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Falling Man and Mad Men

Gary Edgerton

Mad Men's opening credit sequence is full of obvious and hidden clues as to what this series is all about. The program is a stylistic hybrid merging elements of Hollywood movies and television programs from the late 1950s along with TV's contemporaneous "quality" dramas of today. For example, the debt Matt Weiner and his creative team owes to Hitchcock is immediately apparent in this sequence with its pastiche of Saul Bass's title work from *Vertigo* (the optical disorientation), *North by Northwest* (the iconography of the Manhattan skyline), and *Psycho* (the foreboding strings à la Bernard Herrmann). The use of a protagonist in black silhouette even suggests the 1955-1965 television series, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, where the producer-director steps right into a black silhouetted profile of himself during the opening credits of that show.

Still, the most striking aspect of *Mad Men*'s title sequence is the depiction of the male protagonist falling from the top of a skyscraper. The action begins as he enters his office in black silhouette, puts down his briefcase, and watches as his furniture begins to implode, almost melting. A small rotating fan spins in an open window, but we never see how the silhouetted man ends up outside the building; we just see him in a graceful freefall for over half of the sequence tumbling past seductive images of women, a glass of whiskey, advertising slogans ("Enjoy the Best America Has to Offer"; "It's the Gift That Never Fails"), two hands wearing wedding rings, a couple kissing, a smiling nuclear family, and four old vintage photographs. There's a lot going on in just thirty-six seconds. The slow, languid pace of the fall almost suggests a dream where the protagonist is watching his life pass before his eyes. We can all relate to dreams of falling which typically express our latent anxieties, even our feelings of being out of control and overwhelmed. On a deeper level, moreover, *Mad Men*'s perspective is resolutely post-9/11. This vantage point is not just chronological; it is psychic and visceral. On the surface, *Mad Men*'s mise-en-scene and iconography may appear nostalgic, but it comes with an attitude towards the past that exposes the workaday sexism, racism, adultery, homophobia, and anti-Semitism of the era—not to mention all the excessive smoking and drinking. *Mad Men* unapologetically presents the early sixties through the eyes of the present. It is an antidote to the overly simplified and saccharine poetics surrounding the cottage industry of books, films, and

television programs that has emerged since the late 1990s mythologizing the World War II generation. The characters in *Mad Men*—who are basically stand-ins for our parents and grandparents—are hardly representative of a “greatest generation.” They are merely earlier, confused, and conflicted versions of us, trying to make the best of their own transformative moment where they too are caught in a kind of freefall wedged between the recent past and a shadowy onrushing future. Let me conclude with a caveat: my intention in linking *Mad Men*’s opening credit sequence with Richard Drew’s famous photograph of the Falling Man in these notes and in the accompanying video clip is not meant in any way to trivialize or diminish the personal tragedy and pain felt by family members and loved ones on 9/11 and afterwards. 9/11 is what it is and *Mad Men* is after all a television program. On a more iconic level, though, the Falling Man shares space with the firefighters and police officers of 9/11, but it suggests a much darker reality (just as *Mad Men* undermines the wistful nostalgia of the “greatest generation”). After appearing in hundreds of newspapers right after 9/11, the Falling Man image was airbrushed from history as being too callous and inappropriate to be seen. It probably forced people to confront head-on the full life-and-death implications of 9/11 too soon after the event, including their own mortality. That being said, the highly-charged perceptions evoked by the Falling Man image cannot be suppressed forever. It has already found its way into Eric Fischl’s sculpture, *Tumbling Woman* (2002), Henry Singer’s documentary, *9/11: The Falling Man* (2006), Don DeLillo’s novel, *Falling Man* (2007), and now *Mad Men*’s opening sequence (2007-). The terrible, quiet serenity of that image provides a disturbing template for *Mad Men*’s animated black silhouette, capturing the full intensity and unease of our time. As the protagonist lands smoothly on his chair, his perspective is ours as we look over his shoulder. He may strike a confident pose with a cigarette dangling from his fingers, but situated as we are behind him, we know better.