



***IMPOTENCE, NOSTALGIA, AND OBJECTIFICATION:  
PATRIARCHAL VISUAL RHETORIC TO CONTAIN WOMEN***

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**Abstract**

Patriarchal visual rhetoric of containment, evident in contemporary media portrayals, particularly of women, systemically and institutionally oppresses women. How can women break free from the structures that restrict them? One strategy that I explore in this essay is an oppositional reading of the visual codes of containment that operate in the mass media to limit the power of non-dominant groups and attempt to force them into the strict structure of a hegemonic system. Containment visual rhetoric taps into deep-seated fears and hegemonic ideologies, including the fear that the rise of women to more powerful positions in the work force may ultimately result in the disruption or even inversion of patriarchy. From an analytic lens of visual codes of containment, I use an oppositional reading of images produced for *Esquire Magazine* in order to uncover ideologies of power and to discuss rhetorical strategies within patriarchal ideology intended to contain women from appearing to have agency in public spheres of influence. These three strategies are mythological impotence, cultural nostalgia, and the objectifying gaze.

*Keywords: Visual Rhetoric, Powerful Women, Gender, Containment, Mythological Impotence, Cultural Nostalgia, Objectifying Gaze*

**Introduction to Patriarchal Visual Rhetoric of Containment**

In any given society, a series of hierarchies operate in and between different societal groupings. When an established social order in a society changes, or feels threatened by a group that has historically been systematically subjugated, the privileged group often experiences anxiety. For example, the geoeconomic and geopolitical shifts regarding China's changing position in the global scene have elicited anxieties in the United States evidenced by a renewal of Sinophobic rhetoric that has pervaded mass media and political discourse (Hevia, 2003; Isaacs, 1980; Lee, Li, & Lee, 2011; Lee, 2002; Ono & Jiao, 2008). For privileged people, social change is uncomfortable. Shifts in social echelons have the capacity to create uncertainty and disquietude, especially among those whose social position is diminished. To assuage these anxieties, a dominant group may attempt to assert control by legitimizing readings of the changing situation that continue to privilege them, even if those readings are contrary to what many others perceive.

In recent decades, media theorists' attention to the rhetorical dimensions and significance of images has increased substantially as is evidenced by the work of scholars such as J. Anthony Blair (1996); Kevin DeLuca (Delicath & DeLuca, 2003; DeLuca & Demo, 2000; 1999); Greg Dickinson (2006); Cara Finnegan (Finnegan, 2005, 2006; Finnegan & Kang, 2004); Sonja Foss (1992, 1993); Robert Hariman and John Lucaites (2003, 2008, 2011); and Charles Hill and Marguerite Helmers (2004). Though many rhetorical strategies of containment exist (Anderson, 1999; Duncan & Hasbrook, 2002; Fineman & McCluskey, 1997; Kane, 1996; Murphy, 1992; Nadel, 1995; Poirot, 2009; Smith, 2010), I have chosen to focus on three particular strategies that operate visually—mythological impotence, cultural nostalgia, and the objectifying gaze—because they each address how the perception of images is affected by a growing visual lexicon in U.S. culture. These strategies function through intertextuality and by referencing ideologies embedded in iconic cultural images. Attention to the visual is crucial in a contemporary United States society that privileges images, sight, and the glance (Casey, 2007; Jay, 1994, 2002; Mirzoeff, 2012).

One example of the visual containment of a rising non-dominant group can be seen in mediated depictions of women in contemporary U.S. culture. As women in the United States become more empowered through their increase in authority, visibility, and economic capital, they pose a growing threat to patriarchy. Though more progress remains to be made, the changes concerning the status of women generate a need for a reconceptualization of gender roles and performances. For example, women are retaining more positions of higher status, including those of Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Chief Financial Officer (CFO), and Chief Legal Officer (CLO), which challenges socially constructed conceptions of these positions (Abrams, 2008; Cauchon, 2009; Jones, 2009). Women appear on the covers of magazines as more than sex objects in images distinctly different from those produced even a decade or two ago<sup>1</sup>. The resulting shifts have been framed in extreme language announcing women have *won the battle of the sexes* (Luscombe, 2010; Rampel, 2009; Rosin, 2010).

The anxieties prompted by the changes in women's power have been articulated in the growing body of literature concerning the crisis of masculinity (Ashcraft & Flores, 2003; Kimbrell, 1995; Kimmel, 2011; Malin, 2005; Rogers, 2008). These feelings of anxiety and displacement are also represented less explicitly in various forms of visual rhetoric, including television, advertising, and film (Ashcraft & Flores, 2003; Braithwaite, 2011; Malin, 2003; Rogers, 2008; Ryalls, 2013). As any type of anxiety rises, "people turn to mass media for the symbolic means to encompass those situations" (Brummett, 1984, p. 174; see also Adams, 2008; Lair, 2011; Young, 2000). In short, Brummett and other scholars allege that viewers identify with media and use it to see their anxieties about relevant issues play out in front of them, thereby providing them with tactics and tools to use in their own situations off screen. The static image, too, can provide this *equipment for living* by acting as "a ventrilo-

quist's dummy into which we project our own voice" (Mitchell, 2006, p. 140). Through analysis of the visual rhetoric of mediated images produced for mass consumption, in this case images produced for *Esquire Magazine* ([http://www.giadadelaurentiis.com/PDF/012\\_esquire.pdf](http://www.giadadelaurentiis.com/PDF/012_esquire.pdf)), I use an oppositional reading to uncover ideologies of power and suggest ways in which that power is being contained.

Rhetorical scholars have studied methods used to confine and restrict power, with a focus on discursive forms of containment. For example, Anderson's (1999) essay on the use of the word *bitch* illustrates how this derogatory term can be utilized as a tool of containment. However, this word, similar to other words intended as derogatory (such as *cunt* and *dyke*), have been reclaimed as terms of empowerment in the form of publications such *Bitch* magazine and the books, *Cunt* (Muscio, 2002) and *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (Bechdel, 2008).

Murphy's (1992) research also addresses containment by tracing the erosion of the "legitimacy of Freedom Rides" that occurred in opposition to segregation in the South using rhetorical strategies including naming, contextualization, legal sanction, and distraction. The activists posed a threat to the social order of race in the U.S. because they exposed the contradictions inherent in the legal system surrounding civil rights. As the movement grew and posed an increasing challenge to the national government, the media's discursive framing of the situation shifted from *activists as innocent riders* to *activists as inflammatory publicity-seekers*. Similarly, the context of the stories surrounding the Freedom Riders changed from a favorable framing of activists as a group opposed to segregation to mobs that jeopardized the U.S.'s global standing, thereby delegitimizing their efforts. Moreover, the legal backing that once functioned to justify their actions in news stories disappeared as the group challenged the status quo. Finally, media diverted attention away from the event and onto other issues including voter registration, which functioned to quell it. These types of tactics are also evident in Smith's (2010) study of the rhetoric surrounding the communal Amana culture in the early decades of the 20th century. The presence of this "non-normative" group of immigrants raised anxieties in U.S. culture, and descriptions of this community are rife with containment rhetoric that positioned them as

1. Examples of positive portrayals of women as more than sex objects can be found on the cover of the 2010 *Time Magazine* edition featuring the top 100 most influential people, Oprah Winfrey's magazine *O*, *Newsweek*, and various other media outlets. This being said, the number of empowered women portrayed pales in comparison the number of objectified women.

static, somewhat backwards, and peripheral<sup>2</sup>.

Containment rhetoric attempts to curtail the ability of a group to expand definitions, challenge hegemonic ideologies, and propose new performances. Struggles over power are wedged within discursive and visual strategies of containment, which operate by pushing aside oppositional readings and re-placing that which challenges order back into the structure of hegemonic discourses. Containment strategies are used when existing orders are challenged and can direct viewers or readers back to readings that privilege the status quo. In their attempt to contain, these strategies make evident not only the structure of dominant ideologies such as patriarchy and heteronormativity, but also their weaknesses. Containment strategies seek to shut down conversation; thus, the proliferation and privileging of oppositional readings can challenge such strictures and redirect the dialogue into wild new possibilities.

One place in which the anxiety concerning women's changing role is evidenced in media, and where I suggest containment strategies are at work, is a 2007 *Esquire Magazine* spread featuring FoodNetwork star Giada de Laurentiis (see [http://www.esquire.com/women/women-we-love/delaurentiis0807?click=main\\_sr](http://www.esquire.com/women/women-we-love/delaurentiis0807?click=main_sr)). This three-image spread of de Laurentiis originally appeared in the "Women We Love" section of *Esquire* and is authored by photographer Gavin Bond. In the spread, de Laurentiis wears a tight-fitting white dress, the top of which resembles a corset and accentuates her cleavage. She accessorizes with bright red lipstick, nail polish, stilettos, and gold earrings. In each image, de Laurentiis is interacting in various ways with tomatoes; the text accompanying the images offers her viewers cooking tips. In my reading of this series of images, I argue that she is portrayed as both an empowered woman and sex object, as a threat to and passive receiver of the gaze, as a woman in control and a woman who is subservient.

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2. Additional literature discusses how the objectification of women undermines their power in sports and the business industry. Duncan and Hasbrook (2002) discuss the power given to female athletes and the subsequent undermining of this power through their objectification. Likewise, Kane (1996) argues that the female athlete's power is undermined through the use of three strategies—objectification, naming, and ambivalent coverage—despite legal attempts to create equality such as Title IX, a part of the Education Amendments of 1972, Public Law No. 92 318, 86 Stat. 235, which was signed on June 23, 1972.

My reading is influenced by my work as an artist, my experiences as a woman, my positions of power, and my struggle to understand how images of women could simultaneously be read as empowering, oppressive, tantalizing, menacing, victorious, and subjugating. Other viewers will inhabit different positionalities that will subsequently affect their readings of these images. Among other factors, one's interpretations are influenced by the many discourses in which they are surrounded. Within the dominant patriarchal visual regime of media exists a dominant binaristic dialogue that does not position gender as a variable and changing spectrum, but pits women against men (and vice versa). Though a cacophony of discourses exists, one of the prevailing threads tends to glorify the very images some find oppressive (i.e., the hyper-sexual woman) while other concurrent media pats feminists on the head, telling them their work is done. However, feminism is not unnecessary; rather, it is crucial, and so is attention to images<sup>3</sup>.

In 1975, Mulvey opened up an important discussion that addressed how the framing of women in film objectifies them and reproduces a male gaze that viewers of all genders then internalize. The changing nature of the roles of women, the proliferation of authors via new media technologies, as well as the complication of gender, race, ability, and class require that this theory be re-examined and expanded. However, because patriarchy and the patriarchal lens continue to be a dominant ideology and mode of viewing, viewers may return to these embedded practices of looking to alleviate anxieties about the changing order of things and work through problems. As Butler (2004) asserts in *Undoing Gender*, those who have and create knowledge have power. Therefore, in this essay, I work to create new knowledge by pointing out that multiple modes of viewing, or ways of seeing, can exist simultaneously. Moreover, images that may appear to objectify women do not necessarily unilaterally oppress women, but offer insight into the social anxieties concerning contemporary cultural change. The expansion of viewing audiences made possible by the Internet help oppositional readings to flourish.

In acknowledgement of the force of oppositional readings, I offer

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3. Though I focus on images of women in this essay, I argue that the study of images should in no way be relegated to those of women.

ways of looking that function to challenge and fragment the patriarchal visual regime. To do so, I engage the rhetoric that fabricates *a battle of the sexes*, which has been resurrected from mediated portrayals of early feminist movements, and functions to collapse the complexity of the many different hierarchies of power that exist in systemic relation to one another. As a critic, my reading evidences my attempt not to find the one right reading of a text, but to offer creative interpretations that allow us to “invent a text” and explore the consequences of various readings (DeLuca, 1999, p. 151). Thus, in this essay I contend that the images of de Laurentiis perpetuate an ideological ambivalence about women’s changing role in the workplace in a media-constructed world of dichotomized gender. Specifically, I demonstrate how this ideological ambivalence can cloak containment in a discourse of empowerment. This essay complements Sarkeesian’s (2011) work concerning the *straw feminist* by addressing images that simultaneously exaggerate female empowerment and stereotypical femininity.

In what follows, I highlight how the rhetoric of containment operates and is expressed visually, constituting a rhetorical practice built upon mediated visual codes. I first explain the ways in which the visual rhetoric I examine reflects ideologies in contemporary society and how this new representational practice is distinct in its visuality. Then, analyzing the images of de Laurentiis, I explain how current ideologies of hegemony are apparent through her empowerment, containment, and control. Finally, I discuss the social and theoretical implications of my findings.

### The Straw Feminist: Images of a Faux Empowerment

Each of the three images I examine in this essay use visual rhetoric, drawing upon the mediated vocabulary of what hierarchical power looks like, to depict de Laurentiis as empowered. However, the hyper-femininity of the visual tropes used to signal empowerment perpetuate a dichotomized notion of gender and invent an exaggerated character of a feminist, what Sarkeesian (2011) calls the *straw feminist*. The straw feminist is used to construct a world in which women have gained equality and feminism is no longer valid. The *straw feminist* directly threatens men and functions to pit women against men in a false binary. The first

image in the series of photographs depicts de Laurentiis standing behind a counter squeezing a handful of canned tomatoes in each fist and splattering her white dress with red juice. Her eyes are closed, her head is tilted back, and she is smiling open mouthed. Her exposed skin is at the center of the frame and leads my gaze from her neck down to her prominently portrayed cleavage. She is standing behind a surface covered in tomatoes. In the bottom right corner of the frame sit opened cans of tomatoes from which, presumably, she has taken the handfuls she is squeezing.

This image may evoke ideas of castration for some viewers of the primary viewing audience, most of whom are men,<sup>4</sup> as *Esquire* caters largely to a male audience according to their own demographic research.<sup>5</sup> In this interpretation, the tomatoes de Laurentiis holds and squeezes are not the plump tomatoes often associated with women’s breasts, but smaller Roma tomatoes, which could suggest a man’s testicles. Though violence is sometimes linked with pleasure and media catered to men is often rampant with violence, this particular portrayal of violence can read as a threat to masculinity because she literally has man by the balls and is squeezing them until they burst. This portrayal of de Laurentiis can be interpreted as perpetuating the stereotype of the threatening feminist man-hater. After all, testicles hold within them man’s virility, and for her to take these away is to deprive a man of his manhood<sup>6</sup>.

The violence of the image is exaggerated through the use of tomato juice, which is often used theatrically to simulate blood and the

4. The sexual orientation of readers is unknown. However, this image can be viewed as threatening to men regardless of their sexual orientation with this more violent reading.

5. Comments on various blogs that re-post the image of de Laurentiis praise de Laurentiis’s beauty, but also remark that she is frightening. Comments call the images “Very disturbing,” say “Those are SCARY!!!,” and interpret the image as such: “The first one looks like she is laughing maniacally as she holds the heart she ripped out of your chest up above her head while the blood runs down her arms” (“Giada Photos in Esquire,” n.d.).

6. The link here between testicles and breasts is interesting in that male and female organs are being represented by the same fruit, which could be read as another trigger for the “threatening female” who is taking a symbol typically used by men and appropriating it for her own use.

bleeding that occurs during menstruation and in childbirth. Its presence introduces this uncomfortable or taboo topic even today among women and men in the United States. Blood is a messy subject, replete with ambivalence, as violent actions juxtaposed with sexual pleasure is a common visual trope in popular media such as *Spartacus* (2009-13), *True Blood* (2008-13), and *Blood and Sex Nightmare* (2008). Its strong presence in the media suggests this type of visual violence is acceptable. The image of de Laurentiis, is tantalizing, disturbing, curious, and anxiety inducing. Comments made by a number of bloggers (including those on Food Network Addict, Innocent Bystanders, and Tifaux) evidence these simultaneous and contradictory readings.

In the second image in the series, de Laurentiis is standing with one hand on her hip and the other clutching a can opener (see <http://www.yumsugar.com/Giada-Esquire-Love-Hate-429813>). Her left leg is bent and propped up on a stack of canned tomatoes. Her bright red heels stand in contrast to the stark white background. She stares directly out at the viewer as she pours tomato juice on her knee, letting it run down her leg. Her hair cascades down her neck, framing her cleavage. Her self-confident stance is one typically used to signify that the person standing has conquered what is being stepped upon, thereby subordinating what lies beneath. This is a pose male characters have used to signify dominance in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994), *Black Adder the Third* (1987), *Top Gear* (2002-present), and the spokesperson for Captain Morgan's rum. Here, de Laurentiis is assuming this masculine stance, which intertextually links her to dangerous female characters in movies such as *Single White Female* (1992) and *Death Proof* (2007), thereby connecting her, again, to the threatening feminist. By wearing heels, de Laurentiis accentuates stereotypes of femininity as she establishes her dominance, an age-old trope in patriarchal media portrayals of women's power over heterosexual men through luring with sexual promise.

In order to see the last image in the series, the viewer must turn the page of the printed series, where de Laurentiis is spread across two pages, centerfold style, lying in a pool of tomato sauce (see <http://www.esquire.com/women/women-we-love/delaurentiis0807#img>). Her shoes have been discarded, her red dress is now soaked in tomato sauce, and she playfully gazes out at the viewer. She is assuming a prone pose that

is common to portrayals of mermaids, swimsuit models, and odalisques, which amplify female subordination.<sup>7</sup> However, the image contains visual cues that counter the passivity of these often-invoked characters by replacing the sand of the beach or the chaise in the boudoir with tomato sauce. As in the previous images, the tomato sauce complicates a more passive reading of de Laurentiis, because it can be read as blood spilling out from her own body, thereby drawing attention to her reproductive capabilities via the blood of menstruation or childbirth. Again, sexuality and femininity are being submerged in the abject—blood, which is linked to pleasure, pain, and private realms. The ambiguity of the image, which confuses gore, sex, and food, complicates a simple reading. Yet, to give attention to the reading of this image as the ability to carry and give life—a power often seen as a source of envy for men—taps into yet another debate often linked to feminist movements, which is the debate over birth control and abortion. Who has the right to make decisions over one's body is highly contested. Arguably, women have been subordinated and contained in an attempt to closely monitor and control this power.

In these images, de Laurentiis can be read as a powerful figure. However, the power she is portrayed with is fleeting, and contained. As Sarkeesian (2011) makes clear, the feminist figure is often the hated character who is ultimately dismissed. Her dismissal indicates that feminist efforts are unnecessary, thereby obviating further conversations that could put forward alternate gender performances that complicate gender norms and roles. My analysis extends Sarkeesian's work by identifying specific strategies used to cloak empowerment in hegemonic tropes that function to tame the unruly woman who threatens patriarchal order, thereby "redirect[ing] attention away from ... the need for vigilant social activism and social change" (Ono, 2009, p. 26). The strategies I identify below are similar to previous theories of containment rhetoric in that, as Murphy (1992) states, they stem from ideas regarding the function(s) of hegemony. The strategies I define also share some commonalities with

7. For images of mermaids, see [http://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibitions/waterhouse/learn-more-waterhouses-mermaid.989,AR.html#photos=gallery\\_%252Fgallery.html%253FgalleryHandleId%253D139](http://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibitions/waterhouse/learn-more-waterhouses-mermaid.989,AR.html#photos=gallery_%252Fgallery.html%253FgalleryHandleId%253D139) and *Idols of Perversity* (Dijkstra, 1986). For images of swimsuit models see <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/swimsuit/>. For images of odalisques, see <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/une-odalisque>.

those developed by Smith (2010), who theorizes containment rhetoric as “insidious and difficult to detect, as it often includes positive observations about the group at hand,” thereby creating two different readings that must then be reconciled by the reader (p. 129). The result of this cognitive dissonance is typically a return to the status quo. As Smith (1998) argues, “individuals have some choice in their interpretation of events, but when multiple meanings are available,” the “belief matrix” in which they reside will often tip the scales of interpretation (pp. 16 & 22). It is important to note that belief matrices will vary with the viewer’s worldview, lived experiences, and relationship to patriarchy. Therefore, hierarchical relations of power will play out differently within networks of relations.

### **Undermining De Laurentiis’s Power**

In the previous readings of the images, de Laurentiis is positioned as a powerful and threatening woman, which may be uncomfortable for some viewers. Several strategies can be used to allay these anxieties, to tamp down the looming feminist. I have identified three primary visual codes that can be used to undermine, subvert, and reposition the threat she poses to the patriarchal order—the evocation of mythical impotence, cultural nostalgia, and an objectifying gaze. These techniques are rooted in the intertextuality of a growing lexicon of visuality that spans art, advertising, and popular culture. I argue that these techniques dominate over the rhetoric that challenges the established order—the threatening woman—precisely because people are, in general, uncomfortable with change. While the subverting rhetorical strategies work in concert to undermine her power, the peril she poses to patriarchy simultaneously remains visible. This contrast between her power and its containment functions to maintain ambivalence about her power in the image.

### **Visual Evocation of Mythical Impotence**

The first method of subverting De Laurentiis’s power is the visual evocation of mythical impotence. This visual trope makes references to mythological figures from the distant past that have no potent power.

According to Smith (1998), “myth generation . . . is a functional aspect of hegemony and is the structure that largely shapes the character of myth” (p. 15). Mythological figures inhabit stories that have a readily recognizable script with an established ending. Thus, this trope fictionalizes de Laurentiis’s power and places her in a context of imaginary stories with known endings. The visual evocation of mythical impotence redefines and limits the power of the subject and reinforces the ancient hegemonic ideologies present in such mythological narratives including patriarchy and hierarchy. By drawing a connection between de Laurentiis and various recognizable figures from established narratives—the angel of the house, the vampire, and the mermaid—her power is confined and fictionalized.

How de Laurentiis is read using the visual evocation of mythical impotence depends upon the viewer’s lexicon of familiar fictitious figures. In the first image, she can be seen as resembling Hestia (the virgin goddess of the hearth), Bes (the Egyptian god of childbirth), or a number of other characters. Because this image appears in a U.S.-based magazine, I will focus on the reading of de Laurentiis as the angel of the house, a more ingrained and ideologically iconic image in the West. The color of her dress combined with the tie to cooking (via the accompanying text) is easily recognizable as a symbol of purity and domesticity.

The framing of woman as *the angel of the house* originated in the mid-19th century. This woman exists within the confines of the home and is depended upon for her virtue. She “was a woman who would not only be the safekeeper of [a man’s] soul but who would, in fact, offer up her own being, her own soul completely to that task” (Dijkstra, 1986, p. 20). The dress de Laurentiis wears is an angelic white, her face is tilted toward the sky, and her arms are raised in an offering, perhaps to the altar of the hearth and home. Her domesticity is highlighted by the text that accompanies her image, which proclaims her dedication to daily cooking. This visual reference to the pure domestic woman contains de Laurentiis by aligning her with a type of mythical angel, a symbol of perfection and endless sacrifice. However, this purity must be reconciled with the red juice, which evokes a type of horror through its association with blood, orgy, and the body and induces a cognitive dissonance that puts her purity into question.

In the second image, in which de Laurentiis can be read as a vampire, this reference to a familiar figure links sex, blood, and violence, which is both threatening and unreal. I have chosen to privilege this reading due to the recent rise in vampire media including *True Blood* (2008), the *Twilight* saga (2011; 2008; 2010; 2009), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), and *The Vampire Diaries* (2009—). The red tomato sauce can represent both food and blood, thereby offering the viewer space to toggle between reading de Laurentiis as a frightening figure consuming others and something to be consumed. The red of the sauce—or blood—is reflected in her lipstick, heels, and nail polish, connecting her body to the liquid. As vampire, her red mouth suggests she has sucked the blood and her red fingers that she has been caught red-handed. Her red heels, which appear only in this image, are a widely recognized symbol of hyper-feminine sexiness and move her from angel to temptress.

The vampire is the quintessential example of the *femme fatale* and has been the subject of art and fiction for more than a century. In the late 1800s, “every woman” was seen to contain “within herself the destructive potential of the woman-vampire, the sexual woman, the woman of death” (Dijkstra, 1996, p. 64). The vampire derives her power from her sexuality and can lead men into dangerous situations. When read as a vampire, de Laurentiis becomes a figure that can use her beauty and allure to tempt men into dangerous situations. The visual cues evoke a narrative with which the viewer is likely familiar—the vampire—and that cast de Laurentiis as having a type of power that initially can be read as threatening but that is ultimately fleeting and fictional.

By creating a connection between de Laurentiis and the vampire, the uncomfortable viewer can use this mediated depiction to visualize fears of the upending of patriarchy and male enslavement by women. Such media portrayals of frightening women allow viewers to *see* women as a threat. In the narrative of the vampire, the man is dethroned because he has fallen prey to the sexual charms of the vampire and not because the woman is intelligent, dedicated, and hardworking. Thus, such a reading offers viewers, anxious about the shifting power, a way to belittle the accomplishments of women and limit them to the realm of mythology. As Doane suggests, “the *femme fatale* is a symptom of male fears about feminism” (1991, pp. 2-3).

In the third image, de Laurentiis is visually cast as a more passive figure. Her prone pose and submersed body suggest to me a different type of *femme fatale*—the mermaid—although she is bathing not in a pool of water but of tomato sauce. She taunts and tempts with her gaze and gentle nibbling of her finger as a siren would with song. The siren is a highly identifiable figure in contemporary U.S. culture. Siren stories suggest these creatures have the power to lure men into dangerous situations that would render them incapacitated. The mermaids of the late 19th and early 20th century “were not by any means the cute little housewives they have since become by Hollywood directive” but vicious sirens (Dijkstra, 1986, p. 266). She is a temptress who cannot rise above her primordial nature and wants to drag men down with her because her power cannot exist on land. De Laurentiis can be read as a dangerous siren here, inveigling the viewer into what appears to be a frightening scene. Ultimately, this visual evocation of mythical impotence serves to undermine her power. Mermaids may appear powerful, but they are eventually contained and controlled within and by the narrative. The impotence of the siren’s power is evident in the story of Ulysses, who was able to resist the sirens’ song by plugging his ears and asking his deckhands to tie him to the mast of the ship. The defeat of the sirens (and perhaps by association feminists) is achieved, then, by simply refusing to listen to them.

### Visual Evocation of Cultural Nostalgia

Visual evocation of cultural nostalgia functions to contain power by drawing visual parallels between the empowered image and an idealized image of the past. The “nostalgic evocation of some past state of affairs always occurs in the context of present fears, discontents, anxieties, or uncertainties, even though they may not be in the forefront of awareness” (Davis, 1977, p. 420). In the images of de Laurentiis, the evocation of a nostalgic icon can combat the anxiety produced by the changing state of the contemporary U.S. culture. This longing for the comfort of “a more simple time” amidst change is evident in the popularity of de Laurentiis’s cooking shows. She embodies an updated version of the iconic 1950s’ housewife and mother who stays at home to cook, shares recipes, and looks beautiful.

According to Jameson (1991), “for [white middle-class U.S.] Americans at least, the 1950s remain the privileged lost object of desire” (p. 19). Thus, the image of the 1950s’ housewife helps viewers to return “to a time in the distant past viewed as superior to the present,” a time when women and men had defined and limited roles, and differences such as race, sexual orientation, and gender performance were largely ignored (Stern, 1992, p. 13). This allusion draws upon established visual discourses to function, with the link to the ideal housewife pointing to the ideology of separate gender spheres, which “arose to justify the ... arrangement of men in the public domain and women in the private sector of society” (Allen, 2011, p. 44). The visual rhetoric in the images of de Laurentiis reference idealized patriarchy that bifurcates gender into two neat and oppositional categories by layering traits associated with the housewife and thus domesticity onto an image of an empowered woman. This envelopment of her empowerment in a case of domesticity relegates any authority she may have to the home; her imagistic power is impotent in the public sphere.

Ultimately, the visual evocation of cultural nostalgia can privilege the references to a nostalgic icon over that of an empowered de Laurentiis in part because the image of the housewife is comforting to those privileged by her subjugation. As a result of this favoring of the past, the image is turned from frightening to innocuous, from threatening to harmless. The images of tomatoes in the spread also help by confining de Laurentiis’s power to the kitchen. Not only is the nostalgic representation privileged over the image of empowerment, but the literal reading of tomatoes is privileged over the symbolic reading. In his analysis of a Panzani advertisement, Barthes (1978) notes that there are two messages offered by the visual elements—a cultural (connoted) message and a literal (denoted) message that are read simultaneously. The denoted image is “a kind of Edenic state of the image; cleared utopianically of its connotations” that “prepares and facilitates connotation” (Barthes, 1978, pp. 42-43). Connotation, in contrast, is “constituted by an architecture of signs drawn from a variable depth of lexicons” (Barthes, 1978, p. 47).

Although I have offered a reading of the first image of de Laurentiis as her holding man’s virility in her hands, the visual evocation of cultural nostalgia (the housewife) contains the threat posed to the viewer

by limiting de Laurentiis’s power to one over tomatoes. After all, what she squeezes in her hands are *just* tomatoes, *not* testicles. The text on the page also serves to guide the viewers’ visual reading towards one of a culturally nostalgic image by informing the reader that she is on a “crusade to show the world how much enjoyment can be derived from Italian cooking.” She is not on a feminist crusade to carve out a place for women in men’s territory; she simply wants to cook and show others how to do the same.

The visual evocation of cultural nostalgia in the second image dances between the connotative and denotative aspects of the image. Thus, the power established visually through de Laurentiis’s depiction as a victor (a connoted meaning) can be tempered by the appearance of the cans of tomatoes (a denoted meaning), thereby offering the viewer the option to privilege the literal interpretation. As soon as power is established through her stance of domination, it can be contained through reference to the feminine—the only thing she is conquering is tomatoes and the traditional woman’s domain of the kitchen.

The centerfold spread offers viewers the option to read de Laurentiis as the iconic housewife by including a recipe for tomato sauce on the left-hand side of the spread. This recipe reminds the viewer that de Laurentiis appears on these pages to offer instructions and advice from her kitchen, which strays far from the focus of *Esquire*. She is offering a homemade recipe from her kitchen, as the happy housewife should. Thus, the nostalgia of the recent past can be privileged over the recognition of the changing future.

### Visual Evocation of an Objectifying Gaze

A third way in which de Laurentiis’s power in the images can be undermined is through the visual evocation of an objectifying gaze. Objectification occurs when “one is treating as an object what is really not an object, what is, in fact, a human being” (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 257). Also see Bartky, 1990; LeMoncheck, 1985; Mulvey, 1975). The patriarchal gaze as described by Mulvey (1975) is evoked through the framing of each image and the isolated display of de Laurentiis. The perspective provided by the photographer imposes onto all viewers a heteronorma-

tive masculine framing of a highly sexualized woman.

According to contemporary hegemonic ideologies, women are valued as sexual objects, and this is reiterated in the media ad nauseam. Therefore, although many factors concerning her character are being conveyed at once, the ways in which de Laurentiis is objectified are likely the most familiar for *Esquire* readers. This focus on her object-ness is achieved throughout the three images via visual cues such as her revealing clothing, accentuated cleavage, and hyper-femininity. Because the viewer can and does read multiple aspects of the images at once, the evocation of an objectifying gaze is akin to making this reading the loudest and most easily understandable voice in a room. The privileging of this voice can quiet or even silence all other voices that ask for de Laurentiis to be read as a subject. As Smith (1998) argues, current belief matrices more often than not trump alternative readings of images. The belief matrix perpetuated by *Esquire* is a patriarchal one that capitalizes on the objectification of women. This image of de Laurentiis provides the reader with a means of assuaging anxieties. While de Laurentiis is empowered in this image through her stance, the imagery evoking her empowerment can be exchanged for the one drawing attention to her objectification.

Each of the three images visually evokes the objectification of de Laurentiis, which can be used to strip her of her agency and exaggerate her submissiveness. She is cast as highly sexual and consumable. In the first image, De Laurentiis's clothing and the framing of the image underscore her sexuality by exaggerating her cleavage through its relative prominence and placement in the center of the page. The emphasis in this picture lies on her breasts rather than on her talent in the kitchen. The substance of her power, which threatened male virility, can be reduced to the power to tempt men with her body. According to *Esquire* and the visual evocation and privileging of object-ness that is occurring, de Laurentiis appears on these pages because she is sexy, not because she has anything else of interest to the viewer to contribute.

In the second image, the objectifying gaze is invoked through the use of clothing choices, makeup, and stilettos that offer a stereotypical brand of feminine sexuality. The very elements that function to present her as an object also restrict her physically. De Laurentiis is dressed in shoes that are difficult to walk in, wears a dress that limits her mobility,

and uses a striking shade of red lipstick to highlight her lips but keeps her mouth closed—all of which allude to the submissive nature of her sexuality and the static nature of an object rather than the active nature of a subject. De Laurentiis can be contained using visual cues from contemporary media culture.

The visual evocation of an objectifying gaze in the third image of de Laurentiis is evident in her pose as well as the use of a centerfold-style layout typical of images found in the swimsuit edition of *Sports Illustrated* or the pages of magazines such as *Playboy*, which are quintessential examples of the gazed-upon objectified woman. Therefore, the reference to these images—because of their familiar nature to those threatened by a financially and intellectually successful woman—may be visually privileged in order to alleviate anxiety. Moreover, her intimate association with food suggests she is for consumption. She is reclined on one side with legs in tomato sauce, and her hair is slightly wet. Her playful gaze serves as an invitation into her space. Reference to her powers to bear children, suck the life from men, or take rather than give life, is contradicted by her positioning as a consumable object.

### **Patriarchal Visual Strategies of Containment: Mythical Impotence, Cultural Nostalgia, and the Objectifying Gaze**

Visual evocation of mythical impotence, cultural nostalgia, and the objectifying gaze are rhetorical strategies that work in concert to offer viewers the means by which they can contain and control the threat to patriarchy evident in these images. Each strategy relies on visual language to limit power and references existing discourses within and outside of visual rhetoric (narratives, media, advertisements, etc.). These visual rhetorical strategies tap into hegemonic ideologies that allow viewers to envision women in a traditional heteronormative binaristic fashion by referring to several different established discourses across history simultaneously. In the group of images analyzed above, the patriarchal ideologies can be used to undermine the advances some women have attained. The threatening aspects of the images, however, suggest that women cannot be powerful without being threatening.

Throughout this essay, I have argued that contemporary social issues and ideologies are evident in the media. Specifically, I have maintained that a critical analysis of the three images of de Laurentiis appearing in a 2007 edition of *Esquire* reveals a visual ideology of containment and control that can be seen in other forms of contemporary media. The images offer tools that rebuild patriarchy and offer viewers a means of living in a world where change in visual rhetoric of women is unnecessary.

While I have offered some possible readings, this study of visual strategies of containment also acknowledges the agency offered to viewers by these strategies. As viewers process images, they consume multiple aspects of the image simultaneously without conscious recognition of the many factors that are being processed (Ott & Dickinson, 2009); therefore, the ambiguity of images offer viewers the space to realize, recognize, and work through or around any anxieties they may provoke. Hence, if viewers want to alleviate the anxiety produced by the image of a powerful woman, they can choose to place more emphasis on the aspects of the image that align with traditional patriarchy. Conversely, if viewers want to celebrate these portrayals, they can choose to place more emphasis on the aspects of the image that highlight her power. This ambiguity gives the viewer the ability to choose her/his interpretation, which explains why this image can be celebrated by some and condemned by others. By recognizing that multiplicities of readings are available, scholars and students can advocate for particular readings in an attempt to disrupt patriarchal regimes.

My analysis extends the work of earlier studies of containment in that it focuses on how strategies of containment are achieved through visual rhetoric and helps to build this emerging body of literature. Moreover, it acknowledges the agency of the viewer to select which readings to privilege, though their lexicon of images inevitably influences their readings. The tension evident in images, with which the viewer must contend, reflects the current state of affairs— anxiety exists about the social, political, and economic changes in women achieving positions of power. As the viewer begins to process the image, strategies that tap into familiar ideologies such as mythological impotence, cultural nostalgia, and

an objectifying gaze may be more readily acknowledged and, therefore, privileged. Analysis of the contemporary visual dialogue with a focus on multiple aspects of the image and the visual cues that resonate most can offer critics a glimpse into the psyche of U.S. culture and how it recognizes, catalogues, and resists change.

This analysis is important in two significant ways. First, it shows that imagining and imaging women in positions of power that draw from patriarchal structures can interpolate them into a discourse designed to oppress. Therefore, depictions of the strong empowered woman “winning” in a male world can function to reify existing structures of binaristic and oppositional gender norms. When attempting to re-envision gender and a more equitable society, we must be cognizant of the well-worn paths that offer easy escape routes for those uncomfortable with change. Mythological impotence, cultural nostalgia, and the objectifying gaze each offer viewers threatened by change a way of perpetuating old stereotypes and ways of seeing. Just as Sarkeesian’s straw feminist plays into well-worn stereotypes about feminists, which allow them to be dismissed, the evidence of the three strategies outlined in this essay keep old stereotypes alive.

Second, though images of power-hungry man-hating feminists have repeatedly been used against feminists (as is the case with the straw feminist), there is potential for change to occur. Indeed, images were once used to radically disrupt the norm by offering a reality that was previously impossible, but the proliferation of images and public screens has become our new reality (DeLuca & Peebles, 2002), meaning that traditions of viewing have changed. The template for images of women may be difficult to shatter, as well-worn icons limit the viewer’s ability to conceptualize women in new ways, which this analysis demonstrates. The everyday visual lexicon of discourse about women is difficult to disrupt, but the dissemination of these images into multiple formats expands the audiences, and, therefore, the discussions that are occurring. *Esquire* and other specialty magazines are now available online, and image searches pull from a myriad of media sources without the same type of concern regarding demographics. The entrée of these images onto the Internet introduce them to an entirely new and uncontrolled audience where

audiences are exploded. Multiple, creative, and oppositional readings will help to reimagine the images and open up new possibilities of seeing, and scholars, students, and feminists are well-positioned to resist containment strategies.

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