1
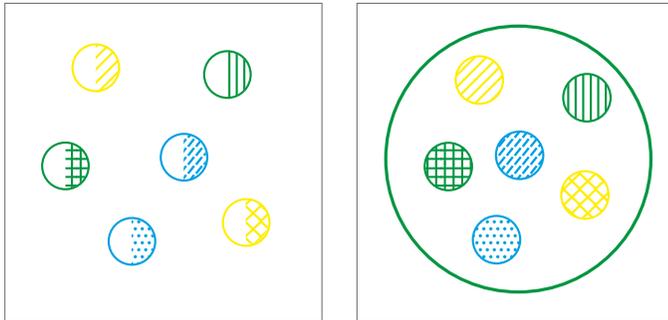# EXTERNAL PRESSURE ON THE BRAND

environmentally friendly. When everyone is reliable, that feature no longer stands out. It dilutes: it loses strength because it is being watered down with too many of the same features. But if everyone then also combines reliability with another specific characteristic that you don't have, then the characteristic slowly fades out of view.

Specific features stand out more and push the generic characteristics into the background. The latter can easily become a canvas against which the first can contrast themselves. If Subaru, just like its first competitors, is seen as a reliable car, then it is its affordable qualities that catch the eye. When Toyota is seen as being just as reliable as all the other cars in its class, then it can make a good impression with its environmentally friendly qualities.

The reliable character of Subaru and Toyota has then only become one condition. You can compare it to paintings that all have the same frame. The frame is generic and ensures that the image (the specific feature) is highlighted.

As in the illustration above. In the illustration on the left we see brands that all have their own individual feature (colour) but also share a feature (half-white). That shared feature will eventually become a white background offering contrast to the individual features.

FADING

Where a positive feature dilutes by being shared with its environment (becoming generic), it fades due to lack of contrast with the same environment. Again, an example from a personal situation: imagine excelling head and shoulders above all of your colleagues because you're the best in your field, only for everyone around you to suddenly get better. The contrast with your colleagues becomes less. They creep up on you. Your own qualities fade against the background of your colleagues that keep improving.

Features can fade when classified on a sliding scale, such as good versus bad. It's a very natural thing to do. It's a recognised strategy of our brains to classify things around us in that way. If we look out across wooded mountain tops for example, we can classify the trees based on their colour nuances, from light green to dark green. If we are talking to friends about our favourite films, we immediately rate all the films that we've seen from good to bad.

It's also really normal to compare what's on offer with each other, using such a sliding scale. Such as price versus quality: the one product is just that bit better and more expensive than the other. Popular examples in service provision are the size of an organisation, the quality of contact with the customer or how extensive the services available are. With products in the supermarket, it can be about the content of ingredients considered to be unhealthy, such as sugars, fats, salt or alcohol. The result is: products that trump each other on containing just a little more or a little less of those damaging ingredients. A popular way of defining technology is the degree of power, such as the amount of horsepower, terabytes or kilowatts. In politics, the sliding scale was a favourite for a long time: the one party is viewed as more right or more left, more progressive or more conservative than the others[8].

[8] It is striking that in Western democracies in particular, successful parties succeed today in not being classified on a sliding scale, but in absolutes (such as people – elite). More about this in chapter 4.
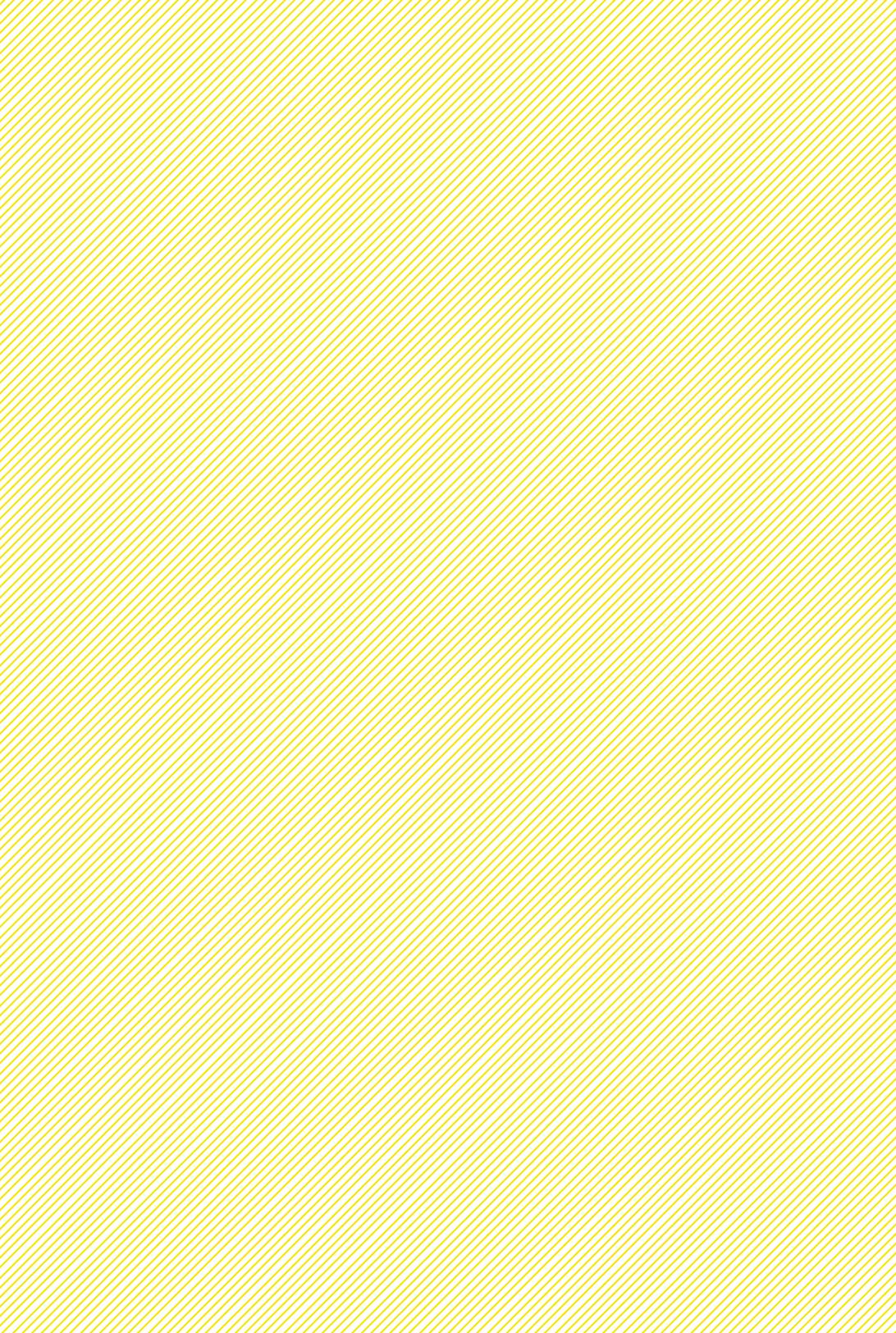
Digitalisation provides the fuel for a non-stop production machine. A machine continually churning out increasingly sophisticated units. Supplying products tailored to every specific wish and for every personal desire at ease, delivered to our front door at the push of the button. Whether from the comfort of our armchair as we're watching television, or in the bus on our way to work, our smartphone allows us to delve ever deeper into the array of specialist items on offer.

But this online world of preferences doesn't have to be a confusing chaos. The bedlam doesn't necessarily have to feel overwhelming. We have our digital filters in place to naturally narrow down your view. Online, the world is like one big system of corridors, blocking your view of the towering product-range mountain. A view we take outside: through our smartphone screens and through the lenses of our smart glasses or smart screen, the real world also changes into a comfortable world of preferences.

But from the perspective of every provider, the increase in product choice leads not so much to a narrowed view, but to a more open one: those who manifest themselves in an increasingly crowded world, get a bigger field of competition in return. Forced to broaden their view to a wider range of providers, or in other words, a wider range of potential competitors.

Compare this to someone in search of a life partner. Online dating is enabling more people than ever before to market themselves, warts and all, to a hungry audience. Great for those looking for 'the one'. Thanks to the enormous range on offer, you'll not be short of choice. Refining your search criteria to further narrow down the field, you'll be able to come up with

branding is based on a contradiction out of which other contradictory concept pairs can emerge. Instead of the identity characteristics competing with each other, they reinforce each other. In the case of the people's liberator, this could give rise to a subsequent set of opposing concepts (see illustration on the previous page). The identity characteristics all correspond to the set of concepts in the right-hand column. These concepts are related to each other because they find their match in a common contradictory background (left-hand column). And even though there are multiple characteristics, they form a guiding whole.

The accompanying contrasting background of a contrarian identity means that there is strategy: that a clear choice has been made with the objective of increasing the chance of being chosen as brand.

Finally, the question of whether contrarian branding is the only effective remedy for a growing field of competitors. It isn't. There is another option. Rewind to our single in search of love: what he could do, is beat the competition on all fronts. He presents himself as 'the ideal man' (or woman, of course). A profile showcasing a perfectly balanced personality, outclassing his competition on every level. These are the brands that position themselves as the (mental) market leaders, who are less vulnerable for new entrants because they do nearly everything well. However many new parties there are, they manage to always be just that little bit better. Like Google, that in the 'search engine' segment still always scores better on all relevant dimensions, such as ease of use and speed. Or Amazon that stays ahead of its competition on all dimensions related to online retail. Or Coca-Cola, that stays ahead of its competition in terms of flavour, distribution and consistent brand management. They may still be ranked on a sliding scale, but they consistently occupy the end of that scale. On all aspects that people find important, they simply do it better.

This strategy doesn't have many downsides. It's just reserved for the very few. For those that aren't successful, there is another option: ensure that the field of competition is pushed radically into the background.

TO OUTDO
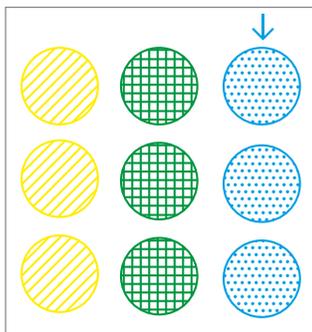
## FORMS OF CONTRARIAN BRANDING

There are three forms of contrarian branding.

ABSOLUTE POLARITY

The previous examples of liberators are examples of absolute polarity. They have characteristics that immediately evoke a counter-characteristic: who says he's a liberator, says at the same time that the other is an insider, institution, central organ or tyrant. Just like someone who says he's honest, implicitly shrouds the rest of the world in a cloak of dishonesty. By adopting an absolute position, all the competition is 'camouflaged away' as the remaining group. Those who manage to do this, present their public with a simple choice and stand out.

Polarity transforms the field of competition into an arena, where two fighters are standing diametrically opposed to each other. The arena is fenced off, so that the players cannot fall outside of the ring. The differences between the players are irreconcilable, they cannot cross into each other's territory.
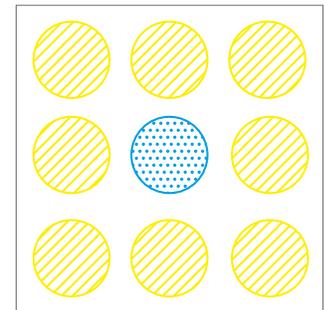
POLARITY

BIPOLARITY

For about the last ten years, it's been the norm in marketing and strategy literature to say that 'the middle disappears'. In fashion retail for example, brands such as H&M, Zara and Top Shop have priced former mid-sector brands such as InWear, Matinique and Benetton out of the market, through a combination of fashionable quality and low prices. But the mid-segment in clothing is back, with European brands such as Majé,

in a difficult to differentiate category sometimes do as brand. They try to put milk back on the map by positioning themselves as the only drink not manufactured in a factory. Pushing themselves to the forefront by using other artificial factory products as absolute contrasting context.

The imported contrast has a different effect than the external contrast, the previous type. With the external contrast, someone tries to stand out from the competition in a completely different market segment. It positions itself within a 'external category', just as WeChat positions itself within the category of payment making.

With the imported contrast, you don't position yourself within another market segment. It's not the case that through their campaign, Camper suddenly became an alternative for a sport shoe. It only used the fast world of the sneakers as context to stand out in its own segment. The same is true for the initial iPad positioning. It didn't compete with newspapers. It just used the disadvantages of physical newspapers to of course stand out itself. Like coffee makers who use the war to come across as sociable.

The formats and examples in this chapter show that absolute polarity can go hand in hand with a great market potential. In the case of internal contrast, the market is large because more competitors can be put aside as a group. This is definitely true for the example of the different liberators, because they present themselves as alternatives for the major market parties. With the exported contrast the market is big because these brands also enter other markets (such as Virgin or Google). Those who create an external contrast have a large market potential because they can compete in another market whilst simultaneously not having to lose appeal in its existing market. Finally: when you import contrast, you will highlight a generic or gradual characteristic in an existing market. Your market potential grows because you can work your way up as ultimate representative within your own market segment (think of Camper).
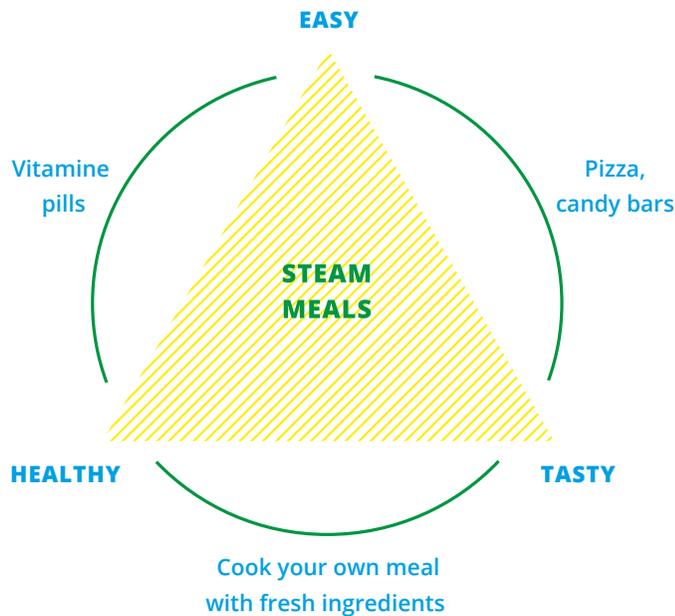
ABSOLUTE POLARITY AS TOOL FOR REFRAMING

Absolute polarity ensures that you can put your brand prominently in the foreground whilst also camouflaging the differences between competitors.

The question is first of all whether there is a method for creating absolute polarity. Many brands have no unique technology that contrasts them absolutely against the rest of the competition, such as our examples of Oldsmobile or Dyson. And so, the trick is to find polar characteristics. The most obvious way, is by carrying out research in a category into 'annoying conventions'. Ask the question: what annoys users when they use the product or services? In nearly every category you'll have a long list. Then look at which of the characteristics are 'absolute': characteristics whereby it doesn't pay or is difficult to adopt a position in the middle ground.

A second way is to look at how you can make less contrasting characteristics that are already connected to the product/ service, absolute. You do this by linking them to another context. Each of the four forms of absolute polarity uses a different context (or the same context in another way). With the internal contrast, you can find absolute characteristics by looking for a symbolic domain that can metaphorically be linked to the less contrasting characteristics that the product or service already has. As we saw with Shinola. A bicycle made in Detroit becomes a symbol of American recovery and craftmanship. Once you've found them, you can go in search of another market against which the absolute polar characteristics of the brand can contrast. So: besides bikes and watches, Shinola can also enter into other markets where luxury or cheap foreign brands are active (from handbags to pocket knives).

With the external contrast, you also use a new market as contrasting context. Only you now use it to make the less contrasting characteristics of your brand more contrasting. Let's take the Shinola bike as starting point. The brand could also have chosen to position the bike as an alternative to a gym membership.

EASY

Vitamine pills

STEAM MEALS

Pizza, candy bars

HEALTHY

TASTY

Cook your own meal with fresh ingredients

tamin tablets. The solution to this trilemma has brought us the handy dairy packages and steam meals in transparent boxes.

With this form, tripolarity, a brand stands out from the crowd by solving three contradictions. In doing so, its competition always misses one of the three characteristics. Compared with the steam meal we mentioned, a frozen pizza is no longer so healthy, a home-made meal is perhaps healthy and tasty, but pretty time consuming, and all the vitamin pills suddenly seem very artificial. The individual differences between all the frozen pizzas, the possible home-made meals and the vitamin pills are pushed into the background. What stands out, is that when compared to a steam meal they're all the same, because they all lack something. The individual product groups are 'prisoners' in longer existing market segments only associated with two of the three characteristics.

To put it more generally: by combining the conflicting characteristics from three segments, tripolarity takes away the view of the specific characteristics, of the representatives within the segments. It conceals the differences between the competitors. It's difficult for them to gain ground by doing things a bit better, because they always lack one essential characteristic.

As far as I know, tripolarity has never been dealt with in marketing literature. But perhaps even more importantly: in practice, this phenomenon is not widespread either. Only since digitalisation has been in full swing, have we seen more examples emerging. This is because digital technology ensures that market boundaries fade, or that market boundaries increasingly blend into one another. With tripolarity, you actually make a connection between three different (potential) markets or market segments. But because this form is not yet commonplace, it's difficult to identify different types. Which is why this chapter comprises descriptions of a range of examples. They come from different markets, from product ideas and business ideas to brand positioning.

The 3D Printer

One of the most well-known trilemmas is as follows: it's difficult for something to be fast, good and cheap at once. Imagine, you want an advertising campaign. If you want it to be realised quickly, and don't want to make any concessions in terms of quality, then it's going to cost you. The best people have to be available immediately, they'll have to work long hours, which is going to be expensive. It can be done for less money, but if you want quality, you'll often have to wait longer for it. An advertising agency can then spread its qualitative work capacity and therefore offer it for a lower price. And finally: when you want to have the campaign quickly and don't want to pay much for it, you can always make concessions in terms of quality. Bring-

But a car is also ballast. You're tied to something. The car brings a multitude of costs with it, such as the purchase price, maintenance, tax (and that's not even mentioning environmental damage). If you don't want to be tied to a car, you can choose to hire a car. You'll then still have the privacy, because you decide who gets in with you. But you are more flexible than with an own car because you have no ties: you can choose one when you need one and don't have to fork out when not using it. You don't have any unnecessary ballast that owning a car brings with it. The downside is that you don't have immediate access to a car. You need to go through all kinds of administrative procedures for the rental company. Looking at it like this, it's much easier to use a taxi or (in some countries) public transport. In most countries, the bus and train are immediately accessible and with the introduction of the chip card, involve much less administrative hassle. You can simply board a bus, train or tram and pay per journey. But a taxi is even easier and with companies like Uber or Lyft has become even cheaper. The only disadvantage is that you need to compromise on your privacy. There are drivers and fellow passengers to contend with.

In other words: the choice for a means of transport is a consideration between immediate availability, flexibility and privacy.

This consideration has become prominent with the arrival of car-share companies such as Zipcar. They offer a solution to this trilemma. Become a member of Zipcar, and for a small amount per month, always have a car available. You can reserve a car up to just a few minutes before departure, always have a car nearby, and can enjoy your privacy whilst driving. The concept is strategically positioned between the taxi (or public transport), the privately-owned car and a rental car. It stands out because it highlights and resolves the disadvantages of these three modes of transport. You can also say: it points out the defects that people previously may not have even noticed.

Compared to the taxi, Zipcar offers the advantage of not having to deal with a driver. Compared to the car, you have far fewer (fixed) costs (you have no ties, are more flexible) and the

advantage over rental is that it is much easier (you can drive away immediately).

The deal site

Another pressing trilemma in the energy sector is that between the continual supply of clean and cheap energy. It is still relatively cheap to produce dirty energy on a large scale. Technology has drastically reduced the costs of production and transportation. Those who want to be sure of a relatively cheap supply of energy, are therefore still best off purchasing dirty energy. Those who prefer clean energy, will have to pay more in most countries, or face the prospect of a less stable supply. Mass production of green energy is expensive, and you can't always count on it. Sun and wind aren't reliable either. The last is actually hidden by a lot of energy companies: those who have a subscription to green energy, don't actually know if the energy they are receiving is actually green, they only pay extra for the production of it. Any fluctuations in the supply of green energy are not visible to the customer.

For a stable supply of relatively cheap energy we are for now dependant on (partly) dirty energy. It's no coincidence that the solution is now being found in a combination of clean and dirty energy sources, that can compensate for the fluctuations. Due to the price and stability of supply, a concession is made to the clean nature of the energy.

The underlying idea of this trilemma is resolved in online retail.

Whoever wants a constant supply of good products will have to pay the price. They are sometimes offered cheaply, but this is often a one-off or in any case, temporary. This is what we call a special offer. There are plenty of stores with a constant supply of cheap goods, but the quality often leaves a lot to be desired. You don't often see a constant supply of expensive, quality products for a bargain price. But with the popularity of online shopping,

be there now. Because covering a distance takes time. This is partly resolved with the invention of telecommunication. Telecommunication has ensured that we can still be a little bit there, now. We can call, e-mail, skype, take part in a video conference. Where vehicle technology evolved by tinkering with the time component (making faster vehicles), the telecommunication evolved by continually improving the place component, namely by enriching the experience of 'being there'. What distinguishes the first crackling telephone from Skype, is that with the latter you have more the idea that you are actually in another place. You increasingly bring, in fact, the other world more into your home. The experience of 'being somewhere else now' becomes increasingly real.

You could perceive it as a trilemma: now, at the same time, being here and there. Spectacular discoveries may be just around the corner that may offer a solution. What we can in any case be sure of, is that the finding that solves this trilemma will quickly stand out from the crowd. With the Smart Glass, you can conjure up another world before your very eyes. A virtual world that integrates with your physical world here. It is already possible to send a good 3D projection of yourself with holograms. The Californian company Magic Leap is working on spectacular applications in the area of augmented reality (AR). In the promo clip we see the crowd at a sport event looking onto the pitch, where a gigantic whale dives up out of the ground and then falls back down. The splashing water making it even more realistic. As if an actual whale is swimming in the basketball pitch. Applications in the field of AR are becoming increasingly more refined and will enable us to further stretch our perception of time (here) and place (now and there).

A number of years ago, the American inventor Ray Kurzweil gave a presentation whereby his three-dimensional figure could be seen on a stage in the Netherlands, whilst he was actually stood talking from his room in America. Conversely, it is equally conceivable that the place where someone gives a speech

is brought to life in living rooms, and his projected African audience is only half a step away from his European or American audience. Pivoting, he connects with three groups of listeners, spread across the world. The evolution in technology gives him the idea to then actually connect with three worlds. He sees them around him, he hears them, smells them and can even make contact with the first row.

These applications not only help to give a presentation somewhere, but also to allow products to exist simultaneously in two worlds. Amazon and Apple, for example, are now using AR to allow people to bring products that they see online to life in their very own living room. Or putting a side-table that you see in the store next to your sofa to see if it looks okay. The table is then here and there.
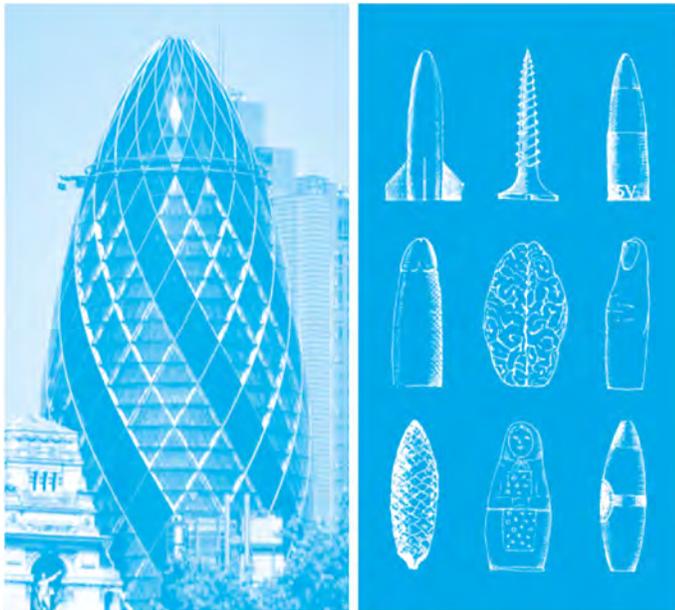
If we look at the direction in which some of the technological inventions are moving, it's inevitable that in about twenty years' time we'll find it quite normal to be here, now and there. Compared to these findings, the current telecommunications capabilities will be characterised as contrived, the means of transport seen as slow and our natural state of being in the here and now as being humdrum.

7
A BARREL FULL OF CONTRADICTIONS

you can also relegate the competition into three corners, like Jamie Oliver, who demonstrates that you can cook food that is good, attractive and affordable. By connecting three contradictions, you dismiss three groups as too limited. I called this tripolarity.

This does however beg the question, what can you do if you become a victim of this effect? What can you do to escape your corner? In the last section of chapter 4 we saw that you can fight polarity with polarity. But there are also other ways. For example, those put into a corner labelled old-style politics or elitist, can try to escape by connecting two contradictions with each other. Like presidential candidate Barack Obama once did, successfully managing to shake off the preconception of inexperienced left-wing candidate, by bridging the most important contradiction in the American political spectrum. He did this by presenting himself, first and foremost, as an Amer-

ican: 'There are no blue states and red states. There are just the United States.' Those trapped in polarity (the stigma of a left-wing politician) can thus escape from this using bipolarity (uniting left and right). And those trapped in two corners (bipolarity), can break out by labelling another group, besides the existing two groups, as one-sided (tripolarity). When H&M came up with the idea of bringing affordable, but real fashion onto the market, more players were quick to play copycat. Rapidly, a new segment emerged, also including brands like Zara and Desigual. This partly wiped away the bipolar advantage that H&M had. It was competing on a sliding scale with similar brands. The Swedish fashion chain would once again be able to stand out, by finding a new contrasting characteristic. It could drastically improve the quality of its clothing without it being at the expense of the low prices or its fashionable character. By doing so, H&M could shake off not only its old rivals (the luxury brands and the cheaper bulk), but also the new ones such as Zara and Desigual, by labelling hem as inferior in quality. H&M would then stand out by choosing a tripolar brand meaning. It would be cheap, good-looking and of a high quality. A bit like Jamie Oliver or MUJI.

The question is, what comes after this? Quadruplepolarity? Can you also adopt four contradictory characteristics? Or five? Or twenty?

We don't seem to find this strange if we're talking about people. We love describing famous people using multiple contradicting characteristics. Take celebrities like Madonna, David Bowie or Lady Gaga, who are often viewed as a barrel full of contradictions. They unite a large number of opposing qualities. Which is what makes them unique. The same happens with buildings. Such as in the photo below, an interpretation by Madelon Vriesendorp of the famous Gherkin (formerly called the Swiss Re Building) by architect Norman Foster in London[31].

31 Jencks, C. (2005). *Iconic Building: The Power of Enigma.*
London: Pan Macmillan.