

Final Written Report

Professional Development Grant

“How Much This Never Happened: Why Does Don Like *La Notte*?”

Mad Men: The Conference
Middle Tennessee State University
Murfreesboro, TN

May 2016

Dr. Emily Hoffman

This final report addresses the results of a professional research project funded by an ATU Professional Development Grant. This report follows the instructions provided in the Guidelines for Professional Development Grants.

A. Title Page (see above)

B. Restatement of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

Abstract of conference paper presented: “How Much This Never Happened”: Why Does Don Like *La Notte*,” by Emily Hoffman, Assistant Professor of English

In Season 2’s “The New Girl,” Don admits his fondness for Michelangelo Antonioni’s *La Notte* (1961) to Bobbie Barrett. The parallels between the movie’s unhappily married Giovanni and Lidia and the Drapers seem somewhat obvious as do those between philanderers Giovanni and Don. But is that why Don likes *La Notte*? As someone who has habitually tried to escape from himself and his actions throughout his adult life, it seems unlikely that Don would enjoy a film because it highlights some of the least flattering aspects of his life. I will argue that Don likes *La Notte* precisely because (1) it is another opportunity to escape and (2) it acts as needed affirmation. Don spends his days cynically honing ad campaigns that appeal to large swaths of the general public. In order to do so, the images must be unambiguous. The words must be precise and direct. Therefore, there is no place for abstraction. Don sees his work as manipulation, not art. Antonioni’s films are defined by abstraction and artful composition, thus their potential escapist—and elitist—appeal for Don. (It is worth noting that Don expresses no enthusiasm for the mainstream entertainment mentioned in the episode.) In addition, Antonioni

eschews cause-and-effect plotting that privileges a relationship between the past and present.

“The New Girl” is the episode in which Don famously tells Peggy she will be shocked by how much her pregnancy never happened. Don speaks from experience, and in Antonioni’s critically-adored, defiantly modern films that frequently erase, evade, or forget the past and causality, Don can find affirmation of his defining survival strategy.

C. Brief Review of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

I attended *Mad Men: The Conference*, an international conference co-sponsored by Middle Tennessee State University and the University of Salford, UK, on the MTSU campus in Murfreesboro, TN. I presented my paper on May 27, 2016. I drove to Murfreesboro from Russellville on May 26, spending one night in Nashville before continuing on to Murfreesboro the next morning. I returned to Russellville on May 28, 2016.

D. Summary of Experiences

I teach courses in both film studies and television studies. This paper, through its exploration of why the television character Don Draper from the show *Mad Men* likes the classic Italian art house film *La Notte*, allows me to combine these two areas. Moreover, I am interested in teaching a future television studies course devoted exclusively to *Mad Men*. In addition to providing me with the chance to address a particular topic I have been interested in through my own paper, the narrow focus of the conference provided me with an opportunity to hear from other scholars and absorb ideas and interpretations of the show that will undoubtedly prove useful whenever I do teach such a course. The presentation of my paper was a success. I received positive feedback from audience members and members of the panel immediately following the

presentation as well as afterward through the conference's Twitter feed. In particular, having Matt Zoller Seitz, *New York Magazine* television critic and author of several books on contemporary television, including *Mad Men*, attend my panel and respond positively to my work was an unexpected treat.

E. Conclusions and Recommendations

Conference organizers have notified presenters that a publisher has expressed interest in a book-length collection of essays based on various conference papers. Expanded abstracts are due July 31. I plan on submitting an abstract and expanding my conference paper into an essay appropriate for this project. Without the funds provided through this grant I would not have had the opportunity to participate in this international conference or potentially contribute to the related essay collection.