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Romanticism Reinforced: The Construction of Nature Through 'Green' Advertising and the Implications for Ecodesign.

Marie Sierra

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Objective of Research

To examine the advertising of products that are designed to be 'green', and how marketing reinforces a romantic ideal of nature that runs counter to the aim of most 'ecodesign'. The vehicle of this examination is home appliance whitegood advertising, particularly for products that have been through a process of 'greening'.

Method

Interpretive analysis of advertising imagery, using the tools of critical theory, and design and art theory.

Nature of the Main Findings

Although there is an evolving interest in environmentalism and all matters 'green', and this is reflected in the world of design, our relationship to nature is constantly reconstructed as a romanticised ideal by media and advertising. As design is marketed and sold through media and advertising, the need for designers to understand how their products are constructed and interpreted as environmentally sound becomes increasingly important. Several theorists argue that nature can only be understood as a cultural artefact, and propose that it is available to us only through limited and mediated 'cultural' experiences. These include such familiar forms as nature documentaries, advertisements that use natural imagery, products that are labelled 'green' or 'environmentally friendly', and even what is commonly offered as a 'direct contact' with nature – the wilderness adventure tour. Images of the natural world are employed as a mechanism for the 'authentication' of products, and can be manipulated to construct nature as dangerous and threatening, fragile and endangered, or the remote other. All such devices serve to ultimately reinforce the position of nature as a cultural construct. What does this mean for the designer attempting to design and market products that are 'green', products that genuinely reduce waste, reduce consumption, or are highly recyclable?

In order to explore these issues, this paper undertakes a critical visual analysis of a range of advertisements for the lowly but omnipresent household 'whitegood' appliance. These infrequently purchased items are expensive to purchase, and then continue to cost the consumer in operation, with the cheaper appliance often costing more to run than its expensive competitor. The paper puts particular focus on those household appliances that have been re-designed to be environmentally friendly, and how these 'green' appliances are marketed to the public. Through consideration of the growth of green business and specific green market segments, the way in which demand for green products drives the design process is also considered. The importance for those in design education of understanding these drivers is emphasised through an examination of what marketing agencies focus on when running a 'campaign'.

In summary, the paper investigates how images of nature are constructed through ideals such as 'dangerous', 'powerful' or 'the imaginary', in order to promote and sell appliances, and what happens to the role of the designer in this process. Through this investigation, the real difficulty of both designers and consumers 'being green' is revealed, and the ability of ecodesign to change the rules of capitalist consumption is questioned.

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Introduction

This paper makes a critical assessment of the construction of nature through advertising. Like any other subject, the complex and rich subject of nature can be portrayed metaphorically. Due to its complexity, the idea of nature is often depicted obliquely in advertising, rather than through direct pictorial representation. There is fertile ground for this approach in the advertising of home appliances – particularly appliances designed to be 'green', or what is referred to in design culture as 'ecodesign'.

Research Approach

The research method employed in this study is an interpretive analysis, informed by aspects of cultural theory. The interpretive analysis takes its form as a postmodern critique of the underlying meanings of the advertisements, and of how these ads are indicative of a human relationship with nature that is mediated through ecodesign. The study particularly focuses on the advertising of ecodesign in household appliances, which are normally purchased by the consumer only every few years, and are generally considered 'big ticket' items in the fit-out of a household.

The interpretive analysis approach allows for multiple postmodernist interpretations of the empirical material researched. Typical of postmodern critique, its empirical approach is 'detailed, close-up, documentary, ethnographic, [including] historical readings of specific social situations and institutions'.¹

As advertisements are a 'thick' blend of word and image, described by Denzin as 'visually and conceptually dense', they are a rich source of material for visual and textual analysis. They lend themselves to both realist and subversive readings, and multiple interpretations that preclude them from being read in an exclusively literal way.² Indeed, authors such as Sut Jhally argue that contemporary advertisements can rarely be read literally.³ From the perspective of a qualitative researcher, Denzin notes that advertisements contribute to the structure of our perceived reality:

There is a double need for analyzing film and photography. First, everyday life is structured and given meaning by visual records including film photographs, and advertisements. How these representations structure reality demands analysis. Second, visual representations are interactional productions. . . . Visual representations of society are both methods of research and resources, or topics to be studied in their own right.⁴

The symbolic-interactionist approach about which Denzin writes extensively has also contributed to the approach of this study. The relationship of people to objects is central to advertising and the creation of desire to purchase those objects. Denzin writes at length about the site of meaning in relation to objects, and how it comes into being through *social* interaction:

Integral to [the symbolic-interactionist] perspective is the view that the social world of human beings is not made up of objects that have intrinsic meaning. The meaning of objects lies in the actions that human beings take toward them. Human experience is such that the process of defining objects is ever-changing, subject to redefinitions, relocations, and realignments. The interactionist assumes that humans learn their basic symbols, their conceptions of self, and the definitions they attached to social objects through interaction with others.⁵

As ecodesign draws on the strength of community concern with the environment, and the ability of the individual consumer to act within that community in what they perceive as a meaningful way, the symbolic-interactionist approach provides a perspective on how people, communities and objects relate. A way toward investigating how meaning is constructed through advertisements for ecodesign

products is made more clear by initially recognising that meaning itself is socially constructed, rather than inherent to objects themselves.

Nature as Dangerous or Powerful

In examining how nature is portrayed as dangerous, powerful or threatened, it is useful to regard a process of transfer as outlined by Jib Fowles:

There are two varieties of advertisements: *simple*, where all the content pertains directly to the commodity being sold (as a classified ad), and *compound*, where, besides the commodity information, there exists a noncommodity material (the symbolic elements that constitute the appeal). . . . The task of the advertisement is to get consumers to transfer the positive associations of the noncommodity material onto the commodity, so that freedom and ruggedness equal Marlborough cigarettes, and friendship equals Bud Light. If this transfer occurs, the logic behind it is nothing more than the juxtaposition of the two orders of content within the frame of the advertisement or commercial.⁶

In appliance advertising, images of nature as violent are quite rare. More commonly, the raw power of nature is seen as something to be harnessed or imitated, and frequently nature is portrayed as the generator of ideas and ingenuity. The text from a Fisher & Paykel advertisement for a washing machine demonstrates that even an appliance, duly anthropomorphised, can take inspiration from nature (Figure 1):

The inspiration behind our washer.

The waterspout. Complex in nature, yet simple by definition. The faster it spins, the more water it extracts. The Fisher & Paykel Smart Drive Washer uses it as inspiration. With its 1000 rpm spin speed, the Smart Drive Washer removes up to 30% more water. Clothes dry quicker, saving time and money. We've even improved on Mother Nature by designing the slowest spin speed, 300 rpm, ensuring gentle handling of fine wearables.

Inspiration is shifted from the design team to the appliance itself, and onward to the consumer. The text is quick to clarify that the image is that of a waterspout, which occurs over a body of water. While tornadoes have been mythologised in films such as *The Wizard of Oz* and the more recent *Twister*, the waterspout is a far less

familiar and foreboding phenomenon. While they are very dangerous for watercraft, waterspouts don't immediately conjure up a vision of destruction – there are no buildings or other infrastructure visible in the photograph presented here, only the blue horizon line. In fact, there is no sense of human presence at all in the image. The 'inspiration' referred to is drawn entirely from the natural world, with emphasis on it being an event of mechanical and engineering proportions. The advertisement demonstrates how powers that once belonged to nature can be transformed to become human powers.

However, this 'inspiration' also satisfies the need for the spiritual. To pay homage to nature as this advertisement does, to site nature and its wonder as the 'source' of greater knowledge and improved washing machine design, actually permits a kind of inversion to take place, where a greater human understanding of nature results in a washing machine design that is more ecologically sound and nature-friendly. Not only does the washing machine save time and money (the latter, one assumes, through the reduced need to use a clothes dryer), which is at the forefront of consumer concerns, but it 'improves on Mother Nature'. The reference to 'Mother Nature' is a personification of nature, where nature operates the physical world, empowered with the ability to act in some way. Usually the capitalised 'Nature' appears where nature is emphasised as external to humans, combining as it does the idea of living matter with a creative power driving it. Here the implication is that we improve on nature by reducing it down, taking a small dose of that creative energy for our own needs, but at the same time, being inspired by and in awe of its powerful, violent and cataclysmic ability. It is implied that we learn from nature, and do so respectfully, through a 'slow speed', a gentler incarnation with which our delicate clothes – and by extension our delicate existence – can cope.

The advertisement portrays the best of both worlds, flattering to the human world for cleverly reading and engaging the power of natural phenomena, and flattering to the natural world which reveals its secrets to us through great acts of power. As the ad states, *Complex in nature, yet simple by definition*. The notion of innovation often stresses such simple, 'elegant' solutions, and Fisher & Paykel are striving in this advertisement to appear innovative. The outcome portrayed is beneficial for both the natural world and the human one, although their separateness is confirmed and reinforced through the language of the text. In order for this washing machine to play the role of mediator between nature and culture, they must be kept separate. Otherwise, the washer cannot perform its brokerage role.

Fisher & Paykel were among the first in the English-speaking market to use the term 'smart' in relation to their product branding. While it could be argued that the mediation role these appliances play between nature and culture is part of that 'smart' ability, Fisher & Paykel also use it to emphasise the technological innovations of their products. In the same year as the above advertisement, they ran another advertisement for their Smart Drive washing machine (Figure 2). While it is essentially the same information about the same machine as in the first advertisement, the high spinning speed, rather than the slow speed for delicate clothing, is highlighted:

*The Smart Drive Washing Machine spins clothes drier.
So they need less time on the line.*

Even on the sunniest day the weather can turn suddenly inclement. Which is a nuisance if you've just hung out the washing. But with a Fisher & Paykel Smart Drive, your clothes will dry up to 30 per cent faster. Because its 1000rpm spin speed removes more water from them in the bowl. So even if it's not a great day for doing the washing, you'll be glad you've got a Smart Drive. It's the new wave in washing machines.

As in the previous ad, the '30 per cent' figure is mentioned, this time in relation to drying time rather than the percentage of water removed from clothing during the high-spin cycle. This is a common figure used in appliance advertising, as it is high enough to make an impression, but low enough to be believable. No direct mention of nature is made – instead the text of the advertisement centres on the idea of the weather. However, the image of the wave crashing on the lighthouse is significant because it comes directly from popular culture.

Except for the addition of the laundry line, this is a famous photograph of the La Jument lighthouse off the coast of France, taken in 1989 by Jean Guichard. Guichard is well known for his lighthouse photographs, many of which are available as posters.⁷ This image, and six others in a sequence from the same storm, were taken from a helicopter, the sound of which brought the lightkeeper outside, creating the human element that is the 'punctum' of the image, a detail that makes the photograph read anew once it is noticed.⁸ The post-production addition of the flapping laundry is the only other human element, and predominates the otherwise well-known image. The consumer is presented with an extreme case of one's washing getting wet, described with understatement in the advertisement as 'a nuisance'.

The power of the ocean in the photograph is stunning, and accounts for the success of the image as a poster, and its appropriate use as an attention-getting factor in an advertisement. The narrative it puts forward in both image and text is clearly that of the 'structure-of-man' against the 'chaos-of-nature'.⁹ This dichotomy poses questions for the audience to answer. Firstly, in regard to the man-made, one wonders how the lighthouse could have ever been built to begin with on such a rugged site. It appears to be built in the water, not on land. Due to the bright light, it is

not particularly clear from the image that this is taken during a storm, so the question arises of whether the sea is normal for this area. The foundation appears to be both awash and exposed to its very base, where there seems to be a void the water is about to fill. Apart from the question of how it was built, the question of how it still stands arises, and indeed, whether it will continue to do so, the element of danger is so apparent. Regardless of the impending doom, it seems that the domestic activity of putting out the washing goes on here, as it does in every household. Through the appearance of the laundry line and flapping clothing, the sense of this being a 'normal' household is upheld, although the location is extraordinary.

Secondly, in regard to the natural elements, aspects of nature are pointed out in the text. For example, the sunlight is referred to directly: *Even on the sunniest day the weather can turn suddenly inclement*. This increases the sense that this is an unusual wave that appeared out of nowhere – as the text says, a new wave, something different than anything that has come before. The wave and the washing machine are made equivalent by association. The power and danger is created, and the sense of a vacuum sucking the water out and away, by the force of the crashing wave. The text *So even if it's not a great day for doing the washing, you'll be glad you've got a Smart Drive* indicates that like the lighthouse, the Smart Drive machine will take care of its owner, protect their interests and defend them against an unpredictable nature.

As in the previous Fisher & Paykel advertisement, the washing machine is portrayed as the mediator between our world and the natural world, our needs and the unpredictable external world. As before, in order to perform this mediation, nature and culture must be kept separate. While the first advertisement reinforced this through use of the term Mother Nature, perhaps making up for the lack of a human

element in the image, the second advertisement needs no such device. Not only are we looking at a man-made structure standing against nature, but also a human appears in the doorway of that structure, giving nature's representation a clear counterpoint.

In Jib Fowles' argument, 'the task of the advertisement is to get consumers to transfer the positive associations of the noncommodity material onto the commodity, so that freedom and ruggedness equal Marlborough cigarettes, and friendship equals Bud Light'. In these examples, the power of nature (the positive associations), but not the threatening storm waves (the negative associations), are transferred to the washing machine. The negative, threatening elements are harnessed and tamed, and made useful by the appliances. They make nature productive, safe, and 'smart' for humans to use. Ultimately the message in this advertisement is that humans pay homage to nature by learning and harvesting ideas from it, while simultaneously outsmarting it.

Green Design and The Green Market

More and more managers are beginning to ask themselves questions such as: Do our customers really need the product the way we have designed it, or do they need another service? Some postulate that society simply has to learn to consume less. Others point out that if the 'less in quantity' is produced, used and disposed of irresponsibly, the net effect could be far worse than the 'more' that incorporates eco-efficient practices. Eco-efficiency is driven by the vision of making the challenge of sustainability a business opportunity.¹⁰

The source of the above quote is an edited book, published in 1999, which describes the increasing sophistication of market responses to green imperatives, usefully outlining green strategic developments, greening that is occurring throughout different market 'mixes', and case studies. In a similar manner to Paul Hawken's *The*

Ecology of Commerce, it seeks to put forward an example or model of how businesses can address the environmental concerns of their customers, while remaining financially viable, or even improving profits and market share.

There are now many such books available. Some are published specifically for the business market, and are targeted at those in senior or other managerial positions. Some, such as *Green Gold: Japan, Germany, the United States, and the Race for Environmental Technology*, more specifically aim to alert American businesses, and the public, that other countries are considering the green imperative more seriously than they are. This includes engaging technologies developed in North America to address environmental issues, create employment, and develop new income streams, and then turn a profit by selling those goods and services back to North America.¹¹ Similarly, some publications are a call to arms for businesses, engineers and designers. Clearly, manufacturers and corporations are beginning to respond to the idea that green business may indeed be good business, and therefore they require examples and market strategies to move forward. However, this progress requires education of both the corporate sector and the buying public. Green business leaders such as Hawken call for business to 'change from being predator to being educator', thereby placing the responsibility for this consumer knowledge squarely back on the corporations and manufacturers.¹²

One reason designers should be aware of their own role as advocates is that many of the environmentally designed aspects of appliances and other products are hard for the consumer to either see or understand directly, and designers are well positioned to alleviate this situation. The place where the fundamental and far reaching changes are made tends to be close to the very early manufacturing stages

of production – one of the farthest points from the consumer’s point-of-sale experience.

Studies cited in marketing research stress that consumers are willing to pay more for quality appliances with long operating lives that have high environment ratings. But *how* a product is marketed and advertised is critical to the final purchasing decision for a consumer, and many environmental and consumer groups are well aware of the issues at stake. The more designers understand the green marketplace and how the products they design are advertised, the more informed their design decisions can become in relation to how those product designs are perceived in that marketplace. As we have shown through the study of advertising images of ecodesign appliances, the consumption of natural imagery contributes to a social construction of nature, often as a romanticised ideal. Like corporate managers, designers who are well informed about the green market and how it works are best able to contribute to its development from within their profession, expanding its sphere of influence. As Robert Isaak notes, ‘rather than starting from freedom, green design starts from responsibility: the responsibility of keeping the earth in good order as our home base’.¹³

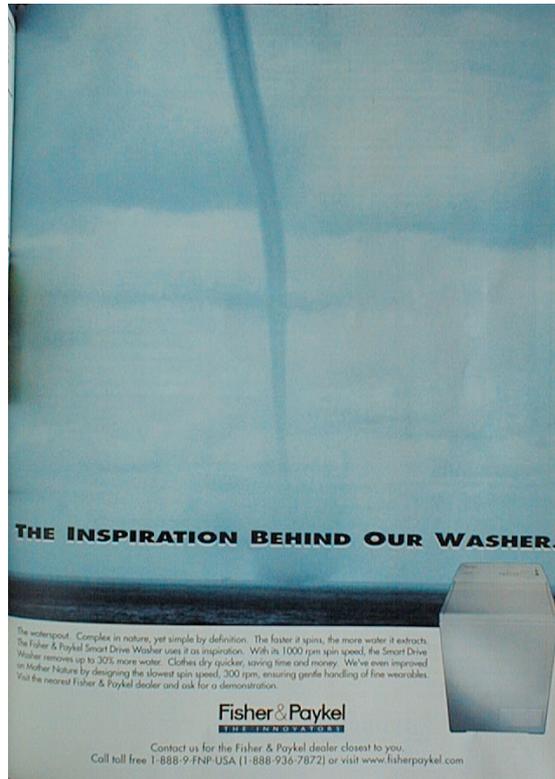


Figure 1: Fisher & Paykel washing machine ad. Source: *Home* (USA), April 1998.

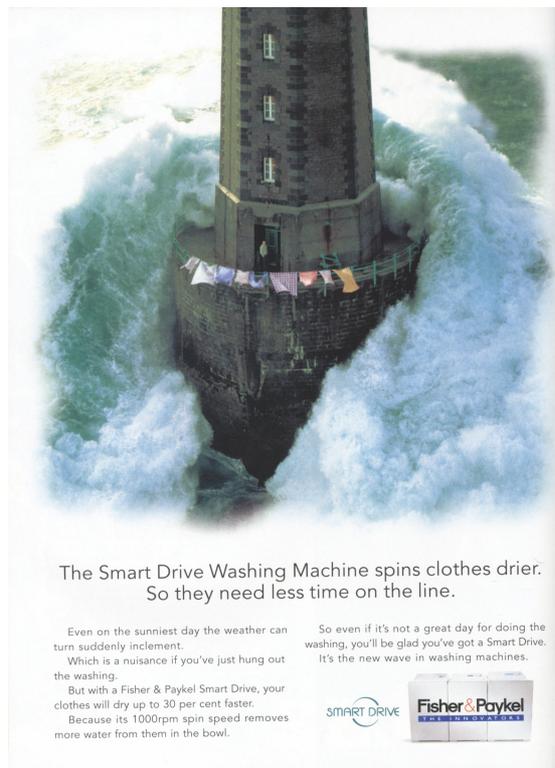


Figure 2: Fisher & Paykel washing machine ad. Source: *Australian House and Garden* (Australia), October 1998.

Endnotes

¹ Denzin, 1989, p. 52.

² Denzin, 1989, pp. 220, 231.

³ See Jhally, 1998, for an expansion on the idea that contemporary ads cannot be read literally.

⁴ Denzin, 1989, p. 211.

⁵ Denzin, 1989, p. 5.

⁶ Fowles, 1996, p. 11.

⁷ Information about the image and Jean Guichard's work was obtained on 15 April 2002 from <http://www.alphapix.com/jument.shtml>, one of several websites about his work, through which his images are available as posters and books. This website relates the story of the 1989 storm that created the photo opportunity, and how the lighthouse keeper, Théodore Malgorne, turned to shut the door only moments before the lighthouse was engulfed by the wave. Indeed the site relates that the lighthouse was built in 1911, but only after many lives had been lost in the area. Many poster sites and outlets sell reproductions of this image; one website dedicated to lighthouse enthusiasts claims it to be their bestselling poster.

⁸ Barthes, 1981, pp. 42-43.

⁹ For a cogent examination of advertisements through discourse analysis, see Cook, 1992, pp. 1-4. Cook argues that discourse analysis, although sometimes 'accused of being large and rather messy', is a more appropriate vehicle for analysis of advertisements than linguistics alone, because discourse analysis examines text (linguistic forms) as well as context. He describes context to include substance (physical material), music and pictures, paralanguage (voice quality, gestures, and typeface), situation, co-text, intertext, participants (which contains several subcategories) and function; advertisements are seen as an interaction of these elements.

¹⁰ Charter and Polonsky, 1999, p. 9.

¹¹ Moore and Miller, 1994, p. vi.

¹² Hawken, 1992, pp. 93-100. Note that this journal article bears the same title as the author's book of 1993.

¹³ Isaak, 1998, p. 39.

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