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The scope of this panel is quite large and encompasses a great deal of possibility for exploring television so, for my response, I chose to focus on how politics and aesthetics mingle in one aspect of one program: the commercial breaks on *Mad Men*.

Although the nature and presentation of the advertisements has mutated over the years, commercial breaks themselves remain a crucial fact of the medium and one that almost all producers and writers have to worry about. The typical writer, when making an episode of an ad-supported TV show, will write to these commercials, making an episode composed of multiple acts, each one ending in some kind of emphatic break or cliffhanger. These moments function as both teasers meant to keep the viewer watching through the commercial break in order to see what happens next and natural stopping points that allow the show to segue to the advertising without jarring the viewer. The aesthetics of the television narrative, somewhat uniquely, have been shaped around these regular interruptions.

*Mad Men* airs on AMC, a commercial network, and thus has these breaks. However, unlike other dramas, the show does not structure its episodes to allow for these breaks. A PDF version of a production script for *Mad Men* confirms that, unlike most dramas, the script does not even indicate any act breaks. When the episode airs, the commercials are wedged in at the end of certain scenes. The result is a show which, often times, is jarring to the viewer when it breaks for advertising. These are not natural stopping points; rather, the viewer is often violently removed from the diagesis of the show.

Many people complain about these breaks, assuming that a gradual easing into a commercial break is the ideal way for every television episode to operate. In most cases, this is true, but for *Mad Men* these jarring resonate on a thematic level. By positioning commercials as a violent interruption rather than a natural moment to catch one's breath, the show draws the viewer's attention to both the advertising and the artificial nature of those ads. The commercials are not built into the show, so the

viewer notices their presence more than she would in a traditional show with the breaks built into the narrative. As a result, the viewer is inclined to view the commercials as an interruption and an artificial intrusion on the perfect structure of the show.

Viewed in the context of the show's politics, these interruptions help the show's structure embody one of its key themes: the emptiness of the fantasies presented by mass advertising and the dangerous ideology promoted by it. This is a difficult theme for a show airing on an ad-supported channel to coherently articulate, but *Mad Men's* structure implicitly critiques the ads by ignoring their very existence, letting the viewer be violently ripped out of the hypnotic world of the show. If the viewer is already jarred and displeased, then she is more likely to view the ads critically (doubly so since the commercials themselves are likely not as classy or sophisticated as the ones presented in the show); their false content is indicated by their unnatural presence. The show takes a fact of its narrative form, commercial interruption, and twists it to heighten its own critique of advertising.

This is just one example of the ways that modern shows are bending the narrative aesthetics of television in order to better suit their needs. It would seem to be a problem, politically, for the medium as a whole that its programs serve as delivery devices for advertising. How much can a program critique power structures and ideology if it has to constantly stop to support those same structures. However, in the process of researching this idea, I noticed that, while it was easy to view an episode of *Mad Men*, it was much more difficult to watch one with commercial breaks. By not writing to the commercials, *Mad Men* ensures a slightly more unified experience for viewers who come to the show on DVD, Netflix, or one of the other new forms of consumption.

So much of the aesthetics of television are currently wrapped up in the need to plan around commercials, even as television viewing habits drift more towards alternatives besides the live broadcast. Is a writer's duty to make a TV show that plays better with commercials (when it will be seen by a large initial audience) or is it to make a show that plays better without them, as it will on DVD and through streaming for the rest of time? *Mad Men* has found a unique way to negotiate that

line, remaking television's narrative aesthetics around its own politics.