Matthew Weiner, The Art of Screenwriting No. 4

Born in 1965, Matthew Weiner is barely old enough to remember the period with which his television series *Mad Men* has now become almost synonymous. His office is exactly what one might hope for the creator of Don Draper: a stylish mixture of midcentury modern furniture, with a cabinet full of top-shelf liquor. But it turns out that the furniture came with the building, which was designed in 1955, and the liquor, mostly gifts, is wasted on Weiner, who hardly drinks at all.

Weiner's sensibility reveals itself on closer inspection. A framed still from the set is shot from behind the actors' heads, showing the crew. There's a black-and-white photograph of Groucho Marx, Alice Cooper, and Marvin Hamlisch in conversation. There's a homemade Father's Day card by one of Weiner's four sons, reading "Dad Men" in red and black crayon. There's a picture of Stedman (Oprah's boyfriend), because when *Vanity Fair* photographed Weiner's desk soon after Oprah's, he asked what she'd had on hers. His bookshelf overflows with fiction, essays, and poetry—from *Diaries of Old Manhattan* to Billy Collins to *Moby-Dick*.

A former *Jeopardy!* champion who once, rather than give notes, jumped up and danced to "Zou Bisou Bisou" for Jessica PareÌ (Megan Draper on the show), Weiner seems never to sleep. Our interview took place in four sessions that spanned almost eighteen months—real months, that is. More time than that passed on the show during the same period, but to say exactly how much would be, in Weiner's universe, a spoiler. We spoke late into the night after he had spent full days in preproduction meetings, in editing, in sound-mixing sessions, on set, and in the writers' room—and we could only sit down to talk on the rare nights when he didn't have to write. Even with this schedule, he comes in every morning inspired by a movie he's seen, an article he's read, or a poem he's remembered. (I'm lucky to be a writer on the show.) Weiner begins every season by rereading John Cheever's preface to his *Collected Stories*: "A writer can be seen clumsily learning to walk, to tie his necktie, to make love, and to eat his peas off a fork. He appears much alone and determined to instruct himself." The life of a showrunner leaves him almost no time to be alone, but Weiner seems always to be instructing himself.

Semi Chellas

WEINER

You know, I got a subscription to *The Paris Review* when I was fourteen or fifteen years old. I read those interviews all the time. They were really helpful.

INTERVIEWER

How did they help you?

WEINER

There were people talking about writing like it was a job, first of all. And then saying "I don't know" a lot. It's helpful, when you're a kid, to hear someone saying "I don't know." Also, they were asking questions that I would've asked, only I'd have been embarrassed to ask them. Like, What time of day do you write?

INTERVIEWER

What time of day do you write?

WEINER

I write at night on this job because I have to, except Sundays when I write all day and all night. Left to my own devices I will always end up writing late at night, because I'm a procrastinator. But if there's a deadline, I will write round the clock.

INTERVIEWER

Did you know when you were a kid that writing was the job you wanted?

WEINER

I wanted to be a writer, but the way my family thought of writers, that would have been like saying, I want to be quarterback of the football team or president of the United States. My parents had the books every Jewish family had—*My Name Is Asher Lev*, *QB VII*, *O Jerusalem!*—but they were also really into Joseph Heller, and my dad took *Swann's Way* on every vacation. I always thought I would be a novelist, like the people whose books I saw lying around the house.

INTERVIEWER

INTERVIEWER

Did you read those books?

WEINER

Not really. I read very slowly. I'm a good listener. If they'd had books on tape back then, I would be the best-read person in the world. When I had to do a report on *Measure for Measure*, I went and got the records, and I listened to John Gielgud do it. My dad read Mark Twain to us at night. I loved "The Stolen White Elephant" and "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." And *The Prince and the Pauper*, oh my God, did I love that. I read *Mad* magazine and stuff, but my parents were always yelling at me, You need to read more! Crack a book already! I was not really a reader until I left college. My favorite form of writing is still the short story. *Winesburg, Ohio* was the first book that I read where I recognized the people in it. I knew the teacher who was sort of gay and couldn't control his hands. I recognized everybody in there. And then, with John Cheever, I recognized myself in the voice of the narrator. His voice sounds like the voice in my head—or what I wish it sounded like.

INTERVIEWER

Who are your favorite writers?

WEINER

I don't make lists or rank writers. I can only say which ones are relevant to me. Salinger holds my attention, Yates holds my attention. John O'Hara doesn't, I don't know why—it's the same environment, but he doesn't. Cheever holds my attention more than any other writer. He is in every aspect of *Mad Men*, starting with the fact that Don lives in Ossining on Bullet Park Road—the children are ignored, people have talents they can't capitalize on, everyone is selfish to some degree or in some kind of delusion. I have to say, Cheever's stories work like TV episodes, where you don't get to repeat information about the characters. He grabs you from the beginning.

Poems have always held my attention, but they're denser and smaller. It's funny because poetry is considered harder to read. It wasn't harder for me. Close reading, that is. Milton, Chaucer, Dante—I could handle those for some reason, but not

fiction. From ninth grade on, I wrote poetry compulsively, and pushed myself to do iambic pentameter and rhymes because free verse was cheating—anybody could do that. But I was such a terrible student. I couldn't sustain anything.

INTERVIEWER

What pointed you toward drama?

WEINER

Actually, I think it has something to do with my not being a great reader. When a play's put up, it's all there in front of you. When you're a little kid who has trouble with long books, it's a very literary experience to go see Eugene O'Neill. During high school, I wrote skits, I did improv, I was a performer. My senior year in high school I was elected by my class to give a speech at graduation. It was seven or eight minutes of stand-up comedy, including a salute to the bottom fifth of the class, of which I was part. The dad of a classmate of mine, a guy named Allan Burns, who created *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, came up to me afterward. He said, Have you ever thought about writing for TV? You could do that.

INTERVIEWER

Had you thought about it?

WEINER

I had been raised more or less without TV. I loved it, my parents loved it—but we weren't allowed to watch it. And yet what was on TV during those years? *M*A*S*H*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, Carol Burnett and Bob Newhart. TV was very bad before that, and got very bad after that, but at the time it was really very good. The thing is, I took what Allan Burns said seriously just because it was the first time someone said I might be able to do *anything*. But my parents hated show business. It's part of living in Los Angeles.

There was one other formative experience. One of our English teachers, Ms. Moser, had a poet come to visit our school—W.S. Merwin. The honor society got to have dinner with him. Even though I made bad grades, I edited the literary magazine, and the teacher made sure I was allowed to go, too. She had even told him about

me, because when we met he said, Tell me your name again, I want to remember it. In my yearbook, Ms. Moser wrote to me, Keep doing what you're doing, and stick to poetry and starve.

INTERVIEWER

Which you did not do.

WEINER

I tried. At Wesleyan I could not get into any writing classes. I applied to everything and got rejected. You're laughing now, you should have heard my parents. Six hundred students, all that money, and you can't get into class!? An older student, who was studying with the famous professor Frank Reeve, told me I should go and ask, personally, to take a tutorial with him. Franklin D'Olier Reeve. This Vermont Yankee, log-splitting son of a bitch. He had gone with Robert Frost to Russia. Incredibly handsome and charismatic—in fact, he was Christopher Reeve's father. I imagined he was in the CIA. So I went to his office and brought my poems with me. He shredded them. I had some line that was like, "Where does it hide?"—this is sophomore poetry, right?—"Where does it hide to gently squeeze the pitch of morning into orange whispers of dusk, squeeze the pitch of dusk into orange whispers of morning," and he said, Lose the split infinitive and juice squeezer. It was brutal. Then he said, When do we start?

I spent three semesters studying with Professor Reeve, writing poems and delivering one or two of them to him every week. I also took a lot of poetry classes. There were a couple years there where *The Waste Land* was the most interesting thing in the world to me. I loved that it was so personal and grimy and gross and epic at the same time. Two women talking about getting an abortion in a bar at closing time right next to a story about Greek gods and the Fisher King. The high and the low together. It is so important to my life as a writer, there's so much dialogue, so much rhythm that I have tried to emulate. That's still my idea of what a poetic sentence sounds like. My senior thesis was in creative writing, was poetry.

INTERVIEWER

What were your poems like?

WEINER

Pretty funny, a lot of them, in an ironic way. And very confessional. A lot like what I

do on *Mad Men*, actually—I don't think people always realize the show is super personal, even though it's set in the past. It was as if the admission of uncomfortable thoughts had already become my business on some level. I love awkwardness. Reeve compared my poems to cartoons. He had me read "Mac Flecknoe," Dryden's satire on the poet Thomas Shadwell, because he knew I had a sense of humor and was interested in celebrities. He also told me that I had to be as interesting as my work, which terrified me. I was like, Forget it, dude. I'm a very conventional person. I'm middle-class. My father's a physician. I had no personality to speak of. I kept wishing I had grown up interesting so I could be a great writer.

INTERVIEWER

Maybe Reeve turned you into a TV writer by giving you a weekly deadline.

WEINER

I've always said TV writing is for people who hate being alone more than they hate writing. Even then I needed to talk about what I was doing. Once I knew that my writing would be read right away, even if it was judged—and once I knew that it would be *shot* right away—that was all I cared about.

INTERVIEWER

Did you figure this out in film school?

WEINER

No. I didn't go to film school for writing, but I realized that if you could write, you could have complete control. All these people I admired—Woody Allen, Jim Brooks, Preston Sturges—directed *and* wrote. When directors would come to the school and talk about their movies, eventually they'd have to talk about the fact that someone else had written it. To me that was like the dirty secret.

Then I graduated from film school and was stuck in a hole by myself for three years, writing. Linda, my wife, was supporting us, but that was awful. I was not made for

writing. Linda, my wife, was supporting us, but that was awful. I was not made for that. I am not the writer who wants to live in the woods. Plus, half my time was spent trying to get into show business, which is demoralizing and somehow futile without finished work, but easier than writing.

INTERVIEWER

What were you writing during that time?

WEINER

Screenplays. I finished a screenplay that I'd started at USC. Then I wrote another screenplay about paparazzi. Then I started working on a Big Movie. After film school, I read everything that had been assigned to me in college. I mean, *everything*. I read *Mein Kampf*. I read all the time instead of writing. And I read a lot of biographies and became interested in this kind of American picaresque character. By picaresque I don't mean like Candide. I don't mean a guy who shit's happening to. I mean a guy who is making his own future because he has no other options. I mean Tom Jones. So I was writing this movie following a guy's life from 1930 to the millennium. And I got to page 80 of the thing, and I abandoned it.

Then I decided I was going to make a movie, an improvised movie that I was going to be in. Kind of a comedy Cassavetes movie—people improvising, but in a story. This was around the time of *Clerks*. I saw *Clerks* and felt the way many people did. It wasn't like hearing the Beatles for the first time. It was a ten-thousand-dollar amateur black-and-white movie. It was inspiring in the way only something crude and peculiar can be inspiring.

And because I had gone to film school, I knew what commercial filmmaking was and knew I didn't like it. In the nineties there was a stranglehold of formula on the

movies. People would point to great movies like *Chinatown* as examples of how structure generates great works. But I always felt that these structures were *derived* from great works. The individual stories are organic, they come out of people's heads. To say that the story of Jesus and the story of Moses are the same story is a horrible mistake. Are they both heroic? Yes. Do they both have inauspicious beginnings and unmarked graves? Yes. That does not make them the same story. But the studios were trying to consolidate films into a bulletproof system, they were

trying to reverse engineer a hit—which, of course, is insane. In entertainment you're a fool to try that.

One of the big things was, everybody hated "episodic structure," as they used to call it.

INTERVIEWER

Meaning what?

WEINER

They were uncomfortable with a movie like *The Godfather* or a story like the *Odyssey*, where the only thing holding the events together is the characters. Now, there's this monster, this obstacle, but there's no real progression—the hero just keeps trying to get home. Sure, Michael Corleone starts off as a young war hero and ends up as the godfather, but the wedding takes up the first half hour of the movie. People liked to talk about "act breaks" and "rising action" leading to a climax, but what about *Apocalypse Now*? Someone's on a journey, and sure, we're heading toward a climax, but there are so many digressions. To me, those digressions are the story.

People would say to me, What's holding this together? Or, How is this moment related to the opening scene, or the problem you set up on page 15? I don't know.

That's where the character went. That's the story. So many movies in the seventies are told this way, episodically, and they feel more like real life because you don't see the story clicking. Movies like *Days of Heaven*—big movies that take time out to show the locusts. Do you need the crop duster in *North by Northwest*? No, but it is the most memorable part of the movie. It has no essential function in the story. Cary Grant has already been pursued. They've already tried to kill him. They've drugged him. They've poured booze down his throat. Remember how Cary Grant goes back to the house where the bad guys got him at the beginning of the movie and poured booze down his throat? He comes back the next day and says, This is where I was, they poured booze down my throat. Remember how he goes into the room where they poured the booze into him and they've changed the couch?

INTERVIEWER

INTERVIEWER

Even now the hair on my neck is standing up.

WEINER

They're so evil. They changed the couch! It's preposterous, but delightful. Of course, anything that is epic is episodic in structure, whether it's *Lawrence of Arabia* or *The Godfather*, which was already being treated like an art movie—the most successful commercial movie in the world treated like an art-house movie.

I liked episodic structure and I thought it worked. I still think it works. At the time I was especially interested in Billy Wilder and Fellini. I liked their grasp of tone, the way the movies are both funny and dark. You're always scared and laughing and on the verge of tears somewhere in the middle of these movies. I could watch *Sunset Boulevard* and *8 1/2* over and over again. Everything you need to know about writing is in those two movies. How to tell a story, where to start the story, whose point of view it's from, at what point you leave their point of view, when you should see a character in a scene by himself or herself—all this shit that drives you nuts

when you're trying to structure something. And then, the fact that there are no rules. That's what both movies are saying—there are no rules, the audience is not as rigid as you think, and certainly not as rigid as the people paying for the movies to get made.

Anyway, once I got out of film school I said, They will not let me fly the plane. So I'm going to build my own airport. I shot my first movie, *What Do You Do All Day?*, in twelve days, in 1995. It cost twelve thousand dollars. Anybody can raise twelve thousand dollars—now it would probably be even cheaper, because there was no digital then.

Around that time, my friend Daisy von Scherler Mayer called me up and said, I sold this sitcom. Come in and sit at the table. We're going to run through the script and you'll just pitch jokes. The show was called *Party Girl*. And I drove onto the Warner Brothers lot and sat down at the table with all these professional writers and had no trouble talking and telling jokes. Not just because I'm an extrovert, but because I'd just made this movie and I knew it was funny. You've never heard of *What Do You Do All Day?* and it never went anywhere, but I still say it changed my life. Making

that movie took me from being a frustrated, bitter person with no control over his life to a delusional, grandiose person with no control over his life. I was so high on the idea of having a job and writing jokes and going down to the stage and seeing the actors saying them and getting laughs. I couldn't believe it.

INTERVIEWER

So none of the screenplays you'd been writing before that period were made?

WEINER

Well, remember the eighty-page picaresque thing I threw away? That turned out to be the basis for *Mad Men*.

INTERVIEWER

Really?

WEINER

Four years after I'd started working in TV, I wrote the pilot for *Mad Men*. Three years after that, AMC wanted to make it. They asked me, What's the next episode about? So I went looking through my notes. Now, imagine this. At this point it's 2004—I'm writing for *The Sopranos*—and I go back to look at my notes from 1999 … but then I find this unfinished screenplay from 1995, and on the last page it says "Ossining, 1960." Five years after I'd abandoned that other screenplay, I'd started writing it again without even knowing it. Don Draper was the adult version of the hero in the movie. And there were all of these things in the movie that became part of the show—Don's past, his rural poverty, the story I was telling about the United States, about who these people were. And when I say "these people," I mean people like Lee Iacocca and Sam Walton, even Bill Clinton to some degree. I realized that these people who ran the country were all from these very dark backgrounds, which they had hidden, and that the self-transforming American hero, the Jay Gatsby or the talented Mr. Ripley, still existed. I once worked at a job where there was a guy who said he went to Harvard. Someone finally said, You did not go to Harvard—that guy didn't go to Harvard! And everyone was like, Who cares? That went into the show.

How could it not matter, when everyone was fighting so hard to get into Harvard and it was supposed to change your life? And you could just lie about it? Guess what—in America, we say, Good for him! Good for him, for figuring it out.

INTERVIEWER

I'm struck by the irony that Don Draper has become an icon of the 1960s

Establishment when the character himself feels like such an outsider.

WEINER

Everyone loves the Horatio Alger version of life. What they don't realize is that these transformations begin in shame, because poverty feels shameful. It shouldn't, but everyone who's experienced it confirms this. Sometimes people say, I didn't know we were poor—Don Draper knows he's poor, very much in the model of Iacocca or Walton, who came out of the Great Depression, out of really humble beginnings. Or like Conrad Hilton, on the show. These men don't take no for an answer, they build these big businesses, these empires, but really it's all based on failure, insecurity, and an identity modeled on some abstract ideal of white power. I've always said this is a show about becoming white. That's the definition of success in America—becoming a WASP. A WASP male.

The driving question for the series is, Who are we? When we talk about "we," who is that? In the pilot, Pete Campbell has this line, "Adding money and education doesn't take the rude edge out of people." Sophisticated anti-Semitism. I overheard that line when I was a schoolteacher. The person, of course, didn't know they were in the presence of a Jew. I was a ghost. Certain male artists like to show that they're feminists as a way to get girls. That's always seemed pimpy to me. I sympathize with feminism the same way I identify with gay people and with people of color, because I know what it's like to look over the side of the fence and then to climb over the fence and to feel like you don't belong, or be reminded at the worst moment that you don't belong.

Take Rachel Menken, the department-store heiress in the first season of *Mad Men*. She's part of what I call the nose-job generation. She's assimilated. She probably doesn't observe the Sabbath or any of these other things that her parents did. That

generation had a hard time because they were trying desperately to be buttoned-down and preppy and—this is my parent's generation—white as could be. They were embarrassed by their parents. This is the story of America, this assimilation. Because guess what, this guy Don has the same problems. He's hiding his identity, too. That's why Rachel Menken understands Don, because they're both trying desperately to be white American males.

Of all of them, Peggy is my favorite. I identify with her struggle. She is so earnest and self-righteous and talented and smart, but dumb about personal things. She thinks she's living the life of "we." But she's not. And every time she turns a corner, someone says, "You're not part of 'we.' " "But you all said 'we' the other day." "Yes, we meant, 'we white men.' "

INTERVIEWER

It's strange that you wrote the hour-long drama *Mad Men* just when you were succeeding as a half-hour sitcom writer.

WEINER

I didn't see a future in situation comedy. There wasn't room anymore for something like *M*A*S*H*, where they would have sentimental moments and episodes that could sneak up on you and make you cry.

When I started out, there were few dramas on TV. They were out of style. There were four news magazines a week, and there was *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?*, or whatever, and the procedurals and the game shows. Reality TV hadn't happened yet. Then, while I was doing it, situation comedy went from being the most lucrative and exciting place to be in television to disappearing. All the things that people hate about network TV were starting to fail economically, and still the networks were asking, How do we re-create *Friends*? By the time I wrote the *Mad Men* pilot, the syndication market had dried up. *Survivor* happened when I was writing on the sitcom *Becker*. *Survivor*, *The Sopranos*, and *Lost* all happened within a few years of each other. By then, drama had become really big. And then David Chase hired me for *The Sopranos* based on my script for *Mad Men*.

INTERVIEWER

INTERVIEWER

You worked on three seasons of *The Sopranos* before you went back to your *Mad Men* pilot. Did that change your conception of your show?

WEINER

Mad Men would have been some sort of crisp, soapy version of *The West Wing* if not for *The Sopranos*. Peggy would have been a climber. All the things that people thought were going to happen would have happened. Even though the pilot itself has a dark, strange quality, I didn't know that that was what was good about it. I just wanted an excuse to exorcise my demons, to write a story about somebody who's thirty-five years old, who has everything, and who is miserable.

The important thing, for me, was hearing the way David Chase indulged the subconscious. I learned not to question its communicative power. When you see somebody walking down a dark hallway, you know that they're scared. We don't have to explain that it's scary. Why is this person walking down a dark hallway when he's on his way to his kids' school? Because he's scared about someone telling him something bad about his kids. He's worried about hearing something that will reflect badly on the way he's raised his kids, which goes back to his own childhood. All that explanatory stuff, we never even talked about it. And I try not to talk about it here. Why did that happen? Why do you think? You can't cheat and tell people what's going on, because then they won't enjoy it, even if they say they want it that way.

You know how sometimes I give you a note that says, Why don't you do X? and you say, That's the thing I wanted to do? That's what I learned at *The Sopranos*. That's

the note I try to give to everyone who writes here. Take the risk of doing the extreme thing, the embarrassing thing, the thing that's in your subconscious. Before *The Sopranos*, when someone said, Make it deeper, I didn't know what they meant. Or really, I knew in my gut—but I also knew that it was the one thing that crossed my mind that I wasn't going to do. To have Peggy come into Don's office after he's had the baby and ask for a raise and be rejected, and look at the baby presents, so we know she's thinking about her own baby that she gave away, and then to have her tell Don, "You have everything and so much of it." There is something embarrassing about that. A scene that was really just about her getting turned down for a raise.

about that. A scene that was really just about her getting turned down for a raise became a scene about her whole life. That was the sort of thing I learned from working with David Chase.

Another thing that happened when I began writing on *The Sopranos* was I noticed that people were always telling me anecdotes. They would throw out a line of dialogue they'd heard somebody say or that someone had said to them—and that *was* the story. I did not know how important that shit was. There's an episode where Beansie and Paulie are reminiscing and Tony dismissively says, "'Remember when' is the lowest form of conversation." And it's devastating. David Chase had witnessed that actual statement. Now I have a ton of stuff like that I've saved, things people have said to me that are concise and devastating and sum up some moment in their lives. When I'm talking to some woman on an airplane, and she says, I like being bad and going home and being good, that is very useful.

INTERVIEWER

Did you cultivate your memory for those moments?

WEINER

I always had that kind of memory, I just didn't know there was any value in it. One time we were doing a research call at *The Sopranos*. It was a two-hour conference

call with a guy talking about emergency medicine. At the end of it, the writer's assistant, who was taking notes, had a bunch of medical facts, but all of us writers had written down the same two ideas. All of us. Just those same two ideas in two hours.

INTERVIEWER

What were they?

WEINER

He said that everyone with insurance is a VIP. And he used the expression "wallet biopsy." I think they're self-explanatory. But that's what being a writer is. I don't know what makes something a story, but I know one when I hear it. *Mad Men* was a show I wanted to see. I really wanted to tell a story about that period. I thought it

was sexy. I wanted to live in it a little bit, and I wanted to remind people that they have a misconception about the past, any past.

INTERVIEWER

What sort of misconception?

WEINER

You know in *Reds*, when they're interviewing the witnesses, and Henry Miller says, People today think they invented fucking? That kind of thing. The old people you're looking at, they may have been more carnal than we are—drunker, less responsible, more violent. So many of those film noirs are about how soldiers reintegrate themselves into society. The private detective is haunted by the shadow of having killed people in the war. Don't even get me started on *The Best Years of Our Lives*. The move to the suburbs, the privacy, the conservatism of the fifties—that's all being driven by guys who, for two years, had not gone to the bathroom in privacy.

I'm not the first TV person to be puzzled and fascinated by the fifties. The two biggest shows of the seventies are *M*A*S*H** and *Happy Days*. Obviously that moment is some sort of touchstone for culture. Is Hawkeye not related to Don Draper? He's an alcoholic Boy Scout who behaves badly all the time. I just wanted to go back and look again.

So I spent a lot of money buying videotapes to watch movies from the period. I hired somebody to do research for me. Then, because I was working all day, I stumbled on the idea of dictating. I found that I was constantly thinking of dialogue and couldn't write it down fast enough. I heard that Billy Wilder did it, too. He walked around with a riding crop while his writing partners would type. Joseph Conrad did it. So did Henry James. I've since kept track because some of my writer friends think it's cheating. And it's hard to believe you can be as eloquent as your characters, but you can be if you have the topic and you're channeling them. Then you get to fix it afterward. It's way better than sitting there and procrastinating while you write a new piece of description and try to perfect the sentence.

INTERVIEWER

Will you describe how you write the show now?

WEINER

At the beginning of the season I dictate a lot of notes about the stories I'm interested in. Then for each episode, we start with a group-written story, an outline. When I read the outline, I rarely get a sense of what the story is. It has to be told to me. Then I go into a room with an assistant and I dictate the scenes, the entire script, page by page.

INTERVIEWER

I've seen you do whole scenes without pausing.

WEINER

I can see it in my head. And I don't look at the dictation. I try and keep it in my head. That's why the fatigue gets so bad. And why it's crucial to have the right assistant. It requires the chemistry, it requires them reading my mind a little bit so they know when I'm moving back to an earlier person who's talking or which person is saying it—because sometimes I stop identifying the speakers. After a while I'll talk in different voices. I don't even know what I'm doing when I walk around making up those scenes. But I wrote my play the same way, and my second movie, *You Are Here*. If you compose that way, it means the dialogue can all be said. John Slattery and I had an argument about something in the second episode, where there was a bit of a tongue twister. He was supposed to say, "Coop is going to want a carbon with your hand-picked team for Nixon on it. And I warn you right now, it includes Pete Campbell." He said it was impossible to say, but I knew it could be said because I'd said it. I rattled it right off to him. Then he smiled and performed it and everything else I wrote for him. I started writing more tongue twisters for John. My favorite was, "He knows what that nut means to Utz and what Utz means to us."

INTERVIEWER

What's the main difference between writing for someone else's show and writing for your own?

WEINER

It's one thing to hear Tony Soprano say your dialogue. That is ridiculous. That's a

totally surreal experience. It's another thing to create an entire environment and walk onto the set of this fake office from a different era and see Peggy in her ponytail and bangs and Joan looking like Joan. It was better than I could have imagined. I am a controlling person. I'm at odds with the world, and like most people I don't have any control over what's going to happen—I only have wishes and

dreams. But to be in this environment where you actually control how things are going to work out, and who's going to win, and what they're going to learn, and who kisses who...

INTERVIEWER

And then you have the challenge of doing episode after episode, season after season. You once said to me, "I've written hundreds and hundreds of scenes with two people in them. You have to know what kind of scene it is." What did you mean?

WEINER

When I was just starting out, a writer explained to me the meat and potatoes of situation comedy. For instance, a scene where one guy thinks he's talking about one thing and the other guy thinks they're talking about something else sounds like a big clicheÌ. But guess what? That's comedy. The question is, Can you do it well? I've personally written some of the most clicheÌd comedy scenes on *Mad Men*.

INTERVIEWER

Like what?

WEINER

Like the first season, when Pete goes to return that chip-and-dip at the store. He tries to hit on the officious clerk and she rejects him, then that other guy comes in and hits on her, and she loves it. That could be a scene on any situation comedy in the world, right down to waiting in line. To me, waiting in line is one of the funniest things in the world.

Or think of the premiere of season 3 of *Mad Men*, where Ken and Pete both get promoted to head of accounts. I put them in the elevator so that each of them can

magnanimously congratulate the loser. I wanted to see how long we could sustain the dramatic irony. When I got to *The Sopranos*, I realized that I hated it when one character would just help another character through the scene. "I got something to tell you." "Well, uh, what have you got to tell me?" "It's kind of hard to say, Ron." "Well, I'm listening." I don't know about everybody else, but I find that whenever I really want to say something, there's a huge obstacle. Except in this interview.

INTERVIEWER

What about all the scenes you do with four or five or six people? Or more? You have all those status meetings, all those partners' meetings.

WEINER

Those are tough, and the hardest part of my job is dealing with exposition. So populating those meetings with a lot of characters gives you a chance to bury it. But I find that giving each of the characters their own goal in the scene helps them talk in my head. And that's usually the place for the most drama. Characters go in the story from having a private problem to having a public problem, even if they just lie about it. Which I guess is some convoluted definition of dramatic irony. Take the meeting in the episode "Hands and Knees." Don has almost been caught by the government. Pete has to turn down North American Aviation and lie for Don or Don will go to jail. Pete also knows that Don is sleeping with Dr. Faye. Lane has been beaten by his father with a cane. Roger has lost their biggest account and sent Joan alone to get an abortion. Joan has not gotten an abortion. And Cooper is just there—he doesn't know anything. So there are six secrets in the room, and when I was writing that scene, the hardest part was forcing the characters to talk about anything. Luckily we had the structure of another dumb meeting. The audience has so much information, and the characters don't have any.

In addition to writing, I happen to go to a lot of meetings, and I find them hilarious

—the rules of order, old business, new business, it's not just from the Marx Brothers. But you know, every scene is comic to me.

INTERVIEWER

The first time I walked onto the set, I saw a stack of mail sitting on a secretary's

The first time I walked onto the set, I saw a stack of mail sitting on a secretary's desk. Every single letter was addressed to a character on the show, from a client they have in the show, stamped and postmarked 1965. How do you make it so real, so detailed?

WEINER

Well, I have a bunch of people who delight in re-creating that physical reality. But as for the writing, I don't make any special effort to write "period." I try to be realistic, but the characters are smarter and more eloquent than regular people. It's part of why I have them talk so slowly—or, really, listen so much—because I didn't want the dialogue to be repetitive and snappy and sound phony. I wanted there to be real things like people saying, What? when they didn't understand something, and coughing—things like that. The director of the pilot wanted it to look "1950s." He actually wanted to do it in black and white. Then he wanted it to be spoken faster. But if you speak that fast, you'll have to keep repeating the information. I did not want to do that. I didn't even have the characters address each other by name because it felt phony. And after two seasons of the show, Roger Sterling was known as "the white-haired guy."

One thing we did agree on was that we were looking for a commercial cinematographic style. We were very interested in the ceilings, in the low angles. The cinematographer, director, production designer, and I all shared a point of reference in *North by Northwest*, which is a story about an advertising man. Even though it's very stylized and it's a thriller and it's Cary Grant, it was made in 1958, a couple years before the pilot took place, and we were influenced photographically

by that.

A lot of these things were decided, like so many good decisions, by financial necessity. In the pilot, I wrote an overhead shot of men coming into the Sterling Cooper building, because I knew that was the cheapest angle to make period. Looking straight down, you have the side of the building—and the buildings hadn't aged much—and you have the tops of people's hats, which might not require full costumes, and some cars, and you get the sensation of period. When we did the flashbacks, our first glimpse of Dick Whitman's childhood, I remembered how, in *Death of a Salesman*, they had staged the flashbacks in the regular sets, and I

thought, Why don't we just put this in Don's dining room? We'll stage it in a sort of theatrical limbo.

INTERVIEWER

Often you'll say, That just doesn't sound period. And someone will go research it and discover that you're right. How are you so connected to a period that you experienced only as a small child?

WEINER

I cut out any slang that I didn't know organically. Even as a kid, you hear certain expressions and then you stop hearing them. I had heard people say, "Make a hash of it." They don't say it anymore. Also, I intuitively cast actors who had a certain formality to them. It turned out they were almost all from the Midwest. They have old-fashioned manners.

But you know, these questions of verisimilitude have a lot to do with the framing and the editing. The original director, Alan Taylor, is a huge fan of Wong Kar-wai, and so am I. What Wong Kar-wai does is let scenes develop in front of your eyes. In a conversation, the point-of-view shots will include parts of people's shoulders and

heads. He has a shot design that appreciates the space, puts the people in the space, puts the audience in the space. Music and mise-en-sceÌ€ne are part of it, but the editorial style was most important of all. We don't use overlapping dialogue. Usually, when you cut a scene between two people talking, you keep cutting to the person who's listening. It allows you to use material from different performances. It's also supposed to keep the audience in the scene. But I felt that, since these actors were so good and they pulled off these transitions in front of our eyes, why cut away? So I'd stay with their performance. They would do the entire speech, and then there would be a pause on one side or the other for the other character to respond. That, to me, magically creates a first-person experience, though none of this was intellectual. That's kind of the way I experience the world. It feels normal to me.

INTERVIEWER

Once you had directed the show, did it change the way you wrote for it?

WEINER

I try now to write every script as if I would have to direct it. I do not leave vagaries of position or gesture. I do not have vagaries about the set. I try to specify who the characters are. It's a blueprint. I will always give visual clues. I'm not talking about the props only, but a visual motif. People sitting or standing. I will write those things in. Where they are in the room, I write that in the script. You don't have to do that, and I used to not write that. Betty has a seat in the kitchen. That's one of my things. Your mom has a place where she sits, if she sits. Directing has made me not write impossible crap like somebody "plops into a chair" or "turns beet red" or "rolls their eyes." That means that there's no cheating in the stage directions—"He's never felt this way before." "He reminds her of her father." You can't write how someone feels, you have to show it in the scene.

The miracle of writing Jon Hamm sitting on the steps at the end of the first season and, as the camera pulled away, seeing his face physically change in a way that . . . It was exhilarating. So much emotion. I'm too embarrassed a person to ever do that job. I don't know how actors do it.

INTERVIEWER

On the level of the scene, you're always searching for a surprising way into a moment, or a way that a moment can turn into something you don't expect.

WEINER

You know that scene in *Rebecca* when Joan Fontaine is exploring the room where everything is monogrammed "Rebecca," and George Sanders just appears in the window? It's a ground-floor room, and he's sitting in the window. He just slides his leg over the sash and walks into the room. You're like, That guy could've come in through the front door, but I know so much about him because he came in the window. We all love moments like that.

How many people say at the beginning of a story that the character is bored, and they start telling all these things about how he's bored—he does this, and he goes to his mom's house, and she's talking, and he's staring off, and then you go to his job

and it's the same every day. But actually, it only takes one shot to explain to the audience that the character is bored, and I mean bored with everything in their whole life. They did it on *The Sopranos*. When Tony was supposed to be laying low, they had a shot of him on the escalator in the mall.

The story is not, We built this great bridge, let's watch people go across the bridge. The story is, The bridge is out, the bridge is broken, I'm going to try to build one. And then it gets blown up right before I finish it.

INTERVIEWER

Do you read any of the commentary on *Mad Men*?

WEINER

I stay off the Internet.

INTERVIEWER

Now you do.

WEINER

Yeah, I couldn't take it. It's like being on trial for a crime you didn't commit and having to listen to the testimony with a gag in your mouth. I did learn, though, that what I intended something to mean is not always what it means. That's okay. It's actually kind of amazing.

INTERVIEWER

You directed a movie last year. You write plays and poetry. How do you feel about being labeled a "TV writer"?

WEINER

I don't even understand what that is. That's going to be a big joke to everyone in ten years because everyone's going to watch things on the same screen. The movie industry is clinging to its perceived role as the dominant form in the culture, but you know, I was just reading an interview with Stanley Kubrick from the late fifties where he talks about how movies, if they want to have any impact, have to start

being more like television, or better. He was talking about the artists in TV at that time—among them, Woody Allen, Larry Gelbart, Neil Simon, Rod Serling, Paddy Chayefsky, Reginald Rose—and the directors who went with them—John Frankenheimer, Sidney Lumet, Delbert Mann. In the next ten years, they all went into the movies. The movies took that business away. But really, the fifties was the golden age of television.

INTERVIEWER

What made the fifties a golden age?

WEINER

Social consciousness and a respect for the audience. This was the same moment as the blacklist, so there was so much subversion. There's poetry, there's great speeches, there's incredible eloquence in those early made-for-TV dramas, but they are derived from real life. There are actors in them who are unattractive. There are recognizable milieus, like automats. Before the 1950s, something like *12 Angry Men* wouldn't have seemed like a promising subject for a Hollywood movie. It had to be a ninety-minute TV show first. But that's how it goes. Americans are subversive and they depend on their entertainment to express it. So thankfully, all subversive entertainment eventually succeeds.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever worry about losing your touch?

WEINER

In show business, careers are always seen in terms of hot or cold. Hot and cold doesn't interest me. That's dependent on the world. Are you in style or are you not in style? My kids have no Faulkner on their reading list. Thomas Wolfe—completely gone. You never know what's going to go and what will stay. But on the creative side, you're either wet or dry. That's what a writer asks himself. Am I going to dry up? The repetition is the hardest part. You know—you deal with it every day. You witness me trying not to get caught with my pants down doing something I've already done. Remember Allan Burns, from my high school graduation? Well, I had

lunch with him after my freshman year of college. I asked him, How do you write? He said, My rule is quit when I'm hot. When I'm in the middle of something and it's good and I know where it's going to go, that's where I stop, so when I get back tomorrow I can get back on it. Underneath this was obviously the fear that he could wake up tomorrow and not be able to write. That terrifies me, too.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have other superstitions about your work?

WEINER

I have a pen I use to check off numbers on the outline. I've been using that pen since *Becker*. I will borrow other people's superstitions. But I'm most superstitious about hubris. I am terrified about having things taken away from me because I finally relax. When I wrote the pilot of *Mad Men*, I was saying, I'm already successful, why am I not happy? Now it's become, You didn't even know what success was. What if your dreams came true?