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Abstract

It is often assessed that the construction of nature, technology and the relation between both is in the midst of a restructuring without specifying exactly what different articulations can be distinguished and how they differ from the modern notion of nature being separated from and domesticated by technology. Through an analysis of car commercials, this study develops a typology of constellations of nature and technology. Besides the well-known modern dichotomy of nature versus technology, with the latter being superior to the former, three types of articulations were found: technology as a flexible and superior technological mimicry of nature; technological mastery as harmful to nature; and nature and technology as two holistically connected realms. Implications for theories about the changing nature of nature and the restructuring of the relationship between nature and technology are discussed.

Keywords

advertising, car commercials, cultural conflict, modern reflexivity, nature, posthumanism, risk society, social construction, re-enchantment technology

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Introduction

A new day dawns in suburbia. Life slowly retakes the streets, while a garage door squeakingly opens up. Just before it has fully opened, hundreds of birds appear, fluttering from the garage. They quickly gain height and form a harmonious flock. Lush suburban green gives way to roads and flyovers; a car driver looks up in surprise to admire the formation's gentle curves and swoops. Now taking the shape of a car, the flock of birds smoothly avoids office buildings and apartment blocks, crossing farmlands, lakes and pristine foothills with snow-capped mountains in the background. Passing a small village and a farmhouse where white laundry hangs out to dry, the car-shaped flock magically transforms into a real car. Taking a curved mountain road, the silver-coloured machine descends to sea level to end up at a beach where happy family life unfolds.

The casual television viewer may be surprised when watching this European television commercial for Citroën's new C4 Picasso.¹ In particular, its marked contrast with more familiar car advertisements, rife with high-tech gadgets and fast cars in desolate landscapes, calls for intellectual reflection and analysis. Commercials like the one described above disturb the modern distinction between technology and nature and, as such, indicate a restructuring of the relationship between both realms. It is the goal of this explorative study of car commercials to investigate how exactly this relationship between technology and nature is transforming. In doing so, we start from the assumption that nature, technology and the relation between both are socially constructed. Nature has no meaning in and of itself since it is always mediated by and understood through a cultural context that provides particular meanings, ethics and ideologies (e.g. Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Demeritt, 2002). Escobar contends that 'there is nothing natural about nature' (1999: 2), whereas Hansen argues that 'constructions of nature are ... invariably "ideological" in the sense that they ultimately serve the purpose ... of presenting particular views, understandings and interests as being "for the common good", "universal" and "right"' (2002: 501). Texts referring to nature, then, including advertisements and commercials, tell us more about (a changing) culture – its core values, ethics and ideals – than about the nature of nature itself.

From this perspective, it is generally assumed that the modern ideology of the Enlightenment constructed a clear-cut 'divide' between technology and nature, presuming a high level of control and mastery of the former over the latter (e.g. Escobar, 1999; Haraway, 2001[1985]; Latour, 1993[1991]). Bruno Latour (1993[1991]) contends that this modern dualism, presented as a natural ontological distinction, is but the outcome of a political project involved in acts of 'purification' and 'boundary work'. Keeping nature and technology apart was always a 'border war' (Haraway, 2001[1985]: 29) – a project haunted by the prospect of proliferating 'hybrids' that threatened to cross and unsettle these neatly constructed boundaries. Nowadays, modern dualism is more contested than ever, and 'hybrids' between nature and technology can no longer be considered anomalies. Stone summarizes: 'the boundaries between technology and nature are themselves in the midst of a deep restructuring' (2001[1991]: 188).

In this article we aim to explore this alleged 'restructured' relationship between nature and technology by studying the contents of car advertisements. Our focus is not so much on the question as to *whether* we are indeed witnessing a transformation but, more substantially, on *what* articulations of the technology–nature relationship can be found in contemporary car commercials and *how* these are related to the modern divide between

technology and nature. We develop a descriptive typology of these different configurations and, in so doing, hope to assess and understand the (competing) cultural meanings in these texts. Our study is mainly based on a content analysis of printed commercial car ads published in issues of *Popular Science*, an American magazine made widely available through the internet. All the monthly issues from this magazine, covering a period from May 1872 until now, are published on the webpages of <http://books.google.com>.² Given the large number of issues (more than 1600) and the low number of car ads in the period before the Second World War, we almost exclusively analysed the issues published from the 1950s onwards, particularly in the period between 1990 and 2009. Given the explorative character of this study, first we randomly selected two monthly issues each year from the latter period, and then applied theoretical (Glaser and Strauss, 2007[1967]) or purposive sampling (e.g. Berg, 2009[1989]) to these, so as to include adverts that feature a break with the modern technology–nature dichotomy discussed above, while simultaneously aiming to maximize the empirical variety within this theoretical boundary. After our empirical typology had attained saturation (which occurred after about 200 cases), we validated it with data from two independent sources: a collection of car ads covering the period since 1897³ and a series of televised car commercials,⁴ both available on the internet. This procedure confirmed that our empirically informed typology was valid and did not require any modifications. Before we discuss our threefold typology, first we address the modern nature–technology divide that has been prominent in car ads and commercials until the present day.

Domesticating nature: car commercials in the trail of the Enlightenment

‘Go anywhere ... do anything.’ This slogan, borrowed from a Land Rover ad from 1948,⁵ perfectly describes the two promises that the car industry has made from the late 19th century until the present day. Ads and commercials have always claimed that cars offer not merely an extension of one’s radius of action, but also new repertoires of action. From the very beginning of car advertising, recreation in a natural environment has been a prominent category of these new possibilities. For example, an early car ad by the Stutz Company from 1926 draws a family driving a car in a mountainous landscape.⁶ The man is driving the car, the woman and children are looking outside, watching mountains, a lake, a white sailing boat and a little village dotted in the countryside. A similar ad by Pontiac, dated 1960, shows a man and a woman enjoying a trip through the mountains. He is driving the car, she is watching the dramatic mountain scene through her sunglasses.⁷ An ad from 2004 by Chevrolet shows a car, again in a mountainous landscape, under a deep blue sky. The slogan added to the advertisement, ‘The shortest distance between two points is irrelevant’, suggests a particular recreational use of this car.⁸

Recreational use of cars is a stable feature in car advertisements. In many cases, the car is placed in natural (be it domesticated) environments (mountains, countryside, woods or beaches). In general, the friendliest and most beautiful properties of these environments are shown. The landscapes are panoramic and sun-drenched (as in the ads mentioned above). Nature is attractive and pleasant, stripped of its grim and inaccessible properties. However, most importantly, nature is portrayed as passive, accessible and controllable by means of technology – especially for those who own this particular car, as the car company

wants the spectator to believe. Such depictions of technology and nature, then, are in line with the modern divide described in the introduction: they thrive on a clear-cut distinction between technology, on the one hand, and neatly domesticated nature, on the other. Moreover, there is a typically modern dimension of gender involved: most pictures link men sitting behind the steering wheel with agency, rational control and purpose, whereas women passively watching the countryside are visually connected to nature. As such, these car commercials confirm the 'modern epistemic order' and 'a totalizing male gaze which objectifies landscape and women in particular ways' (Escobar, 1999: 6).

Domestication of nature can be found in another variety that is more harsh and rough. Examples of this come mostly from motor car companies that produce pick-up trucks and off-road vehicles such as 4x4s and SUVs (for example, Ford, Dodge, Land Rover, Nissan and Toyota). Positioned in raw, undeveloped, sandy or rocky mountainous environments, these cars are represented to be the perfect vehicles to overcome the obstacles posed by nature. To give an example: in a 1998 Ford ad, a car is navigating through rough terrain surrounded by rocky mountains and dry thorn-bushes, leaving behind a trail of dust and dirt. The ad notes 'Goodbye yellow striped road', thus underscoring the car's freedom to boldly go where no man has gone before, to colonize the future and, insensitive to nature, ride the unbeaten track.⁹ A 2004 Toyota ad tells us 'If a tree fell in the forest you'd have a heck of a lot of firewood'.¹⁰ Pictured from below the waistline, this 'not just big' but 'life-sized' pick-up truck easily carries neatly chopped trunks of the tree, thereby effectively appropriating nature. A 2002 Nissan ad also illustrates the total domestication of nature by car technology. Above the giant pick-up truck carrying a black cow in the boot, the ad remarks: 'Next barbeque, you bring the meat.'¹¹ In all these cases, control is represented as the main achievement of technology. To emphasize this, the viewer's perspective is lowered to ground-level only to exemplify the power and toughness needed to overcome nature's impediments to definitive freedom.

In many other ads, it is the urban environment that has to be controlled, as is the case in a Nissan commercial from 2008. With a roaring engine and blasting exhaust, a silver bullet is defeating the urban scene – relying on speed as its main weapon. Although the rear end of the car is breaking, curves do not compromise the car's speed in any way. While shifting gear relentlessly, the driver – whose hands are all we see – has no problems in taking the obstacles the city puts in his path – puddles, edges and potholes. Thus the commercial perfectly illustrates the way in which cars, in this case a Nissan Z-type equipped with 332 horsepower, are considered to be efficient technological means to deal with grim urban environments – managing and ultimately defeating them.¹² Finally, this is nicely illustrated in a 2007 Honda ad in which a tremendous pick-up truck is running over what seems to be a pile of dirt. Yet, a closer look warrants a reformulation of this all-too hasty conclusion: what at first sight seems to be a pile of dirt is actually a miniaturized city. The car, carrying the remnants of other cities on its grill, bumper and hood, is about to run over another city, demonstrating its dominance and inexorable power over its environment. This car, it is added, is 'built for the urban wild'.¹³

Escobar comments that the 'separation of nature and society is one of the basic features of modern societies' (1999: 6; e.g. Latour, 1993[1991]) and many car advertisements represent this dualistic ideology: nature and car technology are represented in opposition to each other, with technology ruling over nature. This is either expressed in soft, recreational

forms of domestication or in rough articulations of domination. Although this discourse is still quite prominent in contemporary car ads, nowadays it is often accompanied by a markedly different type of articulation that takes a distinctly ambivalent position regarding this modern ideology. On the one hand, it breaks with dualism by portraying technology as indistinguishable from nature; and on the other, it conveys a continuation and even a radicalization of technological control over nature.

Nature 2.0: defeating nature with its own weapons

As the illustration in the introduction has indicated, contemporary commercials often portray cars as colliding with their natural surroundings or even as forces of nature themselves. As we will see, this trend of a convergence between nature and technology cannot be simply reduced to one cultural meaning and a uniform interpretation. There is, to begin with, a category of commercials that depicts car technology as ‘better than nature’, so as to simultaneously express the former’s similarity to and superiority over nature.

This coalition between nature and technology’s superiority in itself is not new. In many classical car ads, one can find an alignment with animals to emphasize the vehicle’s powers and technical capacities. Classical examples are the ‘Impala’ (Chevrolet), the ‘Bison’ (a Chevrolet ‘truck’), the ‘Fox’ (Audi, Volkswagen), the ‘Barracuda’ (Plymouth), the ‘Spider’ (Porsche), the ‘Sting Ray’ (Chevrolet Corvette) and, of course, the ‘Jaguar’ – an alignment with one of the fastest wild animals to express the car’s combination of speed, swiftness and elegance. However, in various recent ads and commercials this alignment of car technology with nature is taken a step further. In this type of commercial, cars are not just tied to the specific (and therefore limited) capacities of particular breeds of animals, but tightly connected to the general principle of biological evolution itself. In such car ads, adapting to and coping with a new environment no longer requires a million years of gradual evolution and genetic selection. Instead, evolution becomes a flexible choice – a technical fix that can be realized instantly, literally by pushing some buttons. In this perspective, technology is like nature with only one crucial difference: it is faster and more efficient.

The most striking example of this technological appropriation of the principle of evolution is a Nissan television commercial from 2006.¹⁴ It features a car that ascends with difficulty on a rough mountain road to reach the inevitable point where the road ends. From that point onwards, the car transforms into various breeds of animals, depending on the type of obstacles it stumbles upon and needs to overcome. After a brief moment of hesitation, the car first transforms into an animal that looks like a bear, a cougar or a wolf. Without a glimpse of hesitation, the creature storms the treeless and rock-strewn mountain slope to reach a flat snow-covered plain. Having crossed the plain, the car then transforms into a spider that quickly descends a rocky mountain slope, and a bit later into an alligator to cross a river. Confronted with a rough rock-strewn plain it finally changes into a snake, only to retransform into car mode again when it stumbles upon a highway, to continue its journey without any further obstacles. This commercial features a car that has become much more flexible than the cars that are featured in classical car commercials. The car is still a car, to be sure, but its car status is reduced to its default mode: it can now transform at any moment into the best animal adapted to the environment with which it finds itself confronted. The car is, as stated in the commercial, ‘naturally capable’ and has ‘shift capabilities’. Given its

clear appropriation of evolutionism, we can refer to this trend in car commercials as conveying a 'revolutionized evolution' or 'evolution 2.0'. By revolutionizing the biological principle of evolutionary adaptation, car technology has become like nature, but better. It has become *like nature* in the sense that it has appropriated the ultimate biological adaptive principle: it has become *better than nature* in making this adaptive principle an instant opportunity.

This evolution 2.0 comes in different varieties and flavours. In many recent cases, the association with real animals – such as the wolf, spider and snake featuring in the Nissan commercial – is replaced by the image of a car being a transformer: it does not transform into an animal but becomes an advanced, life-like robot or 'cyborg' – a typically postmodern creature that disturbs the boundaries between nature and culture (Haraway, 2001[1985]). The campaign of the Citroën C4 is a first example of this. Its adage is 'alive with technology' and its commercials feature the evolution from cars to robot-like creatures (and back). In one example, a Citroën car emerges from a forest to approach a frozen lake through a pristine and snow-decked landscape.¹⁵ Five people with red winter coats descend from the car with laptop computers, cameras and binoculars, while the car transforms into an at least 15 feet-long ice skater with hockey skates. The immense robot-like creature jumps onto the ice floor and starts skating fiercely on a prepared track, smoothly curving around the red demarcations that delineate the track and around a handful of small islands that spot the ice floor. The members of the test team carefully monitor the silver creature's achievements, watching its explosive energy, high speed and impressive skills approvingly. Towards the end of its demonstration, the giant brakes fiercely, covering the test team with a cloud of snow. The test team breaks up and the steel giant downsizes to its original car proportions.

Like the car in the Nissan commercial discussed above, the Citroën C4 is presented as a flexible machine that is capable of more than driving alone, because on top of that it has appropriated natural and (super)human skills. However, there is an interesting difference: this campaign does not so much dress technology up as 'real nature', as Nissan does, but rather paints a picture of cars as 'technical nature' or 'artificial nature'. There is no attempt at camouflage, no covering up or 'naturalization' involved: cars are overtly presented as technologically induced organisms and, as such, embody a sort of hyperreality – a model of reality without origin or (imagined) referent in the natural world (e.g. Baudrillard, 2000[1981]). This underscores that the producers, more than in the Nissan commercial, explicitly want to emphasize that the flexible, life-like capacities of the car are due to the implementation of incredibly advanced and superior technology. This message is at the core of the narrative. After all, in such commercials we are literally watching technology that magically comes 'alive'. The cars have become self-referential – they have turned into autonomous agents 'showing off' and 'bragging' about their own technical qualities. They skate and play in natural environments (as in the Citroën C4 commercial), or dance their way through traffic jams, narrow backstreets and the like in risky urban environments.¹⁶

This remarkable portrayal of cars as autonomous agents is visually supported by the fact that in such 'transformer' commercials, car owners are made obsolete. Whereas familiar car commercials like the ones discussed in the previous section typically picture humans as being in full control behind the steering wheel, they totally vanish in many of the commercials discussed here. Humans are either not part of the picture at all, or just stand in the margins, passively observing the performance of their sublime, superhuman machines without having any real control over them. Chevrolet's commercial from 2007 – parodying

the campaign of Citroën – ironically plays with this feature of transforming cars and the agency that they obtain in relation to their owners. In this commercial a car, neatly parked in an urban setting, is suddenly transformed into a superhuman breakdancing machine that dances vividly to electronic music. While the machine is demonstrating its flexibility and cool moves, the owner pushes the button to open the door and drive. Completely involved in its ego trip and dance performance, the car refuses and leaves the owner astonished. After a fruitless attempt ('Please, let's go home') the owner can do nothing but sit and wait, watching his disobedient driving machine with a combination of irritation and bafflement. The man's colleague sees the whole thing happening: he gets in his car – a Chevrolet Aveo – and drives away with ease. The commercial leaves the audience with the words: 'Get real.'¹⁷

The producers of these and other commercials are obviously playing with the question: who owns who? Are we controlling technology or is technology controlling us? The style is ironical and humorous, yet the answer seems to be clear: it is no longer humans that have full agency, but technological artefacts. It is not us who are in control, but man-made cars with their supreme, almost omnipotent powers that can be attributed to superior technology. The implementation of bits, chips and advanced mini-computers in contemporary cars – fed by the rise and widespread application of digital technologies and rudimentary forms of artificial intelligence – actually blurs the longstanding boundaries between 'the born and the made' (Kelly, 1994), 'the real and the hyperreal' (Baudrillard, 2000[1981]) and the 'organic and mechanic' (Stone, 2001[1991]). Moreover, such developments feed anthropomorphic and animistic imaginations about our technological environment (e.g. Aupers, 2002, 2009). In her well-known 'Cyborg Manifesto', Donna Haraway claimed in the mid-1980s that:

Late twentieth century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively and we ourselves frighteningly inert. (2001[1985]: 30)

From this perspective, then, the car commercials discussed above testify to and promote a culture that erodes the modern divide between technology and nature. Certainly, this erosion is not so much based on a romantic yearning or ideological call for a holistic connection between both; rather, it is the result of a technical appropriation, simulation and 'reinvention of nature' (Haraway, 1991) that is considered more impressive and more effective than the 'real' natural world. Evolution 2.0 makes the natural world obsolete. Like many texts in popular culture (e.g. science fiction movies such as *The Matrix*, *ExistenZ* and cyberpunk novels such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and others), these commercials may be understood as forerunners of a technologically oriented culture beyond nature – a 'post-biological', 'post-darwinian' and 'post-human' culture (e.g. Hayles, 1999) that messes up modernity's dualism, but at the same time is spawned by the modern ethic of rational control.

The revenge of nature: technology's superiority reconsidered

A second new type of car commercial maintains a dualistic understanding of nature and technology, but features the emancipation of nature from its role as a passive object of domestication. Unlike the commercials discussed above, they do not portray nature as

subjected to technology, but depict it as a powerful agent with which to be reckoned. This happens in two different ways, to be more precise: nature is either portrayed as a raw, powerful personalized force that strikes back, or as a victim of technological domination that needs to be treated with respect.

The first side, the 'revenge of nature' on man-made technology, so to speak, is literally visualized sometimes in car commercials that portray a grim relationship between both realms. Nature has become an aggressive agent instead of a passive and innocent entity. This type of commercial seems to communicate that transgressing the rules set by Mother Nature will evoke her anger. In a Nissan Pathfinder commercial, broadcasted in 1994, we watch a car struggling to conquer a muddy environment in a rainstorm: 'She will try to drown you', the voiceover proclaims in a threatening voice. After this, a snowstorm, lightning and ferocious wind batter the vehicle, accompanied by the voice: 'She will try to freeze you, she will try to burn you, she will try to blow you away'.¹⁸

Although the commercial shows a continuity with the modern obsession of technological domination (by concluding with the words 'But she will not succeed'), here nature is essentially portrayed as a female force that cannot be easily controlled. Nature is no longer neatly domesticated by male, technological powers, but a loose, wild and angry entity. Reading such commercials as mainly dealing with gender issues and sexual struggles, Catherine Roach (2003) has pointed out the environmental issues addressed in the subtext. They communicate the ethic, she holds, that we should obey and respect Mother Nature's rules so as not to evoke her wrath. A more recent Mercedes commercial (2004) makes a similar point.¹⁹ It depicts an open-top convertible car driving through a dusty, barren desert. With gloomy music playing in the background, dark clouds flock together to form potent, malevolent anthropomorphic creatures obscuring the sun. As soon as the concerned male driver notices the dark shadows, he vehemently steers to avoid them. When he succeeds, the creatures become more aggressive and one of them casts a cloud straight at the car. The chase continues and the driver escapes a second attack. Once it starts raining, he shuts the roof and drives on under a lightning sky. Again, this commercial conveys a certain ambiguity: nature is portrayed as an autonomous and powerful force, and yet the discourse of technological control and domestication still prevails. After all, the clip ends with the words: 'Mercedes Benz. With Direct Control Steering'.

However, nature is not only portrayed as a 'bad' mother, but also as a 'good' or a 'hurt' one (Roach, 2003) in cases that explicitly address ecological and environmental issues. While the Mercedes and Nissan commercials discussed above remain strongly informed by notions of control and domination, this bunch of commercials associates the revised understanding of nature with a new ethical attitude towards it: one of respect, care and friendship. Here, car technology is no longer placed against the natural environment, but depicted as part of it. For example, a Toyota Prius commercial²⁰ shows people in a pristine, natural environment constructing a car with wooden sticks, branches and leaves. As time passes by the car gently evolves from a primitive organic skeleton to an advanced Toyota. Exactly halfway the clip, a bolt of lightning cleaves the clouds, rain falls from the sky and from that moment on the bynow desolate Toyota slowly returns to its original state – the branches, leaves and organic materials it is made of decay, and gradually the car fades away until it finally collides with its natural environment. The images are accompanied by a voice-over commenting:

Can a car company grow in harmony with the environment? Why not? At Toyota, we're not only working toward cars with zero emissions, we're also striving for zero waste in everything else we do. Because the best way to have an impact on the environment is to have as little impact as possible.

Commercials such as these converge technology and nature – not, as discussed above, to demonstrate the superiority of the car's technology over nature, but rather to evoke the notion of 'harmony with the environment' against modernity's dualism and the Baconian dream of control over nature ('having as little impact as possible'). Advertisements in this category, then, testify to what Szerszynski (2005) has called the 'birth of the environment' and the 'politicization of nature': an increased awareness that nature is exploited by the regimes of human science and technology, which lead to unforeseen and undesired side-effects such as air pollution, the greenhouse effect and potential ecological disasters. In the 1960s and 1970s, such an environmental message was mainly expressed by countercultural social movements, but nowadays it has become part of the mainstream and as such it is incorporated in the strategies of car companies and their commercials.

This 'birth of the environment' in car commercials is indicated by the increased attention paid to nature since the mid-1990s. From this period onwards the natural environment in all its dimensions and manifestations – green woods, stormy clouds, azure skies and overwhelming landscapes – becomes quite prominent in car advertising. Nature gains literally a lot of space in the commercials, even to the point where the car is no longer the central focus of attention and where specific details of its technology become unrecognizable. In some cases, nature fills up almost the entire picture, whereas cars become smaller, standing in stillness, almost expressing modesty and respect vis-à-vis their natural surroundings.

As the discourse of sustainability emerges, the modern focus on technological power, speed and performance gives way to nature as an important agent – even a protagonist – in the narratives of many car ads. Echoing the new public awareness that technology is 'polluting' and 'damaging', such ads aim to convince consumers that car technology is 'green' and 'clean'. Sometimes this message is communicated in a subtle visual fashion. A good example is another advertisement by Toyota, in which a sheep and her lamb are prominently positioned in the foreground of the picture in a pleasantly sloping landscape. In the distance we see a car cruising while the sheep and the lamb – symbols of purity and innocent nature – approvingly watch the machine passing by.²¹ In other cases, such green messages are communicated more directly, for example by the Dodge ESX3 advertisement in 2000, 'Representing a step towards a more energy-efficient future'²² or 'Today, Tomorrow, Toyota' – promising 'cleaner cars', 'less fuel consumption', 'lower emissions' and 'total recyclability'. Often, environmental concern is explicitly connected to optimism about the future, with technological innovations such as hybrid, less energy-consuming or cleaner engines contributing to sustainability. In one video commercial, again by Toyota, a glorious, unproblematic future is contrasted with the present-day degraded environment that came about by polluting cars.²³

Obviously, these commercials can be understood as examples of the larger trend of 'ecological marketing' or 'green marketing' (Grant, 2007). They reverse the modern logic: technology plays a more modest role and nature becomes an important player – an active, powerful and valuable female agent that should be respected and protected from the modern technological enterprise. Such articulations are in line with sociological theories

about the emergence of a 'risk society'. Since the 1960s, Ulrich Beck and others have argued that we have been witnessing a gradual shift from a modern society that uncritically embraced science and technology to a late-modern society that brings the risks, undesired side-effects and unintended consequences of modernity to the fore. As Beck dramatically observes, 'In the risk society [such] unknown and unintended consequences come to be a dominant force in history and society' (Beck, 1992: 22; see also Beck et al., 1994; Giddens, 1990).

It is this notion of a risk society and, in particular, the damaging and potentially destructive impact of (car) technology on nature, which has found its way in the discourse of contemporary car advertising. Technologically induced risks are evidently high on the agenda of the car industry, and environmental concerns about sustainability are firmly institutionalized in many of the texts, images and messages that it produces. Green ideologies, once alternative and countercultural, have been commercialized, turned into appealing brands and offered for consumption. Although this green discourse critiques the modern ambition of technological mastery of nature, somehow the dualism of technology and nature is retained: the two are still understood and depicted as fundamentally different realms. Yet morally speaking, the positions have been reversed: technology has now become suspect, whereas Mother Nature has come to be understood as a valuable and powerful force with which to be reckoned.

Re-enchancement: the holistic connection between technology and nature

A third new type of car commercial which can be distinguished totally eclipses the modern discourse of dualism and technological control. Technology and nature are portrayed as completely converging, not by means of an understanding of nature as a metaphor and model for hyper-advanced, flexible technology that is 'better than nature'; and not because nature is seen as threatened by modern technology; but because nature and superior technology are imagined as intimately connected and as beautiful and meaningful in and of themselves. On the basis of this notion, commercials play with the holistic-cum-romantic ideology that an intrinsic affinity exists between both realms.

We have seen already that nature in all its dimensions gains a lot of space and attention in car commercials in the period from the 1990s, but this does not merely convey messages about environmental issues; however, it does address romantic and aesthetic sentiments. In the latter type of commercials, cars are no longer represented as dominators of nature but rather as a part of nature, so as not to simply invoke a 'technological sublime' (Nye, 1994), but to express the sublimity of nature, technology and their assumed relationship alike. In many such cases, the physical appearance of cars reflect the natural environment. Like chameleons, they mirror and mimic nature's properties, colours and beauty. This holistic connection is made most explicit by projecting natural elements onto cars, as is the case with 'The New Ford Explorer' commercial (1995), in which the external environment (the ocean, brimming with colorful tropical fish) is visually connected to the interior space of the car: the environment, as the advertisement comments, is 'Inside and Out'.²⁴

Explicit connections between technology and nature are not only made by means of references to carefully crafted and aesthetically attractive landscapes, but also by emphasizing

the affinity between cars and wild animals. Certainly, these cases differ from those discussed above, where images of animals were evidently adopted to underline the adaptability, efficiency and instrumentality of technology and, paradoxically, show the car's superiority in comparison with the natural environment. Instead, they demonstrate the intrinsic affinity between advanced technology and nature without any reference to the former's instrumental use value or efficiency. These cases point out a romantic relationship between nature and technology: the organic and the mechanical, the inanimate and the animate, car and animal. One example is a Land Rover advertisement depicting a desert-like landscape with one car and two hippos. The commercial begs for a comparison between car and animal, especially since they are both presented as symmetrically ordered points on a straight line. As such they seem interchangeable, entities shaped in one another's image.²⁵ A similar image comes from Opel, depicting a silver, sharply streamlined car under water surrounded by two identically coloured and shaped penguins. Yet another example is the commercial previously discussed in the introduction, which conveys an association between a swarm of freely swirling birds and a Citroën Picasso, with the latter mimicking and reflecting the natural features of the former.

A clip from Nissan (2002) is even more explicit in constructing an intimate relationship between technology and nature.²⁶ It depicts a shiny car driving slowly through the middle of an urban street. On both sides of the car, dolphins elegantly dive up and down a liquid pavement, accompanying the car in a harmonious fashion. In the image, earth and water, technology and nature and dolphins and car are neatly connected into a holistic whole, with the accompanying text summarizing the affinity as 'Intelligence attracts intelligence'. The convergence between nature and technology is reinforced further by the soundtrack, which consists of a hybrid mix of electronic beats, the sound of streaming water and sonar impulses. Commercials such as these, Smelik (2003: 5) argues, convey 'secular spirituality': they break down modern boundaries that are firmly established in the real world, and thereby playfully provide otherworldly experiences that enable their viewers to briefly transcend their everyday lives.

From a cultural-sociological perspective, such commercials are part and parcel of a more general and widespread spiritual discourse in western societies. It is now established that the decline of traditional churches in western countries has been accompanied by the rise and growth of New Age spirituality (e.g. Heelas et al. 2005; Houtman and Aupers, 2007). The new believers share a holistic search for spiritual 'wholeness' and a rejection of dualistic tendencies in modern history and culture: the adage is that at a fundamental level 'everything is connected' (e.g. Campbell, 2007; Hanegraaff, 1996; Heelas, 1996; Aupers and Houtman, 2006). Over the last decade, this holistic turn has deeply influenced popular culture (e.g. Aupers, in press, 2012; Partridge, 2005) and has surfaced in advertising, marketing and branding (e.g. Lau, 2000). Now that the striving for 'Harmony between man, nature and machine', as Toyota phrases it, has become a staple of the car industry, this also applies to car commercials.

However, there is also another, substantially different type of manifestation of modern spirituality and enchantment in car advertising. In addition to the turn from dualism to holism and the equation of car technology with nature and the natural, there are several ads that connect car technology to the supernatural. For example, in the Nissan commercial with the dolphins, the car is presented as a mysterious miracle or a 'magical object', since

it seems to move autonomously and no driver is visible behind the steering wheel (Smelik, 2003). An even more explicit example is a commercial from Seat Leon (2007) titled 'The Myth'. It portrays a handful of men in a dark, sinister atmosphere who look haunted and whisper to one another about an inexplicable event that they each have witnessed: 'This morning at eight, I saw a dark shadow with a deep roar'; 'I blinked and it was gone ... It disappeared in the mist.' While the men can only guess what this weird phenomenon might have been, the scene is permeated by short flashes and images showing a black car to the viewers. It is driving on the edge of a dark lake, emerges from the fog and is accompanied by a mysterious wind. Because of this and because no driver can be detected behind the steering wheel, the car is portrayed as a mysterious, enchanting force.²⁷ In this example, technology and nature are no longer simply converging in a holistic fashion, but advanced technology has become autonomous and mysterious, like the supernatural world.

In the most general sense, such portrayals of car technology disturb Max Weber's classical sociological thesis about a progressive 'disenchantment of the world'. In such a world, Weber famously commented in his essay, 'Science as a Vocation', one can 'in principle, master all things by calculation' and 'one need no longer have recourse to magical means to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculation perform the service' (1948[1919]: 139). Thus a disenchanted world is based on a firmly established dualism, with technology expelling the supernatural. However, in the car ads just discussed, this dualistic notion is replaced by holism with 'things', that is, technologically advanced cars, portrayed as uncontrollable mysteries in and of themselves. The third new category of car commercials, discussed in this section, exemplifies a more general trend of re-enchantment in contemporary society.

Conclusion

A cultural conflict about the nature of nature?

Our analysis of car commercials has demonstrated that the modern dualistic worldview, in which nature and technology are mutually exclusive realms and in which the former is controlled by the latter, remains prevalent in advertising but is complemented increasingly by other configurations. This means that constructions of nature and the relation of nature with technology are changing. First, we have found a newly emerged articulation that breaks with dualism but radicalizes technological control: here, car technology infused with computer technology is depicted as a sort of 'nature 2.0', based on 'evolution 2.0', giving birth to an 'artificial' or 'post-biological' nature to communicate the message that it is better, faster and more efficient than 'real' nature. Second, we have found a new discourse that maintains dualism but portrays technological control as a problem for the environment. These texts reflect concern about the unintended environmental consequences of the technological domination of nature, and feature the revenge of technologically repressed nature. Finally, the third new type breaks radically with the notion of technological control over nature by collapsing car technology and nature, not to hammer home the superiority of the former over the latter, but to romantically claim that both realms are intrinsically connected. As such, this type is related to a more general and much debated holistic turn beyond modern dualism.

In short, these three new types of car advertisements and commercials indicate a restructuring of the relationship between nature and technology, albeit in fundamentally different and sometimes contradictory fashions. Their theoretical significance lies in the fact that they put all-too bold, grandiose and one-sided theories about this process of restructuring in a proper perspective. All-encompassing theories about the emergence of a 'post-biological' society (e.g. Haraway, 2001[1985]; Hayles, 1999; Stone, 2001[1991]), a 'modern-reflexive risk society' that embraces nature and politicizes environmental risks (Beck, 1992; Beck et al., 1994) or an unambiguous, holistic 're-enchantment' of nature (e.g. Campbell, 2007; Heelas et al., 2005; Partridge, 2005), all fail to grasp the full complexity of the changes that are taking place in the real world. The new types that we have found are simply too diverse for that: certainly, they do correspond closely to the three theories, but contradict, compete and conflict with one another.

The restructuring of nature and technology, we conclude, is certainly not headed in just one direction. On the contrary: the various perspectives found in the car advertisements and commercials indicate that the 'nature of nature' is deeply contested today. At the most fundamental level, they illustrate a divide between a culture that fully embraces technology as 'second nature' and a culture that critiques the modern blessings of technology and embraces nature in all its varieties. Hence contemporary western culture seems divided between two fundamentally opposed ontological positions: a post-natural versus a natural approach; a technophile versus a technophobic wing. Recently, Bronislaw Szerszynski (2005) has made the argument that despite stillwidespread claims about a Weberian 'disenchantment of the world', modernity has spawned two trajectories of the sacred that logically exclude one another but are, at the same time, dialectically connected. On the one hand, there is the modern obsession with supreme technological power – with the 'technological sublime' (Nye, 1994) and the eschatological promises of technological salvation from nature (e.g. Ellul, 1967[1954]; Noble, 1999[1997]), which have led to a spiritual appraisal of technology. On the other hand, whereas this trajectory has historically legitimated technological progress as a goal in and of itself, paradoxically and ironically it has sparked a second trajectory: that of a 'birth of nature' as a sacred and deeply enchanting force. Technology and nature have both become objects of veneration in modern culture, entailing two positions that contradict and feed one another, as our study of car commercials demonstrates.

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Notes

1. See www.youtube.com > search for 'citroen c4 picasso TV ad in Europe'.
2. See <http://books.google.com> > search for 'popular science'.
3. See <http://motoring-history.com> > the history of car advertising, which contains an illustrated history of how the motor car has been advertised.
4. Downloadable through www.youtube.com, www.video.google.com and <http://jalopnik.com> (the latter website contains several top 10 selections of televised commercials from the 1960s onwards).
5. See <http://motoring-history.com> > the history of car advertising > the post-war period.
6. See <http://motoring-history.com> > the history of car advertising > the 1920s and 1930s.

7. Ad published in *Popular Science*, January 1960: 201.
8. Ad published in *Popular Science*, September 2004: 2–3.
9. Ad published in *Popular Science*, March 1998: 2–3.
10. Ad published in *Popular Science*, September 2004: 27.
11. Ad published in *Popular Science*, June 2002: 18–19.
12. <http://videos.streetfire.net/video> > search for ‘Nissan 370z first tv commercial’.
13. Ad published in *Popular Science*, November 2007: 28.
14. www.youtube.com > search for ‘2006 Nissan 4x4 television advert’.
15. www.youtube.com > search for ‘Citroën c4 ice-skating transformer’.
16. See, for instance, the following commercial by Nissan: www.dailymotion.com > search for ‘transformer car: no traffic problems’.
17. www.dailymotion.com > search for ‘Chevrolet aveo transformers Chevy Citroën c4 remake remix’.
18. www.youtube.com > search for ‘1994 Nissan pathfinder commercial’.
19. www.youtube.com > search for ‘Mercedes clouds’.
20. See www.metacafe.com > search for ‘the world’s most environmentally friendly car – Toyota Prius commercial’.
21. Ad published in *Popular Science*, July 2001: 11.
22. Ad published in *Popular Science*, May 2000: 52–53.
23. www.youtube.com > search for ‘Toyota Prius commercial polluting the environment’.
24. Ad published in *Popular Science*, March 1995: 36–37.
25. See www.motoring-history.com > the history of car advertising > the 1980s onwards.
26. www.youtube.com > search for ‘Nissan Primera commercial 2002’.
27. www.youtube.com > search for ‘Seat auto emocion’.

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