

**The manifestation of male gender identity
in contemporary perfume commercials.**

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Boys will be boys

I live in the American Gardens Building on West 81st Street on the 11th floor. My name is Patrick Bateman. I'm 27 years old. I believe in taking care of myself, and a balanced diet and a rigorous exercise routine. In the morning, if my face is a little puffy, I'll put on an ice pack while doing my stomach crunches. I can do a thousand now. After I remove the ice pack I use a deep pore cleanser lotion. In the shower I use a water activated gel cleanser, then a honey almond body scrub, and on the face an exfoliating gel scrub. Then I apply an herb-mint facial masque which I leave on for 10 minutes while I prepare the rest of my routine. I always use an after shave lotion with little or no alcohol, because alcohol dries your face out and makes you look older. Then moisturizer, then an anti-aging eye balm followed by a final moisturizing protective lotion. There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman. Some kind of abstraction. But there is no real me. Only an entity. Something illusory. And though I can hide my cold gaze, and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours, and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable, I simply am not there.

—Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*

In the 1991 novel *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis, we follow the protagonist and anti-hero Patrick Bateman. Bateman is a successful and wealthy Wall Street hotshot. On top of that he is respected in his social circles and maintains a good physique by ways of exercise and diet. Simply said: He has it all. Bateman works hard to create an image of himself that fits the governing male gender ideals, in order to be looked up to by others. To see how he does that, we will look at what these gender ideals are and where they come from.

Kimmel (2001) sheds light on the historical roots of masculine ideals in the United States. In the eighteenth-century, two models of manhood were predominant. The first was the “*genteel patriarch*,” whose standing derived from land-ownership and who was refined, elegant, and sexual but also a loving father. The second was the “*heroic artisan*,” whose physical strength and republican virtue is seen, for example, in the yeoman farmer and the craftsman. These early forms of manhood show that the ideals are closely intertwined with the premodern economy; one based on agricultural production. Kimmel claims that these ideals of manhood were shattered in the 1830s by a new ideal: “*Marketplace Manhood*. [...] The Marketplace Man derived his identity entirely from his success in the capitalist marketplace, as he accumulated wealth, power, status. He was the urban entrepreneur, the businessman.”

In the 1970s, behavioral psychologist Robert Brannon pieced together a model of American manhood in his book *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority* (1976). Brannon claimed that the male sex role in 20th Century American society had four dimensions, or basic themes:

- The Big Wheel: Success, status, and the need to be looked up to.
- The Sturdy Oak: A manly air of toughness, confidence and self-reliance.
- Give 'Em Hell!: The aura of aggression, violence and daring.
- No Sissy Stuff: The stigma of all stereotyped feminine characteristics and qualities, including openness and vulnerability.

With this model in hand, we can make clear in what way Bateman fulfills these gender ideals.

The Big Wheel

At the apex of the capitalist food chain he embodies The Big Wheel. His job makes him a lot of money, which enables him to buy expensive Valentino suits, a winsome apartment, high-priced dinners, drinks, drugs, and even as detailed acquisitions as exquisite business cards. All of these in turn earn him the respect of his peers.

The Sturdy Oak

Bateman also takes good care of his body. He keeps himself to a steadfast regiment of diet and exercise to make sure he builds and maintains his hard body. At times when it is not deemed too inappropriate, he makes sure to show it off to members of the opposite sex, in order to provoke their physical desire for him (these women typically range from massage therapists, prostitutes or expendable liaisons). He does not do this to gain confirmation, but purely to feed his ego. As he is, on the facade at least, a very confident man. He himself puts this in words quite fittingly: "I have all the characteristics of a human being: blood, flesh, skin, hair; but not a single, clear, identifiable emotion, except for greed and disgust."

Give 'Em Hell!

Now for the aura of aggression, Bateman not only exudes it, but is living it. Not only is he aggressive and daring in his profession and drug use (faithful to the stereotype of the *Wall Street Shark*), Bateman in particular also has a tendency for violent crime. He is a serial killer. He kills women for sadistic sexual pleasure, usually after having sex with (or raping) them, or men because they anger or annoy him.

While violent crimes do not befit a social role model of any sorts, they do enforce the idea of him fitting the gender ideals of American manhood as Brannon laid them out. These violent acts, as socially unacceptable as they are in contemporary society, are intrinsically masculine in nature.

No Sissy Stuff

Coming to the fourth and final point, Brannon defines masculinity by excluding femininity from it. Although on first glance this sounds like a fallacy, I will attempt to clarify his theory.

Real men are made, not born—so goes the conventional wisdom. In other words, manhood is a social status, something a guy earned historically, through brutal tests of physical endurance or other risky demonstrations of toughness that mark the transition from boyhood to manhood. But while that masculinity is hard-won, it can be easily lost.

Once earned, men have to continue proving their worth through manly action. In modern society, that may no longer mean, say, killing the meatiest woolly mammoth, but there are equivalent displays of masculinity: earning a decent living or protecting one's family. One misstep—losing a job, for instance, or letting someone down—and that gender identity slips away.

The phenomenon helps explain why men are so touchy about their masculinity. Women don't have the same problem, of course. Womanhood is largely seen as something innate, immutable: girls become women through puberty; once achieved, womanhood sticks.

—Meredith Melnick in her 2011 article *Masculinity, a Delicate Flower*

Melnick comes with an interesting insight into the conundrum presented by Brannon. As the transition from boyhood into manhood is not as innate as the transition from girlhood into womanhood (the potential to become a mother), in order for boys to become men they have to actively distinguish themselves from their counterparts; women. In the emotional sphere, Bateman does a fine job avoiding sissy stuff by not expressing (or even being capable of) any emotion that would be associated with femininity. His superficial lifestyle is quite the opposite of being open, and even when later in the story he tries to open up—and confess his crimes—his claims are not taken seriously because the idea of (the flawless) Patrick Bateman is too well established in his social and professional circles.

There is, however, one aspect of 'No Sissy Stuff' that Bateman does not match. This aspect is found in his excessive consumerist behavior. According to Alexander (2003) the woman's traditional gender role, being that of housewife

and mother, implicitly includes the task of consumption. Ranging from groceries to beauty products, women were always the consumers where men were the producers.

Now Bateman's persona as *marketplace man* (Kimmel 2001) requires, just as every type of manhood, proof. In this case, the proof of his success in the marketplace comes as displays of the wealth he has attained in his job. His fashion, his apartment, his business cards, and expensive dinners are all public displays of his success, yet his consumerism does not end here. Bateman spends not only a lot of money, but also a lot of time on cosmetics. This ranges from but is not limited to the right deep pore cleanser lotion, activated gel cleanser, body scrub, exfoliating gel scrub, facial masque, after shave lotion, moisturizer, anti-aging eye balm, and a moisturizing protective lotion, all of which are used in his morning routine.

Alexander (2003) helps us further understand that from the 1960s through the 1980s, social theorists (Baudrillard 1981; Bell 1973; Derrida 1966; Lyotard 1984) established that Western societies like the United States were changing. These societies were undergoing a shift from a modern industrial culture, based on *production*, to a postmodern culture characterised by the *consumption* of products, ideas, and knowledge. As Kimmel (2001) showed us that the structure of an economy is intertwined with social and cultural paradigms (such as gender identity) we must understand that these change too. Alexander further remarks that “[n]umerous studies (Fraser 1989; Nicholson 1990; Smith 1987) have found that the postindustrial shift is affecting women's roles in society. For example, the increasing number of women in the formal economy, both as wage earners and as consumers, has been well documented (Dobash and Dobash 1979; Hartmann 1976; Tilly and Scott 1978).”

But the coming of emancipation has not only changed gender identity for women towards traditionally male roles. In turn the paradigm of masculinity has also been shifting towards traditionally more feminine areas. If masculinity is defined as “not feminine” and more and more traditionally masculine roles are also being assimilated into the feminine realm, naturally masculinity or its definition must change shape as well. Now this raises interesting questions in the field of visual communication. How does masculinity manifest itself in a traditionally feminine role, and what are the gender ideals of the masculine consumer within advertisement? To investigate this I chose to deconstruct and analyse a series of contemporary perfume commercial videos. The choice for perfume commercials is because according to the classical gender model (Brannon 1976), real men avoid the use of cosmetics and give minimal attention to their clothing and hygiene. In their drive to increase profits by expanding market shares, corporations exploit the changing economic structure and these accompanying changes in consumer identity through advertising. Perfume commercials directed to men are a relatively new phenomenon and in itself a prototypical example of shifting gender identity in our postmodern capitalist society.

The male consumer in relation to the femme fatale

While corporations have an interest in maintaining some aspects of traditional gender roles to ensure continued markets for their products—women’s cosmetics are a prime example—they also serve as agents of social change by creating new consumer markets. The post-modern shift in women’s gender role can be seen in new careers for women in the workplace and new consumer products for women that range from business suits to personal trainers.

—Susan M. Alexander in her 2003 article *Stylish Hard Bodies*

In the 1950s perfume was still mainly marketed towards a female audience. Advertisers knew, and still know, that women buy cologne to give to men as much as men buy for themselves (Classen, Howes and Synnott 2004). Coined slogans like “To be a real woman is to bring out the best in a man” set the tone. But in the following decades, together with the relaxation of gender boundaries, new images appeared in marketing. In the 1960s and 1970s two constructs were introduced into perfume ads; the ‘*femme fatale*’ and the ‘natural woman’ (or: ‘flower child’). An example of the first category (I will come back to the second later) is perhaps seen strongest in Dior’s *Poison* and Yves Saint Laurent’s *Opium*. These perfumes can to this day still be seen working with the same—quite literal—image of the *femme fatale*. But interestingly the shape that a *femme fatale* can take has changed together with gender boundaries.

In the 1970s the perfume Charlie made a breakthrough in advertising by showing the woman as a man’s equal, if not superior. In the ad a tall businesswoman is seen giving her male colleague a friendly pat on the behind. This image of the businesswoman opened a door for the *femme fatale*. She could move out of her classical paradigm of sexual predator and seductress, having the upper hand only in love and lust, she could now also be a businesswoman, being financially superior to the man.

The 2013 commercial for Yves Saint Laurent’s *Manifesto* (directed by Nicolas Winding Refn) makes use of this formula. Yet there are a few shifts that happen. The advertisement, quite reliant on plot, opens with the auction of a painting. The male protagonist is introduced first as a potential buyer of the work. Then the following shots are cut with a white flash, apparently implying we are looking at the imagination or fantasy inside his head, of the female artist (played by Jessica Chastain) spreading the paint on the canvas with her body in an sensual, Yves Klein-esque, fashion. We cut back to the auction to see other potential buyers making a bid, much to the annoyance of our male protagonist. Through facial expression we are told that he wants the painting, the prize. Then the bidding war is suddenly ended when a new player enters the auction house;

the artist herself. She wins the auction and collects a token from the auctioneer. As she turns around and walks back to where she entered we see the room that was just filled with people now empty, save for our protagonist, who is waiting for her in the room at the other side of the opened door. She hands him the token, making eye contact, and a voice-over says “Daring is an art / Manifesto, the new feminine fragrance / Yves Saint Laurent”.

This commercial shows the artist as a woman of great financial means—she is able to outbid the man—and a sensuous *femme fatale* that is very capable of using her sexuality as an instrument. She is in control. Yet the most notable shift made in this commercial is that we relate to all this through the experience of the man. He is introduced first, we see flashes his imagination, he is the one that shows emotion and once she comes into play the other people in the room disappear—quite literally—as he has only attention for her. As much as the woman is going to lengths to capture her male prey, ultimately it is more about him than it is about her. There is even the need to add the words “feminine fragrance” at the end, being testament to the fact that from the image itself it was not clear for whom the product is intended.

But rather than suggesting that the woman is inferior to the man, as was suggested in the 1950s, this implies that the role of men as consumers has grown as much that now feminine perfumes also are being evenly marketed towards a male audience that buys these fragrances to give to women. Effectively this intrusion by the male protagonist negates part of the strength of the independent *femme fatale*.

The Don Juan in relation to the female consumer

The *femme fatale* finds her cultural counterpart in the Don Juan, also in advertising. For Yves Saint Laurent’s masculine perfume *La Nuit de l’Homme*, Darren Aronofsky directed a commercial in 2011 starring actor Vincent Cassel in the role of Parisian womaniser. He enters a chamber concert where a beautiful woman catches his eye, and decides to start his hunt. He sits down and, like a hunter stepping on a twig in the forest, deliberately moves his chair to make a sound and catch her attention. When she turns around their eyes lock and he checks his watch, revealing the insignia of an archer on his cufflink. The tone is set and they exchange a promising smirk. In the next scene, taking place in a luxurious restaurant, we see a different woman having dinner. This time we look around the room through her perspective and our eyes find the protagonist seemingly unaware of us and again looking at his watch revealing the cufflink. The woman is visibly intrigued but after she averts her eyes for a moment, she is unable to find the man where he was just a second ago. She looks around but unbeknownst to her, the hunter has stalked his prey and appears from behind her to make his move. He takes a pen and writes something in her hand. The next shot

is of a third woman, looking into the palm of her hand and then up, to a nightclub called *La Nuit*. Once inside she makes her way through, looking for the man that lead her there. Suddenly she is captivated by a sense that makes her smile and she turns around; there he is. The following shots are a mix of the three different women either walking towards or with the protagonist. They get closer to each other, but just before they kiss he backs away a bit to maintain the tension. The last shot is of him walking the streets of Paris with a self fulfilled grin, while a voice-over adds “*L’amour se nourrit de coïncidence, de danger, d’interdit.*” (“Love nourishes itself from coincidence, danger and the forbidden.”)

What we see here is that the *Manifesto* ad takes the other gender in account as a market, while the *La Nuit de l’Homme* ad does not. What woman would buy her man the fragrance of a man that sleeps around, after all?

The Don Juan in relation to the femme fatale

Yves Saint Laurent’s femme fatale and Don Juan also differ in the approach of their targets. The *Manifesto* femme fatale is a seductress that spins a web to trap her prey. She waits patiently for the right moment to make her move, and does not do so before the man has shown interest. Then on top of the effort she put into making her web (painting) she invests even more into her prey to establish dominance, only to give it away at the end.

The Don Juan on the other hand takes a much more pre-emptive approach. He is seen in the role of a hunter, not a trapper. The investment he makes in each of his preys is minimal, shooting a smile as an arrow. This motif of the hunter is also seen in the 2013 commercial directed by Paul Gore for the same perfume. This time the male lead, played by Garrett Hedlund, is portrayed as a wolf stalking his female prey through an upper class party. When he eventually corners her the reflection of an other woman in the same room hints to him catching two women at once. And again here in the last scene the man is seen leaving the mansion alone, on to the next conquest.

What we see here is that going from the male gender ideals that Brannon (1976) formulated, ‘The Big Wheel’ has become both a feminine as a masculine ideal. The *femme fatale* portrayed as a wealthy artist, the Don Juan as a man that associates with high society. But where we see the Don Juan as an independent and emotionally detached ‘Sturdy Oak’, where the *femme fatale* is invested both emotionally and financially.

The natural man

The second construct that was introduced into ad campaigns for feminine fragrances in the 1960s and 1970s was the ‘natural woman’. She is portrayed as a

'flower child' or a 'sportswoman', one that rejects artificiality and uses light, fresh fragrances. Notable examples in contemporary feminine perfumes are Gucci's *Flora* and Marc Jacobs' *Daisy*. The mostly dark evening gowns and indoor setting of the femme fatale are exchanged for lighter colours and outdoor flower fields with breezes and sunlight that envelop her (usually younger) parallel; the flower child.

Now this 'natural woman' finds her male equivalent in the 'natural man' or 'sportsman'. But of course the natural man, adhering to the 'no sissy stuff' rule, will not be found on a bed of flowers while a hint of sunlight caresses his skin and his hair plays in the soft breeze¹. In Dolce & Gabbana's commercial for 'The One – Sport', directed by Mariano Vivanco, all feminine elements are done away with. The young fragile girl is replaced by a male model, wearing a pair of sports shorts and shoes, leaving his muscular torso naked. The flowers are replaced by the ancient stone of a Hellenistic stadium in which the model does exercises and the soft morning or evening light is replaced by a bright noon sun. And perhaps most inconspicuous yet very relevant, the suggestion of a floral smell is substituted by that of a salty sea-breeze when the camera pans over the stadium and reveals the nearby waves crashing on the shore, immediately followed by a shot of the model raising up his arms revealing his armpits. Where the woman wears clothing that match the flowers that surrounds her, the man's own body is immersed into the surrounding rocks through strategic composition and colour manipulation. In the beginning of the commercial he can be seen rubbing sand on his hands and body. His skin is the same colour as the stadium, his abdominal muscles become bricks and the shades on his body mimic those on the ancient stones.

By using the ancient stadium and drawing the analogies between the stones and the model, Vivanco creates the image of an ancient Greek or Roman statue that has come to life², enforcing the model's masculinity by implying his hardness and durability are akin to that of the stones. Where the flower girl is in harmony with nature and the elements, the sportsman successfully withstands and survives the elements.

The sailor

Two years after the introduction of its feminine counterpart 'Classique', Jean Paul Gaultier launched his masculine fragrance 'Le Male' in 1995. Where the ads for *Classique* featured a woman dressed in little but a soft pink corset with a wink to the *Belle Époque*, the ads for *Le Male* introduced perhaps one of the most iconic plays on classical gender construct we still see in advertisement today. The first image connected to the campaign was a work by Pierre & Gilles,

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- 1 A notable exception being Jean Paul Gaultier's 'Fleur du Male' 2008 perfume campaign, featuring a naked man in a bathtub filled with white liquid and flowers.
 - 2 This is a familiar symbolism in the world of perfume commercials, an other contemporary example is *Eros* (Versace, Mert & Marcus 2012) and earlier examples include *Obsession* (Calvin Klein, Bruce weber 1989) and *Roma* (Fendi, Sheila Metzner 1986)

portraying two French sailors arm-wrestling. The appearance of the two borrows much from both classical ideas of the sailor (tattooed arms, the breton stripe) as from gay culture images (Tom of Finland-esque men featuring big shining muscles, tight clothing and feminine facial features).

From 1995 on Gaultier has been pushing the boundaries of the classical constructs in the commercials for these perfumes. In the ad titled '*Le Baiser*' (Jean Batiste Mondino, 1997) we see the female lead assuming a dominant position over the male. In '*Le Rendez-vous*' (Jean Batiste Mondino, 2000) the viewer is confronted with clear homoerotic tones and a cross-dressing woman.

In 2009 Mondino directed two mirror commercials for the fragrances. In the ad for *Classique* we see the woman waking up in bed next to her male lover. She gets out of bed and gets dressed, walks to the mirror to fix her hair and walks to the door with her coat in hand while glancing back at her lover who is just waking up. He smiles at her and turns back to the pillow which he presses against his face, taking in the scent she left behind. The version for *Le Male* is an almost exact replica, but the gender roles are inverted. When comparing these commercials we can distinguish the subtle differences assigned to the male and the female. We see that when the woman wakes up next to the man, his head is turned away from her, and when she walks out she looks back at him twice. In the masculine version we see the man waking up next to a woman who is facing him, and when he walks out he glances back at her only once before looking straight at the doorway ahead. This suggests the man being more independent, looking to the future, where the woman is more reminiscent of the past.

In 2013 Gaultier released a new commercial entitled '*On the Docks*', directed by Johnny Green. This time again a single commercial for both *Le Male* and *Classique*, we are presented with both a male and a female lead. As a large steamship approaches a harbor, one of the sailors is lying in bed, looking at the ocean through a window. Meanwhile a woman wakes up in her bed in the city. As the ship's bell rings the sailor gets out of bed and both he and the woman simultaneously look in the mirror and get dressed. While she tightens her corset the ship crashes into land and continues to sail through the streets of the city, towards the woman's apartment. The man packs his belongings and starts moving across the ship while the woman stands waiting in her room. As the man speeds up his pace, the woman walks towards her opened balcony doors. The sailor runs across the ship's deck and stops at the bow. The lovers see eye to eye just before the ship crashes into the balcony and comes to a halt, while the woman walks backwards into her room, beckoning her lover to follow. She grabs him by his shirt and pulls him in for a kiss, but just before their lips meet the words are uttered "*C'est mal, ce qu'on fait?*" "*Non, rien plus classique.*" ("Is it bad, what we do?" "No, nothing more classical.").

On the Docks is structured as a mirror, with the two images (the male and female) meeting in the middle; the balcony. To reach this point, the sailor travels a much greater distance, befitting a more active (masculine) role. This active position is enforced by many other elements: the sailor is already awake at the beginning of the commercial, while the woman is yet to open her eyes; the sailor runs on the deck of a ship that crashes through the streets while the woman gently walks through her room; the man is surrounded by the elements (wind and water) where the woman barely comes outside. This culminates in a noticeable difference when the two move in for the kiss, namely that the skin of the woman is matte and powdery, while that of the man shines, hinting at perspiration. As a more sexual analogy, the (masculine) ship rams the balcony where the woman gently beckons the man to enter her pink apartment. The woman takes consideration (spending much more attention to her appearance in front of the mirror while the man doesn't look at himself while getting dressed), carefully beckoning the man in with her charms. The man uses momentum and force to get to his lover and the woman not only likes, but also seems to expect it.

Conclusion

Since the sexual revolution of the 1960s female and, inextricably, male gender roles have shifted and evolved. As with all forms of evolution, it always has a strong anchor in tradition. But new things happen when one plays with these classical boundaries. As the definition of what is perceived as masculine and feminine is so closely involved, one can not change one without affecting the other. The same way macho man can appear submissive if countered with a dominant woman, so can a campy male establish a strong sense of masculinity in a feminine environment. Where perfume commercials have at one time pioneered female emancipation, it seems that in contemporary culture there is a need to counter a certain imbalance for the male consumer. Men have embraced many classically feminine traits as their new gender identity, but while nearing an equilibrium there seems to be a new found need for contrast. The bold statements of the 70s, 80s, 90s, and early 2000s have been replaced by subtle differences. Perhaps we have reached a time where the strong voices of the feminist revolution have turned into a whispering conversation between the sexes. But as Patrick Bateman appropriately says about himself:

“And though I can hide my cold gaze, and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours, and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable, I simply am not there.”

The artist must not forget that whatever social constructs about gender are the paradigm, they are just that: constructs. These men and women are not real. And as everything that has been once constructed one can deconstruct it for parts, and make something new.

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