WOMAN AND POWER. SUBVERSIVE STRATEGIES OF MANIPULATION THROUGH VISUAL IMAGES

Simina-Elena Rațiu, PhD Candidate, "Babeș-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca

Abstract: In any discussion regarding advertising there is an implicit need of identifying the best strategies when promoting a certain product. The present paper aims in underlining a few techniques used in an advertisement for lingerie, but also in discussing the relations of power established between the woman who poses and the one who watches and has to decide whether he will or will not buy the given product. We shall focus on the marketing strategies from the perspective of the unconscious elements triggered by the visual image.

Keywords: woman, power, feminism, psychoanalysis, unconscious falocentric world, object.

Introduction:

Taking into consideration that the image of the woman is very much used in advertising, it is important to focus on the strategies used when constructing this image and on the status of the feminine character when considering the involvement in the relations of power with the onlooker.

Using psychoanalysis, we shall prove that the visual imagery is constructed in such a way that it sets off certain areas of the onlookers' unconscious.

A first thesis refers to the fact that the picture discussed here is addressed to an implicit viewer, who finds himself at the oral stage described by Freud. Thus, the visual image reactivates the instinct of oral pleasure, offering in the same time an apparent possibility for its satisfaction. In the same time there is a typically human fascination towards image and mostly towards our identification with it. We shall prove that the picture centers on: 1. an identification of the viewer (the Lacanian stage of the mirror) with the given body and 2. on the erotic tension which sets in when the process of identification occurs (the tension which determines the need of the viewer to take possession of the body that he watches, and eventually of the promoted object).

We shall concentrate our attention on certain feminist theories (belonging to Laura Mulvey and used by Gillian Rose in her book) in order to see to which extent they are valid when coming to the interpretation of the present picture. In order to make things clearer, we will take into account a) whether the woman is ontologically educated by the man, b) whether the man represents the active instance which creates history, while trying, in the same time, to find out the way in which the Romanian society relates itself to gender differences. Further on, we will present and develop an original idea which underlines the fact that, in reality, the games of power are placed at a different level – both the woman who has the role of promoting the product, as well as the onlooker (the potential buyer) become *objects* of a social system.

Methodological approaches:

BDD-A22382 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 13:52:29 UTC)

Firstly, we have chosen to follow a rationalist methodology, analyzing the picture only from the point of view of the measurable data (factual observation). The rational methodology starts off from Descartes and is exclusively centred on the elements which can be quantified and factually measured. Thus, in the first part of my paper, we shall focus on the elements which form the visual image and on the relations that might occur between them.

With regard to the second methodology, we have chosen psychoanalysis, while the method will be based on personal notations. Paraphrasing Gillian Rose (Rose 2001:101), the psychoanalytical interpretation follows the effects that certain visual images might have upon the viewers. Psychoanalysis does not have a specific methodological code (as content analysis). Usually, the psychoanalytical critique operates with just one or two concepts, exploring the articulations of a given image. Psychoanalysis (as a methodology), but especially the personal notations (as a method) assure an extremely appealing freedom when it comes to the process of interpretation.

Due to the fact that psychoanalysis and feminism can not be separated inside the visual policies (Mulvey 1996: 1), we shall also apply a feminist grid of interpretation to the given image. As a method, we have chosen the gender studies. They are centred especially on the problem of sexuality and on the relations of power. The work of Laura Mulvey, cited and depicted by Gillian Rose, will help us determine the existing stereotypes at the level of the Romanian society today, when referring to the status of women.

Last but not least, in the third part of my paper, we shall enter the field of phenomenology. Using this methodology, the focus shifts towards the lived experience. Regarding the method, we have chosen the conversational analysis, based on the direct involvement of the subjects. Finally, we will summarize and present our conclusions drawn from the discussions with a group of nine students, regarding the given picture.

Bibliographical references:

The book which made possible this intercession and which discusses possible methodologies, methods and operational strategies regarding visual images is *Visual methodologies* belonging to Gillian Rose.

I have used the theories of Langstroth which, in a Freudian line of interpretation, identify in full maturity reminiscences of the oral stage developed during childhood. Thus, this theory supports our thesis according to which the image that we analyze seeks to recognize certain reminiscences of the oral stage.

Likewise, Dylan Evens was of great help in establishing the degree of fascination which occurs between the human being and the visual image, with which he/she identifies himself/herself, while on the other hand, due to his concept of *sexual aggression*, he made possible the development of a daring thesis: the tension, felt in the moment of confrontation with the image, creates the desire of taking into possession the object of contemplation, and later on the object which is promoted.

Philippe Julien's work entitled *Jacques Lacan's Return to Freud* brings into discussion the stages of development of the ego, by talking about a stage which incorporates ones identification with the image of the other. This theory paved the way for a new marketing strategy: due to this identification, the target public can be convinced, with the help of the right image, of its desire regarding the promoted object.

BDD-A22382 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 13:52:29 UTC)

Furthermore, the online dictionary of psychoanalysis was very useful when getting accustomed to the terminology and concepts that were frequently used.

It is important to mention the fact that in *Visual methodologies* I also came across a very good reinterpretation of the feminist logic. In her book, Gillian Rose cites an article belonging to Laura Mulvey where she discusses the main feminist objections regarding the woman's status inside the narrative film. We will also identify these objections at the level of the image placed under analysis, thus offering us a perspective of the status which the woman's image has in Romanian commercials and, to a certain extent, in the present society.

Interpretation:

By analyzing the present image we are able to distinguish three layers of depth.

In the nearest one, we can see in the left of the photo a small table with a telephone, while in the central part, there is a pare of pink shoes, which underline a clear discrepancy with the telephone (which has a more classic tinge) and with the wooden table (which has a sober design). Just like a continuation of a vertical axis, which divides the painting in two equal parts, we have, from left to right, the position of the heel belonging to the first shoe. The key element, guides the eyes of the one who is looking at the picture towards the speck of light placed on the model's left leg. In what follows, we shall bring some clarifying notes to what we have mentioned above.

Thus, in the second layer of depth, we have, on a biedermeier sofa, an almost nude feminine presence, engaged in the process of putting on/getting off the lingerie which the picture aims in promoting. The hair accessory is the only static, so-called, item of clothing kept at its rightful place. The face is partially covered by a minute vale, as well, the only element meant to create a certain *covering*.

The model's attention is not focused on herself or on the pieces of lingerie, but on the implicit onlooker, the potential buyer of the promoted object. Her eyes are clearly heading towards the outside, seeking attention and approval.

In the background we can see a lamp which provides the interior artificial light, with the help of which the feminine body is shaped either by areas of shadows, either by extreme light. In this same plan we have the thick, heavy drapes, covering a window whose presence can only be suspected. The reality beyond the window and the exterior light are perfectly disguised by the curtains. This element functions as a barrier separating the exterior from the room, perceived as a self-sufficient space, the space of absolute intimacy.

The crossing point of all the imaginary axes (oblique, vertical and horizontal axes which divide the picture into equal parts) is underlined by the spot of light seen as a continuation of the shadow placed on the left leg. This crossing point of the imaginary axes leads the eyes towards two visual axes; the first one is represented by the leg line down to the foot, the eyes capturing, in the same time, the promoted pieces of lingerie, while the second one is the leg line indicating towards the left, towards the only hidden space of the exposed body, an alleged area of pleasure.

The model's lips are sectioned by an oblique axis which starts from the upper, left corner and ends in the lower, right corner. Furthermore, if we were to draw a horizontal line meant to divides the picture into to equal halves, we would notice the fact that this line runs across the base of the breasts. This observation can be seen as an extremely appealing material for a psychoanalytical interpretation. By resorting to psychoanalysis, we shall point out, in what follows, the existing correlations between the two items mentioned above.

BDD-A22382 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 13:52:29 UTC)

According to the dictionary of psychoanalysis, the first Freudian stage of libidinal development is the oral one. During this stage, the sexual pleasure is predominantly associated with the arousal of the mouth and lips which accompany feeding.

Lovell Langstroth (Langstroth 1955:20) discusses and interprets this Freudian stage. He classifies the nipples and the mouth as being sexual organs, heterogeneous areas which bring pleasure. Even if the oral stage is often surpassed, there are pathological cases, especially at the level male subjects, in which the libido remains stuck at this stage. The impossibility of surpassing the oral stage is often manifested during maturity, through sexual satisfaction of the oral type (kiss and oral sexual relations).

Due to our observation regarding the trajectory of the imaginary axes (one axis sections the lips of the feminine character, while another one runs across the base of the breasts) we can easily place the implicit viewer into this oral stage. The image relies on awakening the infantile oral instincts.

Further on, we shall focus on applying a Lacanian grid of interpretation. In his essay entitled *From Lacan to Darwin*, (Evans 2005:38-55), Dylan Evans presents the psychoanalytical path of interpretation underwent by the relationship between the human being and the visual images. Lacan's starting point is Wallon's study which follows, in a comparative manner, the reactions of a child and of a chimpanzee in front of the mirror. The conclusion was that while chimpanzees quickly loose interest, the children will focus intensely on the image reflected by the mirror. Thus, for Lacan, this difference underlines the fundamental human tendency of being fascinated by visual images, of living in an imaginary world.

By extension, this fascination for images is the main argument on which all current marketing strategies are based. In what follows, we shall focus on the next steps, needed in obtaining a so-called recipe for promoting a product.

A very interesting theory belongs to Philippe Julien (Julien 1996:34), who, while discussing the mirror stage from a Lacanian perspective, argues the existence of a first phase during which the ego is formed from the image of the other. Thus, the first image that the child overlaps to that of his own body is nothing else but an outside image.

At the level of our discourse, this interpretation underlines even more the hypothesis according to which the onlooker unconsciously identifies himself with the character from the picture. As a general fact, the woman chosen to promote a product must correspond to the ideals of beauty and attractiveness of each cultural code, so that the desire of identification can occur at the level of as many potential buyers as possible.

In the same work, Philippe Julien (Julien 1996:34) argues that when the ego forms itself through the image of the other, the sense of narcissism is associated with aggression. During the identification with the other, we inevitably encounter a tension due to the fact that the identifying image can cause both attraction and rejection.

Dylan Evans (Evans 1996:6) takes the interpretation even further and, at the meeting point with the image, he identifies an erotic attraction, on the one hand, and aggression, on the other. This erotic aggression marks all forms of identification, being a fundamental characteristic of narcissism.

Our theory is based on the fact that, in promoting a certain product, the attention is focused intensely on the erotic aggression, generated by the identification with the other. This tension operates in a positive way, creating a relationship centred on the sense of possession

BDD-A22382 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 13:52:29 UTC)

between the onlooker and the object of contemplation (in our case between the onlooker and the promoted object). The recipe is quite simple: we need a picture which can activate the infantile instincts of identification with the other, while the *erotic aggression* which sets in naturally, at the level of the viewer's unconscious, will develop an aggressive desire of taking into possession (the image, the person presented in the image, and in the end the promoted object). From this point of view, we are dealing with an extremely subtle marketing strategy based on an elementary psychological mechanism.

Further on, we shall try to briefly apply a feminist grid of interpretation. Gillian Rose (Rose 2001:106-118) compiles a number of theories placed at the boundary between feminism and psychoanalysis. Following the logic of the principles taken from Laura Mulvey (Mulvey 1989:14, 19), Gillian Rose develops the hypothesis according to which women can not appear in mobile visual images in themselves and by themselves, due to the fact that this is possible only by defining women as non-men. At this point the castration complex is also brought into discussion. Thus, the concept of femininity can only be established through a close relationship to that of masculinity. In a world dominated by sexual differences, visual pleasure occurs somewhere between the active man and the woman who will constantly play a passive role. The male eyes will always assign to the female image, their own personal projections.

These feminist concerns regarding women's status at the level of the power relations with men, on the one hand, and at the level of visual relations, on the other, can be perfectly applied to the advertisement discussed in this paper. It is clear that femininity can only exist in the presence of masculinity; in the advertisement, the character is ontologically constructed by the founding male eyes. She defines herself as a presence only as far as the eyes can perceive her. As already mentioned above, the woman's attention is not directed towards herself or the promoted object, but towards the implicit viewer.

Moreover, the fact that the man is the active instance, while the woman represents the static character nailed to the sofa, becomes quite clear. She is the one who expects, almost begging the viewer's attention. The alleged narrative scenario, suggested by the picture, can only operate as far as this viewer exists. Thus, he, the male character, is the one creating history, the one who gives sense to the femininity standing before him, allowing the woman to narratively participate to an alleged future together. This "future together" is also the result of a male projection: the scenery, as well as the women's attitude, reveals impulses and desires belonging to clichés according to which the minds of men operate. Here we must have in mind the artificial erotic atmosphere, but also the image of an obedient woman willing to accept the rules imposed by the male instance. Furthermore, the way in which spaces are defined can also be seen as an argument for the thesis according to which the implicit viewer is a masculine entity. The crossing point of all the imaginary axes (oblique, vertical and horizontal axes which divide the picture into equal parts) is underlined by the speck of light seen as a continuation of the shadow placed on the left leg. This crossing point of the imaginary axes leads the eyes towards two visual axes; the first one is represented by the leg line down to the foot, the eyes capturing, in the same time, the promoted pieces of lingerie, while the second one is the leg line indicating towards the left, towards the only hidden space of the exposed body, an alleged area of pleasure. In addition, another point of interest should be the model's mouth. The model's lips are sectioned by an oblique axis which starts from the upper, left corner and ends in the lower, right corner. Furthermore, if we were to draw a horizontal line meant to divides the picture into to equal

BDD-A22382 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 13:52:29 UTC)

halves, we would notice the fact that this line runs across the base of the breasts. Thus, the key elements, around which the entire image is created, are actually the mouth, breasts and the area of pleasure.

Basing her arguments on the work of Laura Mulvey, Rose (Rose 2001:110) talks about the ways in which the woman presents herself, from a visual pint of view, at the level of the narrative cinematography. Voyeurism is one of the possible ways brought into discussion. This aspect imposes a distance and a privileged position attributed exclusively to men (we must not forget the fact that Mulvey follows a psychoanalytical logic and that she applies the castration complex). Among the techniques noted by Gillian Rose (Rose 2001:110), when citing Laura Mulvey, with respect to the establishment of women in a position inferior to that of men, we must keep in mind: a) establishing a distance between the male protagonist and the female leading character; b) establishing distance between the female character and the public viewer. In the present advertisement, as we have already noted, the woman is placed in the second layer of depth of the picture, a distance which allows the male viewers to develop a superior overview upon her. Thus, we are faced with a world which constantly addresses and relates to men. Due to these aspects, we are able to draw some conclusions.

Another manifestation of the castration complex is the understanding of the woman as a pretty face meant to please the male presence. Laura Mulvey believes that this pretty face, sometimes counterfeited, can objectify the women. She becomes an image waiting to be seen either by the scene's male hero, either by the spectator. Applying this aspect to the picture discussed here, we can easily see the fact that the female character presented in the advertisement has an attractive face, hidden behind a minute veil, and provocative locks of hair. She actually represents the focus point of all eyes, thus becoming *the object*.

Therefore, we can only conclude that the advertisement addresses a patriarchal, falocentric society. The fact that it relies on such patterns clearly shows that in Romania today such a social structure exists and is perceived as normal. We consider that absolute novelty would not be the best marketing strategy. The only possibility of success with which you can promote a new product on the market is the constant updating of an embedded framework, settled in the psyche, which no longer causes problems or needs questioning. The advertised product has to overlap this stable and reassuring structure.

Moving from a psychoanalytic and feminist interpretation to a synthesis of *perceptions* attributed to this picture, in what follows, we shall focus on the opinions of a couple of MA students (The History of Images, UBB, Cluj-Napoca), regarding the given photo. The interview took place on November 30, 2010, and it involved nine persons. Regarding their attitudes, opinions varied. As expected, some colleagues applied a feminist grid of interpretation. Thus, the picture can be seen as *an advertisement that promotes an erotic call-centre rather than lingerie* (O. 23, R., 24), having as a central image *a self-sufficient woman who is intellectually inferior* (B. 25), placed in a *cliché of representation* (S. 23) with an *artificial silicone flavour* (Z, 33) which diminishes her femininity. The body presented in the image is seen as a *geometry of the SF type* (Z, 33), with *a robotic beauty and features which do not allow us to perceive the improvable imperfections* (L. 33), being mostly *the fantasy of a man about how a woman should look when trying on a certain type of lingerie* (S., 23). On the same line of interpretation, L. notices that the woman's *eyes are not only languorous, but also in a state of expectance, waiting for the voyeur's approval*. This hypothesis underlines, even further, a logic of thinking according

BDD-A22382 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 13:52:29 UTC)

to which the woman, even during the act of seduction, is perceived as an object, invested with value only in relation to the subject viewer. When analyzing the setting, B. argues that it *is counterfeit, unnatural, specially created for an individual porno scene*. This observation also motivates the adjective "self-sufficient" attributed to the women, due to the fact that the sofa, destined for self-satisfaction, can only accommodate one person. Thus, the subject's presence is limited to the role of the voyeur. While Z. notices as well the *discrepancy between the classic scenery and the woman's artificial sensuality*, S. considers the space as being *extremely staged*. This given staging of objects becomes *artificial and overwhelming*, moving towards an erotic cliché.

All these interpretations follow a feminist logic, according to which the woman presented in the picture, belongs to the *silicon diva* typology, while the photo is clearly attributed pornographic extents. Within this line of interpretation, the young woman who poses is seen as an object of desire, invested with meaning and value only through of the existence of a male subject. His status is undesirable and blameful. The fact that this seemingly perfect woman must necessarily be inferior from an intellectual point of view (according to colleague B's opinion), shows that we face prejudices even in the interpretation of allegedly competent persons (all persons who were interviewed are MA students, specialised in the field concerning the research of the imaginary).

A so-called distinct line of interpretation is underlined by colleague A's vision (24), which stated that *the picture can be placed in the genre of erotic photography, clearly different from that of pornography, due to the fact that the photographer himself relies on the onlooker's imagination*. According to this opinion, the woman represents ***the means*** *of seduction*, while the seduction is carried out through the body. A. also talks about the *self-confidence possessed by the woman in the picture, self-confidence which can be seen in her eyes*.

Although apparently different from those presented so far, the interpretation of colleague A. can actually be placed in the same area as the others. There are three arguments for our statement. 1) A. invests the woman with the same object status, calling her *means of seduction*; the object is given consistency only in the presence of a male viewer. 2) The image tends to move toward pornography rather than erotic, due to the fact that it shows the viewer everything, leaving no place for speculations, slanting eyes and imagination put to work. She is naked, reachable to the viewer. There are no veils that might come between the female model and the outside subject. 3) Her eyes are not focused on herself, but on the implicit viewer. She gains trust and a certain sense of power of attraction towards the outside world.

Apart from all the discussions regarding the woman's status in this advertisement, I. (27) applies a sociological grid of interpretation. I. leaves aside the relations of power between the viewer and the one who is being watched, and, by following a Baudrillardic line (Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*), states that *the object, the result of production, threatens to replace the subjectivity and independence of the subject, through alienation*. Thus, regardless of gender, the one who "consciously" watches the product (telephone, vehicle or piece of lingerie) and buys it due to the fact that he was seduced while looking at it, becomes *an alienated subject, hence an object of the system*. Thus, the element brought into question by I. cancels and in the same completes our discussion. At this point we can no longer talk about subject and object since the games of power are now placed at a totally different level. Both the woman who exposes herself,

BDD-A22382 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 13:52:29 UTC)

as well as the viewer who has to be convinced in order to buy the product, become the objects of an economic system.

By limiting the discussion to the photo analyzed here, I. observes that *the sofa, the lamp, the curtains (even the exclusively artificial indoor light) are inspired by the baroque bourgeois, making a clear reference to social class*. Furthermore, *the hair accessory makes us think of a variety show, while the phone might suggest the presence of a call-girl* (typical bourgeois aspirations). This type of imaginary stimulates ones desire of purchasing. The individual is presented, at the level of the unconscious, with the idea that by paying for the advertised product (in this setting dominated by bourgeois elements) he will become *nobler*.

Conclusions:

We consider that we were able to prove the fact that visual images, included in the category of advertisements, are constructed in such a way that they activate various levels of the viewers' unconscious. Following a Freudian logic, we have shown how the image recalls certain reminiscences of the oral stage, offering an apparent satisfaction of these drives.

Starting off from the Lacanian idea, according to which the first step in the making of ones ego is the identification with the other, we have noticed the fact that the construction of the image is centred on this identification. The images are chosen in accordance with the expectations, projections of ones self and with the desires of the target public, in order for the identification to be as precise as possible and to result in the usage of the promoted product. In other words, due a well chosen image, a certain type of public can be convinced in purchasing the promoted product.

We have also proved that the erotic aggression felt in the moment of identification with the person presented in the picture creates a violent need of possessing the identifying image and the advertised object. This can be seen as another element which assures the success of the given advertisement.

After focusing on some preliminary remarks at the level of the feminist grid of interpretation: a) the status of woman presented the picture is ontologically constructed by the male eyes; b) the man represents the active instance that creates history; c) as a staging technique, the relationship between the heroine and hero will always involve a certain distance; d) the woman is identified as a pretty face, thus being objectified, we have reached the conclusion that in this advertisement we are dealing with a patriarchal, falocentric world.

Taking into consideration the fact that we started off from the thesis according to which the best way of promoting an object is the overlapping of novelty (i.e the promoted object) with some safe, stabile patterns, which no longer give raise to questions, we can conclude that for the present Romanian society this patriarchal, falocentric world represents, from a psychological point of view, normality, a structure of stability. Thus, it is not hard to follow the role of the woman in this male-dominated world: she is identified as an object meant to sell a product. The female character is the element which assures the necessary social order.

Last but not least, it is important to mention the fact that there are interpretations according to which, in the production process, the woman no longer maintains the status of object, while the male viewer ceases to represent the subject. They both become objects of an economic system.

BDD-A22382 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 13:52:29 UTC)

Leaving aside the idea of an exhaustive study, the theme of the discussion will be resumed and developed in future research.

Bibliographical references:

Baudrillard, Jean, *Sistemul obiectelor*, Cluj: Echinox, 1996

Evans, Dylan, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psyhoanalysis*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996

Mulvey, Laura, *Fetishism and curiosity*, London: British Film Institute, 1996

Julien, Philipp, *Jacques Lacan's Return to Freud*, translated by Devra Beck Simiu, New York and London: New York University Press, 1996

Langstroth, Lovell, *Structure of the ego. An Anatomic and Physiologic Interpretation of the Psyche*. *Based on the Psychology of Otto Ranke*, London: Cumberlege, 1995

Rose, Gillian, *Visual Methodologies*, London: Sage Publication, 2001

Articles:

Evans, Dylan. "From Lacan to Darwin" *The Literary Animal; Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*, 2005: 38-55, Web. 4 dec. 2010

Web Pages:

http://www.iqads.ro/printul_romanesc_12440/magielle___too_sexy.html
http://www.srdp.ro/dictionar.html

BDD-A22382 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 13:52:29 UTC)