

The Volkswagen Beetle

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The Volkswagen Beetle was created in Germany but the legend was made in America. The small and simple egg shaped car became an icon of a revolutionary generation when the idea of “bigger is better” was the cultural standard. Almost thirty years after its initial popularity, the Beetle was reborn from the power of consumerism. The “flower power” of the people that once made it famous can now be purchased in the New Beetle and its optional dashboard-mounted vase, of course flower or meaning not included.

The Volkswagen Beetle is a beloved part of America’s counter culture revolution of the sixties. When one thinks of the round little car that is the Beetle, images of long-haired, peace-loving hippies soon come to mind. Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany are about as far away from this concept as one can get and in actuality this is where the Beetle had its beginnings. Commissioned by Hitler as the volks wagen or “peoples’ car”, the Beetle came to life in 1938 under the “Reich auto designer” Ferdinand Porsche (Kiley, 2002). Due to the high cost of fuel in Europe, Hitler envisioned an economical car that could get 40 miles per gallon and seat a family of four. He wanted a vehicle that could be easily adapted for military use and an auto industry that would build a self-sufficient nation (Harding, 1987). The fact that this car originated in a slave labor factory of wartime Germany was lost when it was adopted as a symbol of individuality and independence by the youth of America in the 1960’s (Kiley, 2002). The American Post-Modernist Marxist cultural critic, Fredric Jameson would have called this “historical amnesia,” a characteristic of post-modernism (Storey, 1998). This loss or lack of history led to the German made Beetle becoming part of the rebellious counter culture of the United States. A car

driven by the SS of the total conformist Nazi movement was now driven as a symbol of not conforming in America (Barker, 1970).

According to Jameson, postmodernism is a culture of the pastiche: the “complacent play of historical illusion” (Storey, 1998). Pastiche or “blank parody” can be seen in the New Beetle. Dubbed the reincarnation of the original, the New Beetle was unveiled on January 5, 1998. This was the first car in Volkswagen’s history to be launched in the United States before Europe and for a good reason, “Beetle mania” had gripped the nation (Kiley, 2002). The unpretentious car that almost anyone could own and everyone could fix had officially passed on its name. What makes the New Beetle a “blank parody” is that the car lacks these attributes that made it famous in the first place. The new front mounted engine is not as easily understood as it once was and the average price tag in 1999 was not considered very economical at 19,400 U.S. dollars. Finally, in what VW executives called a homage to the original cars popularity within the “flower power” generation, the New Beetle comes equipped with an optional dashboard-mounted flower vase (Kiley, 2002). This dashboard flower vase sums up the “blank parody” of the entire car. The New Beetle no longer conveys the push for social change that was the revolutionary “flower power” of its predecessor. Driving a Beetle was once a statement of individuality within a culture of stark conformity while today the New Beetle is simply a statement of consumerism.

To say that the Beetle constitutes popular culture because it is well liked by many is an understatement. Called the most loved car in America, no other has been made in such seer numbers. In 1972 sales of the Volkswagen Beetle had reached 15 million

and by 1973 sales exceeded the Ford Model T record for units sold of an individual model (Barker, 1970). The arrival of the New Beetle in 1998 created 56,000 sales in the first six months alone. No other car in history had such an impact on our culture including books, toys and even movies. *Herbie the Love Bug*, a feature length movie produced by Disney in 1969 went on to have three sequels, a television show and a cult following (Kiley, 2002). Volkswagen fan clubs create websites and magazines devoted to the Beetle and the restoration of original Beetles has become an industry of its own. Finally, the fact that the original Volkswagen Beetle was manufactured over a seventy-year span truly shows its status as an icon within popular culture.

References

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