

Diesel® Plays the Fool: Translating Performance in Fashion Ads

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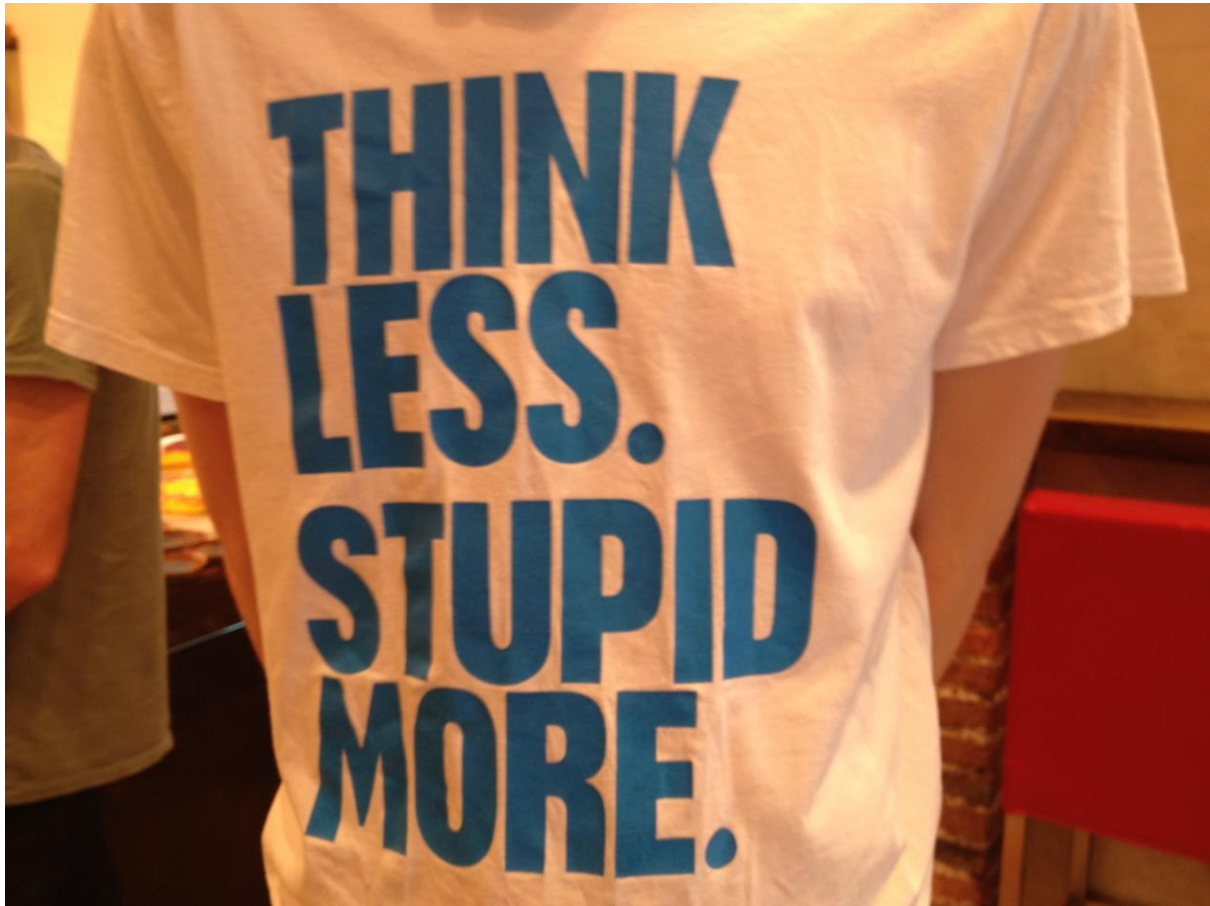


Figure 1: Photo by Elena Siemens

The controversial advertising campaign “Be Stupid” for the Italian fashion label Diesel has received high praise, as well as harsh criticism. It also offers a valuable lesson in the task of translating fashion ads, especially staged images. Awarded the prestigious Grand Prix Lion at the Cannes International Advertising Festival (2010), Diesel’s campaign was banned from showing outdoors by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) in the UK. The ASA ruled that “Be Stupid” slogans and images could be seen by children and could cause “serious or widespread offence” (utalkmarketing 2010). Defending the campaign’s paradoxical philosophy, one commentator writes:

While the headlines can verge on the absurd (“Smart may have the brains, but stupid has the balls”), some carry a surprising sense of wisdom that epitomizes the campaign. “If we

didn't have stupid thoughts," says one, "we'd have no interesting thoughts as all." (Sutton 2010)

Diesel's campaign was created by Anomaly, an agency keen on overthrowing established canons. According to a French source, translating Diesel's provocative (and poetic) slogans into a foreign language presents a considerable challenge: "[t]he French translations, quite literal, don't work with the campaign – possibly because we have so many synonyms for 'stupid'" (Tayebot 2010). In the case of the French translation, the solution was to print the translation in small script and place it discretely on the margins. The corresponding images further complicate the translator's task. Shot by a team of photographers, including the defiant Chris Buck, the scenario-based images derived much inspiration from the set (the campaign was shot in California). Buck watched closely for any instances of the crew over-thinking the shots, and "being smart, and not 'stupid' enough" (Buck, qtd. in Sutton 2010). Interpreting Diesel's ads is akin to reading and translating poetry. As argued by Roman Jakobson, "poetry by definition is untranslatable" (Jakobson 434). It can be interpreted only with the use of one of three types of "creative transposition": either "intralingual," or "interlingual," or "intersemiotic" (434). Diesel's "Be Stupid" ads fall into the third "intersemiotic" category – a transposition "from one system of signs into another (from verbal art into music, dance, cinema, or painting)" (434). Pairing Diesel's slogans with the equally paradoxical images, Anomaly followed a similar strategy. The head of operations at Anomaly, Chris Whalley, states: "Picking which words would sit with which image was an intuitive process" (Whalley, qtd. in Sutton 2010). This has set the groundwork for the future readings of Diesel's campaign and each of its individual ads.



Figure 2: Photo by Elena Siemens

My acquaintance with Diesel's controversial "Be Stupid" campaign began with an ad portraying a model plunging headlong into a mailbox. The model's head is hidden inside the mailbox, while the rest of his body is suspended in air. The slogan reads: "Stupid Might Fail. Smart Doesn't Even Try." I thought at once about a passage from Jacques Derrida's book *The Post-Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. Constructed in part as a series of postcards, Derrida's narrative continually starts and stalls, with the author warning himself (and the reader) not to rush. Why these delays? Is mail connected to some danger? Derrida says yes, especially the act of posting a letter, placing it in a mailbox. He writes:

I can remain planted in front of the box as if before an irreparable crime, tempted to await the following pickup in order to [...] take everything back, in order to verify one last time the adequation of addressees [...] and that there is indeed only one letter, the right one per envelope. The situation is that of a confession without a crime (as if this were possible; *mais si, mais si!*. (Derrida 102)

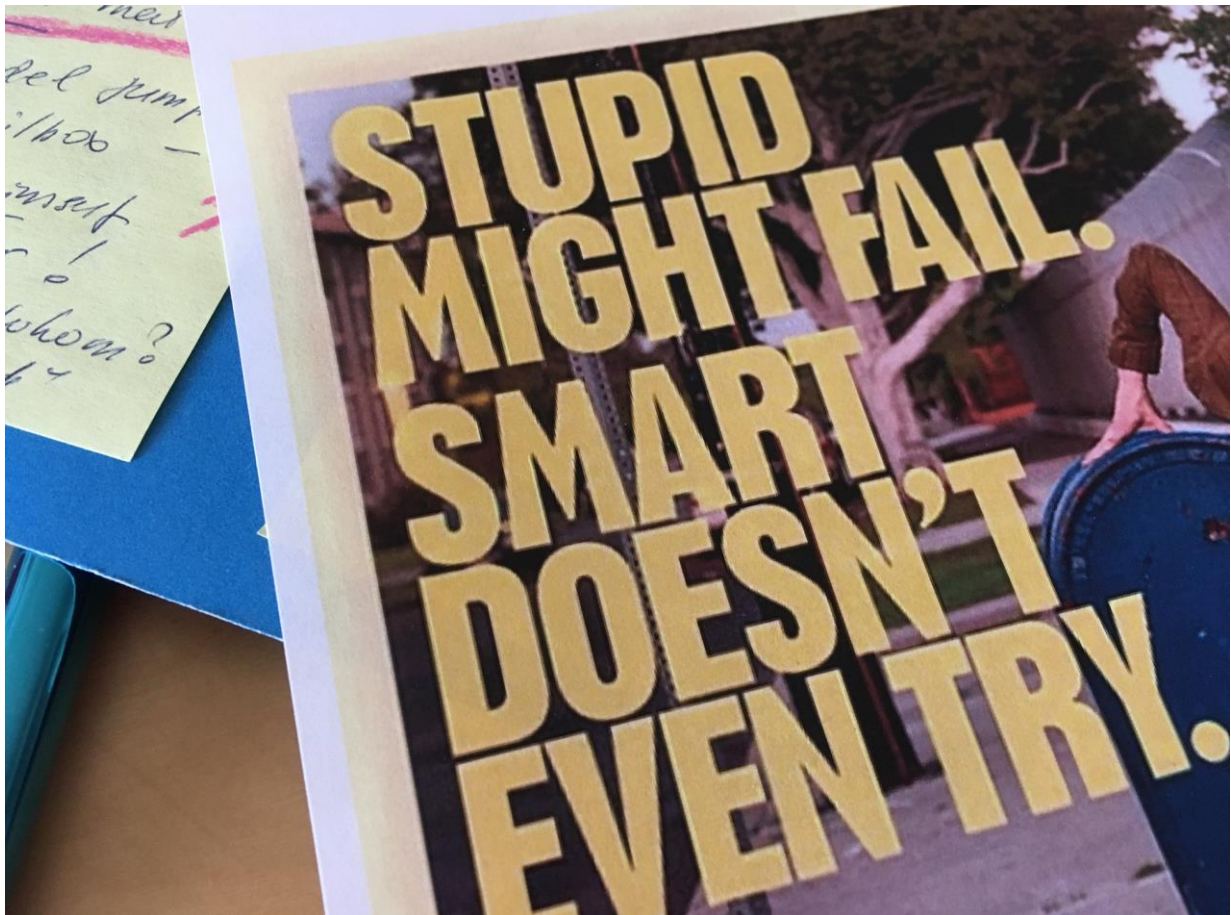


Figure 3: Photo by Elena Siemens

Diesel delivers an opposing message: plunge in, do not hesitate, be stupid, give it a try, what do you have to lose? So what if your letter goes astray, or gets into the wrong hands?

“Stupid Might Fail. Smart Doesn’t Even Try.” Diesel’s irreverent ad is closer in spirit to my old photograph of a Moscow mailbox. I took it on Lubyanskaya Square on a damp spring morning. The mailbox looked rather forlorn, and badly in need of some fresh paint. There was an empty beer bottle placed carelessly on top. It brought to mind a passage from Marina Tsvetaeva’s letter to her friend and fellow poet Reiner Maria Rilke: I wonder if you received my letter. I am asking you because I threw it onto a departing train. The mailbox looked sinister enough: dust three fingers thick and sporting a huge prison lock. My toss was already completed when I noticed this, my hand was too fast; the letter will lie there, I suppose – until doomsday” (Tsvetaeva 198). Tsvetaeva notices the dust and the “prison lock” only after she drops her letter into that “sinister” mailbox. Her hand was “too fast,” she contemplated the odds of her letter reaching the addressee after the fact. Rather than, like Derrida’s narrator, considering various “what ifs” prior to inserting the letter into the slot.

There is truth both to Derrida’s hesitation and Diesel’s (and Tsvetaeva’s) “do first, think after” approach. I can certainly relate to both, and when in doubt, I recall the instructive epigraph, with which Roland Barthes supplies his autobiographical text *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*: “It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel” (Barthes 1989: 1). Barthes opens his book with a selection of photographs, including some pictures of himself. He comments on the photos of himself:

“But I never looked like that!” [...]. What is the “you” you might or might not look like? [...]. Where is my authentic body? You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image; you never see your eyes unless they are dulled by the gaze they rest upon the mirror or the lens (I am interested in seeing my eyes only when they look at you): even and especially for your own body, you are condemned to the repertoire of its images. (36)

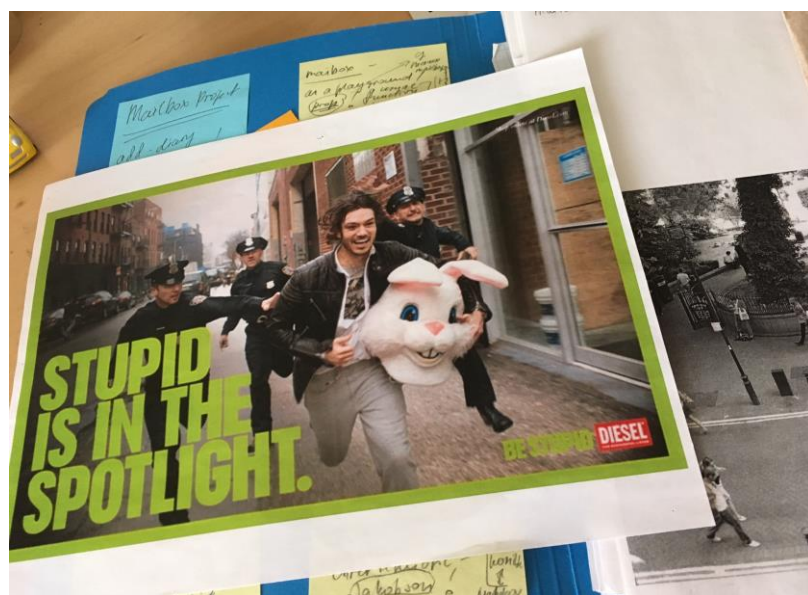


Figure 4: Photo by Elena Siemens

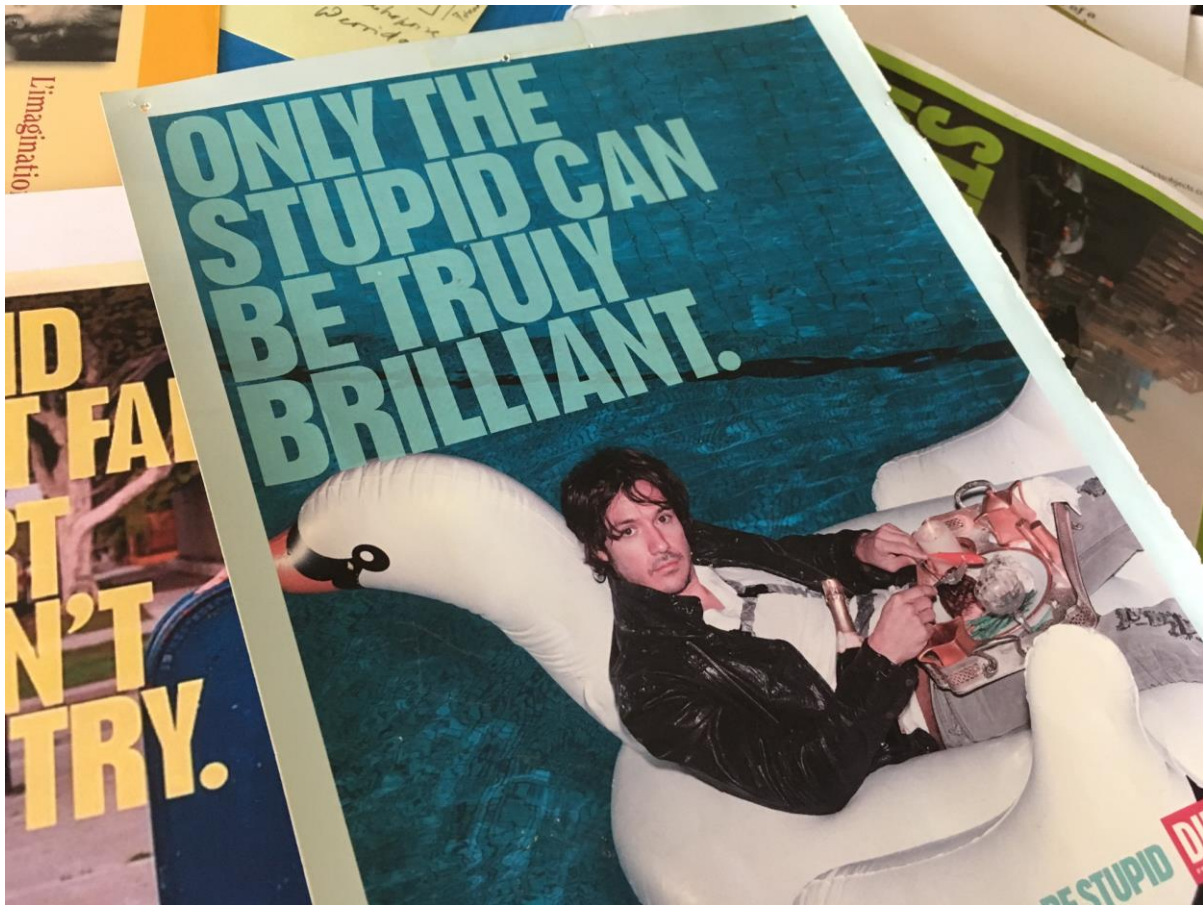


Figure 5: Photo by Elena Siemens

Barthes later returns to his surprising epigraph, adding that his autobiography should be read “as if spoken by a character in a novel – or rather by several characters” (119). He explains that “the image-repertoire is taken by several masks (*personae*), distributed according to the depth of the stage (and yet *no one* – *personne*, as we say in French – is behind them)” (119). He concludes that the “substance of this book, ultimately, is therefore totally fictive” (120). Like autobiographies, letters belong to the realm of documentary writing, whose paramount convention is that the author must deliver his or her authentic self. Calling it fiction, Barthes frees documentary genres from this obligation. One of the consequences of this is that sending a letter becomes less problematic. Since a letter is fiction, the sender has no reason to agonize in front of the mailbox, verifying, as in Derrida, “the adequation of the addressees.”

Diesel’s ad with the model plunging into a sturdy navy-blue US mailbox can be read as a warning, but mostly as an encouragement: “Stupid Might Fail. Smart Doesn’t Even Try.” Diesel takes its provocation a step further in that it additionally questions the distinction between commercial ads and creative discourses, such as poetry and performance art. On this account, Diesel’s “Be Stupid” campaign parts company with Barthes, who argues that advertisement must be “intentional,” and must transmit the signifieds of the advertised product “as clearly as possible” (Barthes 1985: 22). Diesel is not alone in mixing business and art. Andy Warhol’s

famous depictions of Campbell's soup cans also blend commercial ads and art. In his playful and thought-provoking book *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, he points out that "Business Art is a much better thing to be making than Art Art, because Art Art doesn't support the space it takes up, whereas Business Art does" (Warhol 144).

Following Warhol and his soup-cans art, I put together a collage of my mailbox images from around the world. Most likely, it was that Moscow shot of a mailbox crowned with a beer bottle that started it all. I am not certain about this, nor am I certain why I have been photographing mailboxes everywhere I go: longing for home, hope, despair? Another factor might be that, like telephone booths, mailboxes are destined to vanish. Hence, the desire to archive them. Diesel's "Be Stupid" campaign gave my undertaking a much needed touch of boldness and merry-making. I keep one of the ads ("Only the Stupid Can Be Truly Brilliant") pinned to my office wall at home. It reminds me to take chances, be stupid, refrain from overthinking, translate the untranslatable against all odds, make mistakes.



Figure 6: Photo by Elena Siemens

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