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## Marketing Under Feminist Scrutiny

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### Abstract

At first glance, an ad in a magazine may appear harmless when left critically unexamined, but when studied closely, patterns start to arise that express male dominance which habitually goes unnoticed because male dominance has long been taken for granted. Laura Mulvey writes on phallogentrism in her essay entitled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” and explains how to recognize the distinction between men and women in popular media. The most dominant theme in her essay is that marketers depict female characters so they seem like man’s opposite, suggesting that women only exist when defined by their “castration” or penislessness. This essay will project Mulvey’s observations on an ad for Diesel Clothing taken from the popular men’s magazine *Esquire*. This essay was originally submitted as an assignment for the completion of ENGL 3400: Literary Criticism and Theory. The class primarily centered around various forms of literary theory (e.g. Historical, Formalist, Feminist, etc.).

**Key Terms:** Phallogentrism, Penislessness, Masculine Gaze

At first glance, an ad in a magazine may appear harmless when left critically unexamined, but when studied closely, patterns start to arise that express male dominance which habitually goes unnoticed because male dominance has long been taken for granted. Laura Mulvey writes on phallogentrism in her essay entitled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” and explains how to recognize the distinction made between men and women in popular media. The most dominant theme in her essay is that marketers depict female characters so they seem like man’s opposite, suggesting that women only exist when defined by their “castration” or penislessness (Mulvey 840). This essay will project Mulvey’s observations on an ad for Diesel Clothing taken from the popular men’s magazine *Esquire*.



The ad portrays an astonished young man, in Diesel attire, standing outside of an apartment building in which it seems he was living, surprised by his girlfriend hurling his belongings at him from the fourth floor balcony. Surrounded by high-rises in an urban setting, he stands facing away from the viewer with his arms spread as if anxious. The woman in the balcony is looking down at the man screaming with both of her middle fingers raised in his direction. While this scene is taking place, there are storm clouds creeping in to block out what was previously a clear and sunny day. In the bottom left corner there is a message that reads, "Human After All," and in the top right corner a logo reads, "Diesel for Successful Living."

The most obvious concept in the ad constant with Mulvey's view is that the man is clearly the person with whom the viewer is supposed to identify. Mulvey suggests that film is voyeuristic and the images portrayed in film and media are subjective to male understanding of what she calls the gaze i.e., the use of an object simply for its aesthetic value (840). This derivation comes because the man is closest to the viewer with his back turned, peering up at the woman in the ad. In the majority of western media, people are intended to empathize with the main male character, unless the ad is expressly for women or selling domestic products, and the woman is supposed to be sexually desired or revolted for some malfeasance (Mulvey 837).

The woman is in a position partially atypical to what Mulvey depicts in her essay. The typical woman in a movie, as Mulvey understands it, would be there only as a sexually appealing visual for the audience as well as the male character. The woman in this ad is not specifically sexualized in this scene, but demonized for her actions at the time. What is in line with Mulvey's understanding is that the woman's presence does not break the continuity of the scene but provides no substance in terms of the focus, which in the case of this ad is on men's attire. The woman in the Diesel ad has the same role as Mulvey describes; she diminishes the status of the woman in comparison to the man, but does so in a dissimilar manner. She is seemingly vulnerable, though she is standing in a very abrasive position and brandishing brazen hand signals with middle fingers firmly raised and her mouth stretched open. Her vulnerability stems from the apparent message that the man has become such an integral fixture in the woman's life that she is wildly upset, so much so that she has turned to reckless abandon, throwing a dumbbell at the seemingly scared man on the street (though he has not lost his composure), endangering his life.

While the woman on the balcony is not overtly sexual, there is an understanding that there had been a sexual relationship between the two of them, and she is a virago. The ad suggests that almost every man can identify with the struggle of dealing with an irate woman. Any conquest that ended violently will fit this role; the viewer identifies with the man standing in disbelief in the street below, who has had a sexual relationship with the girl in the image and who now stands in disbelief in the street below (in this sense, expressing dominance over her). This understanding further defines the different roles that men and women take in the society that Mulvey suggests is portrayed in media images (838). In addition, the man is elevated to a higher status because not only does he act rationally during the altercation, but he also looks good doing it in his Diesel attire.

Another interpretation in the ad atypical of Mulvey's understanding of women's role in media is that of the looming storm clouds creeping over the male character towards the female representing the woman's emotions as a volatile storm or an act of nature. In other words, it is expected that women will have intermittent irrational outbursts and they are natural and necessary events. When compared to the slogan, "Human After All," which proposes that men with refined enough taste to wear Diesel clothing are nearly superhuman, it is apparent that the woman is making the opposite assertion in that she has regressed to a subhuman state of nature where her emotions become involuntary and uncontrollable like the depicted rain clouds. An interpretation of the spreading dark clouds more in line with the extrapolation Mulvey makes concerning the spreading dark clouds is that any angry averment of female dominance over the superior male has a dark shroud over it, and not only should she not attempt to gain respect for her dominance with her futile emotions, but it merely burdens the rational man. This interpretation suggests that women can in no way ever reach the level of rationality to adjust the flaw that dooms them to inferiority. Therefore, not only is asserting feminine anger openly a character flaw but also women are too dull-witted and emotionally driven to correct it. The difference is that in the media portrayals described by Mulvey, a woman would never dare to step outside of her role (838). This understanding is slightly different than the expectation that when a woman does step out of her socially designated role there will be a backlash.

A more abstract visual anomaly is the entrance of phallic and overtly male symbols throughout the image. There are a number of pronounced rod-shaped figures that protrude from the man's body. One is the dumbbell, which connects to his forehead and is in line with the eye contact connecting the two characters. The other is the seemingly futuristic building to the right of the male on the far side of the image. Triangular shapes formed by the balconies on the building envelop the woman and may be taken for vaginal symbols. She also has two phallic symbols, which she is forcibly inserting into the scene with her middle fingers (which signal "fuck you," a curse word meaning to force insertion). The phallic symbols, even though they pale in size comparison to the man's, contend that the woman is the antagonist and wrong, because she is acting against her natural biological state by attempting to take the power role defined by the male sex organ. The woman's phallic symbols are much more evident than any of the other phallic or vaginal symbols in the ad because they conflict with the biological expectation that she lacks a penis. The ad further defines the differences between the roles of men and women by the objects being thrown out of the window. There are albums, dumbbells, a dress shirt, and a football helmet: mostly objects that are acquainted with exclusively male activities highlighting this particular man's testicular fortitude. Her connection with the phallus is against the social order that name men dominant, making her a social deviant, even though the viewer is without any notion of what the man may have done to her. Though his actions may have justified the response by the woman and make the man the social deviant, in a patriarchal society, Mulvey suggests that it is customary that the viewers give their trust to the main male character before observing the conflicts of the other characters.

The least recognizable issue involving this ad is a metaphor using animals as symbols located on the back of the man's jeans and on the cover of one of the records thrown from the balcony. A cougar head with its jaw spread is stitched on the back left pocket of the man's jeans, and the cougar faces a deer on the record thrown from the window by the woman. The man becomes predator while the woman becomes his prey. This is the most overt, if least noticeable,

expression of the man's dominance. The man seems apprehensive because he is in a tense pose. A dumbbell falls towards his head, but the animal symbols suggest that no matter the appearance, the man has the upper hand over the woman's hostility and he is willing and able to pounce on the poor misguided girl if she oversteps her boundaries.

The slogan in the bottom left corner next to the man's leg reads, "Human After All" which asserts that the man may make a mistake while at the same time suggesting that the expectation is for the type of man whose taste includes the likes of Diesel Clothes to be on a level of superior status to the average person and all women especially, meaning he is above the dramatic outburst displayed by the woman in the ad. All of the power in the scene is attributed to the man because she is acting out emotionally in response to his actions. In addition, the slogan in the top right corner reads, "Diesel for Successful Living." This asserts that the man in the street has somehow succeeded at something. Either this slogan is misplaced, or whatever distress he has caused this woman by duping her is considered a success.

In conclusion, Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure can be observed in this media sample. There is a voyeuristic view of the woman in the ad, though in this image it is because she is abnormal and outside of the socialized role of a civilized woman. In fact, she has no apparent relevance to the men's clothing brand or the product this image is advertising. The woman is automatically the antagonist because she is portrayed as a social deviant. Added to that are the visual elements of the image, which show a number of reasons why the woman in the picture is not an ideal person with which to identify. The image denigrates any outwardly aggressive woman and negates that anything positive could come from her, even while society reveres men who express themselves in a suitably aggressive manner. The main message of this ad therefore demonstrates Mulvey's feminist critique: real men wear Diesel and conquer all.

### References

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford UP, (1999): 833-44

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