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Green Automobility: Tesla Motors and the Symbolic Dimensions of “Green Cars”
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Introduction

Aim of this study is to investigate the symbolic dimensions of products commercialized as safe for the environment, and in particular of “green cars”, emerged since the late nineties on the technological platform provided by hybrid electric and “all electric” engines. In the course of this project, I will initially provide a general understanding of the dynamics through which a “green image” is attached to commodities, bringing into light some of the ideological assumptions sustaining these processes. Theoretically, this paper departs from the premise that in Western societies commodities are consumed for reasons that exceed their utilitarian, functional benefits, and relate to symbolic values commodities bear within consumer culture. Non-utilitarian meanings are attached to commodities through all sorts of social practices, and particularly through marketing, fashion, media coverage and consumption habits. Such meanings serve consumers’ desire to articulate aspects of their individual and collective identities (McCracken, 1986, 1990). The role of Western consumption patterns in environmental degradation is such that it appeared stimulating to investigate the symbolic manoeuvres through which an environmental credibility is associated with commercial products (Durning, 1992). More specifically, given the major contribution of automobiles to environmental issues as resource depletion and climate change (Paterson, 2000, 258-260), a focus on the automotive market-place appeared potentially illuminating. Considerations at both these levels will provide the argumentative basis for
what constitutes a central objective of this dissertation, i.e. understanding which symbolisms are driving the success of the American electric vehicles manufacturer Tesla Motors.

To these aims, I have considered appropriate to set out the work reviewing what environmental concern represented in the historical period during which it reached a level of resonance that made it convenient for Western brands to associate their image to a green sensibility. For green commodities to be as pervasive, it was evaluated, they must discursively draw on political assumptions different from those I took as a starting point considering “green consumption” as a sort of oxymoron. The first chapter will therefore focus on the period after the Second World War, during which an unprecedented growth in environmental concern found a variety of expressions. Post-war environmental sensibilities are often related to older currents of thought nourishing notions about human-nature connectedness, and most notably to thinkers within the Romantic tradition (e.g. Guha, 1999, 11-13). The peculiarities of post-war environmentalism, however, are relevant to our discussion and can be identified in the departure from Romantic individualism, in the orientation towards the future, and in a basis in eco-systemic science that fed pessimistic outlooks and demands for political change (Bennett, 2001, 21; Hay, 2002, 4-11).

Geographically, this excursus will mostly be limited to dynamics characterizing the U.S. society. A link is commonly assumed between rises in environmental sensibilities and processes of industrialization, and this aspect appeared to unequivocally support a focus on U.S. post-war society
Furthermore, the geographical origin of the case study rendered a focus on the U.S. particularly relevant. The chapter follows the progressive popularization of environmental arguments, giving particular attention to ideological shifts in leading strands of the movement. At first, we will notice the dominance of radical perspectives, characterized by indictments of science and capitalist society, whereas, from the end of the seventies, more pragmatic approaches dominated the environmental debate. This tendency, increasingly explicit in the course of the eighties, materialized in views on environmental decline that regarded technological progress as a possible source of solutions, rather than inherently as a threat, and the market as a legitimate context for expressing political convictions. A crucial role in this transition is identified in the ambiguous role science had within late ’60s and early 70’s radical environmentalism. This argument to some extent replicates what Maarten Hajer maintains, and his analysis of the emergence of “ecological modernization” perspectives is here referenced to interpret both the development of “techno-fix” approaches to environmental problems and the evolution of the environmental movement towards market-place activism (1995). While the trajectory of post-war environmentalism in the U.S. can in some respects be easily associated with that characterizing Western European countries, other societies are characterized by different dynamics. In particular, it is stressed how in the same period during which Western environmentalism undertook a process of de-radicalization, shifting its focus to global issues as ozone layer
depletion, in developing countries it focused mainly on local problems, and frequently in radical fashions (Van Der Heijden, 1999, 199-210).

The second chapter understands consumer activism, in the form of boycotting of blameworthy brands and “buycotting” of meritorious ones, as a “semiotic action” through which political meanings are assigned to commodities. Political meanings, it is argued, constitute the public dimension of commodities, and what traditional marketing practices erase from products (Micheletti, 2003, IX). The chapter reviews manufacturers’ reactions to marketplace activism, providing an introduction to practices of “green marketing”. In this context, two perspectives are introduced to understand these semiotic struggles between brands and consumers, one departing from Marxist insights connected to the Frankfurt School of social theory (Goldman and Papson, 1996), the other having bases in a post-structuralist view of the social world (Thompson, 2004). The second part of the chapter follows the emergence of green cars in the context of a discussion of the symbolic meanings historically associated with automobiles. The car, totemic object in Western consumer cultures, appears manifoldly intertwined in conceptual tensions among environmental decline, technological progress and market mechanisms, and thus potentially very relevant to my discussion.

The third chapter consists of an investigation of the visual imagery deployed by Tesla Motors, an American electric cars manufacturer, in the presentation of their Model S sedan on the company’s website. Semiotics has been considered an apt methodology to investigate the meanings Tesla
attempts to convey on its EV. The approach adopted is based on the Social Semiotics take on visual communication developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996). Being Model S the only Tesla product currently available, and considered the company’s avoidance of traditional advertising techniques, it is argued that the company’s website plays a crucial role in articulating the brand’s identity. The analysis suggests that while Tesla’s iconic CEO recurrently sponsors the environmental significance of the company’s activity, the analysed visual texts barely leverage on the political dimensions of environmental concern. This is instead absorbed in a discourse of technological progress that allows Tesla to recover significant elements of traditional automotive rhetoric.
Production, marketing and purchasing of hybrid cars, electric cars or any technological wonder supposed to render our lifestyles more sustainable can be understood as part of a project of progressive improvement of the environmental impact of human societies, which does not see a necessary incompatibility between effective approaching of the environmental crisis on one side, and, on the other, technological progress and the workings of market institutions. Whatever the intrinsic value of a similar perspective or of its singular materializations, it certainly differs from the radical views of the early seventies’ environmental movement, which characteristically contested the cornucopian assumptions of capitalism and the Western “technocratic” mind-set as a whole, envisioning the imminent collapse of Earth’s ecosystem (e.g. Buell, 2003, 39). The environmental discourse recognizing “the structural character of the environmental problematique”, but nonetheless assuming that “existing political, economic, and social institutions can internalize the care for the environment”, has gained prominence since the late seventies, being termed “ecological modernization” (Hajer, 1995, 25). While not precluding the possibility for progressive transformations of society, it entails collaboration with industry for the implementation of policy, and assumes an economic interest on businesses’ behalf in improving their environmental impact. This fundamental articulation is based on a conceptualization of pollution as “inefficiency”, and on the assumption of a shared and growing interest
among consumers in less environmentally damaging products. Ecological modernization, therefore, characteristically values technological innovation as a viable instrument for tackling environmental decline (Dryzek, 1997, 167-168).

Various interpretations have been advocated for the emergence of the ecological modernization paradigm (Hajer, 1995), as well as for the evolution of the environmental movement towards strategies of politicization of marketplace behaviours, as in the case of green consumerism (Micheletti, 2003). In this chapter I will summarize the multi-faceted historical process through which dualistic views about the relation between demands of the environment and business activities have declined. To this aim, I will retrace some of the factors involved in the growth of environmental concern among Western populations after the Second World War. Relevance will be given to points of conceptual tension within the broad formation of post-war environmental discourse, which historically allowed for the emergence of new conceptualizations. In this context, the complex relation between environmental concern and scientific knowledge will receive particular attention. The discussion will prepare the ground for the analysis of my case study, as well as give insights about the development of green consumerism and green marketing.
The Environmental Revolution

The post-war rise in environmental sensibilities has often been linked to economic prosperity, and to a consequential cultural shift from materialist to post-materialist values. In this view, when Western populations started perceiving a certain degree of material security, a cultural shift took place towards second-order concerns, such as costs of economic growth and state of the natural world (Inglehart, 1977, 1990). In a less idealistic vein, it has been highlighted the increased rate of higher education (Eckersley, 1989, 216), credited to have constituted a sort of generational “platform” for the protests of the sixties (Buckingham, 2008, 40). Other authors have pointed out that the rise of a new, educated middle class aspiring to positional goods provoked a form of “social scarcity” of “environmental goods”, triggering the rise of environmental sensibilities (see Hajer, 1995, 77, drawing on Hirsch, 1977). This cluster of reasoning relates mainly to “participatory”, or “quality of life” environmental claims. As such, it gives a sense of relevant aspects regarding the social context in which U.S. environmentalism developed, and arguably helps to explain, for instance the complex relation of environmentalism with the Civil Rights movement (Eckersley, 1992, 8-10; Hay, 2002, 173), or the emergence of environmental considerations in the Democratic Party agenda since the late fifties (Rome, 2003, 528-532; Kline, 2011, 85). However, these arguments do not exhaust the variety of expressions of environmental concern in the post-war period, which ranged from conservative to revolutionary and “non-anthropocentric” declinations (Hayer, 1995, 77; Eckersley, 1992, 7-31). In order to find seeds of more
radical expressions, we may need to look at the public preoccupations about increasingly powerful military technologies, and in particular about atomic fallout. Donald Worster famously argued:

The Age of Ecology began on the desert outside Alamogordo, New Mexico on July 16, 1945, with a dazzling fireball of light and a swelling mushroom cloud of radioactive gases (quoted in Kline, 2011, 80).

According to McCormick, mass concern about the toxic ashes released by atomic tests entered the public debate after the American test on Bikini Atoll, in 1954, and particularly during the 1956 presidential election (1989, 53). The secrecy surrounding both the tests and their connected risks aroused suspicions about government’s conduct and early reflections about a scientific progress completely disengaged from moral considerations (1989, 51-53).

A decisive factor in the processes of radicalization and simultaneous popularization of environmental concern is also identified in a series of publications which had grounds in scientific knowledge, but were aimed at popular political debate (Buckingham, 2008, 39-40). A prominent role in this sense is usually given to Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* (1968), Commoner’s *Science and Survival* (1966), and invariably Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962). Carson’s book dealt with the devastating impacts of chemical pesticides on ecosystems and the ensuing risks for human health. Its publication sparked a national debate that represented an “epochal event” for the environmental movement (Gottlieb, 2005, 121), and brought J. F.
Kennedy to ask for a presidential study on the issues raised. Carson highlighted the military origins of the chemicals and the dangers connected to an increasingly powerful agro-chemical complex. What she found astonishing was the lack of scientific research at the basis of such an intensive deployment, a fact that she attributed to the economic interests in pesticides production (Guha, 1999, 67-69).

Carson’s book can be considered an early example of the emblematic relation between post-war environmentalism and science. Delving into this conceptual tension will allow us to better understand what ecological modernization represents, and to identify its possible sources. The impact of the aforementioned publications on public opinion leads most interpreters to underline the scientific inspiration of the movement (e.g. Hay, 2002, 16). Science inevitably appears as the best provider of proofs and alerts of environmental degradation, as well as being, less openly, a source of hope for a new generation of ecologically redeeming technologies (e.g. Gottlieb, 2005, 129). At the same time, however, environmentalism is characteristically understood as “part of a larger critique of the process of modernization and rationalization” (Hajer, 1995, 87), and connected to a “counter-enlightenment tradition” which accompanies the modernity project and re-emerges powerfully since the mid-sixties (see Bennett, 2001, 103). Such resurgence of Blakean indictments of science has been related to the growing specialization and consequent unintelligibility of scientific knowledge, and to the imperialistic stance made by science as the only valid
epistemological paradigm, thus depriving man of its privileged position in a meaningful universe (Bennett, 2001, 103-104; 113-114).

Through increasingly solid bridges with countercultural and leftist currents of thought, post-war resentment against science involved both its technological applications and, more radically, its validity as a “mode of cognition” (Bennett, 2001, 48-49; 108-109; 124). In the latter sense, particularly contested was the ideal of objectivity, culpable of separating knowledge from value, and objectifying nature. Negative considerations concerning the power of science were reinforced during the sixties by a series of environmental disasters connected to scientifically-enabled industrial activity, such as the wreck of the tanker Torrey Canyon, or the Cuyahoga River catching fire near Cleveland (Kline, 2011, 88; McCormick, 1989, 56-60). Rome suggests that the political dimensions of environmental concern at this point in U.S. history can be best appreciated by considering the protests that followed the oil spill from a Union Oil platform off the coast of Santa Barbara, California. “In a normally Republican community”, he argues, “thousands of people took part in rallies, pickets, and demonstrations against the unchecked power of ‘big oil’” (Rome, 2003, 545-546).

As Bennett highlights, the two faces of the critique against science were indeed understood as deeply connected, due to the social contexts in which scientific research was practiced. The development of weapons threatening life on a global scale presented with the greatest evidence the implications of the separation of progress from moral considerations (2001,
A potent bridge from environmentalism to anti-establishment ideologies was probably constituted by movements of protest against the war in Vietnam. Rome points out how U.S. media were reporting the conflict as a war on two fronts: against the Vietnamese and against a hostile natural environment. U.S. troops were using bulldozers and chemical agents to destroy vegetation, in an operation which activists and scientists started terming “ecocide”. Critical voices at that point were arguing that both the war and environmental decline were outcomes of the same Western technocratic logic of domination, thus connecting to anti-establishment thinkers, most notably Marcuse, very influential in student movements (Rome, 2003, 546-547; Eckersley, 1992, 10). Gottlieb maintains that the technologies employed during the war became a “potent symbol of advanced industrial society” (2005, 137). Scientific arguments, however, were themselves directly fostering a call for radical collective action by the mere documenting of the pace of environmental degradation (Hay, 2002, 186; Gross and Levitt, 1994, 169).

Simultaneous to this process of radicalization of the movement was the popularization of environmentalist ideas. A Gallup report, for instance, stated that “reducing air and water pollution” ranked 9th in 1965 and 2nd in 1970 as national priorities, its relevance increasing from 17% to 53% of the population (see Dunlap, 2014, 92). In 1972, Erskine could already talk of a “miracle of public opinion” (1972, 120). In July 1969, Apollo 11 had successfully landed on the moon, in a triumph of science and engineering. Haq and Paul argue that the images of the lifeless lunar surface clashed
vehemently with the first pictures taken from space of Earth as a whole, and contributed to the awakening of many to the finiteness of resources and the exceptionality of life in the universe (2013, 77-78). Hajer maintains that the image “facilitated the understanding of the intricate interrelatedness of the ecological processes” (1995, 8), and the UN report *Our Common Future* suggested it might have had a deeper cultural impact than the Copernican revolution (WCED, 1987, 1).

The public resonance of green anti-establishment stances reached a peak in correspondence with the Earth Day celebrations, in April 1970 (see Rome, 2003, 549-551). The early seventies were indeed the period during which scientifically grounded publications, as *The Ecologist’s A Blueprint for Survival* (Allen *et al.*., 1972), and the Club of Rome’s report *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows *et al.*., 1972), increasingly portrayed environmental decline as a “crisis of survival”. The apocalyptic tones of such publications were directly challenging “the sanguine belief that we could all continue with business and politics as usual” (Eckersley, 1992, 11-12), providing a platform for anti-technocratic, collectivistic utopias. At the same time, however, environmental concern was taking an institutional route aimed at progressive improvements of society (Kline, 2011, 96-97). This process of “mainstreaming” and institutionalization manifested itself in increased participation of activists to policing processes (Vogel, 1989, 60). In the course of the first Nixon administration, their activity, combined with growing public concern and, according to Vogel, a lack of interest on the behalf of the White House in government-business relations, resulted in the
enactment of four important environmental laws and the institution of a
central agency for environmental programs. Such initiatives represented for
the business community “a series of political setbacks”, unprecedented in
post-war history (1989, 59; 90-91).

The Seventies: From Radical Ecology to the Politicization of the
Marketplace

Given these premises, it might appear arduous to conceive how, in a
matter of a few years, the reigning paradigm in tackling environmental
decline could turn to see businesses as collaborators in the implementation
of policy. Equally surprising might be noticing how market-place came to
be considered a legitimate locus for political action. The processes through
which radical stances lost resonance and ecological modernization rose as
the main perspective on environmental decline have been given various
explanations. In the context of the U.S., relevance is given to diverse crises
which hit the country during the seventies. The OPEC embargo and the
related economic recession, for instance, are credited to have “frustrated the
validity of the discourse of selective growth” (Hajer, 1995, 94; also Kline,
2011, 106). Other events, as Japan’s economic growth and a sequence of
foreign policy defeats, as in Vietnam and Nicaragua, contributed to a feeling
of decline of American power, laying the ground for a “right-wing counter-
movement” against the cultural forces that had dominated the public debate
before the critical period (Buell, 2003, 6-11). Susan Beder speaks of “a war
of ideas” conducted by the corporate world in order to reinforce the priority
of economic growth over environmental concerns. In particular, she stresses the role of corporate-funded research institutes in supporting a vision of “free-market environmentalism”, according to which the internalization of environmental costs in market mechanisms would represent a more effective approach to address environmental problems than the regulative initiatives of the early seventies (2002, 19; 95-105).

Some difficulties encountered by radical versions of environmentalism were in many ways the product of their own successes. On one side, legislative achievements had inevitably increased political resistance (Buell, 2003, 9), on the other, as the environmental crisis became an undeniable fact for larger portions of the population, political actors who had been decisive in putting the issue on the public agenda started losing control on the definition of the problematique (Hajer, 1995, 102-103). Eckersley argues that “official recognition […] helped to define and contain environmental problems as essentially matters of poor planning” (1992, 8). Hajer, however, relevantly suggests that much of what ecological modernization represents should be also retraced to a “great ambiguity” cultivated to varying degrees by those same apocalyptic texts that fed radical environmentalism. While critiquing “large-scale thinking” and capitalism’s assumptions in resource management, and envisioning “decentralized”, “anti-technocratic” utopias, texts as Blueprint for Survival, The Limits to Growth, and Small is Beautiful (Schumacher, 1973) were also leaving space for hopes in technological ingenuity as a means for comprehensive planning techniques (Hajer, 1995, 78-89; 100). It might be
appropriate to connect this line of reasoning to the previously mentioned complex relation of environmentalism with science, and to note how in 1965 anarchist Murray Bookchin was already nurturing hopes in alternative technologies (in Kline, 2011, 84).

The rise in influence of less oppositional forms of environmentalism has been related to the emergence of perspectives gathered under the umbrella of ecological modernization (Hajer, 1995, 95; Micheletti, 2003, 8-9). The mainstreaming of the environmental movement relates also to the demise of apocalyptic tones characterizing the early seventies’ environmental discourse (Hajer, 1995, 89-90). The nuclear issue, which dominated the environmental debate during the mid-seventies, still functioned as a symbol of the centralized, technocratic and expert-led society that radicals were opposing (Cotgrove and Duff, 1980, 338); on the contrary, the “emblematic”, discourse-defining issues of the eighties, particularly ozone layer depletion and climate change, while spurring new waves of environmental concern (Haq and Paul, 2013, 87), were simultaneously more scientifically complex and less “politically illuminating”. They could easily be read as demanding for an increase in collaboration efforts, both in the scientific understanding and in the pursuit of practical solutions (Hajer, 1995, 91-95). Buell also stresses how the process of institutionalization, fundamental in producing the early seventies legislative outcomes, had professionalized driving strands of the movement (2003, 8), eroding radical, identitarian orientations and prompting a shift to more pragmatic approaches (Hajer, 1995, 94).
The rise of green consumerism in the forms of campaigns aimed at boycotting of culpable firms and “buycotting” of meritorious ones is clearly connected to this process of de-radicalization. Since the late seventies, influential strands of the movement have started “staking a claim in the marketplace”, thus shifting their core message from “consume less” to “consume carefully” (Gabriel and Lang, 2005, 49). Green consumerism is often analysed as part of a set of practices, gathered under labels such as “political consumerism” (Micheletti, 2003), and “ethical consumption” (Lewis and Potter, 2011), whose aim is giving public visibility to the political meanings hidden behind commodities and influencing the commodity chain (Micheletti, 2003, IX-X, 1).

The phenomenon of politicization of consumption characterizing Western consumer markets, while not being a new one, in its intense and pervasive contemporary form has been connected particularly to the rise of environmental sensibilities (Gabriel and Lang, 2005, 49). As a broad phenomenon, however, political consumerism has also been related to particular shifts in political landscapes. It has been noted that globalization processes, while bringing closer people around the world and making it problematic for companies to hide the politics behind their products, have seen the emergence of transnational powers in the form of global corporations (Micheletti, 2003, X). This process has not been accompanied by a comparable growth in the power of political and regulatory institutions. Political consumerism is therefore interpreted as a grassroots attempt to fill an institutional vacuum and address the power of global corporations. The
emergence of global environmental problems transcending the limits of national institutions is similarly credited to have produced a call for coordination at various levels of globalizing societies. In this sense the interconnectedness of markets is portrayed as providing consumers with a viable system for political participation on a global scale (2003, 5-15).

As far as it distances itself from radical critiques of consumer society, political consumerism has been critiqued for representing an “individualistic form of politics”, and as such an instrument through which neo-liberal governments encourage citizens to express their political engagement through nonetheless growth-pushing acts of consumption, rather than through collective political initiatives (see Littler, 2011, 32; Willis and Schor, 2011, 165-166). Johnston effectively summarizes this point:

While formal opportunities for citizenship seemed to retract under neo-liberalism, opportunities for a lifestyle politics of consumption rose correspondingly. Neoliberal governance actively promoted the idea of consumer choice in the market as a worthy complement to, and even substitute for the citizenship ideal of democratic participation (2008, 245-246).

Related critiques argue that through political consumerism responsibility is shifted from large economic actors to consumers, and that consumer activism is mainly produced through brand “green-washing”, i.e. the deployment of advertising and P.R. techniques in order to construct an environmentally friendly image without actually doing much to improve the environmental impact of business activities (Littler, 2011, 31; Johnston,
While a comprehensive evaluation of the interesting debates regarding merits and limits of green consumerism and of its manifold manifestations exceeds the aims of this chapter, what is important to stress is that acts of political consumerism can be understood as acts of “signification” through which the world of consumer goods gets invested with political meanings that create distinctions between “good” and “bad” commodities. Political meanings are indeed what the traditional process of commodification works to obliterate from commercial products, thus confining acts of consumption to the realm of private decisions (Micheletti, 2003, IX; 12-13). The next chapter will preliminarily review how firms answered to the politicization of the marketplace and to the greening of demand, themselves attaching political meanings to their products through strategies of “green marketing”. Subsequently, the discussion will focus more specifically on the car marketplace, retracing the historical emergence of “green” cars.
2 – Green Cars

Green Marketing: Co-option or Progressive Change?

Businesses were rapid in capturing the trends towards consumer activism, and green marketing techniques were developed since the late eighties on the wake of market research showing an unequivocal “greening of demand” (Ottman, 1993). The international resonance of publications as The Green Consumer Guide (Elkington and Hailes, 1988) and campaigns of boycotting, such as the one against aerosols containing chlorofluorocarbons, resonantly evidenced the risks facing businesses who were tempted to dismiss the changes in consumer behaviour (see Peattie and Crane, 2005, 358-359). Green marketing is generally defined as consisting of all the activities aimed at generating and facilitating the satisfaction of “human needs and wants […] with minimal detrimental impact on the natural environment” (Polonsky, 1994, 2). While in theory it is therefore supposed to involve structural changes in processes of production, so as to become a tool towards greater sustainability, its practice has been commonly criticized for focusing mainly on promotional tactics (Peattie and Crane, 2005). The term “green-washing” has been used since the late eighties to describe PR-based attempts of corporations to deceptively associate their products with an environmentally friendly image, while hiding the actual environmental impacts of their businesses and doing little to effectively improve it (Orange, 2010, 30).
While this strand of critiques involves great part of what is commonly considered green marketing, it still acknowledges the potentialities of market-based politics (on the part of businesses as well as on the part of consumers) as a tool towards significant improvements of the environmental impact of capitalist societies (see e.g. Prothero and Fitchett, 2000). More comprehensively dismissive critiques of market-based politics characteristically reconnect to the seventies’ radical arguments, and to Marxist perspectives on consumer culture developed by the Frankfurt School (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1944; Marcuse, 1969) and by later followers such as Stuart Ewen (1976; 1988). Fundamental to these critiques is the radical insight that an adequate approach to the environmental problematique would entail a reduction of consumption in general, rather than the creation of debatable distinctions between good and bad commodities (Johnston, 2008, 247-248; Durning, 1992). According to such perspectives, market-based politics, even in their noblest realizations, fall short as plausible solutions to the environmental crisis in that they fail to address the substantial issue regarding the capitalist assumption of an endless economic growth on a finite planet (Beder, 2002, 180).

Most exemplificative of this set of critiques is a chapter from Goldman and Papson’s *Sign Wars* (1996, 187-215). Building on Marxist insights, the authors argue that green advertising constitutes a perfect example of the dynamic through which consensus around the ideology of consumerism is maintained in capitalist societies (1996, 187-191). Consumerism is here intended as the dominant value-system in modern
capitalist societies, according to which consumption practices are main sources of meaning for individuals in life, providing fundamental means for the articulation of individual and collective identities (Slater, 1997, 8; Zhao and Belk, 2008, 231). Binding consumption with self-recognition and desire, consumerism represents a structural obstacle to the addressing of the issue of overconsumption. Green marketing, channelling the radical stances emerging from the environmental problematique within the world of commodities, embodies exemplifies the paradoxical alliance between market interests and alternative lifestyles that marks post-Fordist consumer cultures (1996, 189-190). This view, illustrative of approaches generally termed “co-option theories” (see Holt, 2002, 71; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007, 137-138), highlights how marketers “depend on symbols of cultural opposition to drive the sign-value circuit”, i.e. the process through which meanings valued among consumers are attached to brands and commodities, so that consumption of goods can fulfil a variety of non-utilitarian desires (Goldman and Papson, 1996, 19). In post-Fordist consumer cultures, such meanings come to represent the most effective tool through which marketers can differentiate brands and provide consumers with valuable “badges” to deploy in their “reflexive projects of the self” (Giddens, 1991; Goldman and Papson, 1996, 8-19). While being appropriated and converted into styles and fashion, however, countercultural symbols are also “eviscerated” of the oppositional potential that drove their emergence, so that they can unproblematically serve consumerist ideology, channelling demands for change at the public level into individualized acts
of consumption exploitable by niche markets (Ewen, 1988, 16-20; Goldman and Papson, 1996, 18-19). In Goldman’s and Papson’s view, green marketing “may marginally increase environmental awareness”, but, crucially, it simultaneously “cloud[s] political discourse regarding the environment in a swirl of commodity signs that blocks out critical questions about control over the means of production” (1996, 214).

As evident, such analyses recover the radical stance central to the early seventies’ environmentalism, and build up on a binary opposition between marketplace as a consistent and ordinated whole, and radical perspectives of critique and emancipation. This view is contested by a school of thought embracing a more post-structuralist perspective, supported, among others, by marketing scholar Craig Thompson and sociologist Juliet Schor. These authors stress the potentially positive outcomes of green consumerism, interpreting green marketing as a first, yet controversial outcome of consumer politics. They conceptualize marketplace as “a space of contestation and change”, in which “[c]onsumers and businesses are in a dialectical and historically contingent relationship […], and over time they change in relation to each other” (Willis and Schor, 2012, 168). These perspectives readily acknowledge “structural imbalances of power” (Willis and Schor, 2002, 168), that undermine too optimistic conceptualizations of consumers-producers relations. Particular prominence is given to corporate power to influence the information that circulates about the impact of business activities (Thompson, 2004, 173). In such context, fundamental importance is then attributed to the work of activists, charged
with the responsibility of monitoring the reliability of marketers’ claims (Thompson, 2004, 174). In such understandings, then, it is the activists’ commitment that is called upon to fill the regulatory gaps left open by neoliberal governance, giving a secure basis to the “awareness” of conscious consumers, and thus sabotaging attempts of green-washing.

Activists’ monitoring of corporations’ activities have indeed rendered problematic the kind of direct investment of progressive meanings on companies and products Goldman and Papson review in *Sign Wars* (1996, 187-215; Holt, 2002, 86-87). Companies as “Benetton, Ben & Jerry's, and the Body Shop”, Holt argues, “encountered early scrutiny simply because their explicitly politicized branding begged for it” (Holt, 2002, 86). Brands’ strategies have subsequently moved towards what Ottman calls “radical transparency”, that is the disclosure of good as well as of bad information regarding the political dimensions of their products, with the aim of preventing scandals and facilitating the investment of political meanings on consumers’ behalf (Ottman, 2011, 137-139). This shift takes place in the context set by digital communication technologies that make it increasingly difficult for brands to hide controversial information (Fournier and Avery, 2011).

Despite the public resonance of the environmental problematique may have been decreased by the financial turmoil and subsequent material insecurity of recent years (Scruggs & Benegal, 2012), environmental degradation is obviously still here. Whether we consider market-place politics as an “antipolitics machine” (Carrier, in Willis and Schor, 2012,
or instead we embrace a gradual view of social change, it appears that media literacy, the capacity to decode messages and grasp the assumptions driving them represents an increasingly valuable resource. In a way, this work aims at giving a contribution to such literacy, and can be seen as an investigation on the symbolic dimensions through which green products, and green cars in particular, are marketed and consumed. The next section will review the emergence of green cars in the context of a discussion of the symbolic values historically associated with automobiles.

**Status, Freedom, and Green Concerns as well**

Since the first conceptions of this study, a number of arguments suggested the car marketplace as a privileged site for understanding how ecological modernization perspectives are articulated in consumer culture. The conversion of automobiles into signifiers of environmental concern might indeed appear arduous even just considering the automobile’s historical implication in one of the earliest emblematic issues around which post-war environmental sensibilities coalesced, i.e. urban air pollution (Kline, 2011, 104). The pervasiveness of automobile transport in modern societies continues to represent a primary cause of environmental degradation, involved in phenomena such as acid rains and global warming, as well as in the depletion of non-renewable resources both for the manufacturing of vehicles and for their oil-based functioning (Paterson, 2000, 258-260).
Sheller and Urry, while investigating the “specific character of domination” of the automobile in contemporary societies, have argued that it represents a crucial aspect of modernity, as emblematic of processes of globalization as computer technologies and television (Sheller & Urry, 2000, 737-743; Urry, 2006, 17). While their attention is on identifying the peculiar shape automobility has given to societies, they acknowledge the relevance of arguments from authors like Habermas, who negatively portrayed the impact of privatized mobility on traditional civil societies, pointing in particular at the transformation of the public spaces where the urban public sphere used to unfold “into an ill-ordered arena for tyrannical vehicle traffic” (Habermas, quoted in Sheller and Hurry, 2000, 242). Such arguments present as even more paradoxical the conversion of the automobile into a signifier of political engagement. The history of the automobile, both as a product of industrial manufacturing and as an object of consumption, is furthermore characteristically intertwined with the trajectories of 20th century industrialism, in its evolutions through Fordist and post-Fordist configurations (Sheller and Urry, 2000, 738).

Related to these points is the “keystone” role automobile is commonly given in the affirmation of consumerism as dominant ideology (Gartman, 2004, 177). The car as object of consumption, beyond its functional aspect as a means of private mobility, has been historically loaded with a range of non-utilitarian meanings, “half conveyance, half fantasy” (Gitlin, quoted in Conley, 2009, 37). In his historical excursus on the symbolic dimension of automobiles, Gartman highlights how the car has represented since its birth
a symbol of class distinction and social-status (Gartman, 2004, 171). The car also most commonly bears associations with the idea of family, representing a “home-from-home” (Urry, 2006, 27), its standardized dimensions and configuration often interpreted as implicitly assuming family in its nuclear and patriarchal form (Wernick, 1994, 78-94). At the same time, the car is also consumed as signifier of freedom, autonomy, escape and individuality, connotations based on the “geographical mobility” it grants, away from the “collective regimentation” of public transport timetabling (Gartman, 2004, 171). Other stable associations characteristically include “speed”, “power” and “progress”, directly relating to the role of the automotive industry as symbol of progress and economic growth for most of the twentieth century (Paterson, 2001, 100; see also Wernick, 1994). Quite relevantly to our discussions, Conley notes how such symbolic dimension of the car has been often articulated in advertising through visual metaphors of domination of nature, portraying cars in wild natural settings and able to tackle with all kinds of weather conditions (2009-51-52). Drawing on insights from Adorno and Horkheimer, Gartman highlights how the central role of cars in “the narcotizing edifice of consumerism” should be identified in the possibility they gave workers to symbolically satisfy, in the private realm of consumption, demands they were daily negated by the alienating conditions characterizing Fordist mass-production. While anchored in the use-value of automobile as industrial product and tool for private and autonomous mobility, the associations with
freedom, individuality and progress functioned as ersatz satisfactions of aspirations denied by Fordist Capitalism (2004, 177-180).

While this basic semantic legacy evidently still persists, in its evolutions the automobile has greatly expanded its signifying capacity. In Gartman’s account, the ideal of standardization at the basis of Fordist economies of scale imposed that the differentiation between expensive and cheap makes had to be achieved not through qualitative differences, but through “the quantity of their feature – they had more of what everyone wanted”, i.e. chrome rims, power, or styling cues of aeronautic derivation (2004, 177-185). Such strategy of quantitative differentiation was rooted in a segmentation of consumers based on income, whose implicit assumption was that of a homogenous, conformist society, in which all consumers wanted the same thing, i.e. progress in the economic hierarchy, and thus greater access to symbols of individuality, freedom, etc. (2004, 187). The logic of differentiation characterizing Fordist car markets has entered a crisis since at least the early sixties for a variety of historical forces. Gartman focuses on the internal contradictions of this “cultural logic” of the car, showing how the idea that a standardized, superficially differentiated mass-commodity could provide consumers with surrogates for individuality did not survive the wave of societal change that characterized the decade. In the context of the U.S., an array of “custom-car subcultures” emerged in reaction to the incapacity of national manufacturers to address consumers’ demands for symbols of individuality, and sales of “exotic” European cars also registered a consistent rise (Gartman, 2004, 183-184). In order to
restore the car’s symbolic significance, American brands soon took structural initiatives at the levels of both production and marketing, widening their offers to include typologies of vehicles qualitatively differentiated in function, dimension, engineering and aesthetics. These new ranges targeted niche markets, identified according to “noneconomic issues” like age, gender, sexuality and variously inspired lifestyles. The outcome of this process was a fragmentation of the market and a “pluralization” of car culture destined to mature from the eighties onwards (2004, 185-188).

While a mass produced “green” car did not emerge until the late nineties, Wernick suggests that from the seventies onwards car advertising has responded to the problematizations of “blind technology” rising from countercultural milieus with an increase in the deployment of natural imagery. Car culture saw a reversal of the techno-enthusiasm of the previous decades: “[r]ather than portraying cars as the pinnacle of urban civilization”, Wernick explains, “ads placed them in green meadows” (1991, 78). Building on Wernick’s observations, but focusing on the nineties, Paterson describes advertisements in which the car is almost invisible, “submerged in images of nature”, and others where the appropriation of nature takes the form of an assimilation between the progress of car manufacturing and natural evolution (2001, 98). Both Paterson and Wernick then highlight the use of nostalgia as a tactic to respond to the contestations of automobility. According to this trope, cars are reimagined through references to an age of innocence of American industrialism, prior to the rise of post-war environmental critique. According to Wernick, this trend in
reconceptualising the automobile was reinforced by the oil embargo and by the growing problem of urban traffic, credited to have weakened the resonance of the association of the automobile with individual freedom (1991, 78). It is however relevant to point out that an association with nature is probably constitutive of the car as much as the previously mentioned association with ideas of “geographical escape”. From the early days of automobility, cars have allowed urban citizens to momentarily evade over-populated cities, and immerse in previously inaccessible natural environments (Kline, 2011, 70; Sheller, 2004, 231-232; Conley, 2009, 39). This notion, besides providing nuances to our historical understanding of the relationship between car and nature in consumer culture, helps us in identifying points of possible emergence of symbolic configurations capable of resolving the conceptual tension between the two terms.

The “pluralization” of car culture to which Gartman refers generated a mass-produced “green car” only after the introduction of hybrid engines in the late 1990s, the first, and by far most emblematic model being the Toyota Prius (Garland et al., 2013, 282). Hybrid Electric Vehicles (HEVs) are characterized by the combination of a gasoline engine and an electric motor powered by a battery that recharges accumulating energy normally wasted (USDE, 2014). HEVs have been received worldwide as constituting a cleaner way of experiencing personal mobility (Garland et al., 2013, 282). In 2009, Ozaki and Sevastyanova (2011) conducted a UK-based survey in collaboration with Toyota, whose findings suggest that beside perceived financial and practical benefits, a major role in purchase motivations is
played by the compatibility attributed to HEVs with the green values pertaining consumers. Another decisive motivational aspect appears to reside in the interests in technology of purchasers, who value HEVs’ innovativeness (2011, 223-225). In an early investigation of the symbolic dimensions that HEVs made available to car drivers, Heffner et al. had somewhat relatable results (2005; 2007). Their discussion unfolds from a series of ethnographic interviews with early adopters of HEVs in California, later analysed through methods based on Barthes’ semiotics. Their findings suggest a set of primary, “denotative” meanings attached by early buyers to HEVs, which include environmental concern, ownership of latest technologies, reduction of oil dependence and financial convenience. These primary meanings were connected, in variable fashion, to a set of secondary, broader connotations as “concern for others”, “ethics”, “maturity” and “individuality” (2007, 408-412). The authors highlight how the communicative function of HEVs appears crucial for most of the interviewees’, stressing in particular an almost inescapable “green image” EVs bear. (2005, 5-7).

Garland et al. (2013) have conducted interpretive analyses of 33 Prius’ advertisements published in Canada between 2006 and 2011. In their study they highlight how ambiguities and absences about issues sensitive for our discussion, such as matters of agency in projects for greater sustainability, the relation between technology and nature, and the one between automobility and the state of the environment, served manufacturers’ strategic aims in articulating the image of Prius as a “green
car”. They stress in particular how the natural settings in which the cars are placed appear “hyperreal”, “manicured” and improved, implicitly suggesting hybrid technology’s “ability to repair and reorder nature” (2013, 688-691). Ambiguities like these, relying on readers’ participation in the process of meaning creation, allowed Toyota to avoid some of the risks involved in green marketing, particularly scrutiny of their “green credibility” and accusations of greenwashing that direct association with political meanings frequently triggers (2013, 698). Inspired by critical accounts of consumer co-creation of meaning in the marketplace, they then suggest that such strategy, “while seemingly democratizing” may represent a form of “control through ambiguity” of consumers’ resistance and cynicism (2013, 698). A focus on ambiguity is also at the centre of de Burgh-Woodman and King’s critical discourse analysis of Toyota hybrid car’s Australian website (2012). Toyota’s website, they argue, constructs an idea of sustainability that is not rooted in a gaze on future risks connected to the current practices of automobility, but rather in a generic notion of “human/nature connection”, emerged repeatedly in the history of Western culture, and emblematically during the Romantic period. In their view, the “unchallenging” idea of sustainability constructed by Toyota “invites symbolic engagement”, simultaneously obfuscating the notion of sustainability as an actionable agenda (2012, 16).
3 – A Case Study: Tesla Motors

In the course of the second chapter, it has been argued that the emblematic role of the automobile in the historical trajectory of Western consumerism made it a potentially illuminating object of analysis for understanding how green political meanings are articulated in contemporary consumer cultures. The connotations circulating around “green cars” have been reviewed considering both manufacturers and consumers as producers of meaning. To give an extant dimension to our account, we are now proceeding to analyse the visual communication of an American automotive company producing exclusively electric vehicles that recently enjoyed considerable hype: Tesla Motors.

Spaceships, Solar Energy and Supercars

Tesla Motors was founded in 2003 in San Carlos, California, by Martin Eberhard and Marc Tarpenning, joined in 2004 by South African iconic entrepreneur Elon Musk, who had built a fortune co-founding online payment provider PayPal (Nuttall, 2007). The company’s objective being to “create efficient electric cars for people who love to drive” (Tesla, 2007), Tesla was the first automobile manufacturer to mass-produce highway-capable electric vehicles (Mangram, 2012, 296), and reached its first profitable quarter at the beginning of 2013 (Musk, 2013). Tesla models are equipped with a zero-emissions electric motor, powered by a rechargeable
electric battery composed by almost 7000 Li-Ion cells (Tesla, 2014; Tesla, 2014b). Tesla’s first model, the Roadster, started being delivered in early 2008, its base price being $109,000 (Mangram, 2012). Now out of production, the Roadster was a high-end sports car that made an impact on specialized media and public opinion, arguably changing people’s associations with electric cars (McGlaun, 2011). Besides being able to accelerate from 0 to 60 mph in less than 4 seconds, the Roadster guaranteed an autonomy of up to 245 miles per charge (Tesla, 2014c), thus providing arguments against detractors of EVs leveraging on “range anxiety”, i.e. the fear to deplete the battery far from home, often considered a primary factor in the failure of previous attempts to mass-market electric cars (Friend, 2009). Media commenters have argued that the coverage Tesla received must indeed be related to the car’s performances, and to the novelty of a newly-born manufacturer, operating far from Detroit, succeeding in an evolution of the automobile that major manufacturers did not yet consider possible (Friend, 2009; Brown, 2009; Walsh, 2014).

The idea of producing an EV affordable only to a fraction of U.S. drivers might seems arduous to invest with political meanings, and could trigger the accusations of elitism that green consumerism has frequently attracted (Peattie and Crane, 2005). However, far before the first deliveries of the Roadster, Musk pre-emptively supported this choice on Tesla’s blog. Because of the high costs new technologies require to be optimized, Musk argued, Tesla’s plan would have been to initially target consumer segments willing to pay a premium for an exclusive vehicle, with the aim to
subsequently “drive down market as fast as possible to higher unit volume and lower prices with each successive model” (2006). As Mangram points out, while common in technological sectors, such strategy is very rare in the automotive industry (2012, 304). In his post, Musk continued: “[w]hen someone buys the Tesla Roadster sports car, they are actually helping pay for development of the low cost family car” (2006). While, as mentioned, the impact of the car was very much related to the new technological aspects and standards of performance, there is indeed a sort of missionary tension in many of Musk’s declarations. The same blogpost, for instance, stated:

[The] overarching purpose of Tesla Motors (and the reason I am funding the company) is to help expedite the move from a mine-and-burn hydrocarbon economy towards a solar electric economy, which I believe to be the primary, but not exclusive, sustainable solution (Musk, 2006).

Elsewhere he maintained that Tesla wanted to make “a sexy product, that also saves the world”, and depicted the company’s role as that of a “guiding light, helping bring these cars to market five or ten years faster than they would have otherwise—which could make an important difference for saving the species” (in Friend, 2009).

Alongside Tesla, Musk’s projects include SpaceX, a private company devoted to space exploration, and SolarCity, a provider of solar energy systems (Nuttall, 2007). The visionary outlook behind such enterprises found expression in a range of choices at Tesla. An example is the company’s decision to rely on a network of company-owned stores rather
than on traditional relationships with independent dealers (Mouawad, 2014). Musk explained the decision arguing that franchise dealers have “a conflict of interest” between selling Tesla’s vehicles and traditional gasoline-led cars, and it would be “impossible for them to explain the advantages of going electric without simultaneously undermining their traditional business” (Musk, 2012). Another recent example is Tesla’s decision to “open-source” their technologies, thus renouncing to prosecute any infringement of their patents. Presented as a way to foster progress and participation in the world-saving electric automotive industry (Musk, 2014), such initiative, journalists argued, may bring business benefits through the amortization of infrastructural costs, for example for the expansion of the Supercharger stations network, through which Tesla owners can achieve the fastest recharging possible at the moment (Liedtke and Durbin, 2014).

Particular interest in specialized press has been attracted by Tesla’s little expenditures for advertising and promotion, and by their rejection of traditional marketing approaches. In 2009, Advertising Age magazine, while including Tesla in its list of “America’s Hottest Brands” (Advertising Age, 2009), highlighted the company’s choice to rely on word-of-mouth, internet buzz and Musk’s media appearances to generate coverage (Halliday, 2009). In a later article, the magazine argued that Tesla is “breaking all the rules of automotive marketing”, avoiding standardized advertising and focusing on store experience (McCarthy, 2013). Common explanations of Tesla’s ability to generate “big buzz” have again focused on the uniqueness of Tesla’s product (McCarthy, 2013; Walsh, 2014). Tesla’s singular offer has spurred
deep commitment on the part of customers and admirers, fostering the rise of a very active “brand community” (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001), which on the company’s forum praises Tesla’s conduct, obsessively using the expression “paradigm shifting” to describe Musk’s moves (Tesla, 2013; Mouawad, 2014). Commenters have generally related such level of brand identification to Tesla’s ability in constructing enemies (identified both in car dealers and traditional auto-makers), and in establishing an emotional connection with customers around the idea of making something good for the planet (Walsh, 2014; Giesler, 2014).

Given Tesla’s choice to avoid traditional advertising, the company’s website arguably represents an important channel through which meanings associated with the brand are articulated. Tesla.com hosts the blog where Musk and other high-ranked employees regularly post, and plays a crucial role in the construction of the brand’s community of admirers, harbouring a section dedicated to “customer stories”, and a forum where fans regularly discuss about the company and related topics (Tesla, 2014d). In the rest of this chapter I will focus on the webpages presenting Tesla’s cars, in particular their Model S, introduced in 2012. My focus will be primarily on the visual imagery deployed, but attention will be inevitably given also to surrounding written texts and to the website’s architecture¹. The aim is to

¹ On the 9th of October 2014, Tesla Motors announced new technological developments implementable on their Model S. They subsequently updated their U.S.
investigate from a semiotic perspective the meanings associated with these hyped electric cars, focusing in particular on the way Tesla strikes a balance with respect to discourses about technology, environment and automobility. Pre-emptively, Tesla’s imagery appears considerably distant from the kind of appropriation of nature Paterson (2001, 97-98) described, or from portrayals of the automobile as working “in harmony with nature” (Garland et al., 2012). Tesla cars’ compatibility with the environment appears as given for granted, inextricably embedded in the assumptions from which EV technology has been developed. Despite the hype surrounding Tesla’s innovativeness, I argue, Model S is presented mainly through associations with speed, progress and exclusivity, traditional to automotive advertising (see e.g. Conley, 2009). With a few exceptions, nature remains most of the time “the outside”, or even “the other” to be protected from and to dominate.

My analysis of Tesla Motors’ visual language is very much in debt to the work of Kress and van Leeuwen, as articulated in Reading Images (2006). Building on bases in Critical Discourse Analysis, these authors focus in particular on the “syntax” of visual design, i.e. the ways in which the different elements of an image combine and work together to produce meaning, simultaneously reproducing the ideology from which they depart.

homepage and modified parts of the Model S section. What is here referred to as “Features page” is not currently available. Pictures from the pages on which analysis has been conducted are available in the Appendix.
This approach expands the work of the Paris School of semiotics, mainly focused on the meaning of the individual elements of a representation (2006, 1-16). Despite this influence, my treatment will in some regards desert Social Semiotics’ prescriptions. The role reserved to this case study in the context of the work rendered problematic a systematic examination of the kind generally prescribed by social semiotics (van Leeuwen, 2005, 6), and matters of space precluded the possibility to introduce the reader to technical aspects of Social Semiotics. For these reasons, I have opted for a less formalized treatment, following the example of Thompson’s influential article on the natural health marketplace (2004).

**Cars from the Silicon Valley**

Tesla Motors’ U.S. homepage opens on a side-view photograph of a red Tesla riding on a slightly sloping country road (Fig. 1). On the background, green grass is blurred by the photographer’s attempt to follow the speed of the car. Above the picture, we can see Tesla’s logo and a row of links to the different sections of the website (Tesla, 2014). The first link gives access to the Model S section, whose introductory page carries in prominence an image of a silver Model S on a road in a desert area (Fig.2). The car occupies the foreground in the central and left thirds of the picture, while three distinct blocks of text appear on the right (name of the car, first strapline and second strapline). A few instants after the image has loaded, four smaller texts gradually appear in the left and central portions. Scattered around the car, these superimposed texts specify some of its technical
features. In the lower right corner, three buttons link to pages where it is possible to get in contact with Tesla. All these writings are connected among themselves in a number of ways, echoing and rearticulating different notions about the car. The texts work in conjunction with the underlying photograph, whose composing elements and structure host ambivalences that each of them works to solve in a different manner. I will try to work out the meanings embedded in this layered semiotic text, in order to elucidate the values Tesla attempts to convey on its product. This is the most complex visual text in the section, and its introductive role appears to give it peculiar relevance for an understanding of Model S symbolic dimensions.

Just below the capitalized name of the car, the first tagline reads: “Zero emissions. Zero compromises”. The first half of the caption works as a metonymy, reminding potential customers that Model S is an electric vehicle, and simultaneously stressing its main merit with regards to environmental issues. The second part, “zero compromises”, addresses EVs’ historical negative associations, according to which electric cars are short-range, slow city cars (Friend, 2009; Gartman, 2004, 174). Arguably, it also challenges the assumption that commitment for better collective futures entails self-constraint and privation, as in the case of public transport “collective regimentation” (Gartman, 2004, 171; see Johnston, 2008). The second strapline reads “Introducing a car so advanced it sets a new standard for premium performance”. In a certain sense, this strapline further challenges established ideas around EVs, but the logic is here developed on a higher dimension. Model S not only overcomes the historical inaptness of
electric cars, it is now setting new standards of automobility in general. It represents the highest level of sophistication of the automotive technology. The “compromises” to which the first strapline refers are to be identified primarily in size, speed, and range, as elicited by three of the super-imposed texts. It is interesting to notice how in the first strapline a full stop divides the “zero emissions” feature from “zero compromises”, while here the representation of “0 emissions” is in everything similar to the numerical data certifying Tesla’s overcoming of EVs’ historical deficits. One inevitably recalls how ecological modernization perspectives tend to conceptualize pollution as inefficiency, so that they can identify technological progress as a solution to environmental degradation (Dryzek, 1997, 167-168). The superimposed texts hint at the underlying photograph with dotted lines, working as an analytical layer through which to appreciate some of Model S’ features (see Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, 50-51). The car itself, steady wheels and oblique positioning, addresses the viewer, offering itself for examination and admiration (see Garland et al., 2013, 685-686; Jewitt and Oyama, 2001, 135-139), the three buttons on the low right reinforcing this appeal to the potential buyer.

Despite the analytical structure established by the car’s posture and the superimposed texts, elements in the composition of the photograph work in a different direction. Stopped to be admired, highlighted by the lines of the mountain range behind, the silver Tesla is also on a road, whose route we guess at the bottom of the valley in the background. While, from the point of view of the composition, the road itself conveys attention on the
car, it simultaneously hints at a temporal, narrative dimension, implying the process through which the car has come to be in that position (see Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, 59-63; 97). The car-body glitters in the ephemeral twilight, and, roughly in the direction the road comes from, dark clouds populate the horizon. These elements move away as well from the analytical perspective set by the superimposed texts. The temporal dimension they introduce works metaphorically as a diachronic examination of what, in Tesla’s view, Model S represents in the history of progress of the automobile. As mentioned, these diachronic signifieds are “anchored” and explicated by the text of the second strapline (Barthes, 1977, 39). In particular, there are metaphoric linkages between “introducing” and the sun rising on the right, and between “advanced” and the position of the car on the road. Model S, therefore, represents here the latest evolution of the automobile in general, not only of EVs. In these respects, the presence of the sun is loaded with faceted significance. While its rise alludes to a new era of automobility Tesla is fostering, it also bears an association to renewable energy sources, to which Tesla is also committed.

An alternative interpretation of the sun’s position as indicating sunset unveils a range of signifieds also relevant to our discussion. In this sense, the sun comes to represent a further articulation of Tesla’s achievements in overcoming EVs’ limits: with Model S’ top-class range, you are not afraid of driving at night out of the city. These connotations of the outside as potentially hostile are indeed spread through most of the natural settings. The car is in a sterile, desert environment, the road broken and uneven, and
clouds themselves articulate the feeling of a potential challenge coming from outside. Also, photographic emphasis is away from the natural settings, both diaphragm and focus settings aiming to highlight car features. In these respects, the image is strikingly different from the hyper-real, ameliorated nature of the Prius advertisements described by Garland et al. (2013, 688-691). The settings’ connotations and the imbalance in the amount of detail granted to the car and to the surroundings speak of a fantasy of challenge and domination, a gendered myth of frontier and technological conquest in which the car represents a reliable tool against natural forces. As seen, such fantasy has a long lineage in automotive advertising, and it still has great currency (Conley, 2009, 52). Model S, then, is not an electric city car; it is a technological wonder, but it also is, still, a long-range, safe and fast automobile.

We can now reconnect to Fig.1, to note how also in that much simpler visual proposition, the aim of the undistinguishable green grass on the background was mainly to connote the car’s speed (see Conley, 2009, 46). This consideration indeed can be extended to the only photograph in the “Test Drive” page (Fig. 3), as well as to a couple of images in the “Features” page (Fig.4; Fig.5). In the “Features” page (Tesla, 2014w), the functions accomplished by the single visual representation in the introductory page (Fig.2) are delegated to two different sets of images. More narrative representations, in which context is present although reduced to blurred connotator of speed (in Fig.5 it is even in black and white), are accompanied by larger, “analytic” visual propositions, in which context is
completely suppressed to produce a more conceptual mode of representation (e.g. Fig.6) aimed at technically describing Model S’ features (see Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, 160-163). The symbolic construction of the electric car as latest stage in the progress of the automobile in general is here most explicitly carried out by the written text. Here, emphasis is put on aspects such as the fact that Tesla motors are more responsive than fuel-powered ones, and at the same time more efficient in converting energy in movement, or that the battery’s position lowers the inertia of the car, improving grip and manoeuvrability as well as the safety of the passengers’ cabin (Tesla, 2014w).

Interesting imagery about Model S is found also in the “Top 5 Questions” page (Tesla, 2014j). The page is introduced by a big picture of a decontextualized Model S with the wording “go electric”, and each of the five questions is also introduced by a different picture (see Fig. 7-11). The five pictures have comparable structure, they all appear quite ideal and conceptual, hosting a prominent capitalized question in the upper half (often on the backdrop of a blue sky), with the car just below, providing a confident answer to the doubts raised by the question (see Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, 193). Three of the images have a rudimentary embedded motion system, so that scrolling down the page the car moves², an effect that arguably reinforces the assertiveness of the lower half of the photographs.

² To see this effect: Tesla, 2014.
While most of these images show car-context relations already examined, two of them appear particularly relevant. The last one (Fig.11) hosts the question “how much can I save?”, and while the car occupies the foreground of the composition, we are allowed to catch details of the setting, constituted by a modernist-looking house adorned by educated nature, in front of which the car is parked. This setting is different from the desert area of Fig.2. The relation is not of opposition, but of relaxed narrative integration. Wheels are steady, but the reason is clear: the car is parked. This relevance granted to the house relates to the monetary concerns expressed in the question, articulated as domestic considerations. The image thus recovers another traditional connotation of the car, that with family and domestic responsibility (Wernick, 1994, 78-94), which previous images had left under-addressed, although it actually represents a salient feature of Model S’ functionality, being it able to accommodate up to seven passengers.

A comparably striking car-context relation is that characterizing Fig.10, introducing the question “how is electricity generated?”. In this image, the assimilation of the car into the setting takes a different route, both the car and the greenery and windmills in its surroundings being indeed blurred. This solution again connotes movement, speed, and, in this case, also wind. The integration goes further: the car is not completely visible, its side being covered by a green bush, and we cannot see the road on which it is travelling. This composition, through the blurred effect in particular, works to associate Model S’ functioning with that of the wind blades prominent in the background, which significantly are in the same colour as
the car (see van Leeuwen, 2005, 12-13). We can note, therefore, how Model S finds its maximal integration with the natural settings in the second half of the fifth page in the Model S section, and, most relevantly, through the mediation of a clean energy technology. The photograph serves to introduce an issue potentially problematic for the construction of EVs as symbols of green concern, i.e. the greenness of the energy sources necessary to recharge Tesla’s batteries. Model S’ emissions might be zero, but, if pollution gets simply transferred to the power plant, how much does the environment gain? Under this image, we find a two-level diagram (Fig.12) showing the different sources powering Tesla cars. On the first level we find traditional energy sources as gas and coal, on the second one, renewable energy sources as wind and solar energy. Between the two levels, the sentence “as new power plants using renewable energy are built, generating electricity becomes even more efficient” conceptualizes again the shift to cleaner technologies as one to efficiency.

The diagram leads to a map through which it is possible to calculate Tesla vehicles’ emissions in the different states of the U.S. on the basis of the energy sources privileged by each state (fig.13). The map’s aim is arguably to prevent easy accusations of Tesla representing EVs as green, while leaving out from the calculation energy sources, and simultaneously to present the company as a sincere and committed social actor (Tesla, 2014j). The act of showing the emission costs of the energy through which car batteries are recharged can thus be interpreted as a sort of “gestural unmasking”, of the kind Sam Binkley has effectively termed “fetishized de-
fetishization” (2008, 599-602). As we have seen, direct appropriation of political meanings is a risky move for a brand (Holt, 2002, 86-87), and “transparency” strategies have been developed to attract and facilitate consumers’ investment of political meanings on brands, concurrently constructing the brand as a reliable collaborator towards better futures. It must be noticed, however, that the de-fetishization Tesla puts in place involves another industrial actor, i.e. the energy provision infrastructure, a move that allows Tesla to implicitly communicate that automotive technology, thanks to EVs, is now environmentally safe, and it is the moment for other sectors to do their part. This perspective clearly omits the environmental problems in which automobility is implicated apart from emissions, such as resource depletion and road building, and reinforces the construction of EVs as the final stage of automobile progress, at which environmental care has eventually been internalized by technological advancement.

Tesla Motors presentation of Model S embeds environmental care at the level of the technological sophistication that makes their EVs function. In consonance with perspectives of ecological modernization, this manoeuvre assimilates what initially emerged as a simultaneously scientific and political argument about human-nature relations within a project of technological progress. Tesla, however, does not stop here. Bringing this discursive strategy to its logical symbolic expression, Tesla turns to recover imagery pertaining to traditional automotive rhetoric, including myths of
technological domination over nature, which of course are at the ideological antithesis of radical environmentalism’s anti-technocratic utopias, and also contrast with what is expressed in the Prius advertisements analysed by Garland et al. (2013). The media context set by Tesla’s “paradigm-shifting” technology and the hype around a new automotive manufacturer, headquartered in the land of technological innovation and led by a visionary CEO, facilitate the optimization of this ecological modernization aesthetics, constructing Tesla as a future-oriented prophet towards ecologically safe “techtopias” (Giesler, 2014). The comparisons made by both the website and the blog between Tesla’s electric powertrain and other green car technologies also help in this sense. While Toyota Priuses are “hybrid” creatures, still entangled in the “mine-and-burn hydrocarbon economy”, Model S is “all-electric” and “zero emissions” (Musk, 2006). At a symbolic level, “going electric” might indeed have a kind of absoluteness and uncontroversialness hybrid technology cannot achieve, thus clouding questions about the environmental impact of electric automobility apart from emissions. Wernick noticed how nostalgia in car advertising could momentarily silence contestations of automobility, invoking an “age of innocence” of American industrialism prior to post-war environmental critique (Wernick, 1991, 83-88). Tesla’s approach might be seen as a variation on this strategy: traditional meanings associated with the car are here recovered not through nostalgia, but thanks to a new technology that shields from critiques upstream, having allegedly incorporated environmental insights within its scientific reasoning. The rhetoric of
technological progress in which environmental care has been embedded simultaneously provides partial justification for possible lacks in addressing the demands of environment in the perspective of a gradual enhancement of technologies, obscuring the contextual process of continual obsolescence and resource consumption.

In this context, the reliance on relatively traditional automotive rhetoric works to reassure potential customers that, despite all the media hype, Model S is still a car, just the best you have ever driven (cfr. von Holzhausen, 2009). Simultaneously, a whole set of proscribed signifieds are re-legitimated to the use of environmentally conscious consumers. In Tesla’s visual propositions analysed, the process of digestion of radical political stances of the environmental movement appears maximized. While purchasers of Priuses inevitably had to deal with the “green image” culturally attached to the product (Heffner et al., 2005, 5-7), the range of signifieds available to Tesla’s customers is wider, and involves myths of technological advancement on which the automotive industry has relied for a long time. But how do we want to interpret this strategy? How will traditional manufacturers respond to Tesla’s strategy? Can we, as Musk would desire, consider Tesla’s project an attempt to co-opt automobility towards a greener future? If car-makers, as to some extent they are already doing, will increasingly move towards EVs, it is plausible to expect that marketing necessities will trigger a sort of pluralization of green car culture. For sure, it is preferable if fashion mechanisms operate in the technological context set by Tesla’s open-source and “0 emissions” powertrain, and,
indeed, we may actually consider that the “progressive change” perspective supported by Thompson, Willis and Schor is convenient on the basis of the simple realization that capitalism is here to stay. From a different perspective, however, some questions remain critical: why does a Tesla Roadster need to be able to accelerate from 0 to 60 mph in less than 4 seconds? Given the not yet efficient energy provision infrastructure, would not less energy be consumed if this was not possible? But this, indeed, is a political question.
Conclusion

In the course of the eighties, rises in environmental concern were increasingly translating in shifts in purchasing patterns among Western consumers. The trend represented a process of politicization of consumption behaviours, according to which products perceived as less damaging for the environment were rewarded by consumers’ choices and blameworthy commodities were boycotted. Although commonplace for most of us, marketplace manifestations of an environmental sensibility appear paradoxical when considering the radical stances characterizing the early seventies’ environmental movement. Practices of “green consumerism”, as they have been termed, have been here interpreted as grassroots actions aimed at projecting on commodities political meanings unintended by marketers. The emergence of such trends among western consumers, however, pushed companies to attempt to develop marketing strategies capable of addressing these new phenomena. Part of the second chapter has been dedicated to a brief introduction to practices of green marketing, interpreted as a form of politicization of products on producers’ behalf, aimed at targeting consumers’ political sensibilities. Two alternative perspectives on the broad trend of politicization of the market-place have been presented, the objective being to further investigate the implications of this tendency, and to construct a critical understanding of the movement of meaning in contemporary consumer cultures. An approach inspired by the Frankfurt School, and here exemplified by the work of Goldman and Papson.
(1996), sees the politicization of the marketplace, and green marketing in particular, as a phenomenon that works to convert environmental critiques, whose fundamental insight would be a call to reduce consumption as a whole, into objectified symbols of green sensibility. Thanks to this dynamic, consensus around consumption and consumerist ideology is perpetuated. An alternative view, also presented in the chapter, positively conceptualizes the politicization of the marketplace and values the efforts of marketplace activists as possibly conducive to social change (Thompson, 2004).

The increased circulation of political meanings in markets inevitably involved the automotive sector, which since the sixties had been at the centre of a process of diversification of cars’ symbolic values (Gartman, 2004). The intersection of these two related processes and the introduction of hybrid electric engines has led to mass-production of “green cars” since the nineties. Various strands of literature investigating the symbolic dimensions of hybrid cars emphasize the political significance attached to such vehicles. In the 2000s, HEVs have been flanked by “all electric” vehicles, whose previous commercialisations had failed, allegedly due to the functional deficiencies in comparison with fuel-powered cars. Tesla Motors in particular has made an impact on public opinion improving considerably electric cars’ range and speed. Tesla’s ability to trigger public fascination has received a number of explanations from media, and my case study is an attempt to investigate the symbolic values around this brand, and how they may have contributed to generate hype. The brand has been approached through a semiotic analysis of the visual propositions embedded
in its website, with particular attention on the webpages presenting Tesla Model S. The analysis has attempted to show how Tesla, symbolically embedding environmental care at the level of their technology, significantly downplays the political significance of their activity, at least in the context of the visual presentation of their product. Tesla, indeed, eventually resorts to recover traditional automotive rhetoric that still has great currency in the car marketplace. These conclusions have triggered considerations on possible future evolutions of the symbolic dimensions of electric automobility.

Despite the confidence in the usefulness chosen approach, I recognize that further investigations might provide nuances to an understanding of the meanings circulating in the electric cars marketplace, as well as around Tesla’s brand. In particular, given the importance of company-owned stores in Tesla’s strategy, precious insights might come from a semiotic analyses of such commercial environments, following for instance the example of what recently done by Aiello and Dickinson for the re-design of Starbucks stores (2014). Consumer research in the form of ethnographic interviews could also help to this aim, in particular testing the persistence of political motivations in purchase decisions.

Few days before the submission of this dissertation, Markus Giesler, Marketing Professor at Schulich School of Business and frequent contributor to the *Journal of Consumer Research*, published on *The Huffington Post* a blogpost about Tesla Motors’ success (2014). His
reflections being triggered by quantitative research showing an unequivocal prevalence of men among Tesla buyers, Giesler maintains that despite most explanations of Tesla’s success stress the environmental connotations of the company, in his view it is “the enduring quest for heroic masculinity” the main symbolic driver of the brand. “Tesla Man”, he stresses, “is mindful about the environment but without sacrificing the long-held belief in the power of American entrepreneurial capitalism”, a perspective that appears quite compatible with what hypothesized in the third chapter of this work.
Fig.1
ALL GLASS PANORAMIC ROOF

With the All Glass Panoramic Roof, Model S is the only sedan capable of delivering a convertible-like drive experience every day. It’s more than a sunroof; the entire roof is constructed from lightweight safety glass. With a simple swipe of the Touchscreen, it opens wider than any other sedan’s panoramic roof. On even the hottest days, the innovative glass keeps the cabin comfortable by blocking 100% of UV rays and 81% of heat.

BLOCKS

100% 81%

UV LIGHT HEAT

Fig. 6
Fig. 7

HOW FAR CAN I GO?

HOW DO I TAKE A ROAD TRIP?
Fig. 8

How long does charging take?

Fig. 9

How is electricity generated?
Fig. 10

Fig. 11
The electricity that powers Model S comes from MANY SOURCES.

As new power plants using RENEWABLE ENERGY are built, generating electricity becomes even more efficient.

Where does YOUR electricity come from?
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