The Burden of Being a Woman: Female Spectacle and Gender Performativity in the television series *Mad Men*

by

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Introduction

We make ourselves objects, outside ourselves, something we expect others to admire because we admire, and which we admire through others’ admiration.

But it’s not us really…That beautiful object we stand in awe before has nothing to do with the person we know so well; it is altogether outside, separate, object, a beautiful image, not a person at all. A feast for the eyes.

A feast for the eyes, and not for the mind. That beautiful object is just an object, a work of art, to look at, not to know, total appearance, bearing no personality or will. To the extent that one is caught up in the beauty of it, one perceives object and not person…

It is true that this is part of the burden of being a woman. We are expected to be beautiful and not being beautiful does not make us automatically accepted as people. To some extent and for some people we are never more than our appearance. (Densmore 205-6).

- Dana Densmore, “On the Temptation to be a Beautiful Object,” November 1968

The November 1968 publication of the radical feminist periodical No More Fun and Games: A Journal of Female Liberation includes an essay by then twenty-something Dana Densmore titled “On the Temptation to be a Beautiful Object.” Densmore begins the essay by stating, “We are constantly bombarded in this society by the images of feminine beauty…it is used extensively in advertising, particularly in advertising directed at women: be like this, they are saying, use our product” (Densmore 204). Densmore, writing at the beginning of the second wave of feminism, articulates in her essay the “burden of being a woman,” that is, the pressure to be beautiful and to accept being viewed as nothing but a beautiful object.

Densmore’s essay — from the explanation of advertising’s role in the objectification of women to the emphasis on the work that is required to achieve a beautiful appearance — could feasibly be read as an historical companion piece to the television series Mad Men (2007 –
present), created, produced, and written by Matthew Weiner. The first season of *Mad Men* begins in 1960 at a Manhattan advertising agency. Weiner’s placement of the series at this pivotal point in time — just before Densmore and her peers ignited the women’s liberation movement — is no coincidence. Beginning at the very start of the decade, he uses each episode to reveal more and more of the growing tensions that will lead to the social revolution of the 1960s. While race relations and various other societal and cultural changes are represented, the series’ attention to the changing roles of women is particularly notable. Weiner’s representation of changing women’s roles is achieved primarily through the stories of the three lead female characters — Betty (January Jones), Joan (Christina Hendricks) and Peggy Olson (Elisabeth Moss). When the series begins, Weiner portrays these three characters as representing three very stereotypical images of femininity. Betty is a college-educated housewife who worked as a model in Europe and Manhattan before marrying, moving to the suburbs and having children. Joan is the voluptuous head secretary at Sterling Cooper ad agency who uses her sexuality to wield power in the workplace. Peggy enters Sterling Cooper as an earnest secretary but her writing skills quickly land her a position as a copywriter. When the series begins, each character is depicted as an archetype. However, as *Mad Men*, and the social culture of the 1960s, progress, Weiner complicates the images portrayed by the three characters.

In *American Women in the 1960s: Changing the Future*, Blanche Linden-Ward and Carol Hurd Green write: “Mentions of the sixties conjures up stereotypical images, bordering on myth, of radical change and discontinuity; yet fifties trends of suburbanization, conformity, complacency, growing prosperity, and a renewed cult of motherhood underlying the ‘baby boom’ persisted for many women well through and past the sixties” (ix). Weiner’s placement of *Mad Men* at the beginning of the 1960s allows for a more nuanced view of the decade than the
one offered by the stereotypical images to which Linden-Ward and Green refer. The authors go on to explain, “The sixties did bring the beginning of crucial changes and new freedoms for some in oppressed groups. The fifties were not so gray as they have often been painted, and there were shifts in both cultural and political attitudes that presaged the sixties. 1960 witnessed significant beginnings and significant endings” (xiv). Linden-Ward and Green mention that in that year actors Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz divorced, etiquette guru Emily Post died and in November, John F. Kennedy — a symbol of promise for a new generation — was elected president. However, they continue, “Before the decade was half over, that generation — Kennedy’s — would be attacked by many of its children as the bearer of militarism and capitalism. But in January 1961, exciting and dangerous images were let loose — young, not old; new, not tried; adventurous, not safe — and a climate of expectation began to grow” (xiv).

This climate of expectation is undoubtedly present in Mad Men. After all, the early 1960s saw two large catalysts of the women’s liberation movement: the introduction of the birth control pill in 1960 and the publication of Betty Friedan’s groundbreaking The Feminine Mystique. Linden-Ward and Green write:

In The Feminine Mystique (1963), Betty Friedan contrasted women’s real lives with the ‘image to which [they] were trying to conform.’ In the fifties, social forces and mass media revived the cult of domesticity; and the ideal of ultra-femininity formed a widespread and influential tyranny of acceptable female images, shaping the behavior and self-image of average women of every age; but in the sixties, before and independent of feminism’s revival, new female images emerged to challenge middle-class conventions and shock many women of older generations. (194)

Through the characters of Betty, Joan and Peggy, some of these new — albeit white, heterosexual and middle class — female images that Linden-Ward and Green speak of become evident. A focus on image, or spectacle, and the performative nature of femininity is at the heart of Weiner’s depiction of these three characters [See Figure 1.1]. Through both cinematography
and diegesis, Betty, Joan and Peggy are portrayed as struggling to negotiate what Densmore refers to as “the temptation to be a beautiful object.”

This essay will examine the various and conflicting ways Weiner uses the three lead female characters — Betty, Joan and Peggy — to assert the spectacle and performative aspects of femininity in Mad Men and will examine how these portrayals function within the storylines of these three characters to represent the shifting roles of women in the 1960s.

Figure 1.1 Betty (from top), Joan and Peggy inspect their appearances in the episode “Maidenform.”
Theoretical Background

The theoretical approaches that I will be drawing upon in this essay can be categorized into four themes: image and spectacle, masquerade and artifice, performativity, and female spectatorship. I will briefly address these theoretical approaches in this section, but will continue to apply and discuss them throughout the essay.

Image and Spectacle

Laura Mulvey’s 1975 “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” was groundbreaking not only in feminist psychoanalytic film theory, but in film theory in general. Employing the psychoanalytic work of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, Mulvey addresses the male gaze, point of view, and identification, and how these relate to gender.

Mulvey writes:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pinups to strip-tease, from Ziegfield to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. (“Visual Pleasure,” 33)

In her essay, Mulvey employs Freud’s castration anxiety theory and Lacan’s mirror stage theory (or identification theory) to argue that classic Hollywood films assume a male spectator and place the female character in the film as the object of desire. Mulvey explains how this male gaze in classic cinema operates by applying the two Freudian categories of scopophilia and ego libido. Mulvey defines scopophilia, or voyeurism, as the pleasure derived from watching the female character, or object, on screen and she describes ego libido, or fetishization, as pleasure from identification with the male character, or subject, on screen. Thus, she concludes that the
way in which classical cinema is made is inherently phallocentric, demoting women to the role of object.

In her 1985 essay “Feminist Film Theory and Criticism,” Judith Mayne states, “It is only a slight exaggeration to say that most feminist film theory and criticism of the last decade has been a response, implicit or explicit, to the issues raised in Laura Mulvey’s article: the centrality of the look, cinema as spectacle and narrative, psychoanalysis as a critical tool” (“Feminist Film,” 83). Mayne herself addresses these issues in both this essay and her 1984 essay “The Woman at the Keyhole: Women’s Cinema and Feminist Criticism.” In the latter essay, Mayne articulates a crucial point for this essay on Mad Men:

By identifying women’s presence in the Hollywood cinema through a spectator-spectacle relationship, we are asking the question: How are the relations of seeing, the relation of a person looking and a person looked at, power bound? As film viewers, we have spent more time than we realize watching men and women look at each other, and, most emphatically, watching men watch women. (“Woman at the Keyhole,” 50-1)

Because the spectacle/spectator relationship is such a strong and complex diegetic component of Mad Men, I will be returning to Mayne and her work on spectatorship.

Mary Ann Doane’s essay “Film and Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator” (1982), Kaja Silverman’s 1983 book Subject of Semiotics, and Teresa deLauretis’ 1984 book Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema all concern themselves to a degree with Mulvey’s conception of image and spectacle, however they take Mulvey’s work as a jumping off point to explore how the boundaries of subject/object can be blurred. This blurring of the subject/object boundary is evident in Mad Men, and so I will be returning to these works.

Masquerade and Artifice

One of the ways blurring of the subject/object boundary can occur is through the concept of masquerade. In her 1995 essay “Myth of Pandora: A Psychoanalytical Approach,” Mulvey
discusses the artificiality of the representation of women on screen. She writes, “The antinomy between outside and inside, surface and secret, is the source of a series of images of femininity as artifice. Artifice, appearance, cosmetic, made up. This phantasmatic topography has haunted representations of femininity across the ages, not consistently manifest, but persisting as a strong intermittent strand in our cultural traditions” (“Myth of Pandora,” 6).

Doane’s “Film and Masquerade” explores this idea further. Doane describes masquerading for women as a way of flaunting femininity while at the same time distancing oneself from it. (49). By putting on a mask of excessive femininity, a woman who masquerades both reveals the construction of gender and demonstrates that she controls the image she is projecting. In other words, by revealing the artificiality of her own image and her agency in producing this image, the woman demonstrates that she is not merely a passive object, but an active subject who is controlling the image she produces. Doane writes of masquerade’s transgressive power: “The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed. The masquerade’s resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as, precisely, imagistic” (49).

Masquerade and artifice play a central role in Mad Men as Weiner goes to great filmic and diegetic lengths to highlight the construction and falseness of the images of the female characters. I will return many times to theory on masquerade in my discussion of the series.

Performativity

Similar in tactic to masquerade is the notion of performativity. In her book Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality (2000), Anne Fausto-Sterling writes, “Feminist theorists view the body not as essence, but as a bare scaffolding on which discourse
and performance build a completely acculturated being (6). This is perhaps best illustrated by the work of post-structuralist philosopher Judith Butler. In her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler takes inspiration from Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion that gender is not something one *is*, but something one *becomes* to build her theory that gender is performative: “a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (*Gender Trouble*, xv).

Butler describes these performative acts as socially prescribed, almost second nature actions, including bodily gestures, movements and sartorial styles (*Gender Trouble*, 191). In a 1988 essay on the same subject, Butler elaborates on the transgressive power of performativity: “Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds” (“Performative Acts,” 401).

Like the notion of masquerade, gender performativity reveals the artifice of gender. Gender performativity could in fact be considered to encompass masquerade as a performative tactic. Because Butler’s understanding of gender performativity depends upon repeated and sustained acts, the moments when one fails to correctly “do” gender reveal its artifice: “The abiding gendered self will then be shown to be structured by repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity, but which, in their occasional discontinuity, reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness of this ‘ground’” (*Gender Trouble*, 192).

With *Mad Men*, Weiner employs the female characters to reveal the performativity of gender in various ways. Cinematically, the female characters are depicted as performing gender
through the ways in which they dress, speak and present themselves. Diegetically, the female characters are also portrayed as performing gender, as revealed in the plots of various episodes. The historical aspect of the series highlights Butler’s assertion that what constitutes the “ideal” feminine identity is indeed situated in a specific temporal space (*Gender Trouble*, xv). As the series progresses through the 1960s, the ideal femininity that the female characters perform changes accordingly.

**Female Spectatorship**

The last major theoretical approach that this essay will employ is female spectatorship. In response to Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema” are multiple works of feminist film theory that take into consideration female spectatorship, or what happens when women transgress the active/passive, subject/object dichotomies. As mentioned previously in the section on Image and Spectacle, Mulvey (in “Myth of Pandora”), Mayne (in “Woman at the Keyhole”) and Doane (in “Film and Masquerade”) all address the issue of female spectatorship. Mulvey discusses the potential of female spectatorship for subverting the strict dichotomies of looking that she put forth in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema:”

> My interest in the Pandora myth, as I said earlier, stemmed originally from a wish to consider the aesthetics of curiosity, a wish that stemmed in turn from my interest in giving greater complexity to the argument in my article ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.’ I thought that an active, investigative look, but one that was also associated with the feminine, could suggest a way out of the rather too neat binary opposition: masculine look as active and voyeuristic in polarization with femininity as spectacle, passive and exhibitionist. (“Myth of Pandora,” 16)

In her groundbreaking essay “When the Woman Looks” (1984), Linda Williams examines female spectatorship in relation to the horror film genre, arguing that female spectatorship is always punished in that particular genre:
The bold, smouldering dark eyes of the silent screen vamp offer an obvious example of a powerful female look. But the dubious moral status of such heroines, and the fact that they must be punished in the end, undermine the legitimacy and authentic subjectivity of this look, frequently turning it into a mere parody of the male look. More instructive are those moments when the “good girl” heroines are granted the power of the look, whether in the woman’s film…or in the horror film as discussed below. In both cases, as Doane suggests, “the woman’s exercise of an active investigating gaze can only be simultaneous with her own victimization.” The woman’s gaze is punished, in other words, by narrative processes that transform curiosity and desire into masochistic fantasy.

While an obviously different genre than horror, Mad Men similarly concerns itself with female spectatorship, yet occasionally offers an alternative to the punishing end that Williams describes. Spectatorship plays a large role in Mad Men due to its setting in an advertising agency. The male employees not only unscrupulously gaze at and judge women in the workplace, but also do the same in their personal lives. As the character of Peggy advances in the advertising world, she finds success primarily by assuming a similar unscrupulous gaze herself. Additionally, as the setting of the series progresses through the 1960s, Weiner increasingly portrays Peggy and Betty as assuming desiring gazes with results that are much more ambiguous than those Williams describes.

These four theoretical themes — image and spectacle, masquerade and artifice, performativity, and female spectatorship — will inform the following discussion of the first four seasons of Mad Men.
Betty

Season One: 1960

In the first season of Mad Men, Weiner uses the character of Betty to perfectly exemplify Mulvey’s concept of the passive image. A former model, it appears that Betty is accustomed to being looked at and considers this objectification an intrinsic part of being a woman.

This objectification is particularly evident in the episode “Shoot.” In the episode, Betty has been offered a modeling job with a company that is trying to recruit her husband. She is unsure whether or not she received the offer because of her looks or because of Don (Jon Hamm). Throughout the episode, Betty repeatedly reminds people that she modeled in Italy and Manhattan. In one scene she talks with her friend Francine, another woman from her neighborhood. “My mother always said, ‘You’re painting a masterpiece, be sure to hide all the brushstrokes. She was very beautiful,” Betty tells Francine. She continues to tell her about the psychiatrist she has been seeing to treat her anxiety and depression. “I’m pretty sure Dr. Wayne tried to look down my neckline the other day. And as far as I’m concerned, as long as men look at me that way, I’m earning my keep.” Weiner’s portrayal of Betty highlights Mulvey’s concept of “to-be-looked-at-ness” (“Visual Pleasure,” 33). She believes that, as a woman, she should always be on display.

When Betty appears on set at the modeling shoot, this is even more evident. She is overdressed for the audition, wearing an elaborate gown while the other women wear more casual clothes. Betty realizes that she no longer projects the image of a young, contemporary woman. In the ad for which she models, she plays a mother having a picnic with her two children and husband. The scene and family look strikingly similar to the Draper family, so much that Betty seems to be just playing herself. When the camera pulls back, the lights and studio, and,
thus, the falsity of the image, are revealed [See Figure 3.1]. This is important, as it can be seen to symbolize the happy image projected by the Drapers that, throughout the first season, also proves to be false. Betty, the center of this image at the modeling shoot, as well as the symbolic center of the Draper family, is especially implicated in this imaging.

Figure 3.1 Top Betty and her commercial family on set, Bottom Betty stripped of her jewelry.
The image of the Draper family begins to crack in this episode, as Don makes clear to Betty that he does not like her working outside the home. While she is gone the first day, the children’s dog attacks the neighbor’s pet birds and the neighbor threatens to shoot the dog. Don uses this as an example of what happens when Betty isn’t around to take care of the children.

During the second day of shooting, Betty is told she is no longer needed for the ad campaign, that Coca Cola wants an Audrey Hepburn, not Grace Kelly type. Once again, Betty receives the message that her appearance, the certain type of femininity that she has learned to perform, is no longer current. The art director walks Betty off set and the lights and studio are now visible. Weiner visually makes certain that Betty is merely on a set, not in reality. She cries as an assistant removes her jewelry, stripping her, in a way, of her identity and the image she has tried so hard to maintain [See Figure 3.1]. As the season reveals that the Draper’s marriage is an illusion, Betty’s dismissal from the set and stripping of her jewelry illustrates how the image she has created of a perfect wife, mother and woman is merely a façade. The fact that she is modeling further suggests the performativity of her role as wife, mother and woman.

When Betty returns home that evening, she tells Don she decided to stop modeling to instead take care of the family. The next morning she makes breakfast, wearing a flowy white robe as the song “My Special Angel” plays on the radio. Betty folds laundry, lights a cigarette, takes Don’s rifle outside and shoots at the neighbor’s birds. Still dressed in white, the combination of her outfit, the music, the cigarette and rifle create a contradictory image. Betty shows uncharacteristic emotion as she angrily shoots, defending her family.

In relation to the rest of the season, this is a turning point for Betty. Her character is portrayed as breaking from her passive object status with this alternative “shooting;” one of the first active moves she makes, and certainly the most aggressive. The scene also draws a parallel
to the earlier scenes in the episode when Betty is “shot” by a camera. Taking aim with the rifle and shooting at the birds, Weiner portrays Betty as beginning to reject her status as merely a passive image.

In the second season, the character of Betty realizes Don has been unfaithful to her. However, the suspicion is present throughout most of the first season and as it grows, so does her resentment towards Don. In the episode “Indian Summer,” a man selling air conditioners comes to the house when Betty is home alone. In several shots, Betty can be seen looking at him, admiring his appearance and clearly attracted to him [See Figure 3.2].

![Figure 3.2](image)

**Figure 3.2** Betty looks desiringly at the air conditioner repairman.
The next day, the washing machine begins vibrating and Betty grabs onto it and begins to fantasize about the salesman. After portraying Don with other women is several scenes, this is the first time Weiner shows Betty being intimate with anyone else. Again, she is portrayed as the active viewer, imagining and objectifying, for her own pleasure, a man she has met only once. Williams, in discussing Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure,” explains the lack of female spectatorship thusly: “Mulvey’s extremely influential article on visual pleasure and narrative cinema has best defined this problem in terms of a dominant male look at the woman that leaves no place for the woman’s own pleasure in seeing: she exists only to be looked at” (83). Here, it can be argued that Weiner uses the character of Betty to defy and question both Mulvey and Williams, who argues that women who look with desire are punished in cinema (85).

As the show progresses, Weiner continues to use the character of Betty to challenge this idea that female desire must be punished. Betty is featured engaging in her own affairs and pursuing her own pleasure. These scenes from the first season demonstrate how much value the character of Betty places on her own to-be-looked-at-ness and just how fabricated the image she projects is. However, they also show Betty slowly taking on an active role and refusing to be perceived solely as an object.

**Season Two: 1962**

In Season Two, Weiner further highlights the performative aspects of Betty’s identity. As her marriage crumbles around her, Betty attempts to continue playing the role of devoted wife and mother. In the episode “The Benefactor,” Don calls upon Betty to literally perform the role of a charming wife. Don requests that Betty attend a fancy dinner to smooth over a rift between his clients and their brand spokesperson, comedian Jimmy Barrett (Patrick Fischler). “Is this one where I talk or don’t talk?” Betty moodily asks Don. “You need to charm him [Jimmy Barrett],”
Don says, “I need you to be shiny and bright.” At the dinner, Betty lives up to Don’s expectations, glamorizing her role as housewife, which, from all appearances, she does not actually enjoy. Jimmy refers to Betty as “Mrs. America” and calls the couple Barbie and Ken, clearly buying into the image of married perfection that Betty and Don project. While Betty’s act of the perfect housewife aligns with Butler’s theory of performativity, there is a strong element of masquerade also present. Doane speaks of masquerade as the “hyperbolization of the accoutrements of femininity” (49). The image that the character of Betty projects is in many ways an exaggeration of the housewife stereotype. Betty’s hyperbolized housewife performance is arguably an attempt by Weiner to show how the masquerade of the perfect housewife may, as Doane suggests, in fact distance Betty from this role that she does not enjoy (49).

Weiner further uses the character of Betty to highlight the notion of performativity in the episode “A Night to Remember.” Betty has learned, via rumor, that Don has been cheating on her but she hasn’t confronted him yet. This is presumably because she is throwing a dinner party for some of Don’s clients and colleagues and wishes to keep up the image of a happy relationship. Meanwhile, Don is trying to introduce an advertising campaign that would market Heineken beer to well-to-do housewives. He tells Roger Sterling (John Slattery) and Duck Phillips (Mark Moses) that the target demographic is his wife and he knows her well enough to know the marketing campaign will work. Betty unknowingly purchases Heineken for the party to the amusement of Roger and Duck. The men laugh at the coincidence but no one will let Betty in on the joke. Despite being flustered and unsure why she is the butt of the joke, Betty maintains her role as the perfect hostess. However, once the guests leave Betty tells Don she was humiliated and confronts him about his affair, which he denies. Betty doesn’t sleep that night and once Don leaves for work, she drinks wine and goes through his things to find some evidence of
his cheating. Unable to find anything, Betty passes out, still in her party dress from the night before. She awakes with her makeup smeared and hair unkempt, the dress wrinkled. She accidentally steps on her wine glass and cuts her foot [See Figure 3.3].

![Betty in disarray the day after the party](image)

**Figure 3.3** Betty in disarray the day after the party

Betty, who is portrayed as always trying to always look perfect, has been driven to a state of disarray by Don. In her distress, she is no longer able to keep up her flawless appearance. Or perhaps, with the confirmation that her marriage is no longer perfect, she doesn’t care to perpetuate the illusion that it is. That evening, when Don comes home, Betty kicks him out of the house. However, she tells the children and her family that Don is away for work, unable to completely let go of the image of the perfect family that she has projected for so long.

In the episode “The Inheritance,” Betty and Don continue to keep up the illusion that their marriage is fine while staying at Betty’s father’s house. As soon as they are alone and away from her family, Betty cruelly snaps, “Stop it Don, no one can hear you.” That night Betty initiates sex with Don, but when he wakes up she is gone and when they return home she tells
him he still isn’t allowed to stay in the house. “We were just pretending,” she tells him. Betty, who is portrayed as so reluctant to exhibit desire in the first season, has clearly embraced it by this episode and will continue to do so through the next few seasons. In the last episode of the season, “Meditations in an Emergency,” Betty finds out that she is pregnant, a result of the night she spent with Don at her father’s home. While the children stay with Don in the city, Betty heads to an almost empty bar where she drinks and has sex with a random stranger. She returns home and eats cold chicken off the bone, leaving the refrigerator open. With this episode, Weiner shows that Betty has clearly stopped seeing the need to perform as the perfect wife and mother. She is portrayed as pursing her desires and is not nearly as concerned with how she looks. Season Two begins with Betty performing for Don’s benefit but ends with her rejecting the conventional behaviors that she had so adhered to in the past. As Season Three progresses, however, Weiner once again uses the character of Betty to complicate the notions of performativity and masquerade.

**Season Three: 1963**

In Season Three Betty delivers her baby, Gene, and allows Don back into their home in an attempt to recover their marriage. In this season, Weiner portrays the character of Betty clinging to the past and a happier time when she still believed that her family life was perfect. In episode “Seven Twenty Three,” Betty meets with Henry Francis (Christopher Stanley), an acquaintance who works as adviser for the governor of New York. Attracted to and fascinated by Henry, Betty hesitantly lets him pursue her. In the same episode, Betty becomes attached to an antique chaise that her interior designer hates because it doesn’t fit with the modern style of the rest of the house. Betty clings to the chaise in the same way she clings to the memory of how life was before she found out Don was cheating. Weiner depicts Betty’s hesitation to return the
chaise for something more modern as symbolic of her hesitation to commit to Henry and leave Don. This theme is explored further in the episode “Souvenir.” Betty and Henry kiss, but she seems conflicted by her feelings toward him. Perhaps still clinging to the hope that her marriage can be saved, Betty decides at the last minute to join Don on a business trip to Rome. Betty, who modeled in Italy, speaks Italian fluently and seems truly in her element in Rome. She gets made up in an enormous beehive, heavy makeup and slim black gown, producing an image that is opposite of her suburban housewife image, yet all the same fabricated. Italian men hit on her, and she and Don pretend to have just met and flirt accordingly. Watching how relaxed and happy Betty appears in Rome, it is clear that Weiner is showing how much of the character’s unhappiness stems from her role as wife and mother. College educated and worldly and now stuck in the suburbs doing chores, Betty’s unhappiness seems exactly what Betty Friedan identified in her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*. In her book on Friedan’s historical importance, Stephanie Coontz writes:

> The Feminine Mystique argued that beneath the daily routines and surface contentment of most housewives’ lives lay a deep well of insecurity, self-doubt, and unhappiness that they could not articulate even to themselves. And in describing that unhappiness as something more than an individual case of ‘the blues,’ Friedan unleashed a wave of recognition and relief in thousands of women. (18)

It is likely no mistake that Weiner created the character of an unhappy housewife and named her Betty. By placing Betty in the glamorous setting of Rome, Weiner highlights how trapped Betty feels in her role as housewife. When Betty and Don return home, Betty appears even unhappier than before. “I hate this place. I hate our friends. I hate this town,” she tells Don. Seeing that the trip to Italy ultimately did not change her situation, Betty begins to look forward instead of reminiscing about the past. In the episode “The Wee Small Hours” Betty meets up with Henry at his office. She wants to begin an affair with him but dislikes the idea of having sex in his office.
or at a hotel because it is “tawdry.” Betty wants her relationship with Henry to be perfect, and so she waits. In “The Gypsy and the Hobo,” Don confesses to Betty about his past and his former identity. This seems to convince her even further that she needs to leave Don. As they take the children out on Halloween, a man identifies Sally and Bobby as a gypsy and a hobo, then looks at Betty, Don and Gene and asks, “And who are you supposed to be?” No matter how much the Drapers perform as a perfect family, they are no longer fooling anyone. In the next episode, “The Grown Ups,” Betty seems even more conflicted about discarding her idealized notion of the past and embracing the future. After John F. Kennedy’s assassination, Betty is unusually upset and glued to the television. Watching the dissolution of the Kennedys and their “Camelot” reign appears to resonate with Betty, whose own “perfect” marriage is about to dissolve in divorce. At Roger Sterling’s daughter’s wedding, which is held a few days after the assassination, Don and Henry appear in front of Betty, one on either side of the screen and both looking at her, representing her future and past. After the wedding Betty finally takes action and tells Don that she no longer loves him. In the next episode, the last of the season, she and Henry fly to Nevada so that Betty can obtain her divorce. Betty has decided, after a season of wavering, to finally abandon hope that her relationship with Don would ever regain the same level of perfection that Betty had perceived it to have. Depicted as performing until almost the very end of the relationship, Betty’s obsession with the image that she (and her family) projects is still fully evident in this season.

Season Four: 1964-1965

Despite Betty being in a new marriage, Weiner uses Season Four to continue to explore Betty’s tendency to cling to a nostalgic past. However, cosmetically, Betty’s style has changed. She is made up more maturely, apparently playing the part of a woman who is in her second
marriage. She more frequently wears her hair in an updo and appears in more muted colors. The character’s wardrobe has also changed: she has abandoned the older, 1950s style of clothing that was popular during her marriage to Don. As Blanche Linden-Ward and Carol Hurd Green discuss in their book *American Women in the 1960s: Changing the Future*, “Box-jacketed suits and dresses with sheath and A-line skirts replaced the crinolined, hour-glass figures of the fifties” (319). Weiner uses Betty’s sartorial style to show how the character’s outward appearance allows her to perform a certain kind of femininity.

But despite her new appearance, Betty finds many of the same problems in her new marriage that she did in her old marriage. By the end of the season, Betty appears desperate and even more nostalgic for her past with Don. In “Tommorowland,” Betty prepares to move out of the house she and Don had lived in and into a new house with Henry. Betty appears back in her

Figure 3.4 Betty makes herself up before Don arrives
old, 1950s-style dress. She wears pearls and her hair is down and in curls again. After getting into an argument with Henry, Betty lies down on Sally’s bare bed like a little girl. She waits in the kitchen at night, making up her face in a compact mirror [See Figure 3.4]. She waits for Don to arrive and acts surprised, as if she didn’t know he was coming to meet with the realtor. Betty flirts with Don and lets on that her marriage to Henry isn’t completely happy. “Isn’t that what you wanted?” Don asks. “I don’t know Don, things aren’t perfect.” In Season One, Betty revealed that her mother told her she should always look perfect. Weiner effectively shows that Betty has internalized her mother’s words to mean that her life should always be, or at least appear, perfect. Unable to cope with small imperfections, Betty makes an attempt to relive some of her happier past with Don. At the end, however, they walk off in separate directions.

Throughout the first four seasons of Mad Men, Weiner’s portrayal of Betty’s obsession with her appearance and her constant performing remains somewhat consistent. However, he also allows Betty to have those few moments in which she becomes more active, pursues her own desires without punishment and seems to care less about performing.

Betty’s obsession with appearance and façade are likely not that atypical for a young wife and mother of her time. In her book Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era, Elaine Tyler May writes of the respondents of the Kelly Longitudinal Study, a psychological study of married couples in the 1950s:

The respondents expressed a strong commitment to a new and expanded vision of family life, focused inwardly on parents and children and bolstered by affluence and sex. They claimed to have found their personal identities and achieved their individual goals largely through their families. Yet the superlatives ring hollow, as if these women and men were trying to convince themselves that the families they had created fulfilled all their deepest wishes. For as their extensive responses to other questions in the survey will show, they experienced disappointments, dashed hopes, and lowered expectations. (33)
Like the women in the study, the character of Betty, whose fabricated identity is so strongly connected to her role as wife and mother, is shown as similarly attempting to convince herself of her own fulfillment through the perfect and content image she constructs. Of the three female characters discussed in this essay, Betty is certainly the most traditional and perhaps the most invested in the performative aspect of gender. Weiner’s portrayal of Betty is clearly influenced by Friedan’s depiction of the unhappy housewife in *The Feminine Mystique*. If viewed as a progression in the shifting roles of women in the 1960s, Betty is clearly the most conservative and least transgressive. Yet, Weiner uses her character to significantly demonstrate the construction of gender through the ways in which she reveals the artifice and performative aspects of femininity as well as to question, through her few transgressive acts, the stereotypical femininity that she represents.
Joan

Season One: 1960

Weiner portrays the character of Joan, like that of Betty, as highly aware of the image she projects and the type of femininity she performs. However, she is presented as much more in control of how she is objectified. In the first season, little is known about Joan’s background, other than that she is older than she looks (her driver’s license reveals her to be in her mid-30s), has been living in Manhattan for over a decade and is looking for a husband. This lack of backstory — with which almost every other character is supplied — identifies Joan as almost completely image, not an entire person. As Doane discusses, woman as image “is more closely associated with the surface of the image than its illusory depths” (43-4).

Weiner uses the episode “Babylon” to address Joan and her image explicitly. In one scene, Sterling Cooper is given an account for Belle Jolie lipstick and tests the product on a group of secretaries to see their reactions. The men at the agency — most of whom have nothing to do with the account — sit on one side of a two-way mirror and watch as the women try on lipstick, unaware of the men’s presence. Joan is aware of the two-way mirror and acts accordingly. Roger Sterling, with whom she is having an affair, is on the other side of the glass and she knows it. Joan bends over in front of the mirror then stands up and looks directly in the mirror at the men she knows are behind it [See Figure 4.1]. Weiner uses this exchange to illustrate Joan’s experience of being looked at. She knows men (and women) are watching her, and she controls what they see and how they see it. She appears to be looking at herself, but is really presenting herself to be looked at. Even the self-actualizing act of looking at her own image is a performance for Joan. It is inextricably tied to how other people perceive her.
As Mayne argues, these relations of looking and seeing are power-bound and more complex than they perhaps appear:

We know that women function in the classical cinema as objects of spectacle, a function exemplified by the extreme: Marilyn Monroe. Remember *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* (1953), for example — every time Monroe enters a room, be it a restaurant, a hotel room or a courtroom, the space immediately becomes a stage, and onlookers become spectators, consumers of this image of femininity. A feminist analysis of the phenomenon of Marilyn Monroe seems so simple. She is a passive object, nothing more than the projection of male fantasies. But this “ideology of the spectacle,” so to speak, is more complex than even the cliché of Marilyn Monroe would suggest. By identifying women’s presence in the Hollywood cinema through a spectator-spectacle relationship, we are asking the question: How are the relations of seeing, the relation of a person looking and a person looked at, power bound? As film viewers, we have spent more time than we realize watching men and women look at each other, and, most emphatically, watching men watch women.” (“Woman at the Keyhole,” 50-1)
Weiner employs the character of Joan — who, like Marilyn Monroe, seems to attract gazes wherever she goes — to show that the “ideology of the spectacle” is more complex than it appears by depicting her as taking an active role in performing and portraying her image.

Carrying with the theme of performativity, mirrors feature prominently in the mise-en-scene of Joan’s scenes. She is frequently looking in some kind of mirror or her image is reflected in a mirror. In one scene she appears in a hotel room with Roger Sterling, and as they discuss her looks she is seen both looking directly in a mirror and reflected in the mirror. “You glide around that office like some magnificent ship,” he says to her. “Well I don’t want to be a distraction,” Joan says, although she quite obviously does. “Should I order horse blinders for the rest of the office?”

Again, Weiner uses the mirrors highlight not only Joan as spectacle, but the performative aspect of her image. The compact mirror she frequently looks in is a reminder that her appearance is something that must always be kept up. In one scene, she must remain standing after a long night of drinking because her dress is too tight for her to sit down. As Butler writes, “As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation” (Gender Trouble, 191). Weiner’s portrayal of Joan’s constant and seemingly impulsive upkeep of her appearance highlights this.

However, Weiner perhaps best illustrates the complexities of Joan as image in her scenes with Peggy Olson. As the two interact, Joan’s motivations for maintaining her image are made clear. In Joan and Peggy’s first scene together, the physical differences between the two women
are apparent. Joan wears a tight dress, hugging her curves. Peggy wears a girlish circle skirt and blouse and her hair is in a long ponytail with bangs. She trails behind Joan, who walks assuredly.

In this scene Joan’s motivations for keeping up her image are also revealed: the goal of “doing well” as a secretary at Sterling Cooper is to find a wealthy husband. Joan’s major advice to Peggy is “Go home, take a paper bag and cut some eyeholes out of it. Put it over your head, get undressed and look at yourself in the mirror. Really evaluate where your strengths and weaknesses are. And be honest.” As the later seasons reveal, Joan’s meticulous attention to her image pays off and she marries a soon-to-be surgeon. However, her “goal” turns out to be not what she wanted after all. Like Betty, Joan is presented in the first season as performing a very specific type of femininity — that of a sultry, flirtatious single woman — but as the seasons progress, the performance changes, becoming more complex.

**Season Two: 1962**

Weiner reveals some of the complexities of Joan’s gender performativity in the episode “Six Month Leave.” Marilyn Monroe has just died and Joan is quite upset. Roger questions Joan’s reaction, to which she replies, “A lot of people felt they knew her.” “You’re not like her,” Roger reassures. “Physically maybe…” “This world destroyed her,” Joan says softly. Joan, whose appearance is compared to Marilyn’s a few times in the series, is depicted as clearly identifying with Marilyn and perhaps worries that her own beauty will lead to her downfall. But in later seasons it becomes evident that Weiner will not allow the character of Joan to be merely a spectacle nor an easily manipulated image.

Nevertheless, Joan runs into obstacles as she attempts to assert herself as something more than a pretty image. In the episode “The Mountain King,” Weiner explores themes of female desire that are similar to those in Betty’s storyline. Joan tries to initiate sex with her fiancé Greg
Harris (Sam Page), but when she tries to get on top of him he stops her and asks where she “picked that up.” As he falls asleep, she watches television by herself. The next day, Greg comes to pick Joan up from work and corners her in an office. He rapes her, asking, “This is what you want, right?” The camera cuts back between a shot of Joan’s deadened gaze and a shot of the office interior [See Figure 4.2].

![Figure 4.2 Joan stares blankly at the office interior.](image)

Williams discusses the implications of female spectatorship in both melodrama and horror thusly: “In both cases, as Doane suggests, ‘the woman’s exercise of an active investigating gaze can only be simultaneous with her own victimization.’ The woman’s gaze is punished, in other words, by narrative processes that transform curiosity and desire into masochistic fantasy” (85).
Williams and Doane’s theories of female spectatorship and desire are especially applicable to Joan in this episode. Weiner portrays Joan’s attempt to express desire as leading to punishment, both by her fiancé’s rejection at home and later by the act of rape. At home, instead of being allowed to gaze at her fiancé with desire, she instead passively watches television. Joan’s inability to look at Greg during the rape scene further highlights the fact that she is indeed being punished for looking and desiring in the first place. Afterward, Greg waits outside the office while Joan gets dressed. She appears looking completely normal and calm, another example of how Weiner depicts Joan as always able to efficiently perform.

**Season Three: 1963**

In Season Three, Weiner shows Joan as continuing to resist against her role as image while facing various obstacles. In the episode “My Old Kentucky Home” Joan learns from a third party that Greg, who is now her husband, botched a surgery while in residency and will have difficulty becoming a surgeon. Joan learns this while entertaining some of Greg’s colleagues and remains completely composed. The room falls quiet as Greg’s colleagues and their wives see that he has not yet told Joan. Greg attempts to change the subject by bragging, “Well Joanie has many, many talents. You should play for them.” Joan resists, but Greg continues to urge her. He finds her accordion, continuing to push, “Come on just, uh, sing a little something.” Joan looks disgusted but takes up the accordion, charming the guests with her song [See Figure 4.2]. Even though she ends up performing and acting, like Betty, as the perfect hostess, Joan stares directly at Greg so that he has to look away in shame.

In the episode “Guy Walks Into An Advertising Agency,” Joan has put in her notice at Sterling Cooper and then finds out that Greg will most definitely not become a surgeon. Greg tells her she will have to get another job, which both infuriates and embarrasses Joan, as she
spent so long working her way up at Sterling Cooper and refuses to ask for her job back. Joan spends her last day at Sterling Cooper preparing for a visit from the agency’s parent company. During a celebration in Joan’s honor, one of the secretaries drives a John Deere tractor, a gift from a client, and slices off one of the visiting men’s foot. While everyone else at the office is too stunned to move, Joan jumps into action, making a tourniquet and attending to the man. Joan, who has taken on many ugly tasks as head secretary, is shown taking on a final active role at Sterling Cooper. In contrast to Greg’s failed attempt at being a surgeon, Weiner’s depiction of Joan’s medical skills further highlight that she is more than an image to be gazed upon.

At the end of the season, when several Sterling Cooper employees break away to form Sterling Cooper Draper Price (SCDP), they realize that they have no idea how the office is run
and so bring Joan in as the office manager. In her new position, Joan further proves to be an active and irreplaceable part of the company.

**Season Four: 1964-1965**

In Season Four, Weiner portrays Joan as not only taking a more powerful position in the workplace, but also coming to terms with aging and the fact that she is of a different generation than the young women who now work in the office. However, Weiner’s depiction of Joan’s attitude toward this new, older identity that she possesses is somewhat ambivalent.

In the episode “The Rejected,” SCDP conducts a focus group of 18-25 year old women for Pond’s cold cream. As Joan rounds up the secretaries who fit into this age group, a dowdy, middle-aged secretary self-deprecatingly says to Joan, “We’re old and married. They don’t want us.” Joan looks annoyed, clearly not willing to identify herself as this woman’s peer. Joan’s attitude toward the women in the focus group is different than the one she expressed toward the Belle Jolie focus group in Season One. Joan has less patience for their giggling, partially because they are using her office to set up the two-way mirror. In a shot that is nearly the exact reversal of the Belle Jolie focus group scene, Joan opens the curtain on the window, this time on the other side of the glass. With this, Weiner asserts that Joan is no longer the spectacle in front of the glass, but a spectator behind it. Once the focus group is over, Peggy and several men meet in the focus group room so that the men are watched by Joan, rather than the reversal [See Figure 4.4]. Through her powerful position at SDCP, Joan is depicted as finding a way to transition from object to subject without being punished. This is clearly a visual comment from Weiner on how far Joan has come both professionally and personally, as she becomes more than an object to be looked at. By portraying Joan as beautiful yet capable of utilizing her non-physical attributes,
Weiner uses the character to challenge the image/subject dichotomy that Mulvey, Doane and Mayne put forth.

Figure 4.4 Joan appears on the other side of the two-way mirror.

Toward the end of Season Four, Weiner portrays Joan as even further rejecting the urge to constantly put herself on display. Roger attempts to reconnect with Joan but she refuses to meet him at a hotel like she would have in the past. He comes to her apartment where she is wearing a pair of plain pajamas, looks tired and has little makeup on. “Is that what you sleep in
now?” he asks. Joan does not act coy with Roger like she once did, but instead turns him away. Roger returns home to his young wife Jane, who wears an elaborate housecoat, her hair and makeup impeccable, striking a strong contrast to Joan’s appearance [See Figure 4.5]. After a season in which Joan is depicted as putting less and less investment in her outward appearance, this scene fully illustrates how much Joan has changed from the first season.

Weiner portrays Joan in a complex way, depicting her as unwilling to be merely an object of desire while still maintaining an attractive appearance. While Weiner begins the series portraying Joan as almost a complete spectacle, he slowly reveals the complexities of Joan’s
character and her relationship with performativity and spectacle in order to challenge the longstanding notion of women as filmic spectacle.
Peggy

Season One: 1960

As mentioned in the discussion of Joan, Weiner first presents the character of Peggy as a new and naïve secretary to Sterling Cooper, who at first takes Joan’s advice on how to be a successful working girl earnestly. But, from the first episode Peggy is depicted as having a difficult time adjusting to the objectifying gazes of the men at work.

In the second episode of the season, after a few days of harassment from the men at Sterling Cooper, Weiner has the character of Peggy assert her objections to being looked at. Flustered by one man’s advances, Peggy asks Joan, “Why is it that every time a man takes you out to lunch around here, you’re dessert!”

In one scene, the camera identifies with Peggy as various men at the office walk by and look at her. Peggy is seated and the low-angle shots of the men from her point of view reflect this, but also make the men look even more menacing as they stare. Her reaction shots, however, are also low-angle, giving her a similar amount of stature. While Peggy is technically the object of the men’s looks, the shot-reverse-shot allows the audience to identify with both Peggy and the men. Breaking from Mulvey’s assertion that narrative film dictates an active subject and passive object, Weiner uses this scene to put Peggy in a position of both subject and object.

Peggy becomes so upset by the staring that she runs to the restroom and looks into the mirror. The audience sees Peggy looking at herself in the mirror, and then sees her notice the reflection of another woman who is crying in the restroom. Peggy looks back at herself and holds back her tears, resigned to maintain her composure. She straightens her scarf (an accessory Joan suggested she wear) and leaves the restroom [See Figure 5.1].
Peggy appears to take Joan’s advice on how to project an image and perform the flirtatious and image-based femininity that Joan maintains. Butler’s theory on performativity continues to apply to the character of Peggy as her character is depicted as discovering what kind of femininity she would like to portray, often taking cues from Joan. However, Peggy soon runs into conflict with Joan’s prescribed femininity. In one scene Peggy is at a bar with several co-workers to celebrate a successful ad campaign. The typically serious Peggy is dancing and clearly enjoying herself. Pete Campbell, a character with whom she had an affair, watches as she does this, glaring at her uncharacteristic behavior. “The Twist” comes on the jukebox and Peggy claps and screams with the other young women and dances. She notices Pete looking at her and dances toward him, smiling and staring. She asks him to dance and he replies, “I don’t like you like this.” Her face changes and she is visibly upset. She smiles faintly and goes back to the dance floor, walking back this time. Peggy continues to dance even though she is no longer...
smiling, and her true feelings toward the type of fun and flirty femininity Joan prescribes are clear. The music repeats the words, “round and round and round,” suggesting the constant and tedious aspects of performing this femininity. She is quite literally just going through the motions.

In the Belle Jolie scene (in which Joan performed her own objectification for the men behind the mirror) Weiner further reveals Peggy’s feelings toward being looked at and about her own femininity. As the other women grab the lipsticks, Peggy is shown holding back, unsure about which to choose, just as she is unsure of whether or not she wants to perform the kind of traditional femininity her fellow secretaries maintain. Peggy sits before a mirror like the other women, but does not look into it and does not apply the lipstick. Instead she is shown watching the other women looking at themselves in their mirrors [See Figure 5.2].

![Figure 5.2](image)

**Figure 5.2** Peggy refuses to look into her own mirror and instead watches the other women.
Weiner’s portrayal of Peggy’s ambivalence towards the traditional femininity displayed by the other secretaries becomes rejection as the season progresses. Peggy rips her skirt in a later episode and borrows one of Joan’s spare dresses. Peggy has gained weight since coming to Sterling Cooper and the red dress fits tightly on her body. She is seen from the point of view of some of the men as she walks self-consciously through the office, and the audience continues to watch the men watching her. They comment on her body, suggesting that the writing job she received as a result of her observations in the Belle Jolie scene has something to do with her not caring about her appearance.

Peggy gives the dress back the next day, and Joan suggests Peggy keep it. Peggy is adamant about not wanting the dress and, thus, about not wanting to be looked the way Joan is. Joan accuses her of not wanting what the other secretaries want (to find a husband), and Peggy defends herself with her writing. Joan counters by insulting Peggy’s appearance, to which Peggy replies, “You know, you’re not a stick.” “And yet I never have to wonder what men think of me,” Joan replies. “I know what men think of you,” Peggy responds. “That you’re looking for a husband and you’re fun. And not in that order.” This exchange reveals not only Peggy and Joan’s perceptions of each other (and, likely, other people’s perceptions of them), but also how they perceive themselves.

As Peggy moves up in the workplace and is made a junior copywriter, Weiner depicts the character as increasingly taking on the role of spectator and judging other women. In two scenes from the last episode of the season, Peggy and Ken Cosgrove, a young account executive who harassed her when she first began as a secretary, audition and direct young women for a radio commercial. In the first scene three women audition: one young, slim and conventionally attractive; the other two shorter, older and less conventionally attractive. Peggy and Cosgrove sit
in the sound booth, where the women cannot hear them, and comment on their appearances. The booth is not only enclosed in glass, but is also noticeably darker than the studio, and the three women stand while Peggy and Cosgrove sit down at a table. With this, Weiner visually asserts that Peggy and Cosgrove are the spectators, and that the women, despite being auditioned for their voices, are being judged on their appearances as well. Cosgrove wants to choose the oldest woman, Rita, because “she’s got that voice, randy and knowing.” Peggy objects, saying that the woman could not possibly be confident, but that Annie, the young and beautiful woman, is confident because she is just that: young and beautiful. “What we are selling is confidence,” Peggy says. “A better you. That woman isn’t a better anything. Annie is a confident, beautiful woman and you can hear it in her voice.”

Annie is hired, and in a later scene, records her lines. As Annie reads, Peggy comments, “She doesn’t sound very confident.” Annie’s reflection is visible in the shots of Peggy so that the audience sees both Annie’s desperation and Peggy’s disappointed gaze [See Figure 5.3]. Peggy encourages Annie to be confident by saying, “Pretend you’re you. And now you have everything. You’re beautiful, you’re slim, you’re the beloved prize of a handsome man.” Peggy, who has gained even more weight by this point, due to pregnancy, insists with these words that these things — physical appearance and being an object of desire — are what cause a woman to be confident. Peggy, however, is shown to find her own confidence through her work and competence as a copywriter, despite being openly ridiculed for her appearance at the office. Peggy and Cosgrove discuss why Annie’s voice does not sound confident: “You know, the confidence that comes with beauty,” Peggy insists. Cosgrove tells her that the most beautiful women are the least confident. Peggy prompts Annie once more to pretend she’s herself. “I am being me,” Annie says as she begins to cry. Peggy is unable to comprehend how a beautiful
woman could not have confidence. With this scene, Weiner reveals Peggy’s unusual position as a woman. She understands that a woman’s value lies beyond her physical appearance; yet, her job requires her to identify with a male gaze and judge other women with such. Annie’s lack of confidence, even when “being herself,” appears to startle Peggy.

Figure 5.3 Peggy gazes disappointedly at Annie.

As the series progresses, Weiner portrays Peggy as growing more confident and assuming the role of spectator when relating to other women. Mary Kelly, in her essay “Desiring Images/Imaging Desire,” speaks of the experience of the female artist: “The woman artist sees her experience as a woman particularly in terms of the ‘feminine position,’ that is, as the object of the look. But she must also account for the ‘feeling’ she experiences as the artist, occupying what could be called the ‘masculine position,’ as subject of the look” (72-3).
By placing Peggy in this unusual role in the advertising world, Weiner shows how the character assumes a position that is similar to the one Kelly describes, one in which Peggy negotiates being both object and subject. As she gains power in the workplace, Peggy is depicted as more self-aware and as achieving a more generally accepted “attractive” appearance. Despite this, Peggy is shown as refusing to be objectified by her male peers. Weiner portrays Peggy as asserting that her attractive appearance does not mean she is merely an object or that she is looking for the approval of men.

At the end of Season One, Peggy unexpectedly goes into labor, her pregnancy a result of the affair she had with Pete Campbell. She goes to a hospital due to stomach pains and a doctor informs her that she’s pregnant. In denial, Peggy gets up to leave, but collapses in pain. She is next shown after the birth. A nurse brings in the baby and asks Peggy if she’d like to hold him. Peggy says nothing and turns away from them.

By portraying Peggy as ignorant of her own pregnancy and unwilling to hold her own child, Weiner shows that Peggy is unwilling to accept this maternal identity that has been so suddenly imposed upon her.

In Season Two, a series of flashbacks reveal what happened to Peggy after giving birth. Peggy is placed in a psychiatric hospital and is heavily sedated and confused. Her mother and sister have covered up her disappearance from work by telling Don that Peggy has tuberculosis. Concerned, Don visits Peggy and quickly learns she is not physically ill. Peggy is unsure why she is hospitalized and Don gives her advice: “Get out of here and move forward. This never happened. It will shock you how much it never happened.”

Peggy, who is already depicted as in denial about her pregnancy and childbirth, indeed does this. She returns to work and proceeds to live her life as a single, childless woman. By
having Peggy reject the maternal role that was imposed upon her, Weiner asserts that the character of Peggy will take an active role in creating her own female identity and it will likely not be a traditional (for the time period) wife and mother identity.

**Season Two: 1962**

One of Weiner’s strongest uses of Peggy as a comment on the role of woman as image is in the episode “Maidenform,” as the entire episode centers around the male gaze and how/whether women wish to be looked at. The episode begins with a montage of Peggy, Joan and Betty getting dressed in the morning. The women put on various underclothes — slips, bras and girdles — and examine themselves in the mirror. Setting the theme for the episode, the montage highlights the characters’ self-awareness of the images they create.

In the episode, Peggy creates a campaign for Clearasil that focuses on perfection, again highlighting Peggy’s harsh expectations of other women as a result of her dual role as both spectator and spectacle. Her team is also working on a campaign for Playtex bras. The company would like to compete with Maidenform, whose lingerie ads are sexier and more fantasy-based than Playtex’s plain and functional ads. At their meeting, the men explain that they went out the night before (without Peggy) and came up with a campaign idea. “Women have a fantasy,” says Paul Kinsey (Michael Gladis). “Jackie Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe. Every single woman is one of them.” He opens the office door and points out which one various women in the office are. Peggy objects to the idea: “I don’t know if all women are a Jackie or a Marilyn. Maybe men see them that way.” “Bras are for men,” says Paul. “Women want to see themselves the way men see them.” The campaign clearly highlights many of the issues having to do with “to-be-looked-at-ness” discussed in this essay. Because Paul and his male co-workers work in advertising and use women as images to sell products, they understand the very relations of looking that Mulvey
describes. Aside from objecting to her male colleagues assertion of the male gaze, Peggy is further upset that she was excluded from the creative process because she was not invited to go out with them. Her annoyance grows as she’s left out of the auditions for the ad campaign. Peggy is invited in as an afterthought, but she says no, refusing such a direct role as spectator. Instead, Peggy asks Joan for advice on why she’s not invited to the after hours business outings. “I’ve never had your job, I’ve never wanted it,” Joan tells her. “You’re in their country. Learn to speak the language.” Joan advises Peggy that if she would like to be taken seriously she should stop “dressing like a little girl.” By the end of the episode, and most definitely by the end of the season, Peggy will take Joan’s advice and learn to perform a more mature type of femininity that earns her more respect.

At the Playtex presentation Don again vocalizes Mulvey’s theory of looking relations in his pitch: “Jacqueline Kennedy. Marilyn Monroe. Women have feelings about these women because men do. Because we want both, women want to be both. It’s about how they want to be seen by us — by their husbands, boyfriends, their friends’ husbands.” As Don speaks, the camera pans the room, showing the back of the men’s heads. When he finishes his pitch, the camera finally reveals Peggy in the background, yet at the center of the table and of the shot, again highlighting her unique position as a woman who takes on the role of spectator. Her character embodies Doane’s description of the female spectator as “the site of an oscillation between a feminine position and a masculine position” (47).

Despite delivering Playtex with the fantasy campaign they wanted, their representative decides to stay with their functional type of advertisements. “Let Maidenform have women’s imaginations,” he says. “We’ll take their money.” The Playtex representative makes plans to meet up with the Sterling Cooper men at a strip club. Peggy hears their plans and takes Joan’s
advice: she dresses up in a tight, revealing dress with styled hair and makeup. The men take to this version of Peggy with joy. However, Pete Campbell watches her angrily as she sits on the Playtex representative’s lap, looking so different. Peggy notices Pete looking at her and, as in Season One when she was dancing to The Twist, she becomes self-conscious [See Figure 5.4].

![Figure 5.4](image)

Figure 5.4 Peggy becomes self-conscious as she notices Pete Campbell’s gaze

Like the Playtex representative’s attempt to project a sexier company image, Peggy has been depicted as trying on a different identity and performing a different type of femininity, but she appears to struggle to convince herself that she is being authentic.
Season Three: 1963

Weiner’s depiction of Peggy as struggling to perform a type of femininity that is mature but at the same time still authentic continues in Season Three. The episode “Love Among the Ruins” begins with a clip of Ann-Margaret singing the title song in Bye Bye Birdie. The scene cuts to a shot of the men, Peggy and consumer-researcher Faye Miller (Cara Buono) watching the clip at the office. The men look fascinated while Peggy looks highly disturbed and embarrassed, having to look away from the screen. Patio diet drink has requested Sterling Cooper produce a commercial that replicates the Bye Bye Birdie scene frame for frame. Peggy objects to the commercial because the drink will be targeted to women and she doesn’t believe Ann-Margaret will appeal to women. “I understand why you like this, but it’s not for you,” Peggy says. Peggy deconstructs the appeal that the scene holds for the men as “Ann-Margaret’s ability to be 25 and act 14.” “Is it just a knockoff?” she asks. “Are we allowed to make fun of it at least?” “It’s fun and sexy, don’t be a prude,” Ken tells her. As in the episode “Maidenform,” Weiner shows how the men get to dictate what is considered attractive and appealing to women.

Peggy apparently takes her colleagues’ reaction to Ann-Margaret to heart. Later that night she is in a housecoat, washing her lingerie in the sink. She looks in the mirror as she brushes her hair and begins to sing “Bye Bye Birdie.” She dances in the mirror, mimicking Ann-Margaret, then suddenly stops. She looks down, embarrassed, and continues brushing her hair [See Figure 5.5]. As in the “Maidenform” episode, Peggy is portrayed as uncomfortable performing such an over-the-top and flirtatious type of femininity.

Peggy continues to object to the Ann-Margaret commercial. “Don’t you find her voice shrill?” Peggy asks Don after showing him the film clip. “She’s throwing herself at the camera,” Don says. “No one seems to care that it speaks to men,” Peggy retorts, “Not the people that drink
diet drinks.” “It’s not about making women feel fat,” Don explains. “It’s ‘look how happy I am drinking Patio. I’m young and excited and desperate for a man.’” “I don’t mind fantasies, but shouldn’t it be a female one?” Peggy asks. “Peggy, you understand how this works: men want her, women want to be her” Don says. Don tells Peggy to not be so critical, hinting that she could lose her job if she continues to question the importance of the male gaze in advertising.
Despite Peggy’s objections to the hyperbolized femininity of Ann-Margaret, in her personal life she is still shown as attempting to perform alternate femininities that more closely resemble Ann-Margaret’s. Peggy overhears Joan telling a joke to some men who are visiting the office. Peggy watches in the foreground, amazed with the ease that Joan has in interacting with men. Later, Peggy uses the joke to pick up a guy at a bar. The guy assumes Peggy is a typist and she plays along with his fantasy, seemingly making a concession for the benefit of this new persona she has taken on.

In the episode “The Arrangements” Weiner depicts Peggy as continuing to sort out what type of femininity she can comfortably perform. The episode begins with Peggy telling her sister that she plans to move to Manhattan, as her commute from Brooklyn has become impractical. “You’re gonna be one of those girls?” Peggy’s sister asks. “I am one of those girls,” Peggy replies. Weiner reveals with the episode, however, that Peggy struggles with what it means to be “one of those girls.”

Peggy posts an advertisement for a roommate in the break room at work. It reads: “Clean, responsible, considerate person…serious and financially secure women only, please.” After seeing the ad, Peggy’s coworkers prank call her and she turns to Joan for advice. “This is about two young girls in Manhattan, this is about adventure,” Joan says. “If this were me I’d say ‘fun-loving girl, responsible sometimes, likes to laugh, lives to love. Seeks size 6 for city living and general gallivanting. No dull moments or dull men tolerated.’” Peggy writes down Joan’s exact words and posts her ad.

Peggy is next seen meeting the woman who answered her ad, Karen Ericson (Carla Gallo). Karen appears in a yellow dress that closely resembles the one Ann-Margaret wears in the Bye Bye Birdie clip and acts in a similar bubbly and youthful manner. She praises the humor
of the ad telling Peggy that it seems they will get along well. “I’m fun and I love to have…fun,” Peggy unconvincingly replies. Karen goes on to complain about her old roommate who sounds more like the real Peggy than the persona Peggy adapted with her ad.

Peggy’s failure to convincingly mimic the fun-loving spirit of Karen (and Joan) is mirrored in the Patio diet drink commercial. The Sterling Cooper team watches the ad, which features an Ann-Margaret lookalike singing a parody of “Bye Bye Birdie,” with looks of disgust. Her voice is shrill and her movements look unnatural and awkward. The Patio representative tells the team, “This is not what I thought it was going to be.” Don tells him that it is exactly what they asked for. “I know, but there’s something not right about it,” the Patio representative says. “It’s an exact copy – frame for frame,” Ken reassures him. The Patio people leave, unhappy with the product and Peggy smiles smugly as the Sterling Cooper team discusses what went wrong. “It’s true it’s not right,” says Harry. “It doesn’t make any sense, it looks right, sounds right, smells right, but something’s not right. What is it?” “It’s not Ann-Margaret,” says Roger.

Like Peggy’s attempt to mimic a fun-loving city girl, the Patio commercial fails in execution [See Figure 5.6]. Karen, like Ann-Margaret, is the real thing and Peggy — who is serious and not that interested in her social life — is but an imitation. With this episode, Weiner clearly highlights the idea of performativity. Weiner’s depiction of Peggy’s attempts to perform an identity that resembles that of Joan has continued throughout the series. As a brand new secretary at Sterling Cooper, Peggy seemed more eager to take on this kind of femininity, but as the character matures and realizes the type of person she wants to be, her performance is portrayed as more labored, more obviously artificial. No longer such a blank canvas, Peggy seems to have a better idea of the type of femininity she is comfortable with performing.
Figure 5.6 Ann Margaret in *Bye Bye Birdie* (top) and her lookalike in the Patio commercial.

**Season Four: 1964-1965**

By Season Four, Weiner clearly asserts that Peggy has already begun to form this feminine identity for herself. In the first episode of the season, Peggy is immediately portrayed as more self-assured and attractive. She sits on top of her desk, drinking and taking charge of her staff. Her appearance indicates that she has taken Joan’s suggestions and no longer dresses like a little girl. Yet, she has not embraced the other aspects of Joan’s femininity — the girlish and flirtatious parts.

Weiner highlights the notions of spectatorship and performativity in Season Four, as the character of Peggy is introduced to even more varieties of femininity to possibly perform. In the
episode “The Rejected,” Peggy meets Joyce (Zosia Mamet) a lesbian photo editor at *Life* magazine. Joyce flirts with Peggy on the elevator and tells her that she’s carrying her friend’s portfolio that contains photographs of female nudes that the magazine rejected. “You wanna see?” Joyce asks Peggy, symbolically introducing Peggy to the position of lesbian spectatorship and a way of seeing that renders the male/female subject/object dichotomies irrelevant. Peggy looks at the photographs and she and Joyce soon become friends. Joyce’s androgynous way of dressing and brazen flirting with the Sterling Cooper Draper Price secretaries seems to intrigue Peggy. Peggy appears to be drawn to the way that Joyce takes up the “male gaze,” and in doing so, escapes being the object of the gaze. In her article “The Queer Voice in ‘Marnie,’” Lucretia Knapp suggests a way to theorize lesbian spectatorship that differs from the mostly heteronormative theory Doane and others offer. Knapp elaborates:

The questions of women’s desire and women’s position as spectators have been a continuing locus of difficulty within feminist film theory. Some theorists still rely on clothing analogies in order to distinguish between male and female spectators and desires in ways that suggest how much lesbians have been a forgotten part of mush feminist theoretical viewing. Mulvey’s ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,’ the classic statement of sexual difference in the cinema, defined the only possible identification for the woman viewer as masculine, or masochistic. Although her work was ground-breaking for feminist theorists, her analysis did not take into account the diffuse complexities of the viewer…however difficult she is to imagine, when a woman desires a woman, she is not a man. The lesbian spectator can move into the active position of desire as a woman. In theoretical terms, the lesbian spectator challenges a desire that has always been envisioned as sex specific. (14-5)

Weiner employs the character of Joyce to both represent this notion of lesbian spectatorship and offer up the possibility of this kind of spectatorship for Peggy. Peggy, who allows Joyce to be physically affectionate with her in public, indeed has some similarities to the title character in Hitchcock’s *Marnie* (1964) that Knapp discusses. Knapp argues that the character of Marnie (Tippi Hedren) can be read as a lesbian who “passes” as straight. Her description of Marnie
could very well be applied to Peggy: “Marnie is fascinating in her passing because of the tensions she incorporates, looking feminine but having masculine desires (success in the public world, riding competence, theft). The tension between what she is and what she isn’t, between stereotype and invisibility, gives Marnie an interesting complexity” (16). Weiner’s depiction of Peggy as attempting to at once construct a traditional image of femininity while also pursuing what were at the time stereotypically masculine pursuits, indeed makes the character of Peggy similar to Marnie. Peggy’s interest in the way Joyce seems to side-step the conventionalities of femininity and her acceptance of Joyce’s affection also make it possible to read Peggy as “queer.”

In the episode “The Beautiful Girls” Peggy and Joyce discuss men and relationships and Joyce asserts that she enjoys being the subject and that women in heterosexual relationships are demoted to a supporting role. Peggy seems uneasy with this description, perhaps because she has always been portrayed as uncomfortable with being the object or the spectacle. At the end of the episode Joyce is in Peggy’s office at the end of the day. Peggy tells Joyce to go on without her. Joyce leaves and gets on an elevator on the right side of the hallway. Faye Miller and Joan both get on an elevator on the left side of the hallway. Peggy appears at the last minute, asking, “Could you hold that?” She gets on the elevator between the two other women and the camera holds a medium shot of the three of them [See Figure 5.7]. With this scene, Weiner suggests that Peggy has chosen to reject the position of lesbian spectatorship that Joyce holds. While Peggy is depicted as occasionally taking on the role of spectator as part of her job, she is nevertheless depicted as not yet ready for the complete rejection of the male gaze that Joyce represents. Weiner portrays Peggy as performing a femininity that both acknowledges the male gaze — through her stylish dress and attractive appearance — and questions its validity and authority
through her resistance to certain advertising campaigns and her eagerness to take on the role of spectator herself.

Figure 5.7 Joyce gets on one elevator (top) and Peggy joins Joan and Faye on another.

Peggy’s transformation over the first four seasons of *Mad Men* is undoubtedly the most extreme of the three characters discussed in this essay and can certainly be read as a comment by
Weiner on the changing roles of women that had begun to take place in the first part of the 1960s. Starting as an impressionable secretary, Peggy tries on various types of femininity and frequently fails to find one that seems authentic. Ending in Season Four as a brilliant and successful copywriter, the character of Peggy is undoubtedly still depicted as performing, but it seems to be a performance that allows her to vacillate between the roles of image and subject.
Conclusion

Through both cinematography and diegesis, Weiner highlights the spectacle of women and performativity of gender with his portrayal of the characters of Betty, Joan and Peggy in Mad Men. In this essay I have discussed the ways in which Weiner depicts these three characters as they struggle to negotiate Densmore’s concept of “the temptation to be a beautiful object.”

The character of Betty, the former model and unhappy housewife, is depicted as placing an enormous amount of importance on her physical appearance as part of a larger obsession with keeping up a façade of having the perfect marriage and family. With this character, Weiner highlights the performative aspects of gender as well as the artifice of femininity. While arguably the least transgressive of the three women discussed in this essay, Betty is nevertheless depicted as becoming less and less interested in performing and in being merely a beautiful object for others to admire.

Similarly, the character of Joan is depicted as progressively placing less emphasis on her physical appearance. While still appearing attractive, Joan is shown to be less and less willing to be merely an object of desire. Portrayed at the beginning of the series as almost complete spectacle, Weiner makes the complexities of Joan’s character and her relationship with performativity and spectacle more and more evident as the series progresses.

The character of Peggy is undoubtedly depicted as the most transgressive of the three female characters. Weiner uses Peggy’s attempts to find a type of femininity that is authentic and not an imitation of the more traditional femininity that she observes in others to highlight the idea of performativity. Peggy’s dual role as both a spectator at work and as a woman whose physical appearance is admired by others places her in a unique role and is used by Weiner to demonstrate the complexities of spectator theory.
By taking a theoretical approach rooted in both feminist psychoanalytic film theory and contemporary gender theory, I have used the concepts of image and spectacle, masquerade and artifice, performativity, and female spectatorship to explore these negotiations. As discussed, these negotiations are at times ambivalent and contradictory but there is still a feeling of progress, that the images that these three female characters portray are becoming less objectified and more nuanced and complex as the series progresses. Yet, by the end of Season Four, the characters are depicted as still performing gender in a way that does not suggest the sort of radical conscience that Densmore demonstrates in her essay. However, Weiner’s portrayal of these three characters’ lives is undoubtedly more true to the experience of white, middle class women of the 1960s, those who did not become so radicalized by the decade. As Linden-Ward and Green write:

By the decade’s end the pace of change and the alteration of relations between the government and the people, between black and white, old and young, women and men, was of a rapidity and extent unparalleled in the experience of those who lived through it, yet most women’s lives and expectations remained essentially unchanged…Feminism gave them a glimpse of the gap between an ideal and their reality and, for some, language to express that understanding; but for the majority of adult American women, life at the end of the sixties was not markedly different from what it was at the beginning. (Linden-Ward and Green xiv-xvii).

Weiner does not use the characters of Betty, Joan and Peggy to (so far as Season Four) act out a simple story of “pre-liberation” and “post-liberation,” but instead uses them to demonstrate the complicated and contradictory nature of the construction of female identity and image that continues to exist today.


May, Elaine Tyler. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. New York:


