GRAAT On-Line issue #15 April 2014

Full of Wholes: Narrative Configuration, Completion, and the Televisual Episode / Season / Series

Matthew Poland
The Ohio State University

"The end of a melody is not its goal: but nonetheless, had the melody not reached its end it would not have reached its goal either. A parable."
Friedrich Nietzsche

What do we talk about when we talk about endings? In one sense, of course, we talk about movement—from absorption to apprehension, from immersion to interpretation: the ending as a threshold whose crossing ushers us outside the warm abode of the text and into a space of retrospective understanding. Peter Brooks has famously called an ending "the consummation (as well as the consumption) of its sense-making" (52). In aligning the structural function of narrative closure with the Freudian death drive, he suggests that all narrative actions ultimately point toward their culmination:

> The sense of a beginning, then, must in some important way be determined by the sense of an ending. We might say that we are able to read present moments—in literature and, by extension, in life—as endowed with narrative meaning only because we read them in

> anticipation of the structuring power of those endings that will retrospectively give them the order and significance of plot. (94)

This tendency to read a narrative ending as the final capstone that makes legible all that has come before is buttressed by a privileging of aesthetic wholes and all that they entail: unity, symmetry, teleology. To speak of an ending is to speak of the limit that decides a narrative's shape, that makes clear the boundaries of a text and renders it an intelligible whole to be considered, deciphered, appraised. To maintain symmetry in my own prose, I end this paragraph with a second question: How do we make sense of narratives that perpetually defer their conclusion, that continually shapeshift?

This paper isn't about endings *per se*, but about the implications of their simultaneous presence and absence from a narrative form that is continually concluding while perpetually deferring closure—seriality. If more traditionally bounded narratives ask us to consider the sense of an ending, then serials demand that we think about the *since* of an ending, that is, the perpetuation of a narrative beyond the conclusions it is continually reaching. Serials are full of holes—those gaps that yawn across individual installments—but they are also full of *wholes*, i.e., constituent parts that also demand to be read as self-contained entities in their own right. Consequently, serials are both always ending and never ending; they are both broken and unfinished. As such, they challenge our inherited notions about aesthetic unity, continually raising questions as to the boundaries that constitute an aesthetic whole. Sean O'Sullivan argues that the sense of satisfaction we typically associate with endings is antithetical to the essence of serial storytelling: "Serial narrative, at its most compelling, taps into those norms [of unity and harmony] as its raw construction materials in order to create its own modes and rhythms, its distinctive commitment to the multiple rather than the single, the broken rather than the whole, that which frustrates rather than that which completes" ("Serials and Satisfaction"). While I think O'Sullivan overstates seriality's hostility to satisfaction (indeed, I tend to think the primal urge for cohesion simply forces both artists and audiences to work harder to unify texts composed of disparate parts), there is no question that serial narrative forces us to refine our understanding of the boundaries that constitute an aesthetic "whole," i.e., a self-contained unit of narrative meaning.

Exacerbating the need for this reconsideration is the continued flourishing of serial television, a format whose developments over the past two decades have challenged previous assumptions about TV series as largely composed of endless middles; with the changing perception of television's legitimacy [1] have come corresponding changes in narrative storytelling. Jason Mittell characterizes this shift as a move toward narrative complexity—"a redefinition of episodic forms under the influence of serial narration—not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance" wherein "many programs actively work against serial norms but also embrace narrative strategies to rebel against episodic conventionality" (32, 33). This tension between self-containment and narrative deferral has developed in tandem with evolving conceptions of the season as a meaningful aesthetic unit of meaning, with showrunners frequently discussing the "arc" or trajectory of a particular season. All of these changes bespeak a shifting relationship of serial television to narrative shape and teleology: episodes tell self-contained stories while performing larger functions within the season. However, even as various substrata of the television serial—arcs, episodes, seasons—work to provide a sense of closure, they nevertheless defer a decisive ending that would inscribe a final narrative shape. As such, contemporary serial television solicits evolving forms of viewer engagement.

To that end, I am less interested in radically revising our understanding of reading strategies than in examining how contemporary serialized television asks us to use inherited strategies of sense-making to navigate complex narratives in new ways. Specifically, I am interested in the notions of narrative configuration and completion as they apply to serial television. As defined by James Phelan, configuration refers to "the authorial audience's hypothesis, implicit or explicit, about the direction and purpose of the whole narrative" (*Experiencing* 19). Within Phelan's rhetorical approach to narrative, configuration is a key aspect by which readers (and viewers) make sense of narratives, which they experience as "developing wholes" (*Reading People* 15). The culmination of configuration, completion refers to "the authorial audience's final and retrospective sense of the shape and purposes of the narrative as a whole, which may or may not require a significant reconsideration of earlier hypotheses about configuration"

(Herman, Phelan et al. 61). What's particularly useful about Phelan's model is its foregrounding of the temporal dimension of narrative experience; even as the reader/viewer's tentative configuration of a narrative is predicated on her projection of its end (both its conclusion and its *telos*—which the former makes legible), these configurations evolve as the narrative progresses, leading to revised hypotheses and suppositions. Only once completion is achieved do a reader/viewer's judgments remain stable.

It is this stability that seriality unsettles, for without a secure ending, one must continually reconfigure not simply one's judgment of a narrative but also one's understanding of the narrative whole itself; episodes beget episodes, seasons beget seasons. In contemporary serial television, the episode, the season, and the series all function as meaningful aesthetic wholes, but despite the implication of hierarchy (a Russian doll of episodes nested in seasons nested in the series), their aims are not necessarily harmonious and may, in fact, work at cross purposes to one another. Indeed, if one were to examine a single episode of a television series, one's configuration would likely vary according to the context in which it is considered: As a self-contained aesthetic object? As a part of the season as a whole? As an element of the series in its entirety? In other words, if completion entails a retrospective reading, whereby our sense of the whole reconfigures our sense of a constitutive element, then how do we navigate a narrative form wherein the designation of aesthetic wholes is so fluid?

As a way of beginning to answer that question, I would like to think about the contours of serial narratives as they apply to *Mad Men*, one of the most discussed serial programs currently airing on television. I choose *Mad Men* partly because one of its chief pleasures is the intricacy of its narrative design, but also because of its vexed relationship to narrative teleology. A show like *The Wire*, for instance, engages viewers through self-contained season-long arcs whose narrative appeal is dependent upon finding out what happens next; showrunner David Simon conceives of episodes less as self-contained units of meaning than as chapters to be considered in terms of the season as a "whole"—a teleological enterprise that frustrates attempts to read individual

episodes as aesthetic totalities.[2] By contrast, a show like *Deadwood* largely seems to eschew grander teleology, privileging the moment-to-moment engagement of episodes in themselves over the heavy serialization of an unfolding plot.[3] Within this spectrum, *Mad Men* occupies a middle ground, with each episode telling a (satisfying) self-contained narrative but ultimately building upon one another such that the conclusion of a season demands that we retrospectively reread each episode in terms of a larger, "completed" whole. Likewise, every subsequent season builds upon the last, extending not simply these characters' trajectories but also the series' portrait of 1960s America.[4] As such, the series offers a meticulously designed example of seriality whose narrative aims nevertheless seem divided among the episode, the season, and the series—but whose design negotiates these divided aims in innovative ways.

Just in case it isn't already clear: undergirding my approach to *Mad Men* is a concern with the television serial's intentionality with respect to its conceived borders. I appeal here to Ted Nannicelli, who argues for the need to ground the ontology of an artwork in a relationship to artistic intentions:

> What guides our critical judgments of serial television works qua episodes, story arcs, seasons or series—what determines the boundaries of the objects of criticism—seems to be the categorical intentions of their creators. This does not mean that we usually appeal to statements creators make in order to determine what they intend the boundaries of their works to be. Rather, we assume that these sorts of intentions are manifested in their works' artistic properties, and we attempt to uncover the relevant intentions by analyzing the works themselves. (176)

In other words, Nanicelli, conceiving of the aesthetic object as an intentionally-created artifact, appeals to the intentions of the creator(s) as manifested in the work itself for determining how one ought to define the boundaries of a televisual work. This sort of *a posteriori* approach—taking a serial television's formulation of an aesthetic whole on a case-by-case basis—forms the basis for my own approach, but it also elides the question of shows whose sense of their totality is nebulous. O'Sullivan, for instance, alludes to the thorny notion of narrative progression and continuum with respect to *Mad Men* in thinking about the gap between seasons and the relation between a season finale and

the subsequent season premiere: "'For Those Who Think Young,' the first installment of the second season, is the episode subsequent to 'The Wheel,' the last installment of the first season. But is it? This depends on how we think of the first subsection of a television series, the stratum just below the narrative as a whole: namely, the season" ("Dreams" 118). Indeed, as I've already stated, *Mad Men* works in some ways to construct both unified episodes and seasons; nevertheless, it still frequently asks us to revise and reconfigure our sense of the "whole."

Consider, for instance, the endings to each of the show's first six seasons and the judgments they elicit about the show's protagonist. Season One (in an episode appropriately titled "The Wheel") (S01E13) concludes on a note of karmic justice, as serial philanderer Don Draper, in a moment of epiphanic appreciation for his wife and children, returns home early to prevent his family from leaving on a Thanksgiving trip he earlier remarked where he would be unable to accompany them. He has arrived belatedly, though, and the season ends with him alone, sitting on the house stairs as Bob Dylan's "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright" begins playing over the soundtrack: too little, too late. The satisfaction the episode offers is one of justness; Don's actions throughout the season have earned him the isolation he finds as the episode closes and suggests the show's investment in a controlling moral force. Season Two, by contrast, ends with Don returning home to his wife Betty after having been kicked out following her discovery of one of his dalliances. The season preceding the episode has been largely reiterative of Don's struggle with adultery, even as it has backgrounded much of the narrative baroqueness characteristic of the first season (e.g., surprise pregnancies, stolen identities, secret pasts). Following a dreamlike odyssey in California in which he has seemingly come to realize the impossibility of a life free from responsibility, Don has come back to reconcile with Betty. However, the season concludes on an ominous note, as his wife reveals that she is pregnant, leaving the pair to sit across from one another in silence, a moment of uncertainty in which the full scope of the characters' psychologies remains (purposefully) opaque. Thus, if the first season finale directs us to read the preceding season as a moral tale whose culmination is a loneliness imposed on the wayward protagonist, the second unsettles these conclusions, asking us to consider

the very worth of the Drapers' marriage—and, indeed, the value of marriage as an institution.

Both of the next two seasons conclude with rather grand transformations to the diegetic world. Season Three ends with the simultaneous dissolution of Don's marriage to Betty and his establishment of a new advertising agency; Season Four closes with Don's surprise proposal to his secretary Megan Calvet, following a trip to California whose dreaminess echoes Don's Season Two visit. In both cases, these endings function less as capstones than as keystones, opening up the subsequent seasons to new narrative possibilities; they are, in a sense, "reboots." The uncharacteristically hopeful note on which Season Three ends could hardly be further from the despondency with which Season Two concludes, and it suggests a much brighter "ending" than the previous season. Indeed, if the third season concluded the series, the completion it offers would be one that retroactively validates much of Don's behavior—or at least refrains from censuring it in the way "The Wheel" does; rather than a narrative world governed by justice, it suggests a diegesis where the characters' (seemingly) autonomous behavior is beholden to no controlling moral force. In that sense, the conclusion of Season Five is appropriate. It ends with Don, having spent the entirety of his second marriage up to this point (and thus, the entirety of the season) abstaining from extramarital affairs, alone in a bar, propositioned by a woman who asks, "Are you alone?" Following Don's request for an Old Fashioned in a bar whose décor echoes that of the tavern in which he found himself at the beginning of the pilot episode, the scene seems to suggest a return to the Don Draper of seasons past. O'Sullivan has suggested that "serial storytelling is about the line and circle, and how they alternately work together and work apart," a claim this final scene exemplifies *par excellence*, propelling the narrative forward in time even as it returns the character to his original incarnation ("Serials and Satisfaction"). As an ending, the episode suggests a protagonist seemingly incapable of meaningful change and reconfigures what we had previously read as progress as mere circularity.

However, the Season Six finale revises that impression once again, presenting what appears to be definitive progress in Don's life; having now lost his job and his

second wife, he finally begins to open up to his children about his past and his upbringing. Again, a new narrative arc retroactively takes shape, one that traces Don's rocky spiral downward and the means by which he finally arrives on a path toward redemption.

Rectitude. Return. Rebirth. Remarriage. Reversion. Redemption. Each season concludes in a way that suggests a very different fate for the ostensible protagonist and that guides our judgments in divergent directions. Nevertheless, for all intents and purposes, each could function—and, indeed, has been *designed* to function—as an end to the series; in interviews, showrunner Matthew Weiner has repeatedly stated that he "tr[ies] to make the end of every season feel like it's the end of the show" (Dionne). As such, it is interesting to note how, even as each finale directs viewers to assess the show's characters and narrative purposes differently, each also makes a bid for coherence with what has come before it—both in terms of the season and the series. Certainly, the circularity implied by the fifth season finale attempts to impose a unity on the series, but similar impositions of unity are characteristic of other finales as well. For instance, "Tomorrowland," which concludes the fourth season (S04E13), works on one level to crystallize that season, which has largely been about Don's first year following his divorce from Betty and the establishment of SCDP, his new advertising agency. The first lines spoken in "Public Relations," the Season Four premiere (S04E01), are "Who is Don Draper?" and as an opening, that question functions to direct our attention throughout both the episode and the season as a whole. In the second episode (S04E02), Faye, a character who will become his lover later in the season, offhandedly remarks to Don that she knows the type of person he is and that he will "be married again in a year"—a teasing bit of foreshadowing that becomes legible only in the reconfiguration occasioned by the season's completion. The remainder of the season traces Don's descent into and subsequent overcoming of alcoholism. The latter occurs in tandem with the development of his courtship with Faye, a change we are directed to read as evidence of Don's growth; Faye is presented as an intelligent, challenging, caring partner—which makes Don's impetuous decision in the finale to marry his secretary such a jarring development. As an answer to the question posed in "Public Relations"—

and as a summation of the character post-divorce—Don's actions here suggest once again an inability to change: Who is Don Draper? A man whose fear of a challenging adult relationship impels him to hastily marry his secretary in order to satisfy his ego.

Within the larger context of the series, however, the finale gestures toward a closed aesthetic whole by importing the sense of moral judgment constitutive of the first season finale and guiding us to amend our sense of Don's own progression. The final shot of the episode shows Megan asleep in Don's arms while he remains awake, contemplatively looking out a window to a murky scene outside. Over the soundtrack, the strains of Sonny and Cher's "I Got You Babe" play, as ominous a song as I can imagine for a relationship whose momentary blossoming is doomed to wither. As Chuck Bowen, writing for *Slant Magazine*, notes,

> The controversial fourth season finale managed to effectively pull that comfortable rug out from under us. Don dumped his new girlfriend so he could impulsively marry his new secretary, Megan [...] a gorgeous sycophant clearly interested in ascending the corporate ladder, who represented most everything that Don resented in Betty. The ending was so shocking, in fact, that it seemed to present an ideal completion to the entire series, establishing it as a morality tale in which the hero fails to grasp the moral at hand.

Indeed, had "Tomorrowland" concluded the series (and heated contract negotiations between Weiner and AMC almost ensured that it did), the show's final shape would be one that ultimately estranges us from the protagonist, the final shot functioning as a sort of punchline for the series (and, thus, an echo of the punchline that punctuates the end of the pilot episode, wherein the revelation that Don is married with kids suddenly alienates us from the character with whom we had spent the preceding hour bonding).

The last moments of the Season Six finale, "In Care Of," (S06E13) likewise make a bid for coherence, gaining resonance through their inversion of the final scenes of the Season One finale—both of which transpire on Thanksgiving; whereas "The Wheel" (S01E13) concludes with a professional triumph for Don followed by a rather devastating moment in his family life, "In Care Of" ends with an incredibly devastating moment in his professional life—his dismissal from the firm he helped to found—

followed by a rather hopeful moment in his family life—his open, honest revelation to his children (among them his estranged daughter) of his childhood home, a former bordello now dilapidated and situated in a slum. As is typical of *Mad Men*, the scenes are a variation on what has come before them that implies a strong sense of design, albeit a sort of "contingent" design—a sense of purpose that nevertheless escapes any tendency toward inevitability due to its very provisionality, its recognition of its very impermanence as a definitive capstone.

If the "possible" endings of *Mad Men* lead us to reconfigure its narrative purposes in strikingly different ways, speaking to the series' continual employment of a kind of contingent design, then its middles provide us with much of the raw material that is continually recontextualized as the season—and series—progresses. In the space that remains, I would like to examine a single episode of the series, thinking about how the initial configuration it invites is complicated both by the completion of the season of which it is constitutive and by the continuation of the series beyond that season. Doing so will, I hope, provide insights into the narrative strategies employed by the show's creators to situate the episode at the nexus of several layers of narrative seriality, thereby enabling different moments to signify differently depending upon the context in which they are considered. As an episode, I choose "Lady Lazarus," the eighth episode of the fifth season (S05E08). Located just past the halfway point of the thirteen-episode season, "Lazarus" occupies a space whose distance from both the beginning and end of the season renders it immune to the sort of expository and concluding gestures typical at a season's extremes. Additionally, its subject matter makes it particularly ripe for analysis in the context of seriality. It takes its title, after all, from the Sylvia Plath poem about a woman who continually dies only to return after each passing—a fitting description of seriality. Indeed, the episode stages a number of transformations that function both as endings and beginnings, depending upon one's sense of the whole. (How apt, then, that the episode begins with a shot of Pete Campbell, the ad agency's head of accounts, reading *The Crying of Lot 49*—a novel famous for its frustration of traditional notions of closure.)

As with many *Mad Men* episodes, "Lady Lazarus" tells multiple stories linked by

thematic concerns, in this case, the notion of dissatisfaction and the ways in which it causes us to seek new beginnings. The primary players are Pete Campbell and Megan Draper (nee Calvet): the former channels his dissatisfaction as a newly minted father living in suburbia into sex with Beth, the neglected wife of his commuting companion Howard; the latter directs her dissatisfaction with her job at her husband's advertising agency into a new career as an actress. To the extent that "Lady Lazarus" is about rebirth, it is Megan who fulfills the titular role. Having proven herself as an exceptionally talented adwoman in recent episodes, her decision to quit her job to pursue acting signals both the death of a promising career and the birth of a new artistic avocation. This sense of death and rebirth is cemented during an episode-closing montage scored to the Beatles' "Tomorrow Never Knows," a song whose very title is suggestive of the unbounded nature that futurity entails, and whose lyrics—much like Plath's poem—muddy the distinctions between life and death, between beginnings and endings: "Turn off your mind, relax, and float down stream / It is not dying, it is not dying" begins the song. Appropriately, the song's conclusion resituates death as birth, with the enjambment of the final lines forcing us to reconfigure what we initially read as finality into something originary: "So play the game 'Existence' to the end / Of the beginning, of the beginning." Likewise, during the montage, we see Megan lying motionless on the ground, ostensibly an image of death, but—given that she appears to be participating in an exercise in her acting class—actually an indication of her new life. As a self-contained whole, the episode presents this transition as definitive, though one whose ramifications will be explored as the season continues.

The dissatisfaction that Pete experiences also leads him to create a rupture with his current life, but his attempts at a new beginning prove less fruitful. Though he succeeds in bedding (or, to be more precise, *flooring*) Howard's wife, Beth has no interest in perpetuating the affair: "This can never happen again," she tells him. Pete, by contrast, wants the experience to augur a new beginning; that is to say, he wants for the singular experience to become iterative. Consequently, he spends the latter half of the episode (unsuccessfully) attempting to repeat this moment, to resituate a completed experience into a mere part. As a complement to Megan's successful rebirth, Pete's half

of the narrative proves a thematic foil, endowing the episode with a sense of unity that rewards close reading.

Even so, the completion of the season asks us to reconfigure various elements of "Lady Lazarus" in the context of its entirety. For instance, the completed season makes legible another "death" in the episode—that of Don and Megan's thriving relationship. As the final episodes of the season make clear, Megan's decision to give up advertising signals not simply the end of a career but the end of the contentment that had until this point largely characterized her marriage to Don, whose pride in his young wife's advertising acumen suffers quite a blow with her pursuit of a "frivolous" dream. On Megan's last day at the office, the two momentarily say goodbye as Megan takes an elevator down to the lobby, the closing of the elevator doors creating a barrier between the two. In the context of the episode alone, it's a relatively innocuous scene, but read against the season as a whole, the image carries much more weight, the closing of the doors signaling the closing of a chapter in their life and the beginning of a much more tumultuous period.

Likewise, an image in the final montage, read in the context of the completed season, gains a poignancy and thematic resonance completely absent from the episode considered in isolation. That image—a heart finger-drawn by Beth with the condensation on her passenger-side window, and just as quickly erased as she rolls the window down—is prompted by Pete's longing gaze at Beth in the car with Howard. The episode initially guides us to configure the image as indicative of the ephemeral nature of Pete and Beth's tryst: a momentary encounter that must be effaced. The completion of the season, however, endows the image with greater significance. In the season finale, it is revealed that Beth has been suffering from depression and has been a periodic recipient of shock-therapy treatment. Prior to an upcoming treatment, she arranges for one more rendezvous with Pete. (Notably, the revelation of her mental illness also prompts a reconfiguration of our judgment of Beth herself.[5]) When, following that treatment, Pete visits her in the hospital, she has no recollection of who he is, her memory of their encounter wiped as clean as the finger-traced heart.[6] Thus, what we initially read as an image rooted in Beth's desire to communicate to Pete is

retrospectively revealed to be a communication from the authorial agent to us, an omen of what is to come.

As another ominous authorial communication—and one last moment in the episode that solicits reconfiguration when read against the completed season—we might consider Pete's opening conversation on the train with Howard. They are arguing about life insurance, Howard attempting to foist a policy on Pete, who explains that he already has a policy through the agency. Within the episode, the scene functions to establish Howard's eagerness to sell to Pete, which the episode pays off later when Pete expresses an interest in buying as an excuse to follow Howard home to see Beth. As such, the specifics of their discussion are largely unimportant to the trajectory of the episode as a whole. The completion of the season, however, positions us to read the conversation as a sleight of hand, conveying information retrospectively important for our final understanding of the season. Following the suicide of Lane Pryce, one of SCDP's partners, in the penultimate episode of the season (S05E12), the idea of life insurance becomes much more relevant to the narrative, prompting us to read something much more chilling in Pete and Howard's conversation. Speaking of his policy at SCDP, Pete offhandedly mentions that "after two years, it [even] covers suicide," to which Howard replies, "I guarantee that policy pays the company and not you. Imagine everything you have just stopped short the minute they put you in the ground." As the conclusion of the season shows, both of those statements are true—and both of them are relevant. The reconfiguration occasioned here speaks not only to a reassessment of the scene's relevance, but to a meticulousness of design, an impulse to impose unity on the season—to create linkages among episodes using an almost invisible, gossamer-like connective tissue. Crucial information here masquerades as exposition, the seemingly self-sufficient episode masking its function as a constituent part.

If "Lady Lazarus" is intentionally positioned as an integral part of the season, then its function within the larger series is more questionable. Though *Mad Men* largely constructs its seasons as aesthetic wholes to be retrospectively considered, the accumulative power of the seasons themselves seems less measured. Indeed, each

subsequent season is in some ways just another "aesthetic whole" tacked on to the last. If the meticulousness of a season's construction affirms the viewer's desire for a controlling hand present in the text, the accumulation of seasons renders our reconfiguration of individual moments less fixed with regard to intention (as my consideration of the show's various season finales hopefully illustrates). Thus, a reconfiguration of "Lady Lazarus" in terms of the series as a whole seems less secure, and of course, any consideration at this point can only be partial, given that the final "shape" of the series has yet to be inscribed. Certainly, the progression of Season Six, in emphasizing the distance that exists between Don and Megan, confirming the former's return to his adulterous tendencies, and concluding with the separation of the pair, has functioned to put even more stress on the scene of Don and Megan's goodbye, prompting us to read it as an even more profound turning point than we would have even at the end of Season Five. That said, in lieu of a thorough consideration of the episode's function in the series as a whole, I would prefer to devote my final remarks to one last consideration of the episode's closing montage, thinking about it not in terms of its role within the episode, the season, or even the series but, rather, with regard to the show's very conception of itself.

As a montage, the final assemblage of clips isn't anything unusual for a *Mad Men* episode, providing one last glimpse of these characters' "final" situations before the close of the episode. What *is* striking is the use of music—and not just because it's an extravagantly expensive Beatles cut (and one that, as I've mentioned, foregrounds issues of beginning and ending). Rather, it is distinguished by the context in which it's played. Initially, the music is diegetically motivated, as Don, at Megan's suggestion, begins playing the record on their turntable. (Perhaps appropriately, the song is the last cut on the Beatles' *Revolver* but the first one that Don plays—yet another confusion of beginnings and endings.) The soundtrack seems to occasion the juxtaposition of clips that follows—Peggy, Pete, Megan, all depicted in situations that could be alternately construed as beginnings or endings. Following the montage proper, however, we return to Don sitting alone in the apartment. Obviously not taken by latter-day Beatles, he gets up and removes the needle mid-song—an interruption that denies the song its

completion. But the episode isn't quite finished; Don exits the frame into his bedroom as the camera holds steady on a shot of the empty den. And as the screen cuts to black and the credits begin to roll, "Tomorrow Never Knows" starts up again right where it left off. Fittingly, though, we must wait for Don to exit the room completely before the song can recommence over the (now non-diegetic) soundtrack. Thus, an attempt to thwart the completion of a whole has itself been frustrated by a force beyond its control. And so it is with *Mad Men*—and with serial television more generally: even as its creators attempt to control the terms of a work's completion, the nature of the serial work itself overrides attempts to contain it. Meticulous as *Mad Men*'s design is, the unwieldy nature of seriality promises that even the most elaborate attempts to impose unity on an ever-expanding form are bound to engender resonances that exceed the creators' control—or their initial vision. Rather, the only guarantee with serial television seems to be its ongoing march toward a perpetually deferred horizon of completion—a destination that promises to make everything—and nothing—retrospectively clear.

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Notes

[1] See, among others, Newman and Levine.

[2] Indeed, Simon expresses his opposition to assessing "parts" in and of themselves in an interview in which he criticizes the notion of recapping, i.e., of evaluating individual episodes immediately after they air without waiting for the "completion" of a season: "The number of people blogging television online—it's ridiculous. . . . It [a televisual work] doesn't mean anything until there's a beginning, middle and an end" (Egner).

[3] Counterpoised to Simon's hesitancy about evaluating the "unfinished" work is *Deadwood* showrunner David Milch's distaste for the very notion of completion. Speaking of the incomplete nature of *Deadwood* (due to its cancellation by HBO a season before it was to have achieved "completion"), Milch muses, "The idea of the end of a thing as inscribing the final meaning, the pressure that fixes the mark . . . is one of the lies agreed upon that we use to organize our lives" (*Deadwood*).

[4] The pilot episode begins in late 1959, and the recently concluded sixth season ends on Thanksgiving Day, 1968. Presumably, the seventh season—intended to be the last—will "complete" the decade, encasing it within the temporal borders of the show's diegesis.

[5] Interestingly, the initial response to Alexis Bledel's performance of Beth in "Lady Lazarus" was criticized as being excessively stilted and affected. The season finale's revelation of Beth's ostensible depression, however, served to retroactively improve some critics' assessment of Bledel's performance—another reconfiguration prompted by a broader contextualization.

[6] As an aside, it seems worth pointing out the resonance of Beth's own memory loss to the serial nature of the show; that Beth's mind should be wiped clean—in a season finale no less—seems like a sly commentary on the relationship of one season to another. Indeed, just as Beth's "mind-wipe" creates a rupture with her sense of self while still preserving her ontological self-identity, so too does each season simultaneously extend and break from what has come before it.

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