeling of nostalgia rather than deception, as he vocalizes it to his therapist: “Nowadays, everybody’s got to see a shrink [...]. Whatever happened to Gary Cooper, the strong silent type?” (“The Sopranos”, 1.01). Therefore, *The Sopranos* is not, on the one hand, a period series happening during a transition era. On the other hand, it even denies the very existence of such a transition, presenting it as a naive construct of the protagonist’s mind. In so doing, the series also avoids losing its nature with time.

c) How TV shows avoid self-distortion

Transition era series, however, really take the risk of attempting historical reconstructions. Even so, they never reach a precise point after which they leave the periods defining them behind, and the various eras in question are never described so specifically as to make it possible to differentiate them categorically. In fact, each epoch is connected to a high number of characteristics, which are themselves mainly represented by the cultural and artistic objects from that era or created in reference to it. Together, such characteristics then form an archetype of the era to which, separately, they only corresponded to a certain extent, even during the period itself. For example, the late 1960s can be partially characterized by its “hippie” youth –long-haired and dressed in bell-bottoms, antiwar, sexually liberated as well as interested in certain types of music and art, etc. Thus, the archetype of an era is itself made up of several archetypes, each of them being associated with a generation, a social background, a geographical location, etc. The more consistent with this general archetype the depiction of an era will be, the more it will be considered as close to the era in question. Besides, the

temporal boundaries of an era are not any clearer: in some cases, like the interwar period, eras can begin and end with precise events that bring about sudden archetype reversals, but more often than not, eras merge into one another and elements from their respective archetypes become mixed up, and even more often are competing, at the same point in time. So there is a lack of precision in both the formal and temporal delineations of eras, making the gap between two periods almost imperceptible.

Consequently, the transition era series are set in times corresponding both to the archetype of an era and that of the following one. What allows us to talk here of intervening periods rather than periods in their own rights is that the characterizations brought together do not constitute a coherent whole but are almost systematically contrasting or conflicting. This constant opposition is precisely what creates conflict –an essential narrative element to any story– and accounts for the fact that temporality in transition era series does not simply fulfill a decorative function but shapes the narrative itself. Such opposition stems from the differences which arise between reactionary circles and the individuals who push for reforms or revolutions, most of them coming from middle- or working-class backgrounds and some of them being well-off progressive intellectuals. Indeed, transition processes will both be delayed and slowed down in reactionary circles that have made themselves impervious to change, whereas they will occur sooner and faster in the social classes most interested in and concerned by such changes. This is what is represented, for instance, by Sarah Bunting, the school teacher character in *Downton Abbey*, for whom it is easier to be a revolutionary activist than for Tom Branson: the latter’s beliefs remain unchanged but his assimilation into the Crawley family, and his affection to its members, conduce him to take a different stand.

Thence, so as to extend transition eras over the whole length of a show, the television series in question cling to reactionary characters who, as previously shown, *reveal* the transition at work, but, additionally, *slow it down*. For that reason, these series need to focus on traditionalist characters that move in conservative circles –which, in the cases of *Mad Men* and *Downton Abbey*, are largely tantamount to dominant classes– and mostly silence progressive opinions: Sarah Bunting very soon disappears from the series *Downton Abbey*, Tom Branson is integrated into the rest of the family, etc. In *Mad Men*, which is not an ensemble TV show, Don Draper’s egotism can guard him from the world’s whirlwind around him. This usually explains why he is always or almost always

“on the wrong side of history”, most often denying advances that are known to be inevitable, as Dana Polan remarks:

Even though Don Draper is the seeming protagonist of the series, it is noteworthy how often he is shown to be on the wrong side of history, supporting in his professional work causes that are either doomed to failure (Richard Nixon for president! Don even declares, “I am Dick Nixon,” as a point of identification) or promised success in the immediate present only to go down in the longer annals as errors of moral judgment (the demolition of Penn Station). (Polan, 2013: 43)

Still, this extreme slowing down of transitions has its limits: that of plausibility. Transition era series may indeed last for a long time but they cannot stretch the periods of transition themselves indefinitely.

THE TRANSITION PERIOD: BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT

However, we must still question whether a television medium is able to give a fair overview of these historical periods.

Both TV and film are incapable of rendering temporal dimensions with much precision. They have no grammatical analogues for the past and future tenses of written language and, thus, amplify the present sense of immediacy out of proportion. The illusion created in television watching is often suggested by the cliché ‘being there’. (Edgerton, 2001 : 3)

So television does not do History, it does present. Or “the improbable rise and huge popularity of history on TV is also the result of its affinity and ability to embody current concerns and priorities within the stories it telecasts about the past.” (Edgerton, 2001: 3). The correctness of this assertion can be demonstrated by taking a look at the concerns that led to the creation of the series we analyze here.

a) *Downton Abbey's* look at the present

In 2003, a few years before *Downton Abbey's* broadcasting began, the increasing interest in objects, media and styles expressing nostalgia had Katharina Niemeyer describing parts

of the web as “a huge attic or bric-à-brac market where the individual and collective nostalgias converge and spread.” (Niemeyer, 2014: 1) She goes on to define this phenomenon not only as a fashion, but also as a hint to a current crisis:

Nostalgic expressions or the creation of nostalgic worlds could indicate a twofold phenomenon: a reaction to fast technologies, despite using them, in desiring to slow down, and/or an escape from this crisis into a state of wanderlust and nostalgia [...] that could be ‘cured’, or encouraged, by media use and consumption. Nostalgia could consequently present a symptom of progress, but also of crisis. (Niemeyer, 2014: 2)

This love and need for retro probably explains what interest there was in creating period series but, judging from the similarity in subject matter between television programs such as *Downton Abbey* and *Parade's End*, series creators seem to be especially interested in one particular transition era: the intervening period between the Great War and the very beginning of World War II. The fascination for this period, whether a reaction to the crude privacy- and restraint-deprived world of the social media, a simple interest for the aesthetically pleasing or a nostalgia for a time yet untainted by the Second World War, goes far beyond the British borders in any case. Incidentally, the series *The Knick* (2014-), although less transitional, gives another expression of this same fascination while taking place in the United States.

Nonetheless, England, consciously or unconsciously, remains at the forefront of this trend. A large number of the objects routinely associated with it are actually linked to British culture: tea sets, “Keep Calm and Carry On” posters, etc. These objects too relate to the Anglo-Saxon interwar legacy rather than contemporary culture. What is more, British transition eras series have contributed to the promoting of an image of the English –already widespread around the world and even more so in the United States– as a population of sophisticated, reactionary and deeply class-divided islanders. But these shows are not solely responsible for such a reputation. Indeed, in the past few years, the rising British actors, Eddie Redmayne and Benedict Cumberbatch leading the way, have come from very privileged backgrounds and spoken with an aristocratic accent which reinforces the cliché even more –Christopher Eccleston lamented this state of things in a recent interview with the magazine *Radio Times* (Andrew Duncan, 2015); and tabloids’ ever-renewed interest in the Royal Family plays a part too.

And yet, past the period itself, what both *Downton Abbey* or *Parade's End* look into is the early twentieth-century transition from the world to which the English are assimilated to the very different one they actually live in nowadays but are not culturally associated with: a world in which American culture, most of all, has gained ground on the local culture. Here again, Julian Fellowes's idea of making the show start the day after the sinking of the RMS Titanic makes a lot of sense: this historic event, in addition to symbolizing the necessary decline of a nobility that thought itself untouchable, highlights the will there was then to connect the United States to the United Kingdom. And it is precisely this supposedly safe connection that made the English aristocracy literally and metaphorically sink. In fact, *Downton Abbey* or *Parade's End* do not only stand at the *historical* juncture between a purely British, aristocratic and autonomous world and a globalized and capitalist one, they also symbolically stand at the *geographical* juncture between the two, serving as an interface between the English and American people. This process "flattens" history into geography. In this respect, it is no coincidence that Julian Fellowes's series includes a character – Cora Crawley's mother – who is American, thus giving a recurring nod to its American audience or to its viewers who are westernized in "the American way". This opposition is even taken one step further, crystallizing through the use of two great actresses from the same generation: Maggie Smith becomes representative of an aristocratic and royalist England, Shirley MacLaine of the republican American Great Bourgeoisie. While Maggie Smith made herself known in film through Shakespearean adaptations until she became an icon of British cinema, Don Siegel infamously said about Shirley MacLaine that: "It's hard to feel any great warmth to her. She's too unfeminine and has too much balls" (McGilligan, 1999: 182). This is the kind of vulgarity that she brings to her American character who, unlike the Dowager Countess, does not shy away from money or sex talks. Both of them are paragons of the countries that they represent. The American and the English, owing to their common history and, most importantly, language, see themselves as standing on either side of the transition that the series show, like the two sides of a same coin: the English with the past, the American with the future. This way the series creates a sense of cultural community on one side and on the other of the proverbial "pond" (the Atlantic Ocean), in the same way that commemorative programs, according to Ann Gray and Erin Bell, "seek both to represent a historical national identity, but in so doing, create a sense of community within a culturally disparate nation."

(Bell & Gray, 2007: 100) Thus the show does not only pit "the old era" against "the new era" but "the Old Continent" against "the New Continent" as well.

It would be fair to ponder whether the representation of such a significantly class-stratified England, which only focuses on a minimal, or even negligible part of the population, would not indeed add to a certain British "auto-exotism", for it is precisely here that one finds a perfect illustration of the stereotyped view that the rest of the world holds on England. Admittedly, this auto-exotism glamorizes the British legacy by idealizing it, yet it offers a nostalgic representation of the British culture that is entirely backward-looking.

"Writing television history often means illuminating aspects of a country's socio-political life in parallel, given that these histories are intertwined and inextricable." (Wheatley, 2007 : 4) Thus, as part of the flow of television history, *Downton Abbey* says less about its subject, bygone, than about the present generation, who watches the show and creates it.

b) What *Mad Men* tells us about cinema

"Americans have generally been a presentist people, seldom invoking the past beyond occasional nods to forebears. Recent soothsayers have announced 'the end of history'" (Goodlad et al., 2013: 2). Accordingly, the *Mad Men* series' success cannot solely rely on the historical accuracy with which it depicts this transition from the so-called "Age of Innocence" of the 1950s, to the "Age of Anxiety" of the 1960s.

Matthew Weiner, who created *Mad Men*, had notably distinguished himself as a recurring scriptwriter on David Chase's series *The Sopranos*. Both series have a lot in common, starting with, as we previously discussed, the depicting of a bygone era – in the case of *The Sopranos* – or of an ending one – in the case of *Mad Men*. More remarkably even, the archetypes of the eras in question have mostly been created by greatly influential films that had a major impact on the public. *The Sopranos* continually refers to Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*, and Tony Soprano, the protagonist, is in fact often interpreted as a revised and updated version of the famous mafioso Don Corleone (Messenger, 2012). As regards *Mad Men*, the show's title sequence already gives a nod to Hitchcock: a man in a suit falls in the style of *Vertigo*'s imagery (1958), then becomes a black silhouette in a manner reminiscent of *Alfred Hitchcock presents'* opening credits (1955-1965). As for the plot, it starts in 1959, the release year of the famous Hitchcock's film *North by Northwest*.

Don Draper and his first wife Betty are quintessential of the iconic Hitchcockian figures, and Tony Soprano, at first sight, seems to have the stature of a true Godfather. But such images shatter as soon as modernity establishes itself anew. After a few seasons, Don Draper appears to be, in reality, no more than the wax effigy of a careless and arrogant generation, and Tony Soprano proves to be, from the very first, a paunchy and ignorant pater familias. Their only escape from their own mediocrity is the awareness that they could be something more, something better, and should have been, had the times they live in been on par with their social standing aspirations—an evidence of this way of thinking, Don Draper's favorite drink is none other than the "Old-Fashioned".

What makes Jeremy Varon say that *Mad Men* "is more plausibly the staging of a fantasy than the rendering of history" (Varon, 2013: 258), is that it is the images, the icons, that undergo a transition in this series: a process perfectly consistent with the (self-)appraisal of America as a land with no *memory*, in which past events are experienced again through iconic forms, generally cinematic ones. Thus, *Mad Men* validates Andreas Huyssen's theory in *Present Pasts* (2003) according to which our fascination with memory and the past is a reaction to the "spreading of amnesia" in Western society (Huyssen, 2003): the latter is less interested in the past itself than in iconifying the past. Equally, these fallen, or at least, sad and nostalgic versions of iconic figures, are a proof that when it comes to the depiction of a transition era, Matthew Weiner's main interest lies in esthetic and audiovisual changes. Besides, "*Mad Men* consistently reminds its viewers that Don Draper is a cinephile. Movies, we learn, fill Don's offscreen time: when he's not in his office or another woman's bed, he is catching a matinee." (Rushing, 2013 : 192) A hereditary connection between the works of Antonioni and *Mad Men* is analyzed in detail by Robert A. Rushing—which is interesting because it is also a legacy that the proponents of the New Hollywood had claimed for themselves in the 1970s, just like they were inspired by other European cinema.

Indeed, a wide number of the most successful directors of the period—among them Martin Scorsese, Robert Altman, Arthur Penn, Dennis Hopper, Sidney Lumet, Clint Eastwood, Sidney Pollack, William Friedkin, and Peter Bogdanovich—have named as influences the works of De Sica, Rossellini, Bertolucci, Antonioni, Visconti, Bergman, Godard, Resnais, Rivette, Rohmer, Truffaut, Renoir, Buñuel, Ray, Kurosawa and Ozu. (Berliner, 2010: 6)

As for David Chase, showrunner of *The Sopranos*, he is open about the fact that he wanted to work in film (Brett, 2014) and that television was only his second choice. The statement he, and Matthew Weiner after him, seem to make is that the cinematic era they wanted to take a part in as creators is over. Similarly to their characters Draper and Soprano, they are, in their own world, the reactionary individuals who have failed to accept the transition. David Chase makes a direct reference to the death of the New Hollywood by disintegrating the image of the *mafiosi* that Scorsese and Coppola had helped to invent; and Matthew Weiner, setting his series in the 1960s, makes his own reference to the directors who have influenced and formed the New Hollywood: Antonioni and Hitchcock. But the result is the same: as in the credits of *Mad Men*, these icons are almost literally chucked out the window. Two great figures of the very end of the New Hollywood era, George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, also announced the end of American cinema to the Hollywood Reporter in 2013: George Lucas regretting that "the pathway to get into theaters is really getting smaller and smaller" (Bond, 2013). David Chase and Matthew Weiner obviously know something about this. But at the same time, they both have somehow made the successful transition, since television series are now seen as the future of—or at least the less glorious but quality alternative to—the classical Hollywood cinema.

George Lucas and Steven Spielberg themselves regard TV series as this: when Lucas said "I think eventually the *Lincolns* will go away and they're going to be on television", Spielberg replied: "As mine almost was. This close—ask HBO—this close." (Bond, 2013) So it is an aesthetic junction in cinema history that is depicted in *Mad Men*, and that leads us to question the death of Hollywood and the growing importance of television series.

In the case of *Downton Abbey*, the TV reflects its viewer, and in that of *Mad Men*, its creator. This process, which leads us to question the present in a past universe, is perfectly described by Newcomb:

Television formula requires that we use our contemporary [...] concerns as subject matter [...] and place [them], for very specific reasons, in an earlier time [when] values and issues are more clearly defined (Newcomb, 1974: 258).

The historical perspective thus allows to shed light on a present trend by projecting it further from the viewers, at a distance where they are able to judge it more objectively: in

the past. The transition periods that are represented are actually not strictly speaking “in between two eras”, but between the past and the present time, one allowing us to see the other in a necessarily more nuanced manner; since by means of putting two periods into conflict, there are every time two visions of the world, of a country or of Art that contrast and complement themselves.

To conclude this overview, we have seen that at the condition of being serialized, the TV series does not in itself prevent the representation of these transition periods, despite the absence of evolution of its main characters made necessary by the format.

What makes these series unique is that this lack of character evolution is then reused at the narrative level to create an anchor point that allows us to better judge the depicted historical transition—as does the dramatic irony common in these series, in another way. The serial format proposes therein an interesting tool to treat transitional eras—a tool that cinema cannot offer—and this probably justifies, for example, that *Gosford Park* (as a film) and *Downton Abbey* (as a series) are not strictly set at the same time, despite their similar themes. This subsequently determines the choice of characters made by the series, which, to be fixed without losing credibility, are selected to be reactionary and, in general, upper-class (never middle-class). However, we saw that, interestingly, because the fixity of characters is used to highlight the narrative of transition, the series also puts the viewers on the side of this fixity, and thereby makes them reactionary, or least in an ambiguous position in relation to this past world. It avoids placing them in the position of “Now we know better”, and at the same time makes them more active and less arrogant, or comfortable, than the audiences of some other period dramas.

But if series as such do not prevent the description of those transitional eras, their length can undermine the representation, in that these transitions are by nature ephemeral, and sometimes more ephemeral than the series themselves. If their diegesis were to exceed the time of the transition, the series would eventually be denatured and lose what constitutes their main feature; these are after all “period dramas”. These periods are difficult to determine however, both in their duration and in their nature, and these series artificially lengthen their duration. Again, the depicted reactionary circles are those in which change is slower, since they resist it. However, if these series must still overcome these coherence and credibility issues, they are also gaining tremendous narrative effectiveness, as these transition eras are a vector for conflicts which further the narrative, and even are the

primary constituent.

The TV series is an interesting format to use in order to talk about transitional eras, but beyond their serial nature, we must also reflect on their televisual nature; for audiovisual works, televisual in particular, are grammatically unable to give an idea of the past or even of the future. The televisual language is a language of the present. It is therefore not quite bygone transitions that these series depict, but present “junctions”. In the case of *Downton Abbey*, it may be—among other things—contemporary ambivalence for a country glorified for its past (“There was a time when Britannia really did rule the waves, and it’s a memory which has never wholly faded”, Bell & Gray, 2007: 201) yet nowadays quite Americanized, bringing the United Kingdom in general and *Downton Abbey* in particular to a form of self-exoticism. In the case of *Mad Men*, on the other hand, the junction that is significant above all is an esthetic or even iconographic one, which refers to contemporary questions about the future of cinema, the demise of Hollywood, and the growing importance of the television series in the audiovisual landscape. The past transitions represented are actually a reading of present junctions.

With this overview we have defined ways in which the television series and the representation of transition periods self-complement each other, justify the interest of creating these series and partly explain their quality, despite initial paradoxes between this format and their subject.

REFERENCE LIST

Books

- Ang, Ien. (2005). *Watching Dallas: Soap opera and the melodramatic imagination*. London & New York : Routledge.
- Benassi, Stéphane. (2000). *Séries et feuilletons TV: pour une typologie des fictions télévisuelles*. Liège: Ed. du CEFAL.
- Berliner, Todd. (2010). *Hollywood Incoherent: Narration in Seventies Cinema*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Blum, Richard A. (2001). *Television Writing: from Concept to Contract*. Boston: Focal Press.
- Bowles, Kate. (2000). “Soap Opera: No End of Story, Ever”, pp. 117-129, in S. Cunningham and G. Turner (eds.), *The Australian TV Book*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Bordwell, David. (2012). *Poetics of Cinema*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Douglas, Pamela. (2005). *Writing the TV drama series: How to succeed as a professional writer in TV*. Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions.

- Eco, Umberto. (1984). "The Myth of Superman", pp. 107-124. in Id., *The Role of the Reader*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Eco, Umberto. (1997). "Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics". pp. 14-33, in R. Capozzi (ed.), *Reading Eco. An Anthology*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Edgerton, Gary R. (2001). "Introduction: Television as Historian: A Different Kind of History Altogether", pp. 1-18, in G.R. Edgerton, and P. C. Rollins (eds.). *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky.
- Egri, Lajos. (1960). *The Art of Dramatic Writing*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Goodlad, Lauren. M., Kaganovsky, Lilya, & Rushing, Robert A. (2013). "Introduction", pp. 1-31, in Id. (eds.) *Mad Men, Mad World: Sex, Politics, Style, and the 1960s*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Huyssen, Andreas. (2003). *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- McGilligan, Patrick. (1999). *Clint: The life and legend*. London: Harper Collins.
- Messenger, Chris. (2012). *The Godfather and American Culture*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Metz, Christian. (1974). *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Newcomb, Horace. (1974). *TV: The Most Popular Art*. New York: Anchor.
- Niemeyer, Katharina. (2014). "Introduction: Media and Nostalgia", pp. 1-23, in Id. (ed.) *Media and nostalgia: Yearning for the past, present and future*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Polan, Dana. (2013). "Maddening Times", pp. 43-52, in L. M. Goodlad, L. Kaganovsky, & R. A. Rushing. (eds.) *Mad Men, Mad World: Sex, Politics, Style, and the 1960s*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Reicher, Maria Elisabeth. (2010). *The Ontology of Fictional Characters*, pp. 111-133, in J. Eder, F. Jannidis & R. Schneider (eds.). *Characters in Fictional Worlds: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and Other Media* (Vol. 3). Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Rushing, Robert .A. (2013). "It Will Shock You How Much This Never Happened: Antonioni and Mad Men", pp. 192-211, in L. M. Goodlad, L. Kaganovsky, & R. A. Rushing. (eds.) *Mad Men, Mad World: Sex, Politics, Style, and the 1960s*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Varon, Jeremy. (2013). *History Gets in Your Eyes: Mad Men, Misrecognition, and the Masculine Mystique*, pp. 257-278, in L. M. Goodlad, L. Kaganovsky, & R. A. Rushing. (eds.) *Mad Men, Mad World: Sex, Politics, Style, and the 1960s*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Wheatley, Helen. (ed.). (2007). *Re-viewing Television History: Critical Issues in Television History*. London and New York: IB Tauris.

Journal articles

- Bell, Erin, & Gray, Ann. (2007). "History on television. Charisma, narrative and knowledge". *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10(1): 113-133.
- Seiter, Ellen. (1982). *Promise and Contradiction: The Daytime Television Serial*. *Film Reader* 5: 150-163.

Electronic media

- Bond, Paul. (2013). *Steven Spielberg Predicts 'Implosion' of Film Industry*. (<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/steven-spielberg-predicts-implosion-film-567604>) (26-03-16)
- Duncan, Andrew. (2015). *Christopher Eccleston: I hope I'll be remembered for Doctor Who... but I don't watch it*. (<http://www.radiotimes.com/news/2015-04-20/christopher-eccleston-i-hope-ill-be-remembered-for-doctor-who---but-i-dont-watch-it>) (12-23-15)
- Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques (1998). *Définition et Rémunération de la Bible*. (http://www.sacd.fr/uploads/tx_sacdresources/def_bible.pdf) (03-26-16)

Dictionnaire

- Setting. (s.d.). In *Online Cambridge Dictionary*. (<http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/defense/22625>) (03-26-16)

Script

- Weiner, Matthew (2006). *Mad Men Pilot script "Smoke gets in your eyes"* (<http://goodinaroom.com/wp-content/uploads/Mad-Men-pilot-script.pdf>) (03-26-16)

Films

- Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (T. Alfredson, 2012)
- Gosford Park* (R. Altman, 2001).
- The Godfather* (F.F. Coppola, 1972)
- North by Northwest* (A. Hitchcock, 1959)
- Sense and Sensibility* (A. Lee, 1995)

War Horse (S. Spielberg, 2012)
The Woman in Black (J. Watkins, 2012)
Pride and Prejudice (J. Wright, 2005)

TV Series

Downton Abbey (2010-2015)
House M.D. (2004-2012)
Mad Men (2007-2015)
Parade's End (2012)
The Knick (2014-)
The Sopranos (1999-2007)

