

Reute Reme

# Diesel

World Wide Wear



TED POLHEMUS

**Diesel**

World Wide Wear



THAMES AND HUDSON

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**D**iesel has always operated and will always operate in an independent, instinctive manner – from the heart more than from the head. If you believe in something you must concentrate on it. Focus. Go straight to the point. Straight on course. You must do what you like, what you believe in. This is the secret of our success here at Diesel. We do what we like, what makes us smile. We never do things just because we're supposed to do them. ▀

Renzo Rosso

## Introduction

**W**ELCOME TO the Diesel planet.' This is how they answer the telephone at Diesel Industries – makers of world-renowned anti-fashion fashion, and what are probably the world's most surreal advertisements. And what a strange planet it is. A place where here and now can be anywhere and any time. A post-modern planet which time-warps the past into the future – and the future into the past – while sampling and mixing all known (and some unknown) intergalactic cultures into a funky, cosmic mélange.

And what intelligent life forms they are, these creatures from planet Diesel. Instead of beaming down on some dreary military base in a barely habitable American desert, they have cleverly chosen to make their base of operations the rolling, pneumatic hills and medieval piazzas of the Bassano del Grappa region of northern Italy, where the quality of the local wine is exceeded only by that of the local asparagus. It is from this unlikely spot that planet Diesel's mysterious 'clothing engineers' embark on 'research expeditions' to some of planet Earth's most esoteric (and, more often than not, hippest) locales.

Clever, too, to disguise their interplanetary invasion as a fashion design company – thereby hiding what might otherwise be construed as strange activities, and even stranger appearances, behind a smokescreen of trendy eccentricity. Thus,



*'Welcome to the Diesel planet.'  
The reception at Diesel Industry's headquarters.*



*Diesel on the catwalk: the autumn/winter 1997 collection shown in New York.*

garments layered with a metallic mesh to retain a perpetually crumpled appearance seem an amusing novelty rather than the foil to earth's airport metal detectors which they obviously are. Thus, a fake martial arts book entitled *Fight Me* (a barely coded call to arms and anarchy) gets passed off as a weird and wacky clothing catalogue. Thus, a jacket printed with instructions from a US tank manual is seen as radical chic rather than blatant espionage. And thus, advertisements which mock everything from American evangelism to Japanese consumerism, from Alpine village life to geriatric sun-worshippers, win awards for their wry humour rather than get condemned as sinister brainwashing.

If further proof were needed, we have only to look at the unlikely speed and extent of Diesel's success in transforming itself from a tiny Italian jeans manufacturer to an international brand name which is recognized and coveted from Moscow to Melbourne, Cape Town to Chicago. There is also to be considered the improbable nature of Diesel's director, one Renzo Rosso – the inhumanly energetic mastermind who openly admits to 'looking to the stars' for his inspiration.

### The Italian dream

Naturally, the official story put out by Diesel's own press office makes no mention of interplanetary space travel. What it tells us instead is that Renzo Rosso was born in 1955 near Padua,



north-east Italy, to farming parents. That he attended the local technical college where he studied textiles and manufacturing. That through friends from Marconi he was introduced to Adriano Goldschmied, 'the pioneer of Italian casualwear', who offered him a job in his Moltex company. That, in 1978, Goldschmied and Rosso together founded a company called Diesel (the name, Rosso readily points out, was conceived by Goldschmied) which Rosso then bought complete ownership of in 1985.

Renzo Rosso has long exemplified a global (if not galactic) perspective; nevertheless, his company's Italian context is all-important in understanding its development. Italy emerged from the Second World War with its traditions of craftsmanship in tailoring and textile manufacture intact, and it is hardly surprising that the country soon established an international reputation for well-made, elegant clothing. What is perhaps more surprising to those of us who are not Italian and who grew up longing to emulate the sartorial finesse of the likes of Marcello Mastroianni in *La Dolce Vita*, is the extent to which a post-war generation of Italians were, at the very same time, yearning just as passionately for an escape from the 'good taste' of Italian design and the incessant formality of the traditional Italian lifestyle.

From the 'spaghetti Westerns' produced on their own soil, and from Hollywood's portrayal of rugged individualism, young Italians developed their obsession with American casualwear. As

Renzo Rosso puts it: 'When I was young, America was like, *mamma mia!*, something everyone dreamed about every day. America showed us another world. A world we wanted to be part of.' And jeans were a symbol of that world. When Rosso and others of this generation put on denim casualwear, they were taking off the constrictions of traditional Italian life. It is in this context that we can begin to understand the phenomenal rise of small Italian casualwear/workwear companies such as those founded by Goldschmied, Elio Fiorucci and Rosso. But while based on an American model, their clothing was given a craftsmanship and finesse that only Italy could provide.

The other thing desperately lacking in Italy was a sense of fun. Italians are renowned for taking everything extremely seriously – politics, sex, football, wine, art and, perhaps most of all, style. Here was an important vacuum that needed to be filled, and Diesel in particular evolved to fill it. Diesel's humour – which was 'post-modern' before most had heard of the term – is bizarre and irreverent. It is present in Diesel's clothing design in subtle ways (from waiscoats styled to resemble aircraft life jackets to T-shirts embellished with shark warnings), but its expression is at its clearest in Diesel's communications.

Fun and casual, Diesel products are very Italian in their anti-Italianness. But since 1991, when it launched a worldwide advertising campaign and distribution system, Diesel's real success has

'When I was young,  
America was something  
everyone dreamed  
about. America showed  
us another world.'



Classic Diesel:  
jeans detail and  
retro pocket tags.

been international. When Renzo Rosso took control in 1985 the company sold almost exclusively in Italy; today the home market represents only 15 percent of sales. It is amusing to reflect that an Italian company, which was founded on an Italian dream of Americana, is now selling some 40 million dollars' worth of goods per year in the US alone.

Diesel has now become a global company producing a global product – one which, increasingly, takes its inspiration from Europe, Asia, Australia and the Third World as well as from the US. As Rosso puts it: 'Diesel is a giant tree. The roots are Italian, but as it has grown, each new branch has emerged representing a different nationality. We are English, Dutch, German, Japanese, Swedish, American – you name it.' Rosso sees this multi-nationality as a crucial factor in Diesel's growth. 'The obvious triumphs of this nationless, raceless company make a very attractive statement about the benefits of seeing the planet as without strict divisions – not "us and them", but simply one giant "we".'

All, presumably, wearing Diesel clothing in preparation for interplanetary integration.

### **Diesel as design**

As soon as Renzo Rosso assumed complete control over Diesel, he went about transforming the company's approach to design – in ways which are still revolutionary by fashion industry standards.



'Diesel is a giant tree. The roots are Italian, but as it has grown, each new branch has emerged representing a different nationality.'

'I hired some open-minded new stylists whose basic design preferences closely mirrored mine. I encouraged this group to ignore current movements within the fashion mainstream, and instead to focus their energies on producing a line which would accurately reflect who we were as people. I wanted clothing inspired by our own combined interests, tastes, and sense of curiosity.' Rosso was happy with the existing Diesel product but he was determined that their designs could be more original – more suited to an independent, stylistically creative customer. And so he gave broad stylistic freedom to everyone in the design team. 'I promised everyone in the studio that I would manufacture only what proved to be the most innovative and fresh – not the safest or most easily sold – designs we came up with.'

The approach was a great success. 'Competing labels witnessed our dramatically improving fortunes and began to research, then copy, the Diesel model,' recalls Rosso. 'Fortunately for us, nearly everyone found our methods to be too unrealistic to duplicate. Our practice of preceding the market instead of following it, offering progressive styles before there was a proven demand for them, was something that could be pulled off only by a company willing to risk its future upon the instinct of its designers. Our rivals examined us looking for a magic formula, but discovered nothing more than a group of passionate people taking big chances, believing in themselves, and trusting their guts.'

*Discussing next season's designs at Diesel's Molvena headquarters.*



Despite the freedom this approach offers, Diesel designers have inevitably faced a major obstacle: how to keep abreast of changing trends while geographically separated from Milan and the other fashion capitals of the world. The answer has been to turn a problem into an advantage. As Marly Nijssen, designer of Diesel Females, explains: 'Because we're not in the centre of where it's all happening in the fashion world, we're not so likely to just go with the flow. We're not influenced by the things that everybody else gets excited about. But we all travel a lot and that plugs us into the world. In the last four months I've been to Morocco, Holland, Belgium, Hawaii, Bali, Singapore, Tokyo, LA, Miami and London.'

Indeed, each designer at Diesel is provided with the funding for at least two 'research expeditions' per year, to anywhere they want to go in the world. Chief designer Wilbert Das explains: 'On these expeditions the designers buy clothes, books, magazines, music, postcards – whatever catches their eye, anything that will give them ideas. When they come back they throw everything on the floor, mix it all up. Then everything gets hung on a rail, and the new season has started.' The designers retreat to Renzo Rosso's nearby farm to think, to be in the sun and to collect their ideas. 'Down on the farm, things get very eclectic,' says Das. 'Somebody who has been to Alaska will be working with someone who has been to Honolulu. What's weird is that often the

same type of things come back from completely different parts of the world. This synergy is a sign of the times – these global times.'

An additional innovation at Diesel concerns the way the design studio is structured. 'Here, the designer does everything from A to Z,' points out Nijssen. 'In most other companies a designer produces sketches and from there other people will work on them, developing fabrics, production techniques and so forth. The fact that here we do the whole process makes it easier to insist on something. You can look for solutions on the spot. You end up with fewer compromises and more integrity.'

The result of all these innovations in design strategy is a product which, at least in comparison with most other mass-market clothing companies, is fresh, distinctive, complex, amusing, innovative and flexible.

### **Diesel as brand**

'We don't do advertising, we do communication – which we see as our "face"'. The product is the communication and the communication is also the product. It's all a system – a way to live, "Successful Living" – which we and the customer create together. Our communication and our clothing are one and the same thing.' The speaker is Maurizio Marchiori, Diesel's advertising and communications director. Undoubtedly, many within the fashion establishment would react to his words with horror. But



*Eclectic influences: the 1989 'Valve' waistcoat, far left, derived its inspiration from anti-shark gear and pilots' uniforms; it also inflates like a mattress. The plastic quilting of babies' mats provided the spark for the women's jacket, left, from 1995.*

to do so overlooks two important points. Firstly, the importance of marketing image is hardly a new phenomenon in fashion; Coco Chanel, for one, was at least as skilled at creating a 'face' for her company as she was at designing. Secondly, the 'keep fashion about fashion' approach ignores the extraordinary extent to which today's clothing exists and functions as communication.

In an ever more fragmented and heterogeneous world we all need to be able to send out instant visual signals which explain 'where we are at'. Branding allows an enormous amount of often complex and subtle information to be transmitted in our appearance, with the entire marketing image of a company being compacted into a recognizable style or logo. When we choose to buy and wear certain brands, this information becomes part of our own personal 'advertising' campaign, our own logo. For those who want to project a certain off-the-wall, surreal, knowing and ironic image, the Diesel brand is priceless.

The special quality of Diesel's communication derives from the unique way that the company has structured its advertising team. Marchiori explains: 'When in 1990 we realized that we needed to communicate, we were determined that this communication wouldn't become something separate from ourselves, our company and our philosophy. Most clothing companies hire an outside advertising company and let them get on with it. What we did was to set up a creative team comprising those who know

Diesel inside out – Renzo Rosso, myself, our head designer and so on – together with ad agency people who were prepared to work with us on such a regular basis that they, in a sense, would become Diesel "insiders". We don't just brief an agency; we make tight, intimate contact. We never have ideas imposed from outside; the ideas always come from the heart of Diesel itself.'

It was this creative team that came up with the 'Successful Living' concept. 'We wanted to find something different, something that had our humour, our sense of irony, our sense of fun,' continues Marchiori. 'The result was "Successful Living" – a concept that has become a real part of the company. It worked because it's us, because it wasn't just tacked on from outside.'

As Diesel continues to stack up advertising industry awards, some might ask whether the company's communication is beginning to outshine its product. Renzo Rosso is quick to respond: 'People who say that our advertising is better than our product are missing the point. We win awards for our advertising, yes, but that is just because in the 1990s we have succeeded in making our advertising almost as good as our clothing.' But to return to Maurizio Marchiori's slightly different perspective: in today's world it really has become unnecessary and undesirable – perhaps even impossible – to separate 'product' from 'communication'. Where Diesel really stands out is precisely in its long-standing capacity to fuse together garments and lifestyle image.

'We never have ideas imposed from outside; the ideas always come from the heart of Diesel itself.'



Press advertisements from Diesel's groundbreaking 'Successful Living' campaign. From left: 'Don Juan' (1996), 'Family Values' (1995), 'How to Make Love Pay' (1993).

All this might be unsettling were it not for the fact that Diesel seems consistently willing to mock itself. 'A special thing about Diesel,' argues Renzo Rosso, 'is that we're prepared to laugh at ourselves. In this we are honest. The important thing is that it is our own sense of humour; the face we put on is our face.' Rosso credits his parents: 'They taught me to be honest, to be yourself. We're just taking this and putting it on a company level. And it works for the same reasons that it works in private life.'

### More successful living

Diesel began with two rooms, 20 sewing machines and a telephone, selling jeans and trousers only in Italy. Today, as well as its enormous factory, warehouse and headquarters, Diesel has over 20 flagship stores of its own, including New York, London, San Francisco, Barcelona, Berlin and Rome. There are also some 11,000 outlets for Diesel products in 82 countries. There is even a Diesel hotel in Miami. As well as continuing to produce a large jeans 'Basics' line, Diesel now has extensive collections of designer /casual clothes for women and men (Diesel Style Lab); the Diesel Kids line; Spare Parts (accessories); a leather collection; and, since 1994, 55-DSL, an advanced sportswear line. The company has expanded successfully.

This last addition has come from Renzo Rosso's new-found enthusiasm for snowboarding – a sport well catered for in the

mountains above Diesel's base town. '55-DSL is a more technical line than Diesel itself,' explains designer Paul Thompson, himself an enthusiastic snowboarder. 'A lot of sportswear up until now has been just logo-based. We're trying to play with new technologies and move away from a traditional "sportswear" look.' With technical input from experts and sports champions, this is a distinctive approach. 'We're not losing Diesel's innovative philosophy, but at 55-DSL we take sports seriously.' An unusual stance for Diesel, of course.

With all this expansion and diversification, one wonders what Diesel will do next. 'We have to constantly keep moving,' says Renzo Rosso. 'We want to grow but to be more exclusive at the same time. This isn't a contradiction. We want to have more of our own stores so as to show much more of who we are, to be more true to our own approach. This is what I mean by being exclusive – to be true to ourselves.' So what of the Diesel future? 'Every day we're looking for what is not done. We always look forward. What is done is done, but what is not done is our next great adventure. And I can tell you what won't happen. As long as I'm sitting at this desk I can tell you that Diesel will never lose its sense of humour, its heart. The day I don't work any more from the heart, when I'm just working for the stocks and shares and all that, then I can't see any reason to keep doing it at all. It would seem too much like work. That's when I retire to my farm.'

*Diesel branches out.  
The innovative and  
much-copied 'Sister  
Yes' sunglasses, 1995.*



*Designed for  
extreme sports:  
55-DSL hat,  
1998.*



*'Paveway' trainers,  
a classic design  
from 1997.*