“Commitment to Irony: A Semiotic Analysis of Diesel Advertising”

“The ads are by far the best part of any magazine or newspaper. More pain and thought, more wit and art, go into the making of an ad than into any prose feature of press or magazine” Marshall McLuhan

“It is images and not words which ultimately provide the currency in ads” Judith Williamson

“Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts, unsettles the consistency of one’s tastes, values, memories…” Roland Barthes

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All featured Diesel advertising can be reached at: http://www.diesel.com/successfullivingguides/
1. Introduction

This essay examines the discourses and codes at work in Diesel brand advertising. Diesel is a fascinating subject for semiotic analysis because their work is invariably both visually arresting, deliberately controversial and foregrounds the symbolic and textual features of the advertising.

Diesel a campaign biennially - for the brand’s Spring / Summer & Fall / Winter Collections. I have chosen to concentrate my attention on the “Happiness Sponsored by Diesel” work that appeared in Spring Summer 2002 created by Kessels Kramer of Amsterdam. I make occasional reference to other campaigns but this collection of ads was the main focus. All the print ads referred to can be accessed by going to www.diesel.com clicking on the CAMPAIGNS window and clicking through to SUCCESSFUL LIVING GUIDES and going to Spring / summer 2002. The four executions we look at in detail in analysis are Satisfaction, Freedom, Innocence and Fun.

Diesel is well known for co-opting discourses at large in society and repackaging them in interesting new ways. “Stay Young Forever” Fall / Winter 2001 was an oblique commentary upon the ethical implications of cloning and stem cell technology. In positing the notion of immortality it satirised the self-absorption and narcissism of today’s youth. The campaign featured models with sepulchral complexions who choose to remain embalmed and solitary in return for eternal youth. One of the ads had the protagonists proclaim: "We are 110-year-old virgins and proud of it. By keeping our juices to ourselves, we've prevented aging. Wouldn't you choose everlasting beauty over nine seconds of sticky passion?" The caption reads: signed by James and Agnes Lillywhite, born 1891. “Taking Action!” Fall / Winter 2002 was a shrewd parody taking a cue from the then burgeoning agitation for social justice and the anti-globalisation movement. “Taking Action” lampooned the effeteness and superficiality of today’s privileged youth. It depicted faux protest movements whereby political ideology had given way to the selfish whims and decadence of bourgeois youth. One of the ads
featured a punk defacing a wall with the words: “Legalise the four day weekend”.

All very intriguing, but what is happening here? On the face of it Diesel seems on a mission to lay bare the nefarious workings of advertising culture. Its campaigns have successively alluded to topics such as: dreams and the unconscious, the death of industry, the trivialisation of emotion, the futility of protest, the morbidity of eroticism, and the inequality of the global system.

This paper demonstrates that Diesel’s critique of consumerism is nothing but a deceptive feint. This feint serves paradoxically to cement its own hegemonic position within the world of fashion. Diesel subtly neutralises the critical force of contemporary counter-culture, and sublimates it for its own ends. In doing so it stakes out a powerful differentiating positioning versus its rivals, builds complicity with a switched-on target, and ultimately garners cool mindshare.

The paper examines in detail the key signification systems that underpin this bluff. The overarching theoretical framework for this piece is taken from the essay ‘Myth Today’ which appears in Roland Barthes’s “Mythologies”. The paper borrows Barthes’s notion of second order signification systems and extends it to a third order through application of Baudrillard’s critique of consumerism. The paper ultimately suggests that it is the deliberate palpability of semiotic interplay in Diesel advertising that results in its power and charm.

2. Visual Semiotic Method

In fidelity to its roots in structuralism, semiotics postulates that it is the system of relations between visual units that creates meaning. The first task is therefore a neutral audit of the formal arrangement of features in the advertising. We then move on to assess the content from a semiotic and post-structural perspective. The semiotic approach to textual analysis of advertising is premised on the basis that meaning inheres in the most innocuous of visual features.
Meyer Shapiro: Field and Vehicle in Image Signs

In his important essay *Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs*, Meyer Shapiro lays out the role of non-mimetic, non-iconic elements of the image-sign in visual art. He draws out the 'latent expressiveness' of signs – effects that might otherwise go unnoticed. Shapiro wrote that the sign-vehicle – such as material of frame, the consistency of paint etc - itself came embedded with signifiers that surreptitiously convey meaning. In summation, Shapiro’s thesis echoes that of Marshall McLuhan: ‘the medium is the message’. It is often the ground on which the figure is placed that is the key to understanding. As Shapiro puts it:

“"In certain contexts the choice of the supposedly anomalous side may be deliberate for a particular effect which is reinforced by the content of the representation” (Shapiro p.218)

The tenor of this paper is guided by Shapiro’s eye for these inconspicuous elements. As such we consider such aspects as horizontal and vertical axes, relative scale and positioning of human figures.

Framing and Perspective

The first thing to notice about the adverts is that they are not actually framed in any explicit manner. The figures are carefully arranged however. They are neatly encompassed within the shot and evenly spaced and scaled. The framing is rather implied by the top left to bottom right alignment of strap line and caption. It is also signalled by the rough equivalence between sky space and ground space.

There are no stark geometric lines of sight in these executions. There certainly is no centripetal tug drawing in the gaze to a vanishing point. In this way, the ads are more akin to flat tableaux than to composite portraits. They are rather indifferent towards the viewer. The beholder is at liberty to alight his or her
glance wherever he or she pleases. It is almost as if the executions were
ingrossed in their own sumptuousness, glamour and gloss. However, in one
execution, a girl’s leg is cut off and in another, flowers blur in front of the
camera lens. The overall effect is an eerie mix of gallery art, photography and
photo-shop manipulation.

These Diesel ads do not direct themselves to the viewer – they address
consumers obliquely and tangentially. Their relative ambiguity, detachment and
self-absorption forces consumers to negotiate meaning and imbue them with
sense. One of the hallmarks of Diesel advertising is its high connotative index.
By this is meant the ability to read all sorts of possible meanings into a text. In
this sense they are under-coded rather than over-coded. This is a distinction
drawn by scholar Umberto Eco in his book the "Limits of Interpretation". It
refers to the fact that some texts are more rigid than others in resisting random
attributed meanings. If we examine the work closely enough however we see
that certain graphical elements do nudge viewers towards a preferred reading.

**Topology**

There is a vertical division in these adverts between a blue sky at top and the
green field at the bottom. The human figures are bifurcated by the horizon.
The second thing to notice is the right to left orientation of the figures. The
young models tend to be on the left of the picture and the strange red figure on
the right. With one or two exceptions, the red figure is depicted behind them.
This suggests that he is in the background and they in the foreground not just
literally but figuratively. The protagonists themselves are arranged in a
horizontal row from left to right - they are essentially equals. The animals that
appear are inserted apparently at random in the interstices made available by
human absence. That they also appear de-contextualized and insubstantial is
critical in terms of our foregoing discussion of denaturisation, irony and kitsch.
Anchor and Relay

The strap line appears in the top left of each of the ads and a captioned text box appears at the bottom right. This analysis discounts the captioned text since the print is too small to read without close scrutiny. Conventional processing of Romanic scripts conditions us to read from left to right and on a subsidiary level top to bottom (as in comics). Most viewers will thus first encounter the slogan “X emotion is now sponsored by Diesel” and then move on to survey and process the horizontal tableau from left to right. Its relatively small size relegates the text box bottom right to optional status. Why is this configuration significant? Why does Diesel eschew a more prominent banner headline?

Roland Barthes coined the terms anchor and relay to describe two types of link between written captions and associated imagery. Anchorage acts to elucidate understanding – it orientates the reader towards certain privileged signifieds and shuts down the play of signification. Relay, on the other hand, encourages a lively interplay and slippage between text and image. Signification in texts which use relay are far more discursive and invite a plethora of distinct interpretations.

"Anchorage may be ideological and this may be its principal function...it remote controls him towards a meaning chosen in advance...the text has thus a repressive value” (Barthes Image – Music – Text p.40)

The size and colouring of the slogan at the top left ostensibly seems to suggest a classic ‘anchorage’ relationship with the images. The reality is more complex and ambiguous than that. Certainly the message does aid comprehension, sets some broad parameters and rules out some readings. However, this anchorage is superseded in importance by a relay function. The marginal placement of the slogan is significant because it codes an allusive rather than prescriptive approach. The ‘emotion sponsored by’ text is far from unequivocal – it is loaded with semiotic meaning igniting lively circuits of meaning in consumer minds.
3. Barthesian Mythological Systems

Roland Barthes made it his mission to interrogate the ‘what-goes-without-saying’ as Terence Hawkes puts it in his book “Structuralism and Semiotics”. For Barthes, no cultural expression was ever innocent or purely utilitarian. He was committed to exposing the second-order mythical meanings with which French culture was suffused. In doing so, he devised a way of piercing through the rhetoric of image to underlying meanings - this is classic semiotics.

“It can be seen that in myth there are two semiological systems, one of which is staggered in relation to the other: a linguistic system, the language…and myth itself, which I shall call meta-language, because it is a second language, in which one speaks about the first”. (Barthes Mythologies p. 115)

For Barthes, these mythologies were a way of subtly legitimating bourgeois norms. This paper uses the Barthesian terminology of denotation and connotation but shorn of his class-based ideological agenda. In Image – Music – Text, Barthes analyses a Panzani print advertisement and breaks it down into its constituent elements. In this advertising there are four fundamental elements to account for in understanding the denotative and connotative meanings: i) flora and fauna, ii) the models, iii) the strap line and iv) the red figure.

i) Flora and Fauna

At denotative level, the use of nature in ads can be used to confer feelings of naturalness and authenticity on a given product. As Williamson writes:

“"It has been the supreme achievement of Romanticism to create the one-to-one symmetry between the good and the natural, the bad and the unnatural – thereby investing nature with a moral value”. (Williamson p. 125)
The denotative meaning therefore would automatically transfer these feelings innocently to Diesel. Diesel is signified as a natural and wholesome brand. This might lead to a consumer take out of an outdoor and rugged apparel brand.

When we shift to the connotative level however, this conclusion is revealed as spurious or at least not the whole story. The way in which nature is depicted is vital to understanding the connotative meanings at work here. We might notice that the colours of the grass, plants and other foliage are slightly more vivid than expected. The animals also look rather artificial both in their posture and representation. Their awkwardness is accentuated by their presence and proximity to such buzzing human activity. They appear curiously inured to their milieu – de-contextualised and uncomfortable. It is almost as if they exist in a different dimension superimposed upon the ad. The hedgehog roots through rubbish, rabbits frolic with a red figure of strange appearance. The animals themselves are ambiguously and superficially rendered. In further executions of this series (Spring Summer 2002), butterflies are hideously augmented, a peacock has been given the emulsion treatment, and a grizzly bear looks stuffed. They are coded as accoutrements to the main feature. The author of the ads seems deliberately to thwart, distort and almost humiliate nature as we know it. This artificial treatment of nature is critical to our discussion of kitsch.

ii) The Models
Of all the elements, they are perhaps the least noteworthy aspect of the ad. The models are an ordinary, fresh-faced group of young people. They are jolly, inoffensive and seem acquiescent to the greater scheme of things. They lack that searing look or spellbinding aura that are the hallmarks of true stars. The very absence of their personality is precisely the point – they lack individuation.

Their dress amplifies this anonymity – they wear a miscellaneous syntagm of elements. A permutation of tank tops, jeans, trousers and hats whose jumble mismatch precludes forceful singularity. This rendering leads to an important conclusion. The Diesel models are mere tokens in service of the mythology being
perpetuated in the ads. The ads are a classic example of signification predicated on a system of relations. It is the relationship of generic human beings with nature, the red figure and the caption that create the meaning – not their individual positive values. They are mere tokens: as replaceable as counters in a game of checkers. They woodenly act out the emotion specified by the caption and do no more than that required. The models seem curiously undisturbed by the presence of the red figure as if colluding in his mission – whatever that is. In the Innocence execution they look wide-eyed up at balloons – emblazoned with clown faces. In Fun they run across the field, flying clown kites. In Satisfaction they gaze dreamily into the camera with a languorous sated air.

One of the interesting facets of the characters is their acute awareness of the theatricality of what they are doing. This is signified both by their postures but also, crucially, by their gaze. In all but one of the executions, at least one character stares directly into the line of sight of the viewer. This is significant of characters keen to impress something upon the beholder. What is it that they are trying to communicate? One of the female protagonists looks with a sidelong glance at the camera. Her slight smirk radiates a cheeky complicity but also contains a sort of superior smugness. It almost mimics a static wink: like she is attempting to tip us off to look more closely - an index of deeper meaning. The answer is that this is a clue to irony: knowing chumminess, sly insinuation.

iii) Strap Line
The font used is basically 1950s in origin. It is very baroque in its slanted, cursive style, swollen stems and extravagant flourishes. Both the Baroque and 1950s in the USA were times of affluence, profligacy and innocence. Red and white signifies the combination of blood and religious purity between heaven and hell, between lust and chastity - the tension of the sacred and the profane (inherent to the Garden of Eden narrative). White and red were very popular colours in ice cream parlours, hair salons and other places of leisure. This typeface has been very popular in much recent advertising. This is because it forms a semiotic bridge between retro and contemporary worlds.
The strap line chosen to transmit the central message is highly significant for this study. It is a citation that borrows the values of this era: an era of optimism, clarity and straightforward emotions.

How is the strap line itself structured? The text syntax starts with the brand name, suggests that it now sponsors an emotion. There is a clear equivalence made between the brand name and the emotion. We can conclude this on the basis of the larger font used to signify both concepts. What do we make of the fact that it says ‘now sponsored by Diesel?’ What do we make of the tense and mood of the caption? The statement is in the present tense and indicative mood. It is a declaration as much as it is an assertion open to verification and falsification. It states a bald fact rather than either addressing itself to the consumer to seek to persuade him. On the face of it, it is a rather arch and grandiloquent claim for any brand to make. Baudrillard will help us understand this statement – it is his thinking we draw upon in our subsequent analysis.

iv) Red Clown
This ad works on the basis of a ‘relay’ between the caption and the visual elements. There is a clear nexus on the basis of colour between the red figure and Diesel slogan. This indicates that he holds the key to decoding the text. His salience and conspicuousness force the other characters into relative anonymity. Because of his prominence within the visual schema, determining his role has ramifications for overall advertising take out. The presence of this red figure has pivotal semiotic meaning, which can be traced at three different levels.

First Level Reading
The red figure resembles a clown. Clowns are associated with figures of fun at circuses and children’s parties. Clowns are brightly coloured, childish and bring light-hearted entertainment. However, this is no ordinary clown – in fact he resists mediocrity at every level. Several cardinal features mark him out.
Second Level Reading

Firstly he is coloured red. Clowns are usually portrayed in a mosaic of colours and it is this haphazardness that contributes to their harmless personas. A clown sporting a single colour is making a ‘serious’ sartorial statement. In this case the colour is red. Red is a powerful signifier of danger, power, lust, passion and evil. Secondly, he wears a collar and tie, the formal uniform of the corporate class. This indicates that he has a job to do beyond mere entertainment. Most clowns go collarless or wear a bow tie – symbols of informal eccentricity. Thirdly his facial features: his face is white, concealing facial expression. Fourthly, most clowns are bald or wear a silly hat – this one has a livid tuft of red hair. In wearing a Mohican, we can deduce that he is the representative of Diesel –their logo wass a Mohican and in wearing a hairstyle inaugurated by a warrior class this clown signals potential for belligerence lurking beneath his disarming smile.

This figure’s facial expression is a key signifier: a grin. This grin is permanent and invariable – the clown carries the same expression throughout every scenario. The smile is extreme, bordering on a grimace – it is neither pleasant to behold nor can it be comfortable for its wearer. It is a physical ‘tell’ not borne of emotional impulse but of calculated effect and purposeful façade.

Overall, the red character is an unsettling blend: part clown, part renegade telly-tubby, he seems to have been invented with an amalgam of childish pleasure and adult terror in mind – redolent of the role of the clown in Stephen King’s 'It'. The clown epitomizes what might be called the colourful macabre. This is a trope that is frequently used to draw our attention to the squalid or sinister – c.f. the idents for the Channel 4 series on Iraq – the Bloody Circus.

What is crucial here is what the clown signifies within this narrative. This clown embodies the freezing and anaesthesia of emotional experience. In other words, his presence instigates an emotional ground zero. He apparently experiences no peaks or troughs of emotion - only an unchanging and implacable plateau. Unlike the capricious clown of the circus, who feigns emotional turbulence to
help the audience drop their own stiff masks, this clown wears an opaque mask that abolishes emotion. Simultaneously, in assuming the role of narrator, he seems to undermine the caption and place its declaration in doubt. How can Diesel claim to sponsor emotions when their spokesperson is immune to them? His rictus grin finally mocks and undermines the purported subject matter – the wondrous variety of emotion - of the ad itself. The models collude in this by eulogising the clown: witness use of his icon on the balloons, kite and fast food packaging. In doing so they seem to subordinate their own wishes to his inanity.

**Third Level Reading**

The third level of reading is similarly revealing. The clown is composed of a red and white livery – he is also called Donald. This is clearly redolent of Ronald McDonald - notorious ambassador of McDonalds. This is pure inter-textuality; or ‘citationality’ – the importing of foreign texts into the text in question in order to borrow from them make a point.

Not only is this ad therefore a commentary on emotion, it is a commentary on manipulation of emotion by corporations. McDonalds has over the years become the bête noire of all those who criticise capitalism. Ronald McDonald is emblematic of the chicanery that (allegedly) takes place under the golden arches. The clown is the key to the deciphering of this campaign. The third level of meaning confirms suspicions that this ad is meant as no idealised depiction.

The clown is a common representative of what is called the ‘carnivalesque’. The carnivalesque is a term coined by Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin to describe special environments (usually festivals) when hierarchical distinctions are abolished and people frolic in a primordial gaiety. This is also a world where masks and grotesque combinations serve to reverse roles, deceive the viewer and mock official or conventional ideas of society and history. The use of the carnivalesque in this advertising is another clue to the illusory masquerade of Diesel. What appears fun and light-hearted conceals a dangerous and threatening intent.
4. Kitsch, Irony and Falsity

We are now entering the second order semiotic system – the level beyond the obvious. In order to truly grasp the devices at work in this Diesel campaign, we need to consider the particular aesthetic chosen in this campaign.

The work is very strikingly suffused with what is called ‘kitsch’. The garish typeface of the caption, the glazed expressions and make-up on the models’ faces, the saccharine sweetness of the clown and his merchandise, the cheesiness of the scenarios, the signifiers of schmaltz and sentimentality: rabbits, balloons, white picket fences, Bambiesque deer and doves – kitsch.

Furthermore, there is obvious use of cliché – different executions rehearse the formulas of rural idyll: the picnic, Garden of Eden, Wizard of Oz etc. Cliché is often closely linked to kitsch. This is inter-textual citationality at its most crass: but it has a function. The whole campaign is one sugary confection: a cloying dose of communicational sucrose and designed to be palpably so. Kitsch therefore forms the key signifier of the second order semiological system.

Derived from the German verkitschen. Kitsch or kitch is originally from the German word meaning ‘trash’. It is used colloquially as a word to describe objects of poor taste and usually poor quality - anything that claims to have an aesthetic purpose but is tawdry and tasteless.
http://www.worldofkitsch.com/about/definition.html

But it also has a more subtle signifying function as Matei Malinescu points out:

“Kitsch may be conveniently defined as a specifically aesthetic form of lying. As such, it obviously has a lot to do with the modern illusion that beauty may be bought and sold...beauty turns out to be rather easy to fabricate... even nature has ended up resembling cheap art” (p.8)

*Five Faces of Modernity* Matei Calinescu
Calinescu and others believe that kitsch has been wrongly dismissed as simply bad taste and seeks to rehabilitate its importance. He argues that it needs to be taken seriously as a forgery with ideological content that can have manipulative purposes. The thrust of this paper is that Diesel – whilst coding itself as an avant-garde advertiser - uses kitsch in precisely this vein. Certainly kitsch has long leant itself to both entertainment and propaganda. It is also borrowed and used ironically by the avant-garde for disruptive purposes.

Kitsch is pseudo-art that exploits the age of mechanical reproduction to masquerade as a new standard. It is often a shameless counterfeit of true art or a simulacrum entirely divorced from an original. Kitsch therefore often incorporates motifs of sham and mendacity. In these ads, kitsch draws attention to itself as medium of expression. In so doing it signifies falsehood that is its content. In this instance, it leads us to the signified of an implied critical stance: a nagging sense that Diesel is in fact undermining its own ostensible message.

What is depicted is a utopia of pristine emotion. But this utopia is one which the kitsch aesthetic valorises through polish and gloss whilst simultaneously ironising through parody and caricature. Kitsch intentionally corrodes the utopian depiction and hints menacingly at an emotional void. What fills this void is in fact the substance and manifesto of kitsch itself: immediate gratification through consumerism. This is because it is a cultural form that endorses and celebrates conspicuous consumption and revels in its own obsolescence:

“Even the most laborious and expensive varieties of kitsch contain a built in self-advertisement - an invitation to possession and ready enjoyment. The aesthetic charm of kitsch is transparently commercial” (Malinescu p.252)

Diesel’s instrumental use of kitsch sets up a semiotic parallel: engendered kitsch is to original art what sponsored emotions are to genuine human feeling. At the
same time, by spelling out this signification for the consumer, Diesel’s use of kitsch paradoxically draws attention to and exposes this self same mythology.

The portrayal of nature underlines this denaturing of the emotional landscape. Williamson suggests that situation of objects in a natural setting is an attempt to connote naturalness (in an ideological sense) on the part of the order of things presented. However, as we have seen the treatment of nature by Diesel is far unadulterated. This is no Rousseau-esque noble savage; if anything the clown is rather the origin of inequality. Nature has been sequestered, then artificially airbrushed and contorted. Diesel presents a grotesque treatment of nature: it has been marinated in kitsch, garnished & served up in lurid colours.

Furthermore, in deliberately distorting visions of nature, kitsch signifies the futility of seeking redemption through the romanticization of nature. It exposes the naturalisation of ideology (whether of emotion or of anything else) through exaggerating how this operates. The kitsch aesthetic therefore is a signifier of the author’s playful intention and their play with double meanings.

5. Unveiling the Scaffolding of Signification

In her seminal work “Decoding Advertising” Judith Williamson employed a Marxist approach to uncovering latent meanings in advertising. Williamson acknowledged her debt to semiotics and drew heavily upon structuralism. She was writing at a time, 1979, when advertising was starting to come under attack. Williamson’s work was a product of its time and has its limitations as a theoretical tool for use today. The most valuable part of the book is her acute dissection of signification processes. Part I ‘Advertising Work’ - concerns itself with the mechanics and structure of the meaning process. Part II ‘Ideological Castles’ whilst fascinating as polemic is of less utility as analytical framework.

Nevertheless, Williamson was quite brilliant at reading advertising and dismantling the structures at work. In doing so she used the metaphor of
scaffolding: the latticework of struts and poles that supports a building’s construction. Scaffolding is usually dismantled straight after buildings are complete. Of course all advertisers use the scaffolding of signification systems. Scaffolding describes the ensemble of usually invisible graphical elements that combine to make up the ad. But scaffolding is usually an unsightly impediment to appreciating beauty (in ads as in architecture) so is kept behind the scenes.

What makes Diesel different is that – like the Pompidou Centre - they make the scaffolding a permanent part of the building – its exoskeleton. With Diesel, the scaffolding or signification structure does not just transfer meaning onto the product: it is the signification system itself that signifies. Diesel offers refreshing transparency, highlighting the very sign systems on which meaning is draped.

In this particular case the scaffolding is not greying and flecked with white emulsion but rather spangled in gaudy multi-coloured sequins - i.e. the scaffolding is itself kitsch. Diesel’s use of kitsch as a creative vehicle signifies falsity on the part of what is presented. It also, and this is a critical point, in unmasking dishonesty signifies concomitant honesty on behalf of the unmasker:

“Here our knowledge of the falseness of advertising is called upon - (drawing) on our critical knowledge of advertising. It thus sets itself up as an honest, down-to-earth, aware...The use of our belief in advertising’s dishonesty in order to give an aura of honesty to an ad is a supreme example of the denial of the actual content of any structure of thought...So advertising can incorporate its mythic structure (as a lie) into itself with very little trouble” (Williamson p. 174)

Williamson hardly envisaged a brand building an entire campaign on this brazen gambit. Williamson believed it axiomatic that brands would seek subliminally to link their products to agreeable emotions. It shows how far advertising has advanced since the late 1970s. How would she conceive of an advertiser that actually claims to sponsor emotions? Here there are no straightforward
‘objective correlatives’ and ‘exchange transactions’ of signifiers. All possibility of straightforward correlation is diffused across a chain of floating signifiers.

One plausible interpretation is that Diesel is actually disavowing the possibility of ‘sponsoring’ emotion. The dictionary definition of sponsor is ‘someone who assumes responsibility for some other person or thing’ and this is the point. Diesel is employing irony to exonerate itself from any responsibility for manipulating consumers. In the same breath Diesel seems to distance itself from the mainstream marketing community. The implied message is: ‘we are different and deplore trite advertising formulas that insult consumer intelligence’. This caps our second order semiological system by coding Diesel as Diesel as maverick marketer and vigilante who exposes the mythologies within the general run of advertising. As we shall see in the next section, this important signification system coexists with another system.

6. A System of Differences

“There is very little real difference between brands of products within any category, such as detergents, margarine, paper towels and so on. Therefore it is the first function of an advertisement to create a differentiation between one particular product and others in the same category...image only succeeds in differentiating between products in so far as it is part of a system of differences. The identity of anything depends more on what it is not than what it is, since boundaries are primarily distinctions” (Williamson p. 24)

This section argues that Diesel advertising works not only through orchestrating connotative meanings but also through insinuating a system of differences with reference to its great rival Levis – though this is not explicitly spelled out.

Coke and Pepsi are a classic example of brands that define themselves within this system of difference. Coke is the classic, timeless category leader, Pepsi the edgy, challenger brand. Coke is the anointed word, Pepsi is the transgressive
word. It would be unthinkable for either cola brand to shift their brand positioning without regard to their nemesis. Diesel and Levi’s rivalry may not be as notorious, but is symbiotic and dialectical, and no less worthy of analysis.

Our analysis will start with the semiotic coding of the brand names themselves. Levi-Strauss is the name of the founder of Levis – an American pioneer. His name has become synonymous with the buccaneering frontiersman. Contemporary Levi’s advertising remains wedded to a cluster of values; individualism, freedom, masculinity consonant with an ideology of Americana.

The noun ‘diesel’ refers to synthetic engine oil made from a compound of hydrocarbons. Its properties are viscosity, its ease of ignition and that it causes less friction than regular paraffin based gasoline. Using Diesel oil in cars makes running a car more economical. It also reduces emissions and reduces the demand on oil stocks. In sum, it is a thoughtful alternative to fossil fuel.

This inevitably seeks to code the Diesel company as the enlightened denim alternative. It also connotes something that works on a subtly but critically different basis from its more popular counterpart. Enlightened motorists choose Diesel for reasons of economy – it never caught on in the USA. American attitudes to gasoline remain entrenched and hold a special place in the collective imagination. Just consider the phrase ‘to put your foot on the gas’ and the description of American football teams’ playing style as being ‘high octane’. Gasoline is associated with high performance: the HEMI engine, NASCAR rallies and 1950s muscle cars: all absolutely totemic of white American masculinity.

Whether this adversarial coding motivated the baptism of Diesel as a brand is a moot point. Names are crucial semiotic markers that imbue entities with a certain proclivity, providence and destiny – they tend to take up their own logic. In this case they correctly propels us towards understanding the system of differences set up by Diesel. This is a system of differences which is mindful of
Levi’s as the invisible adversary – a Saussurean system with brands defined as much by their absences or ‘notness’ as by their positive semiotic content:

“Advertisements appropriate the formal relations of pre-existing systems of differences. They use distinctions existing in social mythologies to create distinctions between products: this seems like the reverse of ‘totemism’, where things are used to differentiate groups of people…” (Williamson p.27)

They are almost diametrically opposed in the signification systems they employ. Levi’s focuses on product features and its effect on the user: comfort, fit, toughness, torsion, tactility. The brand speaks in phrases or bullet points, seeking to make its meaning clear. Diesel on the other hand demotes its products to mere accoutrements or ornaments. The brand speaks in discourses rather than in phrases or sentences. Levi’s is an agoraphobic urban brand that generally cleaves to the built environment. Diesel is a claustrophobic open space brand more at home in purpose built contexts and in extended landscapes (whether concrete or virtual). Levi’s is a brand built on certain solid values – masculinity, individuality - it is girded by a firm ideology. Diesel erodes the very basis on which ideology is founded. Levi’s makes a fetish out of jeans to create desire. Diesel fetishizes desire itself. Levi’s is an American brand with a conviction in the value of progress, freedom, morality and jeans as totemic of these values. Diesel is a godless, relativistic European brand that believes neither in the notion of grand narratives, nor in the very mechanisms by which it sells merchandise. Most crucially, Diesel advertising is a text of bliss that works through negotiating meaning rather than by relaying it fully formed into consumer brains. Diesel is not about the hard sell, but rather the soft spell.

Diesel is consistently silent about its clothing lines, fabric innovations and specific product claims. What it ostensibly offers is brand-sponsored art and entertainment. This is in stark contrast to Levi’s. Diesel products are very much accoutrements in these Diesel productions. They sheathe and garland the protagonists of the ads but are rarely showcased. In a paradigmatic analysis
these are the absences that are signified – the optional meanings that were suppressed in composing Diesel’s discourse.

### 7. Baudrillard, Consumerism and Desire

Jean Baudrillard is an intoxicating writer who loves the language of paradox. This makes him tricky to interpret; he provides less a coherent theoretical framework and more an assortment of idea figments. In his sustained critique of consumerism, “Consumer Society” he draws heavily on Marx, Galbraith, Veblen. The work was written at a juncture when Baudrillard was moving into his postmodernist paradigm. Whilst it contains traces of post-structuralism, it also bears a strong structuralist imprint. This paper draws from Baudrillard selectively, only using the ideas that are relevant to the analysis. The two key ideas applied here are: a) the individual dimension of consumerism, roving desire b) the collective dimension of consumerism, the mystique of solicitude.

**Individual Dimension of Consumerism: Roving Desire**

Baudrillard’s philosophy centres on the twin concepts of "hyperreality" and "simulation." These terms refer to the virtual or unreal nature of contemporary culture in an age of mass communication and mass consumption. Baudrillard believes that we live in a world dominated by simulated experience and feelings, and have lost the capacity to comprehend reality as it really exists. We only experience prepared realities that are mere diluted, refracted versions of truth. (see eg. [http://www.egs.edu/faculty/ baudrillard.html](http://www.egs.edu/faculty/ baudrillard.html))

The key ideas, in explaining individual consumerist motivations, are manipulation of signs and roving desire. These ideas stem from Baudrillard’s revisionist view of the consumerist economy. He attacks the myth of a system geared to satisfy needs. This, he argues, is premised both on a disinterested producer class and on a rational consuming subject who judges each object purely by its utility based on a one-to-one correlation of needs to objects. This is the myth that consumer society insistently conditions us to believe. The reality
for Baudrillard is that we are destined never to be satisfied because the very fabric of the system of production is designed to preclude genuine satisfaction. This is because it transforms objects into signs without any solid referent.

In a consumerist society what sells an object is not its practical purpose but its meaning. Our needs are dictated by a ‘overall propensity’ to acquire new objects. Baudrillard, echoing Lacan’s theory of gliding, free-floating desire, compares our consumerist proclivities to that of a psychosomatic patient who fluctuates between an assortment of symptoms. He claims that consumer goods are best understood as ‘floating signifiers that are inexhaustible in their ability to incite desire’. (S.Brajovic)

“Thus the object becomes substitutable in a more or less unlimited way within the field of connotations where it assumes sign-value...they are responding here to ...the logic of desire, for which they function as a shifting and unconscious field of signification” (Baudrillard, Consumer Society, p. 77)

We read into them the desires that are seemingly our desires: they are imposed on us by mass media and the consumerist social climate. We ‘consume’ objects as if they were capable of fulfilling our desires (e.g. our longing for recognition, belonging, social status, love, beauty etc). However, since these desires cannot be satisfied through mere ownership, we continue buying new objects: objects replace objects, but the desires remain. (S.Brajovic)

In the case of the Diesel Sponsors Happiness campaign, we have an example of advertising that claims to regulate our emotions. Whilst the second order signification calls this into question, in the final analysis what is sponsored is consumer desire. Firstly, desire is the variable left missing from the equation. Frustrated desire for emotional fulfilment is what is insinuated by all these ads.
In the construction of the ads capitalised Innocence, Freedom, Fun and Satisfaction are held up as desirable emotions. Whether they are attained within the context of the advertising is irrelevant. They all presuppose desire, an entitlement and craving for a certain mood. It is precisely this urge for instant gratification that Diesel signifies whilst simultaneously satirising. In the end these ads, rather than fetishizing products to generate desire, festishize the very notion of desire whilst also calling into question its selfish excesses.

"Desire yourself before you desire another. Mail yourself love letters. Use mirrors to gaze upon yourself in bed. And then finish with yourself for committing adultery. With yourself.” Diesel Website www.diesel.com

What Diesel offers in compensation is a sublimation of this impossible desire into the glorious bliss of the text. The craving that therefore arises is that of dissolving him or herself in the signifying web of the text. Desire is transferred into the contradictory relay between text and image. For Baudrillard, all ads are mere sporting with signs, they are not meant to be amenable to verification or falsification – they are rather self-fulfilling prophecies in the tautological mode:

"This and other advertising syntagms do not explain, do not offer any meaning, and are therefore neither true nor false, they eliminate precisely meaning and proof...The consumer, by his purchase will merely ratify the coming to pass of the myth” (Baudrillard, Consumer Society, p. 128)

So this Diesel advertising is one colossal endorsement of desire and this symbolic silent exchange between the proffered object and the gaze, is clearly an invitation to real, economic exchange. If we refer back to the advertising, all the models are engaged in satisfying their own hedonistic urges - flying kites, having a picnic etc. They fetishize desire itself whilst hinting at an distinct eroticization of the purchase process and the delight it brings.
For Baudrillard, therefore, the play of signs that we have said compose the first two levels of signification are mere smokescreens for the true intent beneath:

“One must not be taken in by the escalation of the erotic in advertising, any more than by the escalation of irony, the play, the distancing and the 'counter-advertising'...all these contents are simply juxtaposed signs, all of which culminate in the brand name, which is the only real message”

(Baudrillard, Consumer Society p. 148)

**Collective Dimension of Consumerism: Mystique of Solicitude.**

One of Baudrillard’s big ideas is in showing how advertising works through a collective narcosis. Baudrillard writes that 20th century man has been conditioned to consume as thoroughly as puritans were indoctrinated in the work ethic. Baudrillard shows how compelling, ubiquitous and ineluctable the apparatus of consumer media turns out to be. For Jean Baudrillard every marketer’s approach - including that of eccentric Diesel - is merely a tactical flourish within this broader determining logic. In the end, consumers function as drones of advanced capitalist production. They meet the needs of production and in doing so delude themselves that they are servicing their private wants. In other words, all advertising necessarily plunges consumers into a united state of unconsciousness, primes them to consume, and then covers its tracks.

Applying Baudrillardian ideas to our analysis reveals that Diesel no less than imaginative advertisers engineers its campaigns within the constraints of consumerism. Diesel is therefore being disingenuous in seeming to condemn advertising formulas. It is in fact perpetrating a calculated ‘double bluff’ on consumers. This is because according to Baudrillard, even apparent self-sabotage by manufacturers is itself is a ruse geared better to disguise the true ideology underlying all advertising discourse. This is the third order semiological system – the one where all shifts of meaning finally redound to Diesel’s benefit.
Diesels’ endorsement of individuated consumer desire is reinforced and given added force by what Baudrillard calls this ‘mystique of solicitude’.

"Now, the function of all the apparatuses of solicitude...is both to care for and to satisfy, on the one hand, and surreptitiously to gain by enticement and abduction on the other...the ideology of the gift ...serving always as an alibi for the real conditioning...that of his ‘solicitation’ or entreaty” (Baudrillard, Consumer Society p.168)

Baudrillard suggests that advertising works as a consumption object in itself. Regardless of its content it envelops the consumer in the warmth of caring paternalism:

"It is the function of advertising in all its forms to set in place a social fabric ideologically unified under the auspices of a collective super-patronage, a kindly super-feudality, which provides all these 'extras' the way aristocrats laid on feasts for their people” (Baudrillard, Consumer Society, p. 165)

For Baudrillard it is not that advertising hypnotises us with its claims. On the contrary, we smother ourselves willingly within advertising’s warm embrace. Baudrillard believes that consumerism is a collective pursuit that we require in order to justify indulgence of our desires. He suggests that advertising works by insinuating a phantom social unity. He suggests that this ‘reflex of solidarity’ works on the basis of shared desire for a product. This is paradoxical, he reasons, since we presumably buy products in order to differentiate ourselves from the collective. Certainly this collectivism is discernible in the Diesel advertising which displays a penchant for cliques and groups in its advertising.

"Advertising is a plebiscite whereby mass consumer society wages a perpetual campaign of self-endorsement” (Baudrillard, System of Objects, p. 182)
In involving consumers in a riddling, inter-textual, ironic discourse Diesel ‘solicits’ consumers with the gift of sporting signs. This engenders reciprocal warmth on the part of the consumer that is then credited to the Diesel brand and organisation. It is no coincidence that Diesel consistently portrays group activity in their campaigns. This, for Baudrillard comprises a corporate sanctioning of consumerism. For the consumer invited to join this ‘festival of buying’ it cements complicity with Diesel’s values and way of thinking.

"The fact that the consensus produced by advertising can then result in attachment to objects, acts of purchase and implicit conformity to the economic imperatives of consumption is certain, but is not the essential point”
(Baudrillard, Consumer Society, p. 166)

8. Conclusions

Roland Barthes writes in Mythologies: "One immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil; one thus protects it against the risk of a generalized subversion” (p.150) Diesel reveals the manipulative tactics of advertising as a calculated concession – the better to seduce the consumer through its enormous solicitude. It thus shows cunning and sophistication in mollifying the sceptical consumer. The sceptical consumer of the 21st century is also a playful consumer.

Diesel does several things with this stratagem. Firstly it creates high salience and talkability as a brand. Brands that discuss big issues in a provocative voice tend to gain attention. Secondly, it refreshes and sustains a system of differences that differentiates the brand from its key competitors. Thirdly it sets up a lively dialogue with its brand franchise on the basis of shared values.

The last fifty years has seen a critical shift from consumer deference to self-reference. Through the knowledge economy and the democratisation instigated by the internet, consumers now have much more access to information. We now
exist within a semiosphere – a cultural economy of signs. This has heightened consumer awareness of the production process and essential homogeneity of industrial production. Consumers no longer look to brands to provide social status, cachet or even authenticity. Consumers are increasingly drawn to brands that meaningfully reflect their values. Diesel have understood this and have cultivated sensitive antennae for picking up the nuances of consumer sensibility.

In doing so, they have recalibrated their relationship with both consumer and media. Diesel set up a dialogue with its franchises that generates positive publicity for the brand. To the consumer, they offer a token role in a game of signification – a game premised on a deep complicity. Successful decoders are rewarded with the kudos and cultural capital of having solved the puzzle. To external media observers and those whose job it is to quarantine meaning, rather than unleash it, Diesel offers only a mischievous sneer or cynical denial.

"Diesel’s images of consumer paradise must be interpreted very ironically: the standard promise of ‘success’ found in most of the advertising is exaggerated and made absurd. Serious themes seem to be lurking everywhere in the advertising but any suggestion of worthiness is undercut by a final admission that it’s all just a joke” DIESEL PUBLIC RELATIONS

Although they would cast themselves as a radical challenger brand, Diesel are not iconoclastic. On the contrary, they are assiduous idolaters who promote and proliferate icons of their own creation. Each campaign is a concocted hyper-reality of simulacra that use consumer desire in its various manifestations as its recurrent, but hidden, theme. Baudrillard would see a connection between Diesel’s moral conceit and their propagation of simulacra. Baudrillard wrote that religious iconoclasm stemmed from a fear that divinity was being devalued through the pageantry of icons. Diesel, in producing an iconography of utopian landscapes is akin to a contemporary idolater exploiting our moral vacuum. It was this spinning of mythologies that Barthes sought to combat in ‘semioclasm’.
As a final thought, the use of simulacra in Diesel advertising can be linked to the nihilism and existential crisis of the early 21st century. Marcel Danesi has written of the symbiotic relationship of advertising to post-modern culture and argues that both spheres reflect one another. Danesi writes:

"Language in the postmodern mind takes on a new modality of representation: it is either imbued with irony or else it is reduced to mere verbal recipes, stock phrases and the kind of formulaic discourse that ads constantly promulgate...The postmodern mind is ahistorical and nihilistic." (Danesi, p.219)

The Diesel website dispenses guidelines for “Successful Living”. Though the site assumes the air of an ethical bulletin board nowhere is serious comment given over to this weighty matter – nor criteria offered for assessing ‘success’. Diesel offer guides for Successful Living with the detached insouciance of a materialistic Plato rhapsodising on the Good Life. The difference is that in Diesel’s treatise, ethics are sidelined, ridiculed or perverted: successful living is reduced to a quotient of aggrandisement and affluence. In conclusion, what Diesel do is offer figments of philosophical guidance while smuggling in sermons on consumerism.

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All featured Diesel advertising can be reached at:
http://www.diesel.com/successfullivingguides/