



Tomorrow, Tomorrow

An essay by Paolo Tumminelli
about the future of the automobile.

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‘Tomorrow, Tomorrow’

Paolo Tumminelli

*‘Tomorrow, tomorrow, our dreams will come true,
together, together, we’ll make our world new’*

(From the promotional short film, *Design for dreaming*, © General Motors, 1956)

Writing about the future of the car is as fascinating as it is hard. Fascinating because the car is a marvellous object. Hard because, without wishing to criticize their competence and capacity for foresight, everyone who has sought to describe the car of the future, or better, the mobility of the future, has sinned of either by being too vague or by exaggerating, in a manner often verging on the endearingly ridiculous. Sam Medway, author of a paper entitled *The Best Crystal Ball of All*, published in 1975 in *Automobile Quarterly* (in *AQ*, XIII.1, p. 4), was already aware of this. The article is worth perusing for a quick survey of visions of the future, starting with Roger Bacon, a 13th-century monk who predicted the birth of the motor vehicle, and ending with the warning from the *Scientific American*, which in 1923 declared the urgency of ‘making constructors and designers understand the need to adapt the motor car to the imminent lack of fuel.’ Medway’s article introduced the description of three scenarios for mobility in 2020, conceived of, illustrated and commented by the Hollywood designer and futurologist, Syd Mead (*Reaching for Aquarius – A Designer Looks Ahead*, *ibid.*, p.10). Without wishing to detract from the appeal of gyro gondolas, floating personal enclosures and astral projections, with just a few short years to go before the deadline, it seems unlikely that any of these futuristic visions will come true. Overall, they take into account the high-speed evolution of society between the end of the Second World War and 1968, or between the establishment of mass consumption, on to the conquest of Space and up to the cultural revolution. The late 1960s were years of radical reflection and design, fed by atomic power, electronics and plastic, seen as the principal ingredients of a future that was believed to be behind the corner, totally new and free of cultural prejudice. In the motor car, this radicalism takes the form of a brutality in wedge-shaped lines and graphic geometric design promoted and highlighted by the style of design offered by Bertone. That the very idea of future — and not just that of the car — should be lost sight of, and that a sort of neo-romanticism of a tragically nostalgic character would take hold over the next 20 years, affecting our forms of consumption and making us prefer or re-prefer mechanical watches, whole-wheat bread and classical style, was inconceivable at the time. What is certain is that with the end of the 1970s, what arrived was not the future but a household-appliance car, perfected and rationalised but also poorer in style and sadder. The dynasty of visionary constructors was replaced by that of the ‘polluting’ advertisers, as Giovanni Klaus Koenig described them, exploring the theme in *Passato e futuro dell’automobile* (in *Ottagono*, 59, Dec. 1980, p. 56). For Koenig, progress was artificially slowed by the ‘aberrant logic of absolute novelty’ — which was naturally a fraud — and in the ‘stylistic games dominated by the “optional.”’ Better to break free and opt for the true emotions of an old Bianchina, concluded Koenig (anticipating the 1980s cult of the classic car, the retrodesign of the 1990s and the Youngtimer-generation of 2000), and await the formation of ‘that dry, rigorous mentality from which will emerge — if it emerges — the future of the car.’

Unfortunately, no new mentality has yet formed, but this does not mean that the car is not in poor, or extremely poor health. It is true that there are increasingly successful car manufacturers, often helped by the opening of new markets, presenting record accounts. But in the mature markets, which constitute the point of reference for the future, the *Stimmung* is worrying, the direction to take, uncertain. The identity of the car suffers as a result: the first signal of ill-health appeared with the arrival of the Mazda MX-5 Miata in 1989 — an appealing global fetish — created by the Japanese in the United States by copying the classic British roadster, with the aim of recharging the public's emotional fuel tanks. Helping was the soap-and-water beauty of the little roadster, an operation which proved a great success, and which gave birth to a conceptual line that guided car design in a retro direction, and which has still not come to an end. On the one hand, there are veritable remakes, like in the cinema: of the Beetle, the Mini, the Range Rover, the Ford Thunderbird, and now also the Fiat Cinquecento. On the other, a neo-classical look long on eye-catching appeal but short on substance has taken root, especially because it looks back to a period in car design, the golden period of the 1960s, already overcome in terms of affordance — the meeting point between aesthetics, semantics and performance. The conjecture of an exclusive heritage to be protected and repeated *ad infinitum* today freezes the capacity to propose something new on the part of marques historically famous for their conceptually advanced approach, such as Bentley, Lancia, Porsche, for example. What is worse is that the romantic celebration of the neo-classical ideal provides a negative influence on the powerful industry of the new Far East, with false concepts of design. Anyone hoping that this be a passing trend must revise their views. At the launch of its third series in 2006, the Miata still evokes the style of the original model of 1989, after having in part overcome it. The astonished world can now be party to the first absurd retro-retro.

A dog chasing its own tail is the vision one has of car design today. But we must not blame just the designers — or perhaps it would be more correct to call them stylists once more — who are trapped within such a powerful and complex car system as to prevent any Pindaric flight of fancy, even at a theoretical level. Touching the car, hypothesizing a different future, means interfering with a web of production and commercial interests, and hence economic and political ones too, associated with the problem of employment, energy resources and territorial infrastructure. The strategy of the car manufacturers should be no surprise: then as now, it is soft, made of little steps, often guided by legislative dispositions that are never too invasive in terms of taxation, safety, environmental impact, with California heading the list. The idea of a future-car has in some way slipped out of our hands and there is no-one, let alone a single company, apparently able to propose a winning vision. This role is given instead, in line with the idea of product placement, to the imagination of Hollywood. What comes out of this sheds very little light on the matter. For *Minority Report*, directed in 2002 by Steven Spielberg, a group of futurologists and visionaries was commissioned to hypothesize a scenario of mobility in 2054. As a result, we find a magnetic levitation system for city traffic, with improbable auto-cells that become part of the urban landscape and of the home. But for a spin in the countryside, Tom Cruise hops into a highly traditional, even though electronically super-equipped and highly performing car — sponsored by Lexus. In *I, Robot*, directed by Alex Proyas in 2004, the relationship between the human race and artificial intelligence in 2035 is explored. The Audi RSQ, belonging to the hero-cop Will Smith, moves on four spheres but, like the other cars in the film, is virtually identical to cars currently in production. In neither case is the same level of imagination reached as in the fabulous concept cars in Rocket design of the 1950s and 1960s, and it is no surprise to discover that underlying both scripts are stories from that period, respectively by Philip K. Dick and Isaac Asimov. The marketing message is clear: the car, the one we produce so much advertising for, and which costs so much money, is perfect and beautiful. Untouchable today, as desirable tomorrow. If it were up to advertising, our future would be today, as was parodied recently by a television advertisement (for coffee!) in Germany: 'If you could make a wish, what would you ask for?' asks the man,



1. In 1956, Ford dreamed up the Aquacar, a world of flying and floating vehicles
 © Ford Motor Company



2. Standard vehicles for public hire system in a scenario of mobility for the year 2020
 © Syd Mead (detail, from *Automobile Quarterly*, XIII.1, p. 13), 1975



3. Future-Future: the new Bertone Stratos of 1970 in front of the new BMW establishment in Munich
 © Stile Bertone



4. From retro to retro-retro: the first and third series of the MX-5 in a promotional Mazda image
© Mazda Motors, 2006



5. *Aestetica cognita* in Tom Cruise's super-sports car in *Minority Report*
© Toyota – Lexus Division



6. Will Smith in a scene from *I, Robot*, today's design for cars of 2035
© Audi AG

elegantly standing on the stern of his yacht. 'That everything remain just the same,' she replies, beautifully dressed in white, with the Caribbean in the background. Beautiful certainly, but also ingenuous, a poor victim of the intrinsic message of marketing: deny the possibility at the outset that tomorrow, however different, might be better than today as the key to sell products and experience here and now.

But is it truly impossible to tackle the question of the future, especially that of the car, without descending into romanticism and utopian views? Today, nobody is astonished any more to learn that the car of the future will certainly not fly, but will move along electronic motorways controlled by a satellite system; after all, the story has been the same for the past 50 years. The monitoring system on German motorways, the invasion of speed cameras on British roads, the control of access to the centres of London and Bologna are only small, isolated experiments in electronic control applied to mobility. To complete the project, they only need to be linked into GPS, a drive-by-wire system and the autopilot already present in many cars, which follow the road, brake as needed and park by themselves. Nor does it seem to me that we are particularly worried about energy. We know, because we have been talking about it since the 1960s, that the car of the future will be powered by hydrogen, used as a medium to produce energy for electric, internal combustion or hybrid engines, thereby cancelling out the problem of ecological and economic sustainability of personal mobility (or at least shifting the goal posts). The pieces needed to manufacture cars of the future, in other words, already exist. It seems only that no-one wants to be first to put them together. The technical solutions needed to modify the industrial product, in its form and content, to the given circumstances of the moment, may be applied to any shell. The presentation in Geneva in 2006 of the prototype LAND_e was symbolic in this regard: tomorrow's technology applied to a virtually shapeless shell. An imaginary 'all and nothing' expressing the material lack of spring (or desire) in formulating future scenarios. The paradox is that there is nothing to prevent us using a Ford Model A of 1927 as the basis for the new technology. Like many of its contemporaries, this car is, in construction terms, already perfectly mature and, in its varied choice of bodywork models, compatible with today's demands. This apparent provocation serves to clarify how the problem of the car of the future has very little to do with the form of the object *per se*. If we go along with the common dialectic, it would be child's play for designers to interpret it in the preferred style: neo-classical for Jaguar, baroque for Mercedes, Pop for the Mini, Deconstructivist for BMW, Empire for Rolls-Royce, minimal for Audi, or combinations of these and others as preferred. But the concept of the future car is not expressed, as the manufacturers (would have us) believe, in an aesthetic seen as the interpretation of the brand identity, processed in relation to emerging trends. Nor will the car of the future, despite the best effort of all concerned, derive from a combination of the logical conclusions of already known typologies. The so-called crossovers are for the most part useless cars, good only for creating compromises but not for offering real alternatives to the ordinary car. The question is not one of technology or of style, but of design, and so deeply entrenched is the culture of the consumption project.

The question we should ask ourselves is instead a quite simple one: what will happen to the Myth of the Machine? What meaning, what role will the car of the future carve out for itself? Let us consider: today, cars are in good health. If chosen well, they are versatile, safe, economical, robust and reliable. The problem is that their myth on the one hand is now meaningless, and on the other is incompatible with the emerging global market — today still so heterogeneous but moving towards a tomorrow that will be more aligned. The Myth of the Machine has formed in two main thrusts, that of speed and that of status symbol. The myth of speed, the collective euphoria of the Modern Movement, wooed by the cultural avant-gardes, promoted by races and experienced personally by a population of drivers and passengers dreaming by the side of the roads of the Mille Miglia, came to an official demise on 26th Novem-

ber 2003, the day the supersonic Concorde was finally grounded. And was buried with the constriction of motor sports within the media circus, an experience beyond the reach of most, except sitting in front of TV screens or behind VIP lounge windows, watching the cars and their drivers as tiny, noisy dots in the distance. It has now become a commonplace experience to find ourselves in a world of inoperable infrastructures, limitations to traffic planned by and for sadists and masochists, and drivers who daily gamble their lives and penalty points. Seduced and abandoned, the public accepts a marketing technology that provides heaps of horsepower and then neutralizes it with traction and stability systems. It accepts a correctness that suggests the self-limitation of top speeds, whether a powerful BMW or little Smart, and then gives out a message like this: 'It could go at 300, but we don't trust you,' or 'we're worried that going flat out the car could fall apart.' At top speed, like in the Vasco Rossi song? If only! Cars are becoming increasingly large and the roads seem increasingly small; actual average speeds are constantly dropping. We live our experience of the car as an interminable intestinal spasm. In this dimension of quasi-immobility, the 400 kph Bugatti is no less ridiculous than a utility car with a sporty line, wedge shape and widened wheelarches. Here is an aesthetic fiction designed to give the impression of speed whilst parked, and its perception has been cancelled by technological perfection: sit in a Jeep at 200 kph, and it seems immobile; you feel nothing and no skills are needed — splendid! There is no fun in this and the myth of the racing driver, fascinating hero and at the same time a condemned soul, faded away from the collective imagination on 30th September 1955, when James Dean and his little Porsche 'bastard' crashed into a commonplace Ford coupé. So Marinetti was wrong when in his *Futurism Manifesto* he praised 'the beauty of speed' and 'the man holding the wheel' of 'a roaring motor car, which seems to race on gravel.' Proust was instead right when in 1907, in *Chronicle of a Journey by Motor Car*, he wrote that when travelling by car, he seemed to be still and see the road, the trees and bell towers of St. Etienne rushing by; the Playstation effect! And indeed, the overturning of the concept of speed has its origins in the logic real time of a computer: speed today is not perceived, it is sublimed in the instantaneous, in the imperceptible instant between a click and the download.

So perhaps the old myth of the status symbol still survives, the desire to show oneself to best effect, the American imperative to impress the neighbouring Jones with a bigger automobile than his. More car equals more man? This is what Cadillac used to promise, with a car that 'gives a man a new outlook' (1956), as did also the Buick Roadmaster ('it rolls out the red carpet wherever you go'), and Walt Disney with racing driver Jim Douglas in *The Love Bug* (1969): 'Without a real car I'm only half a man.' For decades, our society has been divided between drivers and aspirant drivers. Not owning a car used implicitly to mean desiring one. Possessing implied showing. And what else did Barthes intend in his *Mythologies*, comparing the Citroën DS to Gothic cathedrals, if not this? Were these cathedrals not intended to show the city to best effect, to impress the bumpkins Joneses from out of town? But nowadays, cars and their respective owners no longer impress anyone. If you turn your head, at the most you smile — or more often laugh. Possession as symbol of refinement? Jaguar produces diesel-powered baroque mini-estate cars. Possession as symbol of wealth? A used Rolls-Royce costs the same as a small Volkswagen. Possession as symbol of exclusiveness? Mercedes-Benz sells more cars in Germany than Ford. So what does possession mean? Today, (hardly) anyone buys a car any more. You can feel rich by hiring a Ferrari for a few euros from Sixt, or seem rich by taking a Porsche in leasing for a couple of years. The instalments are paid for by the company, after all, at least in the great majority of cases for the so-called prestige cars that invade our roads. The decline of the car as status symbol has also been caused by the incessant and monotonous business of brand building: all the marques, if we are to believe the brochures, offer cars that are uniformly beautiful, dynamic, elegant and prestigious. Decency, normality, defects; ugh! Long live the pimp, obscene silicon taste of the sort used by MTV to decorate a car and life (sic!). In truth, not everyone wishes to listen to these pre-digested fibs. It is from



7. Rocket design: Harley Earl poses in front of the GM Firebird concept car, 1953-58
© General Motors



8. Technology without form: the prototype Land Rover LAND_e, 2006
© Ford Motor Company



9. Symbol of a myth: the supersonic Aérospatiale-BAC Concorde, 1969
© Adrian Pingston 2003



10. Future simple: prototype of a fuel cell vehicle, Glo-car, 2003
© Ford Motor Company



11. The Future comes from space in the prototype Seattle-ITE XXI of 1962
© Ford Motor Company

this intolerance that springs the young cult for Youngtimer cars. Everything that was once considered ugly and old — Grandad's beige Fiat, the pensioner's gold-coloured Opel, the lemon-yellow Toyota from the provincial playboy — have suddenly become 'in.' This attraction for the banal, trash and all that is out of fashion, demonstrates a courageous rejection of the monotony of the advertising image and at the same time of the popular-elitist attempt to set up new reference values. Or should we believe that cars ought to be made to measure, as a unique model or limited series, inspired for the nth time by the myths of the past, whether contemporary status symbols or not? To paraphrase Benito Mussolini, one feels tempted to say, in defining the car status symbol today: 'it's not hard, just simply pointless.'

The car cannot cease to exist and represent, but it must change. A new myth needs to be formed. I believe that the fundamental value of the car is based on experience. The car serves to establish relationships, and not just physical ones, with ourselves and with our surroundings. Even a caustic author like Henry Miller noted in *The Air-conditioned Nightmare* (1945) that 'the automobile has been invented in order to force us to learn to be patient and kind with each other.' It is not the shell but the possibilities it offers that dictate the rules for the car of the future. I am not speaking of engines, gearshifts, numbers of doors and consumption here, but of spaces, relationships, sensations, contents, to define which new values are needed. With my childhood myths of speed and of the status symbol in tatters, let us try to take in the adult myth of the 'gettingonwelltogether' myth for a moment and hypothesize an intelligent 'slow driving.' (What would advertisers make of it, I wonder?). Acceptable? But then we have no need of a beautiful, imposing, aggressive, high-performance car! We need an appealing, light, fascinating and versatile one. It might be the prototype Ford Glo-car of 2003, which not coincidentally was not planned for a motor show but for a triennial design fair, without engine and with a luminescent, sensitive skin. Of course, the car will have to sacrifice its now useless engineering in the name of other qualities; naturally, electronics will take over as the playful centre of the appearance and behaviour of the vehicle, of the on-board infotainment and communications. No longer a motorway rocket or off-road caravel, the car of the future will become a mobile space for adventure and relaxation, and again takes centre-stage as refuge-toy-telephone-cinema-eatery-cupboard-gym-discotheque... That the shell be small to take dad (or mum) to work, or large, to take a family (or friends) on holiday is not the point, as whether it be open-top or not, that it resemble Buckingham Palace, an iPod or something new. Technology is flexible and can adapt itself to everything, even style. The man-consumer will respond to this as long as good examples are set him: the valid motives are evident and urgent.