

Running Head: THE SUV FANTASY

Living Above it All: The Liminal Fantasy of
Sport Utility Vehicle Advertisements

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American popular culture offers a long history of celebrating modes of transportation. From the pony express through the various planes, trains and automobiles, each has captured the national imagination. Television and movies such as *Route 66*, *Knight Rider* and *Smokey and the Bandit*, among others, have made particular automobiles popular. This essay does not examine the popularity of a particular model of vehicle such as the Mustang, but rather an entire category of vehicles: The SUV. The sport utility vehicle has become a dominant vehicle on both the physical and cultural landscapes of America. The popularity of SUVs, and the way they have been portrayed in advertisements, reveals a cultural stance regarding the environment and speaks of what “wilderness” can mean in popular culture. In this chapter I briefly review the popularity of SUVs as well as some negative implications of that popularity. I then introduce the concepts of fantasy theme, dialectic and liminality, which will guide my analysis of SUV advertisements. Third, I offer analysis of the advertisements from the vantage point provided by these concepts to demonstrate that the fantasy operating in many SUV advertisements attempts to position the SUV as a purchasable and permanent resolution to the dialectics inherent in our relationship with the environment. I conclude with implications of how this fantasy informs how the environment is defined in the arena of popular culture.

Everywhere You Want to Be: The Rising Popularity of SUVs

Current Popularity of the SUV

Fifteen years ago there were a handful of SUVs to meet the demands of a small niche of drivers who needed the size and strength of a truck but the configuration of a van or station

wagon. However, there were over 27 versions of SUVs by 1996 and that number almost doubled to 47 by 2000. While some figures suggest the SUV market is maturing and stabilizing, those in vehicle design and marketing believe there is still more easy gold to be prospected. George Murphy, Ford's general marketing manager, is confident that "there are still a few opportunities to define a segment with a new vehicle" (Robinson, 1999, p. 16). Murphy expects the number of SUV models to increase to 70 by 2005 and other experts agree.

A large variety of vehicles already exist within the SUV category. Automakers as diverse as BMW, Mercedes, Toyota, Suzuki, Ford and Chevy all have at least one entry in the SUV market. At one point, many of these entries were products of what is known as "rebadging." This occurs when one manufacturer dresses up another maker's SUV and calls it their own (Isuzu Rodeo/Honda Passport). However, this practice is lessening as each manufacturer begins to create its own models and seek its own niche (Needham, 1996). At least one SUV, the Oldsmobile Bravada, has been specifically targeted toward female buyers. Advertising for the Bravada has included captions such as "As a matter of fact, I do drive like a girl" (Halliday, 1999).

The popularity of SUVs is certainly not without controversy, particularly as SUVs continue to become bigger than the great outdoors they are ostensibly designed to roam. A strong appeal of SUVs is the perception that the bigger vehicle is the safer vehicle. *Sierra* writer, Paul Rauber (1999) cynically called this doctrine the "survival of the fattest" (p. 20). Rauber notes that in many cases, this is a misconception since many smaller cars score safer in crash tests than SUVs.

The poster child for the SUV arms (and leg room) race is the Ford Excursion. The Excursion measures 19 ft., up to 8,500 pounds and gets 10-12 miles per gallon. It has become

the target of consumer and environmental groups alike due to its size and high fuel consumption.¹ Ford has replied that the Excursion's fuel efficiency qualifies it as a low-emission vehicle and that, "What we do to help the environment must succeed as a business proposition" (Nichol, 1999, p. 50). Ford CEO, William Ford, has openly admitted that SUVs are harmful to the environment but that they are also Ford's most profitable product line. Over 90% of Ford's profits come from the SUV/light truck segment. William Ford's strategy to counter criticism by advocacy groups has been to openly admit the harm and promise to commit significant funds to improve SUV environmental track records. Several environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, have rewarded his stance with guarded support (Welch, 2000).

GMC's response to the unveiling of Ford's behemoth that is one foot longer than a Suburban was "We set the benchmark for this type of vehicle. We don't intend to simply hand it over" (Nichol, 1999, p. 50). Fortunately, one report indicated that Suburban will become more refined, rather than larger, and market itself as the "sensible SUV." (Neil, May 29, 2000). Indeed, Dodge Durango has also tried to market itself as being in between the "toys and the tanks." However, its 15 miles per gallon gas mileage undermines that claim a bit. There are some indications that the economics of fuel pricing could modify the SUV industry. The Daimler Chrysler Corporation delayed if not abandoned its Jeep Commander concept, which was to be built on the Dodge Ram full size pickup chassis, because of rising fuel costs (Welch, January 17, 2000). Some companies seem to be questioning their ability to sell such "gas guzzling" vehicles during a season of rising fuel costs.

Yet Toyota lumbered into the behemoth SUV category with its Sequoia model. The 2000 model boasted Excursion-like dimensions inside and out. In fact Ford vehemently contested

Toyota's claims of equal interior storage noting that Expedition has 3.7 cubic feet more cargo space than Sequoia if you use a U.S. and not a Japanese calculator (Mateja, 2000).

Impact of SUV

The environmental impact of SUVs is multifaceted but largely predictable: more raw materials, more fuel, more impact on environment and infrastructure. However, this impact is difficult to quantify. How much additional erosion do we suffer because SUVs encourage off-roading and the tire tread is typically more aggressive than traditional tires? How much wildlife is harassed due to human/SUV presence?

The 1999 Ford Explorer weighed over 1,200 pounds more than the Ford Focus, a compact car. The 1999 Excursion was 4,639 pounds heavier than the focus. The raw materials and manufacturing processes invested in the Ford Excursion and other large and/or luxurious SUVs is significantly higher than in standard automobiles. In addition, SUV gas mileage clearly suffers from the additional weight. While meeting government regulations for low emissions, the Excursion's 10 miles per gallon does not compare favorably with Focus' 28 mpg, or even the Explorer's 18 mpg (Neil, 2000). Rauber (1999) offers compelling examples of the various hazards of SUVs:

The dangers caused by SUVs are not just to their own drivers or to others on the road. Half of all cars these days are gas-guzzling sport utes, minivans, or pickups, and the more fossil fuel consumed, the more global-warming gas is added to the atmosphere. In its lifetime, a fuel-efficient Honda Civic emits 40 tons of carbon dioxide, a Ford Excursion 134 tons. The reason is the huge loophole in the CAFÉ law that requires fleets of passenger cars to average 27.5 miles per gallon, but allows light trucks an average of 20.7 mpg (p. 21).

Such direct impact on the environment has led to some interesting efforts of active protest of SUV's and their owners. Two mischievous Californians have printed up bumper stickers that read "I'm changing the environment! Ask me how!" and have placed them on hundreds of SUVs in order to publicly shame the owners. The activists have even created a website that tells the SUV owners how best to remove the bumper sticker and provides information and an opportunity to dialogue (Gaudette, 2000).

The resource-intensive and fuel-guzzling nature of SUVs could be avoided according to the Union of Concerned Scientists. The UCS redesigned a Ford explorer to "shave 621 pounds, double its fuel economy and cut pollution by 75 percent" and claims that the UCS "Ford Exemplar" could be built with current technology" ("Memo", 2000, p. 2). In addition, some changes are already on the way. Rules requiring improvement in gasoline quality as well as SUV and light truck emissions standards are scheduled to phase in between 2004 and 2009 (Kruger, 1999). These changes will likely raise both gas and SUV prices.

Another hazard SUVs present is less obvious. A recent traffic patterns study found that several types of motor vehicles slow down traffic due to slower acceleration and the tendency of other motorists to give these vehicles more space. The primary offenders are SUVs, trucks and minivans (Bradsher, 2000).

However, none of these factors are likely to deter the SUV hold on automobile makers or the national imagination. A Cox news service (February 2000) story offered anecdotal evidence that SUV owners will keep their SUVs but alter their driving habits in light of higher gas prices (p. 6C). In addition, an increase in SUV production costs can be easily covered by manufacturers as the profit margins for these vehicles is quite high. For example, the Excursion brings fifteen to twenty thousand dollars profit per sale, which will continue to make it a dealer

favorite and allow its retail price to remain fairly stable despite modest increases in manufacturing costs (Neil, 2000).

The SUV is a popular, controversial and perplexing breed of vehicle. They are not designed for suburban life, yet most are driven in suburbia; they are not very maneuverable in parking lots, nor very zippy on on-ramps. They are not fuel-efficient. Many also have greater potential for rolling-over. While they are often safer in accidents involving smaller vehicles, they have not been proven safer in general than other types of vehicles. So why have they become so popular? Why are there over 50 varieties with more coming every day?

The “Western Cowboy” myth could offer one explanation of their popularity. Certainly the four-wheel drive, ground clearance, and very name—sport *utility* vehicle—capture the American “can-do” attitude and spirit of adventure and exploration. However, these vehicles are not marketed solely—or even primarily—on their utility at all. While no single study could fully explain their popularity², I submit that a significant contributor to their success is revealed in the underlying liminal fantasy of many SUV advertisements. These ads perpetuate a particular view of nature and our relationship to it. The meanings promoted by these ads are important because, as Mead (1934) and others have argued, we react to things on the basis of what they mean for us. The SUV choice is often a symbolic, not a pragmatic one. An examination of SUV advertisements using the concepts introduced below provides clues to their popularity.

Enjoying the View: Gaining Perspective Through Critical Concepts

There are a number of SUV ads where the SUV owner and his vehicle stand alone atop a pristine vista enjoying views rarely seen by man generally and never by the owners of a mere car, or even another brand of SUV. Just as these jean-clad souls and their bandana-wearing dogs need an SUV to assume that vantage point, so we too need a little help in gaining perspective.

Three critical concepts will be used to provide such a view: Fantasy theme, liminality and dialectic. It is also important to briefly layout some presuppositions about rhetorical analysis that guide this project as well.

Martin Medhurst and Thomas Benson (1991) identify three positions one can take on the rhetorical analysis of mediated artifacts. First, one can draw a strict line between the rhetorical and the poetic. Second, one can examine the rhetorical dimensions of artifacts. Third, one can assume, along with Kenneth Burke, that rhetoric is inherent and intrinsic. That is, that every human activity is thoroughly if not entirely rhetorical because of human nature and the human condition. Rather than align with a particular school, Medhurst and Benson argue for an eclectic critical practice that “should be judged by the insights and understandings it affords the reader . . .” (p. xviii). This approach often uses a variety of tools to focus primarily on illuminating the artifact rather than refining theory. This essay embraces that eclectic and pragmatic perspective. It also acknowledges the value of artifact-oriented analysis. Leff (1980, 1986) Darsey (1994) and Foss (1990) have, in various ways, taken rhetorical scholarship to task for being preoccupied with advancing and refining theory and method rather than understanding the artifacts under analysis. While this article invokes several theoretically rich concepts, they are subordinate to the goal of understanding the artifact at hand. They are tools to help explain the cultural phenomenon of the SUV.

Fantasy Theme

Earnest G. Bormann (1972/1995) argues that fantasy themes, and the resulting rhetorical vision they chain out to create, are powerful contributors to group identity:

Individuals in rhetorical transactions create subjective worlds of common expectations and meanings. Against the panorama of large events and seemingly

unchangeable forces of society at large or of nature the individual often feels lost and hopeless. One coping mechanism is to dream an individual fantasy, which provides a sense of meaning and significance for the individual and helps protect him from the pressures of natural calamity and social disaster. (p. 245)

Individuals often coalesce around an idea or drama. Thus, the overall label for Bormann's project is called symbolic convergence. A key communication variable that contributes to this convergence is the fantasy theme. This is a dramatizing message that expresses group ideals. Foss (1996) wrote that it is "a word, phrase, or statement that interprets events in the past, envisions events in the future, or depicts current events that are removed in time and/or space from the actual activities of the group" (p. 123). Borman, Knutson, and Musolf (1997) suggested that groups resonate with particular fantasies because 1) the fantasies express a shared psychodynamic concern, 2) the fantasies provide an indirect way of engaging a problem or issue that is too intense to engage directly, and 3) the "conscious artistry with which the message was designed and delivered was a factor in whether or not it was shared" (p. 256). The recognition of artistry is an important extension of Bormann's system and will feature prominently in the analysis that follows.

I will be treating the dramas imbedded in the SUV advertisements as fantasy themes, since they are meant to appeal to individual consumers and not to be the basis of any large-scale collective action. It should be noted that the imbedded fantasy themes are also arguments since they seek to gain our adherence and ultimately guide our attitudes, beliefs and behaviors.

Dialectic

The second concept that informs this analysis is the dialectical perspective of relationships as articulated by William K. Rawlins (1992), and Leslie Baxter (1988). Dialectic is

a “tension between two or more contradictory elements in a system that demands at least temporary resolution” (Littlejohn, 1992, p. 280). A key insight to take from Littlejohn’s definition is that most resolutions are temporary—despite the fantasy presented in SUV ads. This is consistent with Baxter’s (1988) reminder that despite the various uses of the term dialectic “the two features that are common across various dialectical theories are *process* and *contradiction*” (p. 258). Rawlins’ examination of friendships revealed two general classes of dialectics: contextual dialectics that address “the place of friendship in the prevailing social order of American culture” (Rawlins, 1992, p. 9) and interactional dialectics that focus on tensions within a relationship.

The contextual dialectics include the tensions between public and private, and between ideal and the real. The actual friendship is a private affair yet there are cultural forces that can inform that friendship. Culture is often a source of ideals and these ideals must be negotiated into the “real” friendship.³

Valerie Freysinger (1995) applied the concept of dialectics to the uses of leisure among mid-life men and women. In her interpretive study of leisure motives and practices, she found that leisure was an agency of affiliation with friends and family, an opportunity for self-expression, for learning and development, for challenge and accomplishment, and for recognition and credibility. In addition, three central dialectics emerged from her analysis: familiarity and novelty, engagement and disengagement, and agency and affiliation. With this last dialectical pair, Freysinger attempted to capture the tension between the self and the other in one’s use of leisure.

The dialectical perspective informs this study in two important ways. First, all relationships are inherently dialectical. This includes our relationships with “wilderness” and

“environment.” While these entities do not actively negotiate with us (although we do encounter consequences for land development, excessive hunting, etc. which could be interpreted as the earth “speaking back to us”), we often engage in an internal dialogue when clarifying our relationship with the environment or other “inanimate” objects.⁴ This analysis will demonstrate how some of the established dialectical tensions are represented in the SUV advertisements. Some tensions unique to the human/environment dyad are also identified. Second, for both Rawlins and Baxter, culture informs and frames the relationships being enacted within that culture. This insight is important since this study examines how the cultural/popular portrayal of the SUV encourages a particular relationship with the environment at the individual level.

Mark Meister’s (1997) essay that connects the United Nations discussion on “sustainable development” and the Jeep Cherokee foreshadows the dialectic perspective at the heart of this essay. He argues that the Jeep advertisements offer a “consumer vision of sustainable development by associating technology with nature” (p. 228). His analysis illuminates not only the function of the Jeep as a metaphor for technology that provides protection and comfort during the wilderness experience, but also the shortcomings of the UN conception of “sustainable development” which focuses “almost exclusively on human needs, without any attention paid to the non-human needs of nature” (p. 232). His analysis addresses one of the tensions imbedded in the Cherokee advertisements—technology and nature—as the basis for insightful critique of the UN discourse. This analysis makes such tensions the central focus and expands beyond the Jeep Cherokee to SUVs in general.

Liminality

In his insightful studies on ritual (1974, 1979), Victor Turner articulated a unique “in between” state that many ritual participants experience. He calls this state “liminal” and

summarizes it as follows: “The ritual subjects pass through a period of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has a few (though sometimes these are most crucial) of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states” (1982, p. 24). Important to our analysis of SUV advertisements is Turner’s assertion that “passage from one social status to another is often accompanied by a parallel passage in space, a geographic movement from one place to another” (p. 25). The attraction of television is in some ways liminal. We are transported “there” while staying “here.” We need not be in a formal ritual for liminality to occur. Many of the SUV ads position the SUV as the agency of liminality. That is, it is quite literally the vehicle that transports us from one geographic *and social status* to another. We move not only from suburbia to wilderness, but we undergo a similar change in identity as well. Such a change might be from “city worker” to “nature woman.”

Analysis of SUV Advertisements

Even a cursory examination of recent SUV ads reveals a diversity of themes and appeals. There are appeals to adventure, to security, to roominess, to maneuverability and the list goes on. However, despite this diversity, there is an underlying drama in many of the ads. I will begin my analysis by describing the typical fantasy theme that is dramatized in SUV ads and then introduce four dialectics the advertisements suggest that the SUV will resolve.

The SUV Fantasy

“Damn the tuxedos, full speed ahead.” is the caption on a Ford Expedition ad. The vehicle is traveling up and away from the town below. The driver cannot be distinguished. The vehicle is simultaneously presented as agent and agency—horse and rider. We know there must be a driver, but this is also somehow more than a machine. It seems to instinctively head for higher ground—SUVs almost always either travel upward or comfortably rest at the top. George

Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) note that “up” is universally viewed as positive. SUVs must somehow know this too.

When SUVs are in the wilderness, or at the top of a mountain, they are presented without spot or blemish. The machines are apparently so at one with nature that they are not scarred by their encounter, nor, by implication, do they scar. There are, of course, exceptions to this description. Some companies do show their SUVs getting dirty. For example, Range Rover often shows their vehicles “down in the jungle” rather than up on hilltops, and Subaru often shows their SUV in snow. Jeep has had a Grand Cherokee shake off the mud like a dog shakes off water after a swim. Other ads depict the vehicle in an urban setting. Often, however, these urban settings are reframed as “wild,” a clear extension of the urban jungle motif. But the underlying fantasy is that we can purchase something that will effortlessly take us from the banal suburban home front or urban jungle into pristine wilderness. It is also typical that the sun is rising or setting in the ad. We are there to either greet the dawn or, like many other creatures of nature, move under the safety of dusk. SUVs and their human companions like water too. If we cross a stream, both the vehicle and the stream remain crystal clear.

The typical SUV drama takes full advantage of the journey metaphor and the archetypal uses of water, mountains and deserts to suggest purification, renewal and enlightenment. It is in this way that the liminal dimensions of the SUV’s appeal emerge. We are seekers not drivers, initiates, not suburbanites. The time in the SUV is a liminal experience and we emerged from it with a changed identity according to the advertisements.

Even the names of the vehicles suggest that we are transported to another place, action or new identity (see Figure 1). Within dramatic terms, the vehicle names imply scenes, plots and characters. A GMC Yukon ad demonstrates that these names are critical to the trans-formative

dream of SUV ownership. For example, a Yukon ad claims that “We redesigned the GMC Suburban so completely, everything worked but the name: The all new Yukon XL.” Once the suburbs became the normal mundane mode of existence instead of embodying the dream to escape the city, the name Suburban lost its function as a catalyst for a cultural fantasy. The ideal SUV name must help us take the ordinary activity of driving and reframe it as a transformative action. This can be seen in a Toyota 4Runner slogan: “Adventure. Every Day.” In the ad from which this slogan was taken, the vehicle is on the top of a mountain above the tree line at dusk. There is still, clear water in front of the vehicle reflecting the vehicle, which is spotless despite the implied recent ascent (the headlights are still on and the wheels are blurry indicating motion). The caption is “Wouldn’t you rather blend in with nature instead of traffic?”

An overlooked contradiction in the ad is the sentence that appears just below the showroom clean 4Runner: “Mud makes the perfect camouflage.” Apparently so since it is invisible on the vehicle! This ad, among many, raises an important point about fantasy themes. Their “truth” is often irrelevant to their success as a convergence-inducing message. Fantasy themes need not be logically sound or factually accurate to be taken as “truthful” for a given group or culture. However, they do need to reflect the ideals of the culture. This characteristic makes fantasy theme a particularly appropriate tool for analyzing advertisements.

Dialectics in the Man/Nature Relationship

Each pole of dialectic can be seen as positive in certain circumstances. It is not a win/lose or good/bad continuum but rather a good/good (and in some ways, bad/bad) continuum that is constantly negotiated or managed. The ads themselves present a potentially infinite number of dialectics. BMW describes its X5 as “highly exhilarating yet extraordinarily safe. It’s rugged yet thoroughly refined. It’s playful yet ingeniously practical. In a word, perfection.”

This copy serves to position the X5 as the ultimate resolution to any troubling automotive dialectics.⁵

Fig. 1: Names of Some Popular Sport Utility Vehicles

Place/Scene	Action/Plot	Identity/Character
Durango	Escalade	Amigo
Montero	Escape	Blazer
Outback	Excursion	Cherokee
Rodeo	Expedition	Explorer
Sante Fe	Sportage (portage)	Forester
Sequoia	Tribute	Land Rover
Suburban		Navigator
Tahoe		Pathfinder
Xterra		Tracker
Yukon		Trailblazer
		Trooper

Many of the established dialectics listed in the footnote above can be found in the SUV ads as well. As an example, Rawlins’ dialectic of judgment and acceptance in friendships is seen in ads that unconditionally “accept” the wilderness on its own terms and those that explicitly or implicitly “judge” it to be hostile or something that an SUV can and should “conquer.” In one Chevy Tahoe ad we are comforted by the “Autotrac advanced four-wheel drive system that instantly adjusts to changing terrain all over the world.” The characteristics of the wilderness are accepted and the SUV does the adjusting. In a Cadillac Escapade advertisement the theme is

very different: “Their mountains? Your speed bumps. . . . It’s the power you need to cut any circumstance down to size, making obstacles obsolete.” Here it is very clear that the vehicle doesn’t adjust, but overpowers the wilderness. While many of Baxter’s and Rawlins’ dialectics can offer insight into the SUV ads, I offer four broad dialectics (see Figure 2), drawn from a distillation of existing dialectics and those unique to the civilization/wilderness tension typical of most SUV ads to guide my analysis.

Dominion/Harmony

A Ford explorer ad begins with clever play on words: “Dominating the field.” The field simultaneously refers to the competitive SUV market through design advancements, and the field or landscape pictured in the ad. In the picture, the Explorer is apparently co-existing peacefully with a Bison. This symbol of the American plains and the vehicle (no human is pictured) are almost nose-to-nose—neither is aggressive nor subordinate to the other. The ad concludes that the Explorer is “The most evolved species out there.” The effort to reframe a machine as animal and placing it in a field with the generally passive Bison suggests a harmony with nature. The caption in boldface type, however, suggests dominion. A central distinction of much of Western civilization has been the assumption that man should conquer or subdue all which is wild. The Bison was almost a complete victim of such a worldview. Misinterpretation of the biblical call to dominion (actually a call to stewardship or care taking), and the rise of scientism (explanation, prediction and *control*) lead to a historically antagonistic relationship between Western man and the wild. For example, nature is often depicted as the adversary in literature or the news, and natural disaster movies have had much commercial, if not critical, success. An assumption by those aligning exclusively with this polar position is that we must dominate nature or it will dominate us. This is a dysfunctional extreme. But, even in a healthy

management of this dialectic there is a sense in which any species, including man, must assert itself somewhat if it is to survive.

Fig. 2: Central Dialectics in SUV Advertisements

Dominion Power over nature—Western Separate from nature	Harmony Submissive to nature—Eastern/Native American Part of nature
Tame In control/domestic/civilized	Wild Free of controls/undomesticated/primal
Familiarity Suburban/reliable/consistent	Novelty Unknown location/serendipitous/spontaneous
Material Technological/physical comfort, protection and status needs.	Spiritual Supra-rational/metaphysical/indifferent to status At one with the spirit that flows in nature

On the other side of dominion is complete harmony with nature. This approach is often advocated by Eastern and Native American worldviews. From this perspective man is not outside nature or against nature, but in and of nature. The goal is to embrace the rhythms of the universe and the limitations that nature places on man’s existence in it. The harmony concept also finds place in the Judeo-Christian Garden of Eden. In the Garden, man is in direct communication with both the natural and the supernatural world. Adam and Eve experience the bounty of nature without having to toil or subdue it. Falling exclusively on the harmony end of the dialectic can cause trouble, just as falling exclusively at the dominion end can. Advocates may suggest nature or animal life is more important than human life. They may seek to lose themselves in nature, rather than find their place in it. In such cases there is an attempt at unison or enmeshment, rather than engagement or interdependence.

Owning a SUV is portrayed as an experience that will reconcile one’s desire to be simultaneously “one with nature,” and in a position of dominance. With the purchase of an

SUV, harmony and dominion are integrated into perfect resolution. In an SUV, we are above it all in the driver's seat and above it all on the mountaintop.

A Chevy Tahoe campaign is illustrative of the harmony/dominion dialectic and also of how image and text interact to form the fantasy theme. The images in the ads place the Tahoe in a variety of pristine settings: desert mountains, uncivilized coastlines, and the like. There are no humans visible in the ads, though the vehicle is typically in motion. The font is suggestive of Eastern or Native American writing. All visual cues point to harmony with nature, however, the text focuses on dominion. One ad discusses the power of the engine and concludes that, "fault lines aren't the only source of rumbling on the planet." This statement serves not only to integrate the mechanical with the natural but also to assert the potential for dominion even as the image implies harmony. The text in another Tahoe ad claims that, "it's equally comfortable racing across the plains, exploring the backwoods or just being parked next to a placid fishing hole. It's big, powerful and willing to go just about anywhere you want to take it." The text treats the Tahoe as a central character in the drama: it is comfortable and it races and explores too. The text of this ad makes clear the potential for dominion while the picture of the Tahoe negotiating a pathway through some lower foothills accented by a stand of cedars, suggests all is in harmony.

A significant characteristic of the dominion/harmony dialectic is expressed through Rawlins' affection/instrumentality dialectic. When one views the wilderness as a means to an end (dominion), it becomes an instrument. When one appreciates the wilderness without trying to derive anything from it—more indicative of harmony—one demonstrates Rawlins' notion of affection. Many of the ads are very explicit about getting out and doing things in the wilderness. A Subaru Outback ad shows the vehicle on the rocky shore of a riverbed. There is a kayak on

the hood of the car. To the left of the kayak is the sentence “Or you can spend the weekend surfing the Net.” Later in the ad we are told, “you’ll need the week to recover,” further suggesting that weekends in the wilderness should be filled with activity. A Ford Explorer ad offers similar appeals: “Tom and Sally worked hard to get where they are. But now that they’ve ‘arrived’ all they want to do is get the heck out. So, last week they traded business talk for a babbling brook and conference calls for conifer pines.”

Alliteration aside, these ads treat the wilderness as a tool, a means of escape, a way to recharge, a key to future success—what is in it for Tom and Sally. At the same time the overwhelmingly positive portrayal of the outdoors, combined with driving a vehicle designed for this natural environment, is depicted as a demonstration of appreciation for the wild.

Tame/Wild

The cover fold of an elaborate pullout brochure for the 2000 model year Ford line of SUVs features a key ring with about 30 keys that completely fill the ring. It is lying on top of an aggregate sidewalk surface. There are also two smaller pictures of a somewhat smoggy city skyline in the upper and lower corners of the page. The caption reads, “They get you into your office, into your file cabinet, into your safe-deposit box, into locked up, locked-in places. But is there one that can get you out?” As the reader unfolds the insert the “out” places are further defined by natural images and text that includes the following: “Out where a trip to the bank involves waders and swirling waters. Out where hard drive describes a rutted half-road.” The argument put forth is that the reader’s current life is tame to the point of captivity: A forced tameness. There is enclosure and inclusion to the point of implosion. What is needed is an exit, and most Ford SUV names use the prefix “ex.” What is needed is seclusion to release the wild aspects of the SUV owner.

The tame/wild dialectic is almost archetypal in its centrality to Western culture. Historically, the wild side of the continuum was seen as something to be overcome. However, the environmental movement, extreme sports, the men's movement and other cultural forces have made wild at least as appealing as tame. I have used wild/tame to clarify its application to the SUV fantasy. But Fiske (1989) has offered identified similar dynamics through the inside/outside and nature/culture dialectics.

In his interpretation of a beach vacation, Fiske asserted, "A tanned body is a sign to be read by others, particularly others in the city. It signifies that the wearer, a city dweller, has been into nature and is bringing back both the physical health of the animal and the mental health that contact with nature brings into the artificiality of city life" (p. 46). In the same way, driving an SUV suggests: "I may be stuck in traffic now, but I'm part animal and can go off-road if my instincts compel me." Living in civilization requires some conformity and adherence to rules, whereas being in the wilderness, as defined by SUV ads, is a free, individual experience.⁶

The SUV promises resolution of this dialectic because it separates us from the mundane, urban, and tame while offering connection with the hallowed, natural and wild. Yet, within this promise is an important qualifier: SUVs simultaneously promise comfort and power, as well as an uncontrolled encounter with the wild. For instance a Pathfinder ad reads, "We're as macho as the next guy. But on a cold morning it sure is nice to fire up the heated leather seats." The reader is to identify with a wild character that is willing to be tame when convenient. The ad continues:

Even the most hardened mountain man knows enough to come in out of the cold. And that the next best thing to a warm fire in a snug, out-of-the-way cabin is a pair of warm, power-adjustable heated front leather seats in a snug, out-of-the-

way Nissan Pathfinder, with the automatic temperature control set at, say, a balmy 78 degrees.

In this example, the wild/tame dialectic is addressed and managed through the features found in the Pathfinder. What might be construed as luxury-heated seats (tame) is reframed as fire (wild), rhetorically managing the tension of the wild/tame dialectic. A separate Pathfinder campaign features a Jane Goodall-type character studying nomadic males in their natural habitat. The “wild men” in this ad are seen eating potato chips and watching a sporting event on a portable TV. In this enactment of the fantasy, culture and nature are blended seamlessly to resolve the dialectic.

Familiarity/Novelty

Many of the ads discussed thus far emphasize the less desirable routines of cultural life, such as long commutes and high-stress jobs. The SUV is positioned as uniquely qualified to rescue its purchaser from the literal and figurative ruts we may encounter on life’s journey. A slogan for the Nissan Xterra cautions one to “Choose your sick days wisely.” A Jeep ad reminds us that we spend an average of 95% of our life indoors. Jeep is therefore “Designed to get you out—way out—into wide-open spaces.” In these two ads we see appeals to break with the familiar both in terms of time and space. The familiarity/novelty dialectic is sometimes called the certainty/uncertainty dialectic. It recognizes that while people generally like to solve problems and know the answer, there is also excitement in mystery, spontaneity and the unpredictable.

The wonderful thing about an SUV, according to the fantasy implied in the ads, is that one can have both the novel and the familiar simultaneously. A Toyota ad places a black 4Runner on a mountain ridge above the tree line and compliments this image with the following text: “Air conditioning doesn’t grow on trees. Neither does power windows and power door

locks, aluminum alloy wheels, keyless remote, sport seats or premium 3-in-1 6-speaker stereo systems.” The location is novel: it is remote, harsh, uncivilized, and potentially dangerous. The listing of design elements in the 4Runner offsets this novelty. The SUV is a portable enclosure of familiarity, of civilization, that one takes with them to the uncivilized setting they are told they desire.

The familiarity/novelty dialectic exhibited in the ads might also be understood as a tension between security and adventure. A 1999 Blazer campaign focused around a slogan that read “A little security in an insecure world.” In one Blazer ad there is a white spotless lighthouse perched upon a forbidding coastline. On top of the lighthouse is not a beacon, but a Blazer—with its headlights piercing the incoming fog. The lighthouse is a dialectically rich setting. It is at once a dangerous setting (harsh coastline) and a safe setting (secure tower).

In many SUV ads, wilderness is presented as both a haven and a place of danger. A Jeep ad with a red Cherokee in the desert suggests that we are viewing it “as seen by the poisonous Sahara scorpion.” Within this dangerous setting the Jeep provides “an oasis of capability and confidence” that “even a toxic three-inch arachnid can see.” In another example, a Pathfinder ad invokes early American history in a way that addresses this dialectic: “Lewis and Clark would have been appalled. Green with envy but appalled.” One section of the text reminds the reader that, “Exploration is supposed to be hard work,” while another describes the Pathfinder’s cabin as “blessedly serene, spacious and luxurious.” The historical allusions to danger and discomfort associated with adventure and discovery are met with the balancing forces of serenity, spaciousness and luxury found *within* the cabin of the Pathfinder. This combination of text and image fulfills both the wild/tame dialectic and the security/adventure dialectic.

Yet in many of the SUV ads, the wilderness, not the cabin, is defined as a place of rest. Tom and Sally escaped *to* the wilderness to find comfort. This vision of the wilderness is often contrasted with the urban or suburban setting as the source of danger or undesirable adventure. Isuzu alludes to this with an ad that reads, “The shortest distance between two points is always under construction.” The text is accompanied by a picture of a Trooper out on the Western plains but surrounded by traffic cones and construction signs, much like a driver’s education range. Visually we are told that even urban driving can be an adventure for which we must prepare through the purchase of an SUV. Also implied in the juxtaposition of wilderness and traffic cones is the idea that the freedom and safety await outside the city limits where the Trooper is equally at home.

SUV ads offer two ways of managing the familiarity/novelty dialectic. First, the SUV owner can be in a familiar and safe cabin while surrounded by the unfamiliar and potentially dangerous environment. Second, the SUV owner can reframe the familiar, and even mundane, driving experience as an adventure, ripe with the possibility of a novel encounter. According to the ads, the potential for adventure and novelty lies within the unique characteristics of the SUV, as much as security and safety do.

Material/Spiritual

We come full circle in our exploration of the major dialectics imbedded in SUV ads as they frame man’s relationship with the environment with the material/spiritual tension. Man has often used machine (material) to enforce dominion over the environment. Yet there has also been a mystical attraction to become “one with nature.” Machine has typically been masculine, while Mother Earth and nature generally are considered feminine. Wisdom has also been personified in the feminine. Spiritual journeys are typically defined as turning away from the

material culture and heading out into nature where true wisdom can be found. The goal is moving from a position of dominion through materialism, to harmony through spirituality. Even on this hallowed ground, the SUV has left its customary tread mark.

The material aspects of the SUV include their technology and comfort. Virtually every SUV seems to be the “most advanced” at something. Infiniti highlights its MonoFrame that is “actually one solid structure, united by 4,200 precision welds.” Suzuki markets the Vitara’s power: “The secret to engineering the first V6 powered mini sport utility vehicle is in the details.” This is an appeal to the material because engineering focuses on maximizing the potential of the material world. An ad from Jeep is particularly adept at integrating the two poles of the dialectic. “We added a new overhead console with a trip computer and compass, making it even easier to get lost.” This ad clearly reminds the reader that the material advances made by Jeep will not interfere with the non-material advantages of the SUV as it assists you in escaping the material world.

The desert is a frequent setting in SUV ads. This taps into long-standing connections between the desert and purification or spirituality. Abraham and Jesus were called to the desert, as were many other spiritual figures. It is stark and isolated and devoid of material comforts. It is an ideal setting for self-denial that may lead to spiritual epiphanies. Mountains also figure significantly in the ads. The connections here are also rich. Spiritually rich moments are often called “mountain top” experiences. Moses was given the keys to righteous living while on a mountain. Monasteries of many world religions are very often built upon mountains. Even when these settings are examined within a New Age perspective, where the journey itself is the goal, both settings remain spiritually charged. A Mercedes SUV ad shows eight different pictures of roads along with the caption “Go where other 4 X 4s fear to tread.” The line “fear to

tread” is borrowed from the more common phrase “where angels fear to tread” and the emphasis is placed on the act of journeying itself. The use of eight options in roads, not one, suggests that any road is valid. The key is to journey *somewhere*. Turning left or right or disappearing behind a hill, each road extends to an unknown destination. Just as important, seven of the eight roads head upward. The only exception is a long straight road that disappears into the shadows of the mountains.

Setting out on a spiritual quest is heady stuff. If embraced fully, such a journey takes one far outside of mainstream, consumer culture. Consequently, a balance between spiritual and material is sought within the SUV ads by presenting the SUV as the integral part of that journey. It is this *material* purchase that can equip its owner for the *spiritual* journey. A Jeep Wrangler ad pictures a Wrangler in the American desert next to a huge oblong rock that looks like an exclamation point. Awareness of Native American spirituality reminds us that such a location would likely be seen as spiritual ground. The proximity of the Jeep to such a symbol forms a spiritual/material cluster that seemingly resolves this dialectic. Mike Featherstone (1991) has argued that we live in a “consumer culture” and that such a culture traditionally emphasizes hedonism. Though he is clear to point out that this pleasure orientation is not at the expense of the sacred (pp. 113 ff), it does shape how we define it and pursue it. In this same Jeep ad readers are encouraged to define themselves by “Your passion for discovery. Your quest for fun.” In a consumer culture, a challenging journey can be made pleasurable through the right purchase. “Quest” is a term typically reserved for meaningful journeys—here it is paired with “fun” suggesting that the pursuit of fun is a significant and fulfilling goal worthy of the term “quest.” Nissan claims that if life is a journey we should “Enjoy the ride.” The United States culture is also individualistic so it is not surprising that the journey offered in the SUV ads is as individual

as each consumer makes it. That same Nissan ad asks “Road maps? Who the heck needs road maps.”[sic] Roads are collective and cooperative and Nissan frees its drivers from such convention, allowing them to pursue their own journey.

Traveling in an SUV puts us in a transcendent position where there are no boundaries. SUV drivers are above boundaries for three reasons. First, the literal elevation of driver’s seat puts the driver above other drivers and above the earth. Second, these vehicles are frequently depicted as taking drivers to mountaintops and other revered locations. Third, the ads frame the driving of the SUV itself as a transcendent experience. The Lexus LX 470 promises to “Go places mere mortals will never see” and the Lexus RX 300 is “like no other vehicle on earth.” Sitting in the cabin is itself a “mountain top experience” even if we never literally take to the hills.

Ford’s “Outfitters/No Boundaries” campaign also offers insight into how the SUV’s manage this material/spiritual dialectic. This \$50 million TV and print campaign was created, in part, from findings in focus group studies about another Ford SUV, the Sport Trac (Robinson, 1999). This was a particularly comprehensive campaign that positions all of their SUVs, and much of their truck line, as vehicles through which to explore a wilderness knowing “No Boundaries.” Your Ford “outfitter” (dealer) will recommend a vehicle that matches the quest you are planning to undertake.

The idea of no boundaries is, in many ways, a contemporary spiritual ideal. The notion of liminality discussed above is about being between boundaries. Yet if we are in a place (the cabin of a Ford SUV) where no boundaries exist, that liminality becomes tied to the unique status of the SUV since it alone is able to provide such a unique state of being. When we step out of the SUV we are back in a world of boundaries. Only when we are in the SUV are we

caught up in a perpetually liminal state. The localized, relativistic nature of the postmodern attitude is also commensurate with a no boundaries philosophy. No boundaries can apply geographically, but also be projected out to psychological and moral dimensions of our lives as well. Psychologically it resonates with the “if you can dream it, you can achieve it” doctrine. Morally, it supports the hedonism articulated by Featherstone and symbolically it suggests that the dialectical tensions outlined in this essay need not even exist. If they don’t exist, they need not be negotiated. The “No Boundaries” campaign attempts to permanently resolve inherent dialectics by denying their existence.

Two Other Important Dialectics

Once one adopts a dialectic perspective, it is difficult to see any list as complete. At the risk of cluttering up the “big four,” let me conclude with two less central but still important dialectics. The first is the ideal/real dialectic identified by Rawlins. In the world of advertising, idealized representations far outnumber realistic portrayals. The idealized version is frequently a spotless vehicle on the pinnacle of some remote vista, enjoying the view with or without an obvious driver present. It has arrived there seemingly on its own, untouched and apparently having touched nothing. There are some exceptions to this portrayal. Nissan and Land Rover ads often depict muddy vehicles. Though, in truth, this too is an ideal: The mud is the right mud in just the right places. It is more like makeup than dirt—and it never leads to scratches or even minor dents!

The second minor dialectic that captures elements of each of the dialectics discussed above is that of inside/outside. Inside life is good but outside life is too. In the inside life, humans have dominion. Inside life is tame and domesticated. “Not in the house!” is a parent’s cry to remove wild behavior from the inside and take it outside where wild behavior belongs.

We are familiar with the interior—it is our creation. We are less familiar with the outside—it is not our creation. The inside life is dominated by the material. It is tangible and close. The spiritual life is found outside in the seeking journey and is often ephemeral and diffuse. The SUV promises that we can be inside and outside at the same time. An interesting extension of Ford’s “Outfitters” campaign has some showrooms transformed into outdoor settings complete with streams. (Green, 2000, p. 9). That is really the SUV fantasy in reverse. A version of outside life brought inside. The SUV promises to take an idealized version of inside life (air condition, comfortable seating and a great sound system) outside.

Discussion

The SUV is presented as a way of managing several cultural dialectics imbedded in man’s relationship with the environment. The consistent use of elevation (physical, natural, socio-economic) and other images in these ads suggests that we no longer need to manage these dialectical tensions because we can transcend them. This transcendence ushers in a state of liminality. We are at a place of no boundaries and infinite possibilities about where we will go, what we will do and who we will be.

But just as true liminality is temporary, so is any resolution of a relational dialectic. The harmful myth in the ad is that the purchase of an SUV *permanently* resolves the man/environment relationship and positions the owner as somehow in harmony with nature and perhaps even its advocate. It is a static fantasy that belies the process nature of dialectics, the process nature of organic systems and the literal impact of SUVs on the environment.

A contributor to this problem is identified in Featherstone’s (1991) concept of consumer culture. In this culture there is a “dominance of the commodity as sign” (p. 85). That allows the symbolism discussed above to work powerfully in shaping not only one’s decision to own an

SUV, but the set of meanings that inform such a choice and the perceived impact of such a choice on cultural and natural systems. Barry Brummett (1991) elaborates on how this works. He suggests that a message works on three types of meaning that exist along a continuum from left to right: exigent, quotidian and implicative. By exigent he is suggesting that a message addresses an immediate concern. Within the SUV ads we see explicit claims to establish a particular SUV as the one the reader should purchase now. There are appeals and sets of meanings that relate specifically to that decision at that time.

At the quotidian level there is no immediate decisional crisis. Rather these messages serve to inform the basic set of public and personal meanings that inform everyday decisions. At some point the SUV becomes the preferred vehicle ideal or a widely recognized status symbol. This is now an accepted cultural meaning we may bring to other areas of our life. For example, a family in a movie is shown to be successful because they drive SUVs. While we are generally explicitly aware of appeals made at the exigent level, we are less aware of those operating at the quotidian level: "We are almost on automatic pilot as we manage the meanings of everyday life" (p. 43). The movie example would be "decoded" without much--if any--conscious effort. In addition, quotidian levels of meaning are established indirectly through a variety of texts. In this essay I have examined a number of SUV ads. There are significant commonalities to the ads that, when taken as a whole, create and rely on a certain set of established meanings.

Three examples may serve to illustrate the themes apparent at this level. First, the rationalizing of luxury as necessity is central to these ads. Heated seats are compared with fire in their centrality to our survival. Six-speaker audio is the least we can do for our psychological well-being and serenity. This is the natural extension of a set of meanings born of a consumer culture being applied to a symbolically rich commodity. Second, bigger is better. This is a

general assumption of the consumer culture as well. The framing of the Excursion, Navigator and Escalade (among others) as “advancements” only works if the “bigger is better” set of meanings is in place. Third, many SUVs are now actually two-wheel drive models. While they still possess sturdy frames and powerful engines, the two-wheel drive and various other hybrid models have become signs of signs.

Finally, the messages I’ve examined also operate at Brummett’s implicative level. “This area includes the management of meanings that are unproblematic and taken for granted; the farther to the right on the continuum we go, the more sedimented and unquestioned are the meanings” (p. 44). For instance, some of the dialectics I use in this analysis—particularly wild/tame—are so fundamental to various cultural productions: literature, film, scientific documents, etc., that one would hardly think to question them as “real” categories.

At the implicative level, the messages within SUV ads are much further reaching than the individual appeals made at the exigent level. While those appeals might also merit analysis, they do not serve to frame humanity’s place in the world as directly as the themes outlined above.

The most damaging assumption in the ads is that nature is infinite. “No Boundaries” suggests an unending quality to nature. This slogan is reinforced visually because virtually every image of nature proceeds beyond the frame provided by the ad. Images of nature in SUV ads are generally devoid of any other signs of civilization. No humans, houses, fences, silos, domestic animals, vehicles, and the like are included. The implicit conclusion here is that pristine nature is commonplace out there, and “ours” for the consuming at the individual level. In the SUV universe, one might assume that no one actually owns the land or does anything else with it. It is our playground and squatter’s rights are still the norm. Environmentalists have spent decades

trying to inform legislatures, captains of industry and the general citizenry that nature is indeed finite. The fantasy of the SUV drives in direct opposition to that message.

The final message I will deal with in this essay, which lies at the heart of the consumer culture, is that materialism is good and consumption is great. Even though there is evidence that the SUV is framed as a way to manage the material/spiritual dialectic it is important to remember that the SUV is ultimately a rather expensive piece of material. The SUV is popular because it has been defined as a solution to a set of problems that are fundamental to man's relationship with his environment. Brummett uses the term "commodification" to suggest our culture's preoccupation with things purchasable and consumable. This orientation is taken for granted and thus lies at the implicative level. It is particularly important to be aware of those times when we attempt to commodify things that defy commodification. Harmony with nature and serenity are obvious examples discussed above, but so are balanced lifestyle, and contentment. These things cannot be purchased. Certainly an automobile, regardless of specific characteristics, does not play a central role in the achievement of such abstractions. Yet within a consumer culture where commodification is a central assumption, such logic is powerful and it is in full operation in the SUV advertisements.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that the popularity of the SUV is fundamentally symbolic, not pragmatic. The popularity is based not on what it actually does for its purchasers as a machine, but on a fantasy it helps create for the user and the larger culture. This fantasy is clearly revealed in the SUV advertisements. The fantasy theme offered in the ads suggests that the purchase of an SUV will resolve the ongoing and inherent dialectical tensions of man's relationship with his environment. This relationship can be expressed in terms of four central dialectics: 1)

Dominion/Harmony, 2) Tame/Wild, 3) Familiarity/Novelty, and 4) Material/Spiritual. This fantasy is dysfunctional on a number of levels. First, the resolution of such dialectical tensions is not possible. Dialectics must be managed, not resolved. Second, the power of the fantasy draws from fundamental assumptions operating at the implicative level of the consumer culture. These assumptions reinforce a view of the natural environment and our place/role within it that is harmful. It is harmful to the individual lives of each person subscribing to such beliefs, to the larger culture and to the environment. Kenneth Burke defines man as being separated from nature by instruments of our own making (in Foss, Foss and Trapp, 1991, p. 198). The SUV is erroneously portrayed as an instrument of our own making that can breach this separation.

¹ As of the writing of this essay, there is a web campaign urging listeners of the popular NPR show, *Car Talk*, to help get the Ford Excursion nominated as the worst car of the millennium.

² Human nature and culture are inherently complex and are best explained by multi-causal models. While I think the symbolic dimensions are important to explore and offer significant explanatory value, a variety of other factors likely contribute to the SUVs current popularity including: 1) a strong economy providing a high percentage of discretionary income, 2) a general shift from outdoor jobs to indoor jobs which allows outdoor vehicles to become signs of leisure rather than signs of work, and 3) conspicuous consumption is a habit of our culture generally.

³ Within friendship, four dialectical tensions emerge for Rawlins. The first is the freedom to be independent and the freedom to be dependent, which are similar to Baxter's dialectic of autonomy and intimacy. The second dialectic is affection and instrumentality. This dialectic manages the friendship being an end in itself, and the friendship as a means to an end. The third dialectic is judgment and acceptance. A friendship must negotiate the tension between unconditional acceptance and the advice and criticism of a "true friend." Finally, the dialectic between expressiveness and protectiveness addresses the degree of spontaneity and strategy in self-disclosure. Baxter's set of dialectics is similar to Rawlins' as each has a manifestation within the relationship, as well as between the dyad and the larger community. A dialectic not addressed by Rawlins, however, is that of certainty and uncertainty.

Friendship is characterized by a certain degree of stability and predictability but also must avoid become a lifeless routine.

⁴ Anthropomorphizing might be seen as anecdotal illustration of this tendency. When the thing we want to enter into relationship with is unable to fully participate in the dialectic than we do that work for that entity by endowing it with human qualities and speaking to it and for it.

⁵ It is interesting to note that many of the high-end entries into this market are naming their SUVs in the same way that sports cars are named. BMW offers the X5, though we never did see X 1-4. Lexus/Infiniti offers the QX4 and the RX300. Mercedes offers the ML 430.

⁶ In stark contrast to the Ford campaign is the 2002 Mercury Mountaineer pitch that begins with the caption “Beauty lives here.” A Mountaineer is said to be built *for* the city, “to handle the rigors of where you drive most.” Other captions in the multi-page ad also stress the attractiveness of the city setting: “Strength lives here,” “Grace lives here,” and “Safety lives here.” Each caption is accompanied by a monochromatic picture of urban structures. Although the variety of messages may increase, I believe the central messages will remain those expressed in this essay. With so many SUVs on the market, the search for a niche will increase significantly.

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