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COLUMN

Romantic headset

**Roland Legrand**

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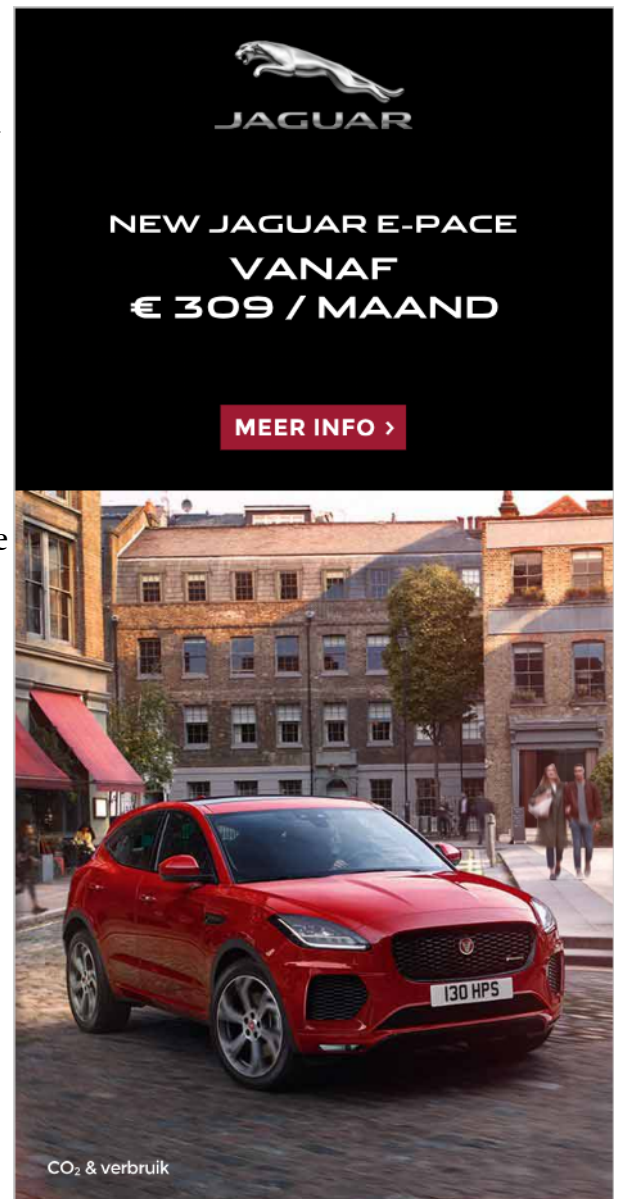
Finally he is here: a headset for virtual reality (VR) that is not stuck to your computer with a lot of cables. Where you do not have to attach a smartphone in any way. No, a 'standalone' thing that you just set up and ready.

Oculus Go is his name, a Facebook product, department Oculus VR.

From now on I can take VR to anywhere, even though I have not yet dared to use the cumbersome headset on the train. With such a headset you will be disconnected from the physical reality. You get the almost perfect illusion in a comfortable living room where you look at the - real - Netflix on a virtual large screen. Or where you transform into an avatar to meet other VR geeks in a VR world. 'Social VR' is that if someone thinks VR is antisocial by definition.

Romance

'Antisocial' is only one reproach that VR enthusiasts receive. All that technology is non-authentic and cold, I still hear. Like meditating in a virtual zen garden, how fake can it be? The philosopher in me must remember all



the criticism of romance, with her enthusiasm for the past, nature, authenticity and the recovery of your real self.

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Computers became 'personal', concealed the cold technology and made us dream of love and horror, of sex and monsters.

It was a reaction to

enlightenment, science, the industrial revolution. But still, the notion that romance was completely anti-technology is wrong. This is evident from a recent book by the Belgian philosopher Mark Coeckelbergh, with the beautiful title ' **New Romantic Cyborgs** ' (MIT Press, 2017).

Coeckelbergh shows how romanticism does not turn away from technology and science, but is fascinated by it.

There is fear of subjecting man to the machine, but also immense curiosity about how far we can go. Mary Shelley published her story about **Frankenstein** in 1818.

Although that was a horror story, the author was very well informed about the current state of science in her time.

There was then also experimented in real life with electricity on dead limbs.

The professor does not stop in the 19th century. The counterculture of the sixties and seventies of the last century was full of themes from romance. Hippies retreated into nature and tried out an agrarian existence. At the same time they devoted publications about technology such as 'The Whole Earth Catalog' by Stewart Brand.

Virtual

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Fascinating, I find Coeckelbergh's analysis of **virtual worlds**, a phenomenon that dates back to the nineties. In a 'Rousseau-like' way, the internet promises worlds where you can be yourself, versus a world 'where you have to adapt to the expectations of others'. Computers became 'personal', they concealed the cold technology and made us dream of love and horror, of sex and monsters.

Now, in this still young 21st century, the techno romance has again changed shape. Instead of shielding ourselves from reality, we can romanticise the so-called reality with new media such as smartphones and social media. What is **augmented reality** (AR) - making digital information on physical reality - other than making your environment magical? For example, to hunt down virtual monsters in the streets?

"There is no longer a real outside versus a virtual inside," says Coeckelbergh. We are still busy with monsters, love and magic, we still want to discover our 'real self'. But suddenly, while we were not paying attention, the internet was no longer a separate world and we were swallowed up by a net-world or a world-net.

Conclusion for Facebook: that Go must quickly get an AR option, otherwise he will stick in the 90s. So that we can seamlessly switch from the magic inside to that of the former 'outside'. But of course Mark Zuckerberg is already working on that. After all, he is a prophet of the 21st century. How we deal with that magic is another question. There is a next column about it.

Roland Legrand, Digital news manager

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