

“Mimetic Desire According to *Mad Men*”

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ABSTRACT

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The TV series *Mad Men* depicts the intensification in modern media of a widespread, competitive, overt process of mediation—the cultural process of modeling desire. Its probing, literary method is to dramatize obvious mimetic behavior, in order to invite the viewer to contemplate much less obvious mimetic behavior.

We flatter ourselves that we could never be so mimetically stupid as our benighted predecessors. But *Mad Men*'s portrayal of anachronistically obvious examples of social mimesis constitutes only the surface of its portrayal of the even deeper, and ever current, dynamics of mimetic desire.

Don Draper himself illustrates how *wanting what other people want* is something that reaches to the core of each one of us. He allows us to appreciate just how inescapable the irony of mimetic desire is. Don, too, *wants what other people want*, because this is the universal structure of human desire, although in his deepest self-deceptions (best illustrated in all his romantic entanglements), he mistakenly thinks he can escape this truth. For, even if he is a master at manipulating the desires of others, we see he is dramatically powerless to master his own desire, which is just as human, just as mimetic.

In Don's case, the essence of his identity is that he must conceal—he must drape—the real “Dick Whitman” with the “romantic lie” (“Don Draper”). The cynical version of this lie in which he has concealed himself, and by which he maintains his cool superiority, is exactly what he spouts to Rachel Menken when he ridicules her complaint of never having been in love. Don's success, we learn, is his greatest weakness, because it alienates him from the possibility of turning weakness or failure into the opportunity for him to connect with others.