

Female Bodies and Visual Fantasy: Psychoanalysis of Women's Representation in Axe's Television Commercials

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This study critically examines television commercials advertising AXE, a male body spray. Using the framework of male gaze, originally coined by Laura Mulvey, which manipulates the viewer's (and camera's) perspective, this analysis uncovers the ubiquitous myth that exposes such instinctual voyeuristic pleasures. This psychoanalytic investigation goes beyond the descriptive visuals of bikini-clad women; examining the inconspicuous maintenance of a deep-rooted patriarchal structure that silences the female voice. Its intention is to make the biased representations of women in the media a prominent issue, encouraging dialogues and deliberation in the public sphere.

Keywords: Female representation, psychoanalysis, Laura Mulvey, male gaze, AXE commercials

AXE, a brand of men's product selling deodorant, body spray, shower gel, etc., is well known worldwide for its gender controversy in advertising. While a fairly large body of critiques and discussions exist in the way AXE portrays women in television commercials (e.g., Blair, et al., 2006; Lindstrom, 2011), there is a lack of systematic study of their inferred meanings from the psychoanalytic perspective. This paper reveals an analysis of "Billions," one of AXE's typical television commercials released in 2006 on both a "denotative" (the "preferred" reading) and "connotative" (the "negotiated" or "oppositional" reading) level (Hall, 1980 [1973], p 136-138), while basing the later on the theoretical framework of Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytic assumptions.

Ellen Seiter (1992) argues, "in images, denotation is the first order of signification: the signifier is the image itself and the signified is the idea or concept — what it is a picture of. Connotation is a second-order signifying system that uses the first sign, (signifier and signified), as its signifier and attaches an additional meaning, another signified, to it" (p. 39). By analyzing at two levels, the purpose of this paper is to uncover how AXE's customers were invited to take on a "male gaze" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11) stance to watch "Billions"; thus, AXE aligns itself with the ubiquitous patriarchal system based on our social-cultural settings in order to attract its target customers and boost its product sales.

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Denotative Meanings of “Billions”: Magic Power for Heterosexual Attractions

A large number of bikini-clad women run through the jungle, while others embrace the massive waves of the ocean. Since this advertisement is not promoting an athletic event such as the Ironman Triathlon, who is the target audience? A close-up shot shows a man looking around and smiling, followed by a series of the man’s point-of-view shots of these bikini-clad women running toward him. This man looks ordinary and is obviously not a “Lady Killer,” hence, the audiences may ask, “What are they doing and why?” Later on, the answer comes out, accompanied by a series of shots showing his usage of AXE’s new body spray. “Spray more, get more,” the slogan ends the commercial. As the audiences can see, “Billions” explicitly indicates how AXE positions its new body spray not merely as an anti-sweat product, but it can also reinforce heterosexual attractions by “the AXE effect.”

According to Wayne D. Hoyer and Deborah J. Macinnis’ *Consumer Behavior* (2009), one typical advertising strategy is to make their target customers “feel involved” (p. 47) in order to strengthen their motivation for purchasing certain products. While watching this commercial, men can be deeply caught up in this manipulating scenario — a large number of sexy women attracted to a man using AXE’s body spray. For “Billions,” AXE adopts this tactic by celebrating heterosexual attractions based on men’s fantasies or day-dreams, leading to a sense of personal relevance (p. 49) and an agreement on “personal value, goals and needs” (p. 50). By manipulating the magic power for heterosexual attractions, AXE successfully catches their target consumers’ eye, further motivating their purchase behavior.

Yet, there are some issues not discussed while adopting Hoyer and Macinnis’ hypothesis. For instance, what is the relationship between “Billions” and patriarchy, which serves as an unconsciously dominated ideology in today’s American culture? What is the stance a target consumer may take on while watching this commercial? In order to respond to these questions, this study employs a psychoanalytic analysis in order to better explore the deeper meanings of “Billions.”

Connotative Meanings of “Billions”: Visual Pleasure and Patriarchal Reaffirmation

In 1975, the British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey first proposed the concept of the “male gaze” (p. 11) in her famous essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* and slightly revised the concept in 1981 to delineate the psychological state of how spectators (both male and female) are invited to take on a heterosexual male’s point of view in order to perpetuate their fantasies while watching Hollywood films. As a follower of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, Mulvey’s theory assumes that “voyeuristic” (p. 8) and “fetishistic” (p. 13) lookings are the origin of pleasure, and this hypothesis explains how women are represented in films to fulfill the spectators’ expectations and needs (Mulvey, 1975). As E. Ann Kaplan (1992) further explained,

“Voyeurism and fetishism are mechanisms that the Hollywood cinema uses to construct the (presumably male) spectator in accordance with the needs of his unconscious. Voyeurism is linked to the scopophilie instinct (that is, the male’s pleasure in his own organ is transferred to pleasure in watching other people have sex). Mulvey argues that cinema relies on this instinct, making the spectator essentially a voyeur. Fetishism also comes into play in the cinema, where the whole female body may be “fetishized” in order to counteract the male fear of sexual difference, that is, of castration.” (p. 263).

Furthermore, Mulvey defines three ways of gazing: “that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion” (1975, p. 17). Since the interplay between “who’s doing the gazing” (the agent) and “who’s being gazed at” (the otherness) signifies how the power works on it, Mulvey’s assumption is an ideal theoretical framework for analyzing “Billions” at the connotative level.

Male Gaze and Audiences’ Pleasure

Media production is typically seen as a male-dominated industry (Gamble, 2004), leading to men’s total control of the way women are portrayed in the media. And if this is true, the representation of women in TV commercials may unavoidably reflect men’s interest and echoes patriarchy and the dominated ideology in contemporary America — they are often marginalized or served merely as sexual objects. Assuming that a male photographer was behind the camera during the filming of “Billions,” thus portraying his gender’s perspective, audiences are persuaded to accept this manipulated characterization. Explicit in “Billions,” there are numerous shots focusing on bikini-clad bodies exposing their breasts while they run through the jungle and beach. These shots not only objectify women, but also serve as a guide to where its target consumers should focus their attention. Thus, the female image in “Billions” is alienated except for serving the spectators’ fantasies.

The use of characterization in “Billions” serves as another means to consolidate women. In order to generate this spectacle for the viewing audience, there are a series of point-of-view shots in “Billions” displaying the man’s perspective that bikini-clad women from any direction run toward him. Through his facial expression, we can sense a feeling of pleasure as the man looks back at the entourage following him. Even though the “looking” among characters is within the commercial itself, audiences inevitably take the place of the man and acquire immediate pleasure through the imagination of becoming the protagonist in “Billions.” Mulvey (1975) argued, “as the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence” (p. 12). This mechanism also allows audiences to have a good excuse that what they look at is not their original intention; rather, they just follow the protagonist’s viewpoint, exempting them from feeling guilty (Mulvey, 1975). By connecting the protagonist’s perspective with spectators’ looking position, “Billions” ensures their target consumers’ visual pleasure.

In addition, female audiences are able to obtain the same enjoyment as male audiences do while watching “Billions.” Mulvey (1981) adopted the “pre-Oedipus phase,” which was originally proposed by Freud to explain that by identifying either male or female protagonists while watching films; thus women spectators are capable of oscillating their gazing position. In this sense, female audiences watching “Billions” may recognize themselves as the male protagonist using AXE’s new body spray and take pleasure in the spectacle of bikini-clad women. This shifting ability further consolidates female audiences’ positive opinions with regard to AXE’s new product, leading to their expectations for men’s usage of it. Or, women may consider AXE the best choice of men’s body spray while purchasing this kind of product for their significant others. Thus, the spectacle of female image in “Billions” leads to both the male and female consumers’ fascination with AXE’s new body spray.

Patriarchal Reaffirmation

The “male gaze” mechanism is reasserted in the display of women’s faces, breasts, and legs in “Billions.” Mulvey (1975) pointed out in her *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* that Hollywood films stylize women’s physical bodies into iconic images and relate them to erotic fantasy in order to fulfill spectators’ “voyeuristic” and “fetishistic” pleasure. This is to say, “the ‘male gaze’ projects men’s illusions upon female images, making ‘woman as image and man as bearer of the look’” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 6; Tseng, 2005, p. 93). Hence, through the representations of women in media, men position themselves as agents, or storytellers, while women lose their power to better describe themselves and become “the other.”

Although male-ruled exhibitions in the advertising industry are ubiquitous, consumers are often unconscious about the portraits of women in TV commercials reflecting the patriarchal ideology, which has deeply embedded in our social-cultural setting. Even female practitioners in the advertising industry follow this male-dominated rule while producing their works. As Mimi White (1992) claimed that,

“...the ruling class promulgates systems of meaning to promote its own interests and works to generalize and universalize them, so that oppressed or subservient classes mistakenly adopt the ruling-class ideas as their own. This, then, is ideology: beliefs that are taken as “natural” when in fact they perpetuate the status quo and continue the class system of oppression. In adopting the values and beliefs of the ruling classes as their own, individuals participate in their own oppression” (p.165).

Since the depiction of our everyday life in TV commercials unavoidably mirrors the dominated-subordinated relationships in the real world, it helps to maintain the existing order and norm, and most importantly, to avoid any unexpected social changes. Take the relationship between men and women as an example. It is through the representations of women in the media, which are either served for our “voyeuristic” or “fetishistic” pleasure, that patriarchy reassures the male-dominated ideology in contemporary America and keeps women alienated from power. As a result, the unequal access to define themselves in TV commercials further consolidates the gender inequality.

Conclusion

This study has analyzed the 2006 AXE TV commercial entitled “Billions” at both the denotative (“preferred” reading) and the connotative (“negotiated” or “oppositional” reading) levels. First, the “preferred” reading of “Billions” indicates AXE positions its new body spray not simply as a men’s product, but it further makes the magic power for becoming “Lady Killers” available for their male-based users. For the second implied level of analysis, this study uncovered the myth of AXE’s alignment of their commercials exposing the ubiquitous patriarchal system. It is through the objectified representations of women in “Billions” that AXE ensures spectators’ pleasure, associating its brand image with the dominant ideology of our social-cultural setting to boost its sales.

Nevertheless, the primary concern in this article is the lack of opportunity afforded to women. Silenced and labelled “the other,” this perpetuates their subordinated status in our society. As Hal Himmelstein (1994) suggested, “Dreams’ in the mythic world of television advertising are no less ‘real’ than those of traditional mythology, with its emphasis on

cosmogony (the origin or creation of the world or the universe); both speak to us of entire ways of life and canonize patterns of organizations of society that regulate behavior, ensuring a continuity of values and beliefs" (p.62). In this sense, it is through the process of ideological reaffirmation between the female representation in the media and the value and belief in our society that makes the change of women's status less likely to happen.

Thus, the "male gaze" that leads to the media industry's universal exploitation of women as a spectacle pleasure must be eradicated. As Mulvey (1975) claimed, "cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire. It is these cinematic codes and their relationship to formative external structures that must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged" (p.17). However, the purpose of this study is not to provide a specific solution for challenging the ubiquitous patriarchy in our society. This psychoanalytic investigation goes beyond the descriptive visuals of bikini-clad women; examining the inconspicuous maintenance of a deep-rooted patriarchal structure that silences the female voice. Its intention is to make the biased representations of women in the media a prominent issue, encouraging dialogues and deliberation in the public sphere.

Transcript for AXE's "Billions"

AXE "Billions" Worldwide Commercial: 60 Seconds

Director: Fredrik Bond

Year: 2006

Scene 1

Sound: Birds and insects in the jungle with running steps (00"- 06")

A close-up shot of running feet (00"- 04"); a long shot of a bikini-clad woman running in the jungle (04"- 05")

Music: Epic background music gradually fades in (05")

A close-up shot of the woman looking around (it looks like she searches for something; 05"- 07"); a series of rapid shots from different angles showing the woman running through the jungle (07"- 14"); a close-up shot of the woman looking backward while running (it looks like she is afraid of someone catching up with her; 14"- 15").

A close-up shot of the woman cuts to a medium shot showing lots of bikini-clad women coming from all directions in the jungle (16"- 18"); a series of rapid shots of women running in the field and climbing the slope (19"- 23")

Scene 2

A close-up shot of a woman swimming in the ocean (24"); two extreme long shots showing a large number of people swimming across the ocean cuts to a long shot showing some of them swimming in the big waves (25"- 27")

Scene 3-1

A long shot cuts to a close-up showing two women push each other while running through the jungle (28"); a series of shots of women in the jungle running in the same direction (29"- 34")

A bird's eye shot of people in the ocean swimming in the same direction cuts to a long shot showing the bikini-clad women landing on the beach and running (34"- 36")
Two long shots showing the women from the jungle climbing down steep rocks and arriving

at the beach (37"- 39"); A couple of shots showing both the women from the jungle and ocean aim for the same destination (39"- 41")

Scene 3-2

A close-up shot of a man on the beach looking around and smiling (41"- 42") cuts to a series of his point-of-view shots showing the bikini-clad women from the ocean landing on the beach and running (43"- 45")

A close-up shot of the man using body spray (45"); a long shot showing a woman falling down among the running crowd on the beach (46"- 47"); a medium shot of the man using body spray in front of a large number of women running toward him (47"- 48"); a medium shot showing a woman jumping across a rock and another falling down on the beach (49"- 50"); a medium shot of the man using body spray in front of a large number of women running toward him (50"- 52"); a close-up shot of a running woman's face showing her determined eye (52"- 53")

Music: the epic music gradually climaxes (53")

A God's-eye view shot of the man standing in the center of where these bikini-clad women runs to (53"- 54") cuts to an extreme close-up shot showing the man's satisfied facial expression (54"- 55")

Music: the music climaxes and suddenly stops (55")

Cut to the title, "Spray More, Get More, the AXE Effect" overlaps the bird's eye shot of a crowd of bikini-clad women on the beach (55"- 60")

Voice-over: Spray more, get more (56"- 59")

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