Ghosts and Miracles
The Volkswagen as Imperial Debris in Postwar West Germany
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Abstract:
Starting with the author’s own experience of ghostliness in the archive, the article explores the political meaning of the postwar Volkswagen in West Germany as embodiment of the country’s “economic miracle”. The investigation follows the uncanny in texts and images about the Volkswagen between 1945 and 1960, arguing that the car carried with it a “public secret” as a “debris” from the Nazi empire that silently transcended the 1945 divide. This reading of the Volkswagen as well as the methodological path toward it highlight a phenomenon postcolonial scholars have described as “haunting”: a confusion about the relationship between past and present that also bears on those who study the past. The Volkswagen as such a haunting imperial debris is, finally, taken as an encouragement to revisit the powerful myths and “miracles” of postwar consumer cultures in the West from a new angle. The article calls for historical genealogies of these myths across the 1945 threshold that conceive of the postwar West as a – not yet – postcolonial space.

Keywords: Ghostliness, material culture, imperial debris, miracles, postcolonialism, postwar consumer culture, Germany, Volkswagen

Word count: 13.996 (including abstract and appendix)
I. Getting the joke

How many Jews fit in a Volkswagen?

500. Two in the front, three in the back, and the rest in the ashtray.

I remember this joke. Someone at school told it to me in my schooldays in Westphalia, West Germany. The memory is both distinct and vague. I suppose it happened in the early 1980s, when I was around ten years old. I had all but forgotten about the joke until a few years ago. It popped into my mind again like a ghostly apparition after I had begun to study the cultural meaning of the Volkswagen during the 1950s in West Germany.¹

“To study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it” writes the sociologist Avery Gordon. “This confrontation requires (or produces) a fundamental change in the way we know and make knowledge”.² Gordon contends that an uncanny feeling stirred by a surprising encounter in the archive should be taken seriously as important information and therefore should be followed up. Ghostly matters, the title of Gordon’s book, are ghostly because they arise insisting that they encapsulate something difficult, painful and essential to what we study, yet they cannot be captured adequately with any of the conceptual frameworks that we have at our disposal. Confronting the ghostly means starting “with the marginal, with what we normally exclude or banish, or […] never even notice.”³ How many Jews fit in a Volkswagen?

¹ I use the name Volkswagen for the Volkswagen Beetle (or Bug) as the car was simply known as the Volkswagen in Germany until the launching of the follow-up model, the “Golf”, in 1974.
³ Gordon, Ghostly Matters, 24-25.
There is a historiographical tradition which has taken its clues, just as Gordon does, from anthropological insights about the importance of the marginal and of the odd detail as a starting point for studying hidden cultural structures and codes.\(^4\) Robert Darnton illuminated eighteenth century print culture in Paris by attempting to “get the joke” of “the great cat massacre”.\(^5\) In such studies, the importance of starting with the odd detail derives in part from the fact that the cultural reality studied is quite far away from the historian’s own reality and therefore requires such a method to make sense of it.\(^6\) But where does it lead us if we try to “get” the Volkswagen joke in a similar way? Where does it lead us if we take the joke seriously as that marginal element possibly holding the key to “know” differently, and maybe better, an aspect of contemporary history that is all too well-known. A contemporary historian who decides to start exploring a culture “where it seems to be most opaque”\(^7\) enters a particularly strange terrain. The most opaque may turn out to be the most familiar, the most familiar may turn out to be the most obscure.

We usually assume that bizarre phenomena are either rare in contemporary European history or merely exist on the “margins” of society.\(^8\) In that respect “our” extended present often begins

\(^4\) See the work of historians like Robert Darnton, Natalie Z. Davis and Carlo Ginzburg.


\(^6\) Clifford Geertz, “History and Anthropology”, *New Literary History* 21.2 (Winter 1990): 321-335. This might be why early modern and medieval historians have embraced a certain strand in anthropology more enthusiastically than historians studying later periods. In anthropology, the focus on what is different from “us” has also become the topic of a critical debate. See James G. Carrier ed. *Occidentalism: Images of the West*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995.

\(^7\) Darnton, “Workers’ Revolt”, 78.

\(^8\) This article is inspired by Till van Rahden’s call for “approaches similar to those scholars who explore stories of magic and miracles […] to understand late medieval and early modern cultures in their ways of envisioning normality and enforcing norms.” Till van Rahden, “Clumsy Democrats: Moral Passions in the Federal Republic”, *German History*. 29.3 (2011): 485-504.
shortly after 1945, closely linked to the establishment of “the West” as the dominant political and geographical framework of thinking. It is no coincidence that scholars of postcolonial history have been attuned to the dimensions of estrangement in contemporary history, to the difficulty of recognizing the familiar when it bears the traces of that which society does not want to know about itself. Ann Stoler has coined the term “colonial aphasia” to grasp how widespread insights about colonial and postcolonial history become systematically forgotten again, dissociated from the national histories and excluded from the prevalent narratives.\(^9\) The Volkswagen’s symbolic meaning in contemporary Germany is, as I want to argue, an example of a similar phenomenon.

The Volkswagen started out in 1938 as one of the Third Reich’s most heavily propagated people’s products. Hitler promised a “people’s car” to every family within the racially defined German *Volksgemeinschaft* and the German population received this promise with overwhelming enthusiasm. For years, the car was omnipresent in propaganda publications, various public exhibitions and press coverage. Yet, it was never produced in large numbers in the newly built factory and city east of Hannover. From 1939 onwards, the Volkswagen factory, relying on forced labor, produced weapons instead, as well as around 50,000 *Kübelwagen*, a military version of the Volkswagen delivered to the German Wehrmacht. When the production started again in 1946 and increased after 1948, it was the first time that the car as it was originally conceived became a mass-produced reality populating German streets. Through its enormous success, both in Germany and abroad, the Volkswagen developed into a symbol of the “economic miracle”, of West Germany’s

new beginning. Eventually it became “one of West Germany’s few largely uncontested collective symbols”.10

The latter, post 1945 part of this story constitutes the basis of the established Volkswagen narrative in Germany. This narrative rests on the assumption of a clear cut cultural dissociation between the post- and the pre-1945 Volkswagen. Yet, how could the Volkswagen in the 1950s so successfully come to symbolize the new, post-fascist Germany, while it started out being so closely connected to the Germany of the Third Reich? Within the framework of interpretations developed in recent decades to better understand postwar West German history, it is far from obvious how to address this question. Neither the rise of consumer culture and the efforts to establish a viable democracy, nor the persistent reality of Nazi penchants, Volksgemeinschaft mentality and the dominant memory culture of German victimhood suffice as interpretive schemes to grapple with the challenges this question raises.11 Few scholars have brought up the important problem lurking


As an iconic commodity, the Volkswagen epitomizes this problem in a unique way. Until this day, it embodies Germany’s successful transformation from the rubble of the Third Reich into a consumer-democratic model of the West. Yet, how did this transformation from the Volkswagen’s meanings during the Third Reich to its postwar status as political symbol take place? The success of this transformation entailed burning down the bridges which we would need to properly see its genesis. Making a genesis invisible in turn is how “miracles” come into being. Material from the margins is needed to better understand the historical emergence of Germany’s “miracles”. Trying to get the Volkswagen joke means confronting the ghosts lurking behind the trope of “miracles” which worked to make them invisible.\footnote{On the “miracle” trope in connection to the aesthetics of consumer exhibitions see Jonathan S. Wiesen, „Miracles for Sale. Consumer Displays and Advertising in Postwar West Germany”, in: David F. Crew ed., \textit{Consuming Germany in the Cold War} (Oxford, 2003), 151-178. See also Monica Black, “Miracles in the Shadow of the Economic Miracle: the “supernatural '50s” in West Germany”, \textit{Journal of Modern History}. 84.4 (2012): 833-860.}

\textit{How many Jews fit in a Volkswagen?} In her introduction to the volume \textit{Miracle Years} historian Hanna Schissler mentions that she and other historians of her age remember a version of the joke from their childhoods in 1950s West Germany.\footnote{Hanna Schissler, “Writing about 1950s West Germany”, in: Hanna Schissler ed., \textit{The Miracle Years. A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949-1968} (Princeton, 2001), 3-15, 11.} In the early 1980s the American anthropologist...
Alan Dundes and the German ethnologist Thomas Hauschild collected the Volkswagen joke together with other so-called Auschwitz jokes in the city of Mainz and published their findings in an English journal.\textsuperscript{15} To publish these anti-Semitic jokes in German they had to overcome their own reluctance as well as their tendency to minimize the scope of what they first thought to be “a marginal phenomenon” but eventually identified as a common linguistic practice in Germans’ daily lives.\textsuperscript{16}

In 1983, the theater maker George Tabori gave the Volkswagen joke a central function in his play “Jubiläum” (“Jubilee”) which premiered in Bochum on January 31 1983, that is on the fiftieth anniversary of Hitler’s rise to power to which the title “Jubilee” refers. The main characters are ghosts of dead people who are all either victims of the Nazi regime or of \textit{postwar} National Socialist attitudes.\textsuperscript{17} As they talk about their suffering they expose the ways in which the Nazi past and its afterlife still haunts German society. The Volkswagen joke is uttered three times during the play, tormenting three of those characters.\textsuperscript{18} It is a central motif that serves to enact on stage the presence of the Nazi past in West German everyday life. George Tabori was born in 1914 into an assimilated Jewish family in Budapest and lived in Germany since 1968. His father had died in Auschwitz.

\textsuperscript{15} Alan Dundes and Thomas Hauschild, “Auschwitz Jokes”, \textit{Western Folklore} 42 (1983) 4, 249-260, 250.


\textsuperscript{18} See Tabori, \textit{Theaterstücke} 2, 59, 68 and 77.
How did the joke work and what can it tell us about the Volkswagen? The joke connects the car that has become a symbol of postwar West Germany and links it to the group of Jews, the very people that the Federal Republic’s predecessor polity, the Third Reich, had set out to annihilate. How many Jews fit in a Volkswagen? Why ask this question? Would Jews fit differently in the car than other people? The first part of the answer is a surprise, the number of Jews is much higher than the spatial dimensions of the Volkswagen would allow. The second part of the answer resolves the surprise by, first, reducing the number to the usual five and by, second, transforming the remaining Jews from living human passengers into the dead material of ashes that perfectly fits in the car’s ashtray.

From a psychological perspective one could say that the joke manages anti-Semitic aggression and feelings of superiority as well as a German consciousness of the Holocaust – possibly accompanied by feelings of shame. Following psychological and sociological theories of humor it seems appropriate to assume that the Volkswagen joke, when it “works”, releases those impulses and feelings, which are usually repressed due to a social taboo, into their expression in the form of laughter. But this effect requires that the joke builds and dissolves a tension through some form of witty jokework. In this case, the jokework is constructed around the Volkswagen. The Volkswagen joke, as any joke, uses the tension between the normal and the forbidden. It evokes something that was well-known and recognizable and at the same time unspeakable. The joke does not only connect the mass murder of the Holocaust directly to the object of this specific car. More importantly, it expresses the broken relationship between Germans and Jews through the object of the Volkswagen.

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Such a reading, however, seems to contradict the existing Volkswagen historiography as well as all those stories about and images of the car that were widespread in West Germany after 1948. We are used to detecting in these images and stories the following messages: The production and export success of the Volkswagen turned Germany into a once again accepted, even respected member of the Western world. Its ubiquity on West German streets marked the end of postwar misery and the beginning of economic recovery. For millions, the car represented the promise of a better life. It epitomized the feelings of freedom and the joy of driving through West Germany’s rebuilt cities and idyllic landscapes, of going on a weekend trip with the family, or even of travelling to foreign countries. The Volkswagen imaginary, in short, made Germany a radiant modern society, for which the past of the lost war became almost as elusive as a bad dream, or as unoffending as a challenge that was successfully overcome.

How do all those well-known and incontestable meanings of the postwar Volkswagen relate to the past of a Germany re-modelled as a racial community? How do they relate to the past of a greater German Reich that, as Alon Confino has convincingly argued, was imagined in many ways as “a world without Jews” long before it put this imagination into the practice of mass murder?20 The postwar success of the Volkswagen represents, both in collective memory and in

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historiography, the development of West Germany into a Western, consumer oriented society. But something is missing from this story that has never been seriously addressed.

By using the joke and an advertisement as my entry points to follow the traces of the ghostly in texts and images about the Volkswagen, a different meaning of the car during the years between 1945 and 1960 has come to the surface. This meaning was both obvious and not obvious at the same time, similar to what the anthropologist Michael Taussig has named a “public secret”, defining it as “that which is generally known but cannot be articulated”. Although “public secrets” can emerge in many forms, their characteristics match what scholars of material culture have claimed about the specific ways in which material objects become culturally significant. Due to their durability in time and their physical presence in space, material objects can be invested with a highly affective quality that differs from the significance of immaterial symbols. Concrete objects derive their meanings both from linguistic and visual discourses about them just as well as from the bodily interactions between people, places and objects. In this way a material object can


22 An exception is Gregor M. Rinn who argues that the virtue of usefulness was attached to the conception of the German automobile before and after 1945, embodied first and foremost by the Volkswagen. See Gregor M. Rinn, Das Automobil als nationales Identifikationssymbol. Zur politischen Bedeutung des Kraftfahrzeugs in Modernitätskonzeptionen des “Dritten Reichs” und der Bundesrepublik (Ph.D., Humboldt University Berlin, 2008).

23 Michael T. Taussig, Defacement. Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative (Stanford, 1999), 5.

incorporate conflicting and contradictory meanings without difficulty. In other words, it lends itself to create a silent presence of that which is generally known but cannot be articulated, next to, and possibly contradicting, that which is generally known and can be articulated. The Volkswagen, this mass-produced material object, was the vehicle in which millions of postwar Germans imagined to drive away from their past. But they were also driving “debris” from the Nazi empire. The presence of this “imperial debris” was made invisible and transformed into ghostliness through the postwar trope of (consumer) miracles, inviting us to further explore the post-fascist and postcolonial cultural conditions of postwar Western dreamscapes of consumption.

II. Genealogy of an advertisement

A Volkswagen advertisement was published in August 1960 in the high-brow cultural magazine magnum (fig. 1). The text says:

Young people – ‘critical generation’ – chrome-sparkling catchwords and mere promises have ceased to impress them already long ago. They try to find the meaning behind the things, they ask – and expect clear answers, they calculate –


26 See Stoler ed., Imperial Debris.
and expect a reasonable, reliable value. Young people (of every age) examine the Volkswagen – and then drive Volkswagen again and again.”

The photo shows a group of young people inspecting the Volkswagen in a critical way from different angles. The text presents the young generation as rational consumers who choose the Volkswagen for its reliable value for money. The ad gives the already existing meaning of the Volkswagen as a symbol of West Germany’s economic recovery a twist by associating it with an informed approach to things that is necessary for a functioning democracy. It shows the Volkswagen as a central element of the new, economically successful and democratic West German society. Germans’ capability to dispassionately scrutinize and subsequently choose the Volkswagen becomes proof of the vehicle’s good quality. Or is it the other way around? Does the ad promote the quality of the car, or does it promote the quality of the German people?

These young people are different than people used to be, the text tells us, because “chrome sparkling catchwords and mere promises have ceased to impress them already long ago.” [emphasis added] This sentence clearly evokes a change of mentality. The “long ago” leaves the earlier mentality in a foggy past, but in order to make sense the reader probably had to assume that this past was situated prior to May 1945. The text therefore conveys the idea that choosing the Volkswagen implies choosing a different Germany than the Germany of the Nazi past.28 The image, however, seems completely situated in the timeless presence of a rational modernity, or does it? This effect suddenly appears in a different light, when we juxtapose the photo with a series

27 Volkswagen ad published in magnum, n. 31, August 1960, 61.

28 “Chrome-sparkling” was a term used to describe bulky American cars, the very opposite of what the Volkswagen stood for. The catchword “critical generation” is reminiscent of the famous sociological study on young West Germans by Helmut Schelsky, Die skeptische Generation. Eine Soziologie der deutschen Jugend (Düsseldorf, 1957).
of other photos from 1938 and from the following years of the Nazi regime’s intensive propaganda for the Volkswagen or KdF-car as it was also called after the Nazi leisure time organization “Strength through Joy” (*Kraft durch Freude*). A group of people surrounding and examining the Volkswagen was a standard visual motif of the campaign, starting with the presentation of the first small model to Hitler by Ferdinand Porsche in 1938 (fig. 2) and continuing with photos of the public presentation of test cars all over Germany in the subsequent years (fig. 3). These are the images of a German people that was developing a “KdF-car psychosis”, as the Social Democratic opposition put it in one of their clandestine reports in 1939.

A different interpretation of the advertisement now becomes plausible. The advertisement stages the car as an object that *manifestly* ensures the transformation of a society into a democracy by *latently* calling to mind its totalitarian past. The iconographic effect thus appears powerful not *although* there is this second layer of meaning, but precisely *because* of it. The question is: If the Volkswagen’s success in the early Federal Republic had all been about leaving behind the Nazi past, why would the Volkswagen company in the year 1960 have had *any* interest in publishing an advertisement whose text, even if implicitly, conjured up precisely this past?

The car had obtained a sacrosanct status as a national symbol in the course of the 1950s. This status reached a peak three months after the Allied occupation of West Germany officially ended and the FRG became a sovereign state, when the production of the millionth Volkswagen was celebrated with great pomp at the factory in Wolfsburg on August 5, 1955. Yet, in 1957 and in 1959 a curious thing happened. The Volkswagen was attacked in prominent periodicals. Less

29 „Kraft durch Freude“ was part of the German Labor Front. See Shelley Baranowski, *Strength through Joy. Consumerism and mass tourism in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 2004).
than a year before the *magnum* ad, *Der Spiegel*, the most important political magazine in West Germany, started a full-blown offensive against this popular German symbol.\(^{31}\) The magazine’s cover story consisted of a long interview with Heinrich Nordhoff, director of the Volkswagen plant.\(^{32}\) Under the headline “Is the VW outdated?” the interviewers confronted Nordhoff with their conviction that the existing Volkswagen model, with its streamlined body and bug shape, was decidedly behind the times. Nordhoff referred to the commercial success of the Volkswagen as his main argument against such critique.

As the interview goes on endlessly about technical details, there is a mismatch between this matter-of-fact content and the journalists’ aggressive expressions of dissatisfaction with the car. But then, there is one short moment, appearing out of the blue, like the “strange accidents” that can be associated with instances of defacement,\(^{33}\) when the journalists of *Der Spiegel* articulate a very different form of discontent:

> “DER SPIEGEL: The automobile, as it is now, is, one could say, a homunculus, an artificial creation after a socio-political model, we all know after which one.”\(^{34}\)

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\(^{32}\) The headline of the same number’s cover (n. 40, 1949) was: “Another million of the same type”.

\(^{33}\) Taussig, *Defacement*, 3.

\(^{34}\) “Ist der VW veraltet?” 47.
Nordhoff agrees with the claim but immediately pushes it away by saying that “this is not important in this context”, that it has nothing to do with him personally, that it is “history”, that they should stay “to the matter itself”.\(^\text{35}\)

In this passage, a problem comes to the surface that was obviously difficult to express openly, namely the perception that, together with the Volkswagen, something of the spirit out of which it was born remained present. The Volkswagen embodied a “homunculus”, an artificially created human being stemming from the Nazi past. As they try to argue that this past is still relevant, and problematically so, for the present Volkswagen, the journalists break an unwritten rule. Nordhoff strives to reestablish the threatened division between past and present. The public secret – “we all know after which one” – is not to be spoken about.

It had, however, already been written about two years earlier. In 1957, the illustrated magazine Der Stern published an article by the writer Alexander Spoerl, also under the title “Is the VW outdated?”\(^\text{36}\) “The Volkswagen”, the author stated, “has long ceased to be an automobile. It is a catchword. Yet, in everything that has to do with “Volk”, concepts are dangerous.” By complaining about how difficult it had become to say anything critical about it, Spoerl denounces the sacred status of the car. He formulates his own critique by presenting the Volkswagen as having an unusual “father”: “His mother was a very sound construction idea. His father was faith”, namely the “unflinching faith” of the Germans who believed the promises of the Third Reich. The words “unflinching faith” are put in quotation marks to identify them as Nazi language.\(^\text{37}\)

\(^{35}\) Ibid.


\(^{37}\) A. Spoerl, “Ist der VW veraltet?” Der Stern, n. 43, 26 October 1957, 54-61, quotations 56.
In order to capture the true Nazi meaning of the car a joke is told about a worker in the Volkswagen factory of the Third Reich who stole all the pieces of the KdF-Car to put them together at home. When his friend asks why he still hasn’t assembled the car, he answers: “However I screw together the parts, it never becomes a car, but always a cannon.” These cannons, Spoerl claims, were in reality Volkswagen, namely the military Volkswagen-Kübel which is then presented as an anthropomorphic entity living through recent German history:

“The VW-Kübel became the most loyal comrade of the German soldier. Afterwards he was the first ‘war criminal’ to be de-nazified. He put on the Limousine again, the occupying soldiers fell in love with him, Wolfsburg received steel and the license for reconstruction. His off-road construction and the front-line experience made him well suited for the slightly uneven postwar Germany. That is how he acquired his steadfast reputation.” 38

Spoerl crossed the line of the usually unsaid by identifying the Volkswagen and the enthusiasm attached to it with the Germans’ “faith” in the Nazi movement and its promises. The article apparently caused a great stir, as references to it in automobile magazines indicate. Yet, the resulting discussion focused solely on the technical aspects and left the political dimension in the realm of the unsaid. 39

This is the context in which we have to read the cover story interview in Der Spiegel. It is also the context in which we should place the magnum advertisement. In 1957, Spoerl had exposed

38 Spoerl, “Ist der VW veraltet?”, 57.
the public secret in an explicit and witty effort to desecrate the holy status of the Volkswagen. In 1959, the interview in Der Spiegel showed both a consciousness of the exposed secret and the impossibility of consistently naming it. Yet, in 1960 it was apparently sufficiently exposed to publish an advertisement which both evoked it and at the same time covered it up with another layer of meaning in order to make it disappear again.

These three examples are the most outspoken ones among occasional expressions of discomfort about the car and the unmanageable presence of its Nazi past, occurring often in the form of humor and irony, both in journalistic writings and in some of the advertising efforts for the Volkswagen during the 1950s.\textsuperscript{40} In 1952, a Volkswagen advertisement stated:

“What has made [the Volkswagen] well-known and popular, what has made it the top-selling and much sought-after German car \textit{is not its history of origins}, but the harmony of its technical and economical features its value as a utility vehicle without unnecessary and expensive freight.”\textsuperscript{41} [emphasis added]

The Volkswagen’s history of origins that this ad so explicitly tried to push away consisted first and foremost of the massive propaganda campaign which the National Socialists had organized to promote the Volkswagen and which had continued even during the war. According


\textsuperscript{41} “Der VW setzt sich durch”, Volkswagen advertisement published in Quick, n. 2, 13 January 1952, 22-23.
to historian Paul Kluke writing in 1960, the Nazi Volkswagen propaganda had a “magic effect” and the success of that campaign “nearly” turned the Volkswagen into a “symbol of National Socialist propaganda technique” and “of the blind confidence of all German social classes”. This campaign had produced the “chrome-sparkling catchwords and mere promises” which resonated so deeply into the postwar era that the postwar “critical generation” had to be declared immune to them in the *magnum* advertisement that was published in the same year as Kluke’s analysis.

Taken together, the three examples discussed above make it possible to expose to a certain extent the workings of the public secret. Spoerl and the journalists of *Der Spiegel* expressed an uneasiness with what the Volkswagen silently embodied in the German public sphere and thereby tried to expose the secret and undermine its untouchable status. The 1960 ad implicitly referred to this uneasiness in a way that arguably paved the way for a reinforcement of the public secret, especially for a younger generation. In 1962, Volkswagen started its first big ad campaign in the postwar German press with the German branch of the New York agency “Doyle Dane Bernbach” that promoted the VW in the US since 1959. Against the background of the growing discomfort about the Volkswagen at the end of the 1950s, the DDB campaign of the early 1960s can be interpreted as implicitly addressing the criticism that the car would be outdated (fig. 4).

The brilliant irony and humor of the campaign broke with the dominant forms in which the car had been promoted during the 1950s. It thereby prepared the car’s appropriation by a younger generation that had not been exposed to Nazi Volkswagen propaganda. The campaign brought about what the *magnum* ad of 1960 had already attempted, namely lifting the car’s perception out

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of its still present but usually silenced implication in the Nazi project. It thus managed to transform the car’s public secret of the 1950s, present for the older generation who had consciously lived through the Nazi years, into a secret that became even more unknowable for younger Germans.

III. Driving the Volkswagen through space and time

What were the narratives, metaphors and images used in the postwar period that may have incited such expressions of discomfort? And what can those cultural scripts tell us about the hidden meanings of the Volkswagen that eventually transformed into ghostly apparitions? When Spoerl identified the car with the German man in Der Stern, he took up an existing narrative. Already in 1949, the car magazine Motor-Rundschau presented the vicissitude of the Volkswagen since 1938 as the story of a young man named “Vinzenz”. This identification of the car and the German man through the change of times implied a physical continuity of both that included as one and the same car the Wehrmacht’s Volkswagen, the Kübelwagen. During the war, Vinzenz the Volkswagen, “proved himself as a loyal comrade and served in France, Russia and Africa. Neither the cold in the east nor the heat in the desert sand harmed his primordially healthy constitution.”

The Kübel therefore seemed to enable the idea (or experience) of a continuous existence of the Volkswagen through the change of times and, eight years later, Spoerl ironically criticized exactly this idea and its implications.

This conflation of Volkswagen, Kübelwagen and German man directly counteracts the notion that the Volkswagen was a symbol of a new beginning and harks back to an heroic image of the Nazi war, an image closely associated with the conquering of geographic space.\textsuperscript{45} In spite of this, or maybe because of this, it was a common theme whose origins dated back before 1945. The habit of describing the Volkswagen Kübel as a “loyal comrade”, of insisting that it was essentially the same car as the civilian Volkswagen and of conflating it with the German soldier, stemmed directly from Nazi propaganda. From May 1941 onwards, the magazine \textit{Arbeitertum}, the nationwide organ of the German Labor Front, used the name “KdF-Car” or “Volkswagen” interchangeably for the military Kübelwagen that had just demonstrated its quality through its successful services for the German Africa corps.\textsuperscript{46} In an article from March 1942 car and driver merged into one: “Quickly advancing to the enemy, versatile in combat,” the Volkswagen was even more resilient than the German soldier. He conquered “the wide snow fields of Russia” and “the stony deserts of destroyed Soviet cities” as well as he resisted “North Africa’s glittering sun”.\textsuperscript{47}

Already in December 1940, an \textit{Arbeitertum} cover article reiterated the promise that after the war “every German worker will own his Volkswagen and drive on German highways from Klagenfurt to Narvik. […] the German worker will not have to deal with time and space – due to his social status he will own the world!”\textsuperscript{48} This Nazi propaganda envisioned the postwar


\textsuperscript{46}“KdF.-Wagen auf den Wegen des Sieges”, \textit{Arbeitertum}, n. 28, May 1941.

\textsuperscript{47}“Die Front bestätigt es: Der Volkswagen hat alle Erwartungen übertroffen“, \textit{Arbeitertum}, first March number, 1942, 6-7.

\textsuperscript{48}“Sieben Jahre “Kraft durch Freude”. Auch im Kriege kein Stillstand – Große Zukunftspläne”, \textit{Arbeitertum}, n. 18, December 1940, 2-3. The Norwegian harbor city Narvik had been occupied by the German Wehrmacht in the Spring of 1940.
experience of owning and driving a Volkswagen as a form of conquering time and space. The promise that the “Volkswagen” would be available for every “German worker” came with the promise of a new (European) order under German leadership, including greater social equality within the racially defined “Volk”. The car functioned as a medium to imagine this future world in a concrete way: The German worker would drive his Volkswagen on the German Autobahn through the expanded German Reich, from the Austrian Klagenfurt to the Norwegian Narvik. Driving the car meant belonging to the German people, being part of the “people’s body” and – dominating the world.49

Traces of this envisioned future were still alive in the postwar imagination. The car transported the past’s dream of the future into the postwar present. Yet, as the previously discussed articulations of discomfort indicate, the transition of these Nazi fantasies about the Volkswagen into the postwar presence was not self-evident. Indeed, it required a mythology. Such a mythology was delivered in 1951 when the young author Horst Mönnich published his first novel Die Autostadt. It became an immediate success, selling more than 100,000 copies.50 Mönnich’s novel is the most sophisticated and explicit attempt of the postwar period to re-narrate the story of the Volkswagen. In 1968, Mönnich, a former Hitler youth and soldier during the war, summarized his 1945 moment of disillusionment with the question: “But where […], if this, in which we had


50 Horst Mönnich, Die Autostadt. Roman (Frankfurt/M., 1951). The novel’s success enabled Mönnich to become a member of the famous Gruppe 47 and to build a career as a writer on it.
wrongly believed, had never been Germany – where had Germany then been?" His novel’s answer was: the real Germany had been contained, and had survived, in the form of the Volkswagen and in the form of the city and factory that produced it. Volkswagen director Heinrich Nordhoff praised the book in his foreword to the first edition as uncovering “truths” that “lie deeper than the visible, that touch the true core of events”.

The text orchestrates the experiences of the German population during the Third Reich, the war and its aftermath by looking through the prism of the Volkswagen, the factory and the city. Like a force of nature the machines, the factory, the streets and buildings of Wolfsburg form the glue that binds together all the different German characters from all regions of the former German Reich, many of them refugees. Large parts of the novel use organic metaphors to describe a mystic link between the people, the place, the factory and the car: the organization of the city is compared to a human organism, the factory is "a being that has an autonomous life" which, together with the German workers, engenders another living being: the Volkswagen.

The novel’s transcendental worldview of organic wholeness ties in with many elements of Nazi culture and is reminiscent of what Jeffrey Herf has called “reactionary modernism". It is the dream of a society without social differences, a redeemed organic entity realized through the

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52 The city in which the Volkswagen was, and is, produced (Wolfsburg), was previously called “City of the KdF-Car” and had already partly been built as a model city of the Third Reich.


workings of a soulful and animated technology embodied miraculously in the Volkswagen. *Die Autostadt* is, at its core, a founding myth that makes sense of Germany’s historical rupture by presenting the Volkswagen as an object with magical qualities. The car that is repeatedly referred to as “the miracle” ensures the postwar resurrection of a West Germany rising from the ashes and ready to bring about its postwar economic recovery.\(^5^6\) The military Volkswagen Kübel plays a key role in enabling this mythical transformation.

The section dedicated to the Kübel’s war exploits marks the transition from the car’s and the city’s Third Reich history to their new postwar life. While the car is depicted as a living being with superhuman capacities, the identity of the Kübelwagen, the Volkswagen and the German soldier becomes an important element of the Volkswagen’s transfer to the postwar world.\(^5^7\) The object of a rotating globe frames these scenes gradually displaying the various theatres of the German war of expansion. The moment of defeat is captured in the form of a burnt down Volkswagen followed by the standstill of the globe. This zero moment of standstill contains the seed of rebirth: The sun shines its light exactly on the place which will induce the car’s and the people’s resurgence, namely the city in the North of Germany where the Kübelwagen was produced and where the civilian Volkswagen will follow in its military brother’s footsteps, conquering the world once again, this time as a commodity. The novel presents the beginning postwar mass production and export of the car as filling a void created at the dark hour of Germany’s war defeat. The “miracle car” enables German superiority, seemingly destined for the dustbin of history in 1945, to transform itself from its military manifestations into its civilian form.

\(^{5^6}\) For the Volkswagen being named a “miracle” see Mönnich, *Die Autostadt*, 56, 275, 277.

\(^{5^7}\) Mönnich, *Die Autostadt*, 182-193.
of international trade relations. The text thus uses the notion of a “zero hour” in combination with the Volkswagen as an enchanted commodity to create a myth that was meant to ensure cultural continuity.

How did this novel relate to the Volkswagen imaginary available in the German public sphere? The official Volkswagen advertising in West Germany, limited in general, was characterized by a lack of innovative elements that could have clearly separated the meaning of the car from its Nazi legacy. Volkswagen’s most important advertising activity during the decade after 1949 consisted of producing and disseminating promotional films. Most of these films, especially until the middle of the decade, used an audio-visual language that continued the aesthetics of the Weimar and the Nazi Kulturfilme. If the Nazi educational films “infused” the avant-garde cinema of the 1920s “with new ideological meanings”, the earlier Volkswagen films in turn transported many elements of this nazified aesthetics into the postwar era. The most

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58 In the first part of the novel, a girl is introduced who moves around pinheads for the location of Volkswagen dealers on the “ordnance map” (“Generalstabskarte”) of the factory. The pinheads are explicitly compared to “an army”. Mönnich 1951, Die Autostadt, 82.

59 On the limited scope of VW advertising see Michael Kriegeskorte, Automobilwerbung in Deutschland 1948-1968 (Cologne, 1994) 120. There is no in depth study of the whole variety of early Volkswagen advertising activities.

60 Between 1949 and 1961 at least 21 films were produced for Volkswagen and shown in commercial cinemas, at car dealers and at automobile exhibitions, reaching a spectatorship of several hundred thousand. Günter Riederer, Auto-Kino. Unternehmensfilme von Volkswagen in den Wirtschaftswunderjahren (Wolfsburg, 2011), 12-34.

61 Some films reproduced earlier Volkswagen films released under the Third Reich, or reused titles of other Nazi Kulturfilme. On the continuities between Nazi Kulturfilme and Volkswagen films see Riederer, Auto-Kino, 13, 22, 33, 50 and 143.

important of them, “Aus eigener Kraft” (“From one’s own strength”) from 1954, is a symphonic film in Agfacolor that stages city life, factory buildings, assembly line production and industrious workers as a natural, flowing process of matter and bodies that magically engenders this hugely successful car “from” the people’s “own strength”.63

The film performs an identification of the Volkswagen and Germany through two maneuvers: On the explicit level, the Volkswagen appears as a phenomenon floating in the timeless space of an ideal modernity, disconnected from both its Nazi past and the concrete conditions of its early postwar relaunch. On the implicit level, the film stages the transfiguration of the car’s industrial production into a constitutive element of an organicist model of society, thereby continuing a connection of the Volkswagen to National Socialist fantasies of social harmony, racial exclusivity and German superiority. This combination of the outspoken and the silent generates, again, the mythical character of this miracle story about the people’s and the car’s regeneration.64

While the film celebrates the expansion of Volkswagen’s export, the images and the language used to tell this civilian story call to mind the imperial tropes used by the Nazi campaign for the Kübelwagen. At the end of the film, the finished car rolls from the assembly line onto the streets and the narrator captures the moment with pathos: “Here, finally, he can touch the earth.


64 The film premiered on March 30 1954 in cinemas in Berlin, Hamburg, Munich and Frankfurt Main. Federal ministers and members of parliament attended a special premiere in Bonn. The film found its audience mainly through matinees organized by contract dealers and two big tours of special screenings. It won a prize at the documentary film festival in Venice and was officially assessed as “worthy” (“wertvoll”) by the West German office of film evaluation, although only after a “long and intensive debate”. Riederer, Auto-Kino, 42 and 35-53.
The earth has him and he has the earth, the whole wide earth for himself.” Earlier postwar Volkswagen films had staged how the car conquers the globe in a similarly emphatic way. The ending of the 1949 film “Symphony of a car” showed Volkswagen rolling out the factory followed by rows of VWs on a train and then a shot from a highway bridge on an endless line of VWs on the autobahn (fig. 5). In the last – animated – sequence, the viewer sees a globe from afar with Germany roughly in the middle of both screen and globe, while an endless number of Volkswagen cars are streaming out of Germany, towards the viewer and into outer space (fig. 6).65

IV. Genesis of a miracle

The connection between the Volkswagen and a National Socialist body politic was a cultural phenomenon that left many traces in the archive. They can be found on the margins, on those occasions when an uneasiness about this connection was expressed explicitly. They can also be found in the way rhetoric and aesthetic patterns were continued after 1945. The mismatch between these findings and the meaning of the Volkswagen as symbolizing a West Germany which was defined away from its own past must have created an interpretive void, or, psychologically speaking, a cognitive dissonance. The concept of the “miraculous” seems to have filled this void by smoothing over the intrinsic cultural contradictions of how Germany’s Western reconstruction happened.66

65 “Sinfonie eines Autos”, Germany 1949, UKA Film-Produktion, directed by Ulrich Kayser and Werner Liesfeld, 14 minutes.
Mönnich’s novel about the “miracle car” was published in 1951. Around 1952 West Germans began to agree that the term “German miracle” (initially more rarely “economic miracle”) was suitable to describe the development of their country after the currency reform. As a phrase that encapsulated the whole process of West Germany’s postwar reconstitution, the “German miracle” redirected attention away from the concrete occurrence of cultural transformation, especially from those dissonant parts which undermined the coherence of the narrative. Referring to the economic boom and the Volkswagen’s as well as other German commodities’ success as a “miracle” both acknowledged and brushed aside the unlikeliness of a new West German identity built on these phenomena.

In order to understand the genesis of the Volkswagen as this kind of “miracle”, we have to revisit the postwar process of cultural transformation yet again from a different angle. As Peter Fritzsche put it, “the idea of Germany had been covertly Nazified as well as Aryanized” after January 1933. National Socialism’s total war defeat and the loss of state sovereignty resulted in a deep crisis of identity, a collectively shattered “unconscious self-confidence”.

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67 “Adenauer fordert Mut zur Entscheidung”, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 8 March 1952, 1; „Das deutsche Wirtschaftswunder. Unsere Korrespondenten berichten, was das Ausland dazu sagt“, FAZ, 29 March 1952, 7; “Es gibt kein Deutsches Wunder”, Der Spiegel, n. 37, 9 September 1953. The “German miracle” and the “economic miracle” had also been common expressions used by Hitler and the Nazis for the successes of the Third Reich. This common use of the term was not forgotten after the war, see Gerd Bucerius, “Hintergründe eines Wirtschaftswunders. Ein Beitrag zum Fall Schacht”, Die Zeit, n. 14, 3 April 1947, 2; Jens Daniel, “Das Zwinkern mit dem Wunder”, Der Spiegel, n. 47, 17.11. 1954; Schäfer, Das gespaltene Bewußtsein, 10.

68 This analysis overlaps with Falko Schneider’s in his “Unfassbares Produzieren”, 323.

69 Peter Fritzsche, Life and Death in the Third Reich (Cambridge, 2008), 268.

70 Richard Bessel, Germany 1945. From war to peace (London, 2009), 7, who borrows the term from Fritz Stern. On the emotional reactions of postwar Germans see van Rahden, „Clumsy Democrats“; Jeffrey K. Olick, In the House of the Hangman. The Agonies of German Defeat, 1943-1949 (Chicago, 2005); Werner Sollors, The Temptation of Despair: Tales of the 1940s (Cambridge, 2014); Anna M. Parkinson, An Emotional State. The Politics of Emotion in Postwar West German Culture (Ann Arbor, 2015); Stephan-Ludwig Hoffmann, „Besiegte, Besatzer,
followed a twelve-year period of extreme collective self-aggrandizement at the expense of the Third Reich’s proclaimed enemies and the racial community’s “others”. Before the war, an excess of national symbols, rituals and other aesthetic materializations constantly provided the presence, and thereby an experienced reality, of these ideas in the public sphere. After the war, the state of Germany’s national non-existence was reflected in the destruction of some of these symbols by the allies and their subsequent absence from the public sphere in which a different sovereignty ruled.\textsuperscript{71}

A crisis of identity, a world view in shambles and the resulting disorientation play out above all on the level of affects and emotions. In the German case, this crisis was necessarily intensified by the allies’ efforts to de-nazify the population by confronting them with their collective responsibility for the mass murder committed in their name.\textsuperscript{72} Collectivities need narratives and symbols to make sense of themselves. An individual’s sense of self also depends on the acknowledgement he or she receives from other human beings. On the level of a society this entails being recognized by other countries. After Germans had embarked on coercing such “recognition”


\textsuperscript{72} Ulrike Weckel, Beschämende Bilder: Deutsche Reaktionen Auf Alliierte Dokumentarfilme Über Befreite Konzentrationslager (Stuttgart, 2012); Ulrike Weckel, „Disappointed Hopes for Spontaneous Mass Conversion. German Responses to Allied Atrocity Film Screenings 1945-46“ Bulletin of the GHI 51 (Fall 2012), 39-53; Sollors, The Temptation of Despair, 85-150; Olick, In the House of the Hangman.
or “respect” from other nations through the brutal force of war and mass crime, they suddenly found themselves at the mercy of how the world in general and the occupation forces in particular looked at them. The gradual genesis of the Volkswagen as a national symbol of West Germany is inextricably entwined with such dynamics of real or imagined external perceptions and the affects evoked by them.

To get a better grip on how the Volkswagen became the symbol of the postwar “economic miracle”, it is useful to pay attention to the affective sensibilities emerging around this object in journalistic discourses from the years of allied occupation onward. Any object’s symbolic power derives from the affects it is able to provoke, affects which may spring from more complex narratives and interpretations and at the same time contain these (possibly contradictory) narratives in a condensed form. 73 If we follow the car in this way through its random occurrences in the press, the emotional reactions around the Volkswagen can roughly be summarized as a journey from resentment to pride. 74 Focusing on the expression of these kinds of emotions throws a sharp light on how the object of the Volkswagen served to mediate and embody the changing relationship between (West) Germans and the occupation forces as well as the western world outside of Germany.

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73 The focus on objects thus allows for an integration of the symbolic and the affective, i.e. bodily dimensions in the evolution of identities. When it comes to objects, affects and the workings of self-consciousness Winnicot’s ideas about “transitional objects” are still the most important reference, Donald Winnicott, Playing and Reality (New York, 2005) especially 1-34.

The first Volkswagen to come off the assembly line in 1946 and 1947 were not available for German private customers nor for German civil authorities, but were nearly exclusively delivered to the occupation forces. Thus, in the initial period, the car that the Nazis had previously made into a symbol of the imperial German postwar order of affluence had fallen into the hands of Germany’s former enemies. The earliest appearances of the Volkswagen in the press testify to a complicated constellation of sensibilities linked to this situation. In August 1947, Der Spiegel reported on the preparation of the export exhibition in Hannover, mentioning 25 new Volkswagens deployed as official taxis. The road traffic department had issued a special decree for this occasion in order to prevent “that the taxis would only be entered by foreigners full of calories and nicotine.” In January 1948 Jan Molitor writes in Die Zeit about the celebration of the 20,000th Volkswagen. The disappointment of the workers about the fact that the Volkswagen is only available to the occupation forces, is a central theme of the article. Summing up their frustration, Molitor reports: “‘The Volkswagen?’ the workers say. ‘The car runs and the people watch from the outside.’” The mood is not celebratory due to the workers’ bitterness about the war defeat caused by Hitler, and due to their disappointment about the foreign sovereignty over, as well as exclusive use of, the newly fabricated Volkswagen.

The currency reform, however, marks a clear break with this early period of heightened resentment surrounding the postwar status of the car. After the production of the Volkswagen had

increased and the car became available both for export and for German customers, the most dominant theme in the press became the success of the car outside Germany. In October 1948, *Quick* printed a photo of a Volkswagen on the Dam square in Amsterdam with a caption stating that “our small Volkswagen” could be found on every street corner in Holland. Two weeks later another photo showed American workers at the port of Hamburg admiring a Volkswagen as a “nice little car”. This tendency culminated in May 1949, right after the founding of the Federal Republic, with a headline on the big success of the German Industry fair in New York and a photo of the Volkswagen surrounded by admiring visitors.

That the specter of national shame could still loom large behind the new spectacle of national pride became apparent in a report on the same event in the magazine *Neue Illustrierte*. Here, the photo of the admired Volkswagen was placed beneath an equally large one showing a picket line of protesters in New York carrying banners with slogans such as “We don’t want soap manufactured from Jewish bodies” and “Boycott this Nazi show”. In the caption the magazine informed its readers about another slogan namely “Today People’s Car – Tomorrow Death Car”. Without any further explanation the reader was thus confronted with the fact that presenting German commodities, and especially the Volkswagen, in a city with a large Jewish community was not self-evidently generating enthusiasm, but rather brought to the surface a reminder of the

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80 „Deutschland stellt aus“, *Neue Illustrierte* (Cologne), n. 19, 12 May 1949, 6-7. *Quick* also mentioned the boycott but didn’t mention or show any of the slogans.
close connection between German industrial production, in particular of this car, and the mass murder of Jews.\textsuperscript{81}

Der Spiegel’s first cover story on the Volkswagen from May 1950 established the image of the car as an epitome of West Germany’s regained power and authority as well as an important source of national pride. The first paragraph set the tone by citing a Life magazine story in which the Volkswagen was presented as a “symbol of German ‘Reconstruction’ [English in the original]: Symbol of the sturdy German proficiency”.\textsuperscript{82} American experts in New York, American soldiers in Hamburg, Dutch customers in Amsterdam, and many more foreigners enter the stage in 1948, 1949 and 1950 to affirm again and again to German readers that there are good reasons to be proud – of the Volkswagen in particular, and of West Germany’s steps towards economic and political recovery in general. Taken together these examples indicate that the perception of how Germany was seen from the outside fulfilled a crucial, if not decisive role for the Volkswagen to emerge as the quintessential object of postwar national pride and as the symbolic center of the evolving miracle narrative.

What kind of perceptions from the outside were available to Germans in this period? Der Spiegel’s remark about Life magazine referred clearly to the magazine’s photo report on West Germany from 1949 entitled “Recovery in the West”. The report gave indeed special attention to the Volkswagen with a full-page photo showing rows of Volkswagen in front of the factory in

\textsuperscript{81}  Herbert Engst, “New York übertraf alle Erwartungen”, Die Zeit, 28 April 1949, contained no sign of any presence of a shameful past.

\textsuperscript{82}  “Porsche von Fallersleben. Geschichte eines Automobils”, Der Spiegel, n. 18, 4 May 1950, 21-26, here 21.
Wolfsburg.\footnote{Life, 16 May 1949, 37; 38-40; 41; 42-43. In 1954 Time magazine published a cover story on the Volkswagen and Germany under the title “The Fabulous Recovery”, Time. The Weekly Magazine, 2 February 1954.} This story in *Life* magazine, however, is merely one reflection of a much larger effort from the outside to reinterpret Germany’s position in the world. Between 1948 and 1952, the Marshall Plan propaganda campaign, “the largest international propaganda operation ever seen in peacetime”,\footnote{David Ellwood, *Rebuilding Europe. Western Europe, America and Postwar Reconstruction* (Harlow, 1992), 162.} accompanied the European Recovery Program (ERP) all over Europe. This campaign in many ways established the most important features of the new postwar political imaginary of the West. As Sheryl Kroen’s recent work makes clear, the campaign essentially staged the event of Western Europe’s “recovery” based on the principles of free trade, productivity and international cooperation.\footnote{Sheryl Kroen, “Liberal Tales of Origin at the Berlin Industries Fair”, unpublished manuscript. Thanks to the author for giving me access to this manuscript. See also Sheryl Kroen, “Robinson Charley. The Ideological Underpinnings of Atlantic History”, in: Lisa A. Lindsay and John Wood Sweed eds., *Biography and the Black Atlantic* (Philadelphia, 2014), 66-299; Brian Angus McKenzie, *Remaking France. Americanization, public diplomacy, and the Marshall plan* (New York, 2005); David W. Ellwood, „The Propaganda of the Marshall Plan in Italy in a Cold War Context“, *Intelligence and National Security* 18:2 (2003), 225-236; Greg Castillo, “Domesticating the Cold War. Household Consumption as Propaganda in Marshall Plan Germany”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 40:2 (2005), 261-288.} In the context of this endeavor Germany, the author of Europe’s postwar crisis, was rebranded as a West Germany without history, a new entity rising out of the rubble, a model country of Western production and export whose inhabitants were praised for their “almost fanatical reverence for toil”.\footnote{“Gateway to Germany,” KA, B140 299, Publication on behalf of German Federal Ministry of the Marshall Plan (Bonn, 1952), quoted in Kroen, “Liberal Tales of Origin”.} This process of rebranding culminated on the occasion of the 1950 Berlin Industries Fair which was broadcast around the world.\footnote{The event became the theme of the Marshall Plan film “Air of Freedom” produced by HICOG Film Section for ECA Germany, 1950.} In the exhibition,
Germany’s official appearance as national entity happened in the form of a hand-drawn figure named “Herr X”. The exhibition showed “the transformation of Herr X – from a soldier in uniform, marching, producing destruction, annihilation and extermination all over Europe, into a hard-working, vital participant in the recovery, wearing a new suit”.\textsuperscript{88}

West Germans appropriated this Marshall Plan story of Germany’s recovery and turned it into a popular narrative of national regeneration. In the emerging West German version, the Western Allies were relegated to the sidelines, from where they were acknowledged as shouting approving remarks that confirmed a recuperated German self-confidence. Even before the term “German miracle” came into use, the 1948 currency reform was already labelled “the great miracle”.\textsuperscript{89} But it was not only the abundance of commodities suddenly filling German stores, which were perceived as a “miracle”. The greatest miracle for postwar West Germans was the recognition of their country as a vital member of the Western community in the context of the emerging Cold War.

„One should not accuse a person of the bad manners of his past” wrote the magazine Motor-Rundschau in 1949 about the Volkswagen. “Now, after the currency reform, the great miracle, he appears spick and span, with really good manners and therefore: young man from a good family.”\textsuperscript{90} Herr X, and his anthropomorphized mirror-image, the German Volkswagen, were not marching any more. Although the war was mentioned in this article as an experience that had shaped the Volkswagen’s – or the German soldier’s – character in a positive way, the Western framework of “the recovery” instilled a different meaning into the same narrative, one that could eclipse the fact

\textsuperscript{88} Kroen, “Liberal Tales of Origin”.
\textsuperscript{89} See e.g. “Wolfgang Weber machte einen Besuch am D-Mark-Strand“, Neue Illustrierte, n. 19, 2 September 1948, 8-9.
that the “good family” the article evoked may have been uncomfortably interwoven with the Third Reich’s racial community.

V. Haunting miracles

In the course of this article I have spun together the different knots of the marginal and uncanny popping up in the archive around the Volkswagen and I have tried to knit them into a connected, but necessarily not altogether coherent, web of readings. A physical activity like knitting is perhaps a fitting metaphor for the work needed to understand “the ‘unexpected capacity of objects to fade out of focus’ as they ‘remain peripheral to our vision’ and yet potent in marking partitioned lives.” Ann Stoler aptly uses Daniel Miller’s words to get to the core of what the study of “imperial debris” means. “Imperial formations”, Stoler writes, are defined by racialized relations of force. Their “political forms […] endure beyond the formal exclusions.” After the imperial formation has officially ended, much of its “rot” remains which defies the clear demarcation between before and after. Material objects become the carriers, “peripheral to our vision”, of the still ongoing past. “Imperial debris” disobey a totalizing notion of continuity and rupture. They can only be “debris” because something has become past. They can only assert their power, because something is still present. But they remain also, in spite of all their cultural force, a fragile phenomenon, an “ungraspable moment”. Or rather, their force is in part due to the very fact that they “fade out of focus”.  

Between 1946 and 1962, the Volkswagen became a sacrosanct national symbol of Germany’s postwar “miracles” through its capacity to silently transcend the 1945 divide. That capacity derived from the fact that it was not merely a symbol. The Volkswagen became a mass-produced material object that could be perceived and experienced as an embodiment of an organic German body politic. The car was associated with dreams of a harmonious and superior racial community, it was linked to the desire and experience of belonging to an invincible people’s body and it combined promises of timelessness with the imperialist fantasy of conquering and dominating exoticized geographical space. The Volkswagen could keep something alive that was supposed to be dead. It could bridge the gap between the Germany before and after 1945. It could do all this, not although, but because it could simultaneously be the opposite, namely an innocent technical commodity, driving into the future and fading out of the political observer’s focus.

_How many Jews fit into a Volkswagen?_ Was the question meant as a provocation when it was asked during the 1950s? At the very least, the question must have reminded Germans of the fact that the postwar Volkswagen was different from the Volkswagen promised before 1945. Jews were now allowed to enter and drive it, something that was certainly never intended by the Nazi regime.92 Telling the joke, in any case, assumed a laughing audience of Aryan Germans. It thereby performed, and repeated, a cultural practice of exclusion and dehumanization. As a speech act the joke painfully gives linguistic presence to the mass murder that had been the result of precisely the kind of body politic that the Volkswagen had silently continued to manifest after the war.

Paying attention to the uncanny has proved to be a helpful methodological tool for exposing rarely acknowledged meanings of this powerful icon of postwar West Germany and by extension

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92 On December 3rd 1938 Himmler passed a decree prohibiting German Jews from driving. In Mai 1938 Hitler had laid the foundation stone for the Volkswagen plant. See Klaus W. Tofahrn, *Chronologie des Dritten Reiches. Ereignisse, Personen, Begriffe* (Darmstadt, 2003), 60 and 65.
postwar modernity. It has enabled me to identify as a “ghost” a personal memory of the joke and an archival encounter of an advertisement that seemed to make no sense. Experiencing the ghostly aspects of these Volkswagen apparitions has meant to recognize their unique characteristic of lingering in a limbo between past and present, disrupting the usually unproblematic separation between a “then” and a “now”, a disavowed and objectified past and a present that is owned as one’s own. This is what makes the postwar Volkswagen an “imperial debris”, a manifestation of a disorienting and therefore haunting cultural formation.93

Postcolonial studies scholars have started to resort to the notion of haunting in order to grasp the ongoing presence of the colonial past after the formal end of empire, the bewildering ways in which “the complex colonial legacy [is] still circulating in and between former imperialist centers and their peripheries.”94 Homi Bhabha’s text “The World and the Home” (1992), has played an influential role in these conversations. Bhabha declared the “unhomely” and the haunting “a paradigmatic post-colonial experience”.95 Whereas the ghostly can also be approached as an object of study, in the context of postcolonial studies the concept is used in particular to reflect on how the confusion about the relationship between past and present bears on those who study the past.96 The case of the Volkswagen as an “imperial debris” speaks to this latter dimension

96 This can even be the case with a story that happened in the eighteenth century. See Ian Baucom, Spectres of the Atlantic. Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History (Durham, 2005).
and encourages us to think about postwar West Germany as a postcolonial society shaped by the unruly presence of a double colonialist past.\textsuperscript{97} The image of a Volkswagen whose “healthy constitution” could neither be “harmed” by “the cold in the east nor the heat in the desert sand” is a reminder of the manifold entanglements between Germany’s earlier colonial presence outside of Europe and the Nazi version of a colonial project on European grounds, entanglements that are the object of recent academic debates and a growing body of historical scholarship.\textsuperscript{98}

While “imperial debris” have mostly been identified in former colonies, the concept applies here to a metropolitan culture after empire.\textsuperscript{99} The Volkswagen as a postwar symbol emerged fully after, as Robert Young has put it, Europe’s “own postcoloniality with respect to the Nazi empire was instituted.” The process to formally end the imperial regimes of the other European countries, however, took much longer thereby producing a long-lasting “postcolonial condition” and carving out the terrain in which “imperial debris” can still haunt the present.\textsuperscript{100} The “ruination” of social

\textsuperscript{97} As Ella Shohat critically remarked, there are many different versions of what is called “post-colonial”. The “post-colonial” of metropoles has to be distinguished from that of former colonies or settler-colonies. See Ella Shohat, “Notes on the “Post-Colonial””, Social Text 31/32 (1992), 99-113. In all cases it seems, however, that it is the temporal murkiness of the term’s “post-”, positing not only a critical but also a historical distance to the colonial, which has inspired recent discussions about “ghostliness” in all forms of postcolonial societies and with respect to different positionalities and experiences.


\textsuperscript{99} This is consistent with the move towards studying the effects of empire at home. See Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, At Home with the Empire. Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). In her introduction Stoler includes the metropole in the concept of “imperial debris”, Stoler, “Introduction: ”The Rot Remains””, 15 and 19.

relations that the Volkswagen carried into the postwar present was, however, hidden behind and within its “miraculous” and shiny existence as a timeless commodity.

This Volkswagen story is, then, not only about ghosts, but also about miracles. The car did not only haunt West German society as unspeakable debris of the Nazi empire, but it also enchanted postwar West German society as the symbol of the “economic miracle”. Ghostliness turns up in relation to that which society “knows and does not know”\textsuperscript{101} about itself and which it therefore cannot articulate. The trope of the “economic miracle” can be defined as a collective myth, a story about an improbable and therefore wonderful occurrence that society willfully accepts and identifies with. In the case of the Volkswagen, the ghostly and the miraculous belong together. The Volkswagen and the miracle that it embodied exemplify an enchantment that is about un-seeing the ongoing presence of a disavowed past and turning it into something that is hidden in plain sight yet never properly graspable.

Is this configuration of the ghostly and the enchanted limited to the Volkswagen case and to the “economic miracle” of West Germany? The previous paragraph has indicated the extent to which the Volkswagen “miracle” was imagined as a global phenomenon by West Germans and how this imagination was enabled through a transnational, especially a transatlantic production of meaning. We should think of it, therefore, as a piece in a larger transformation of the political and cultural framework during the formative postwar years between 1945 and 1960. These years saw the establishment of the idea of the “West” as a cultural-geographic sphere binding together societies that shared a common history, a “modern” culture and liberal political norms.\textsuperscript{102} At the same time, free trade and a Taylorist emphasis on productivity were promoted intensely in the

\textsuperscript{101} “L’européen sait et ne sait pas.” Frantz Fanon, \textit{Peau noir, masque blancs} (Paris, 1952), 198.

\textsuperscript{102} See Patrick T. Jackson, \textit{Civilizing the Enemy: German Reconstruction and the Invention of the West} (Ann Arbor, 2006).
context of the Marshall Plan as the definitive formula to solve Western Europe’s social, economic and political problems. Part of this endeavor was to imbue the resulting consumer objects with a socially and politically redemptive, or miraculous, quality. Considering both of these newly established frameworks of meaning as well as their interdependence is important to understand how the Nazi Volkswagen could reemerge as Germany’s favorite “miracle car”.

The emergence of the idea of the “West” at the beginning of the twentieth century, however, was closely and ambiguously intertwined with the history and legacy of European imperialism.\(^{103}\) Both the focus on the Cold War framework and the acceptance of the 1945 divide, which usually accompanies it, have dominated scholarly interpretations and collective memory to such an extent, that the ramifications of imperialism and colonialism on the postwar histories of Western societies are still far from being fully understood. This is particularly true regarding consumer culture and the postwar “modern”. The relationship between the political dimensions of postwar consumer cultures and the previous colonialist and fascist politicization of the commercial sphere – during high imperialism, the interwar period and World War II – has only recently become a topic of historical scrutiny.\(^{104}\) The same holds true for the racial dimensions of US American postwar consumerism as well as for the connections between the imaginaries of postwar European consumer cultures and the context of decolonization.\(^{105}\)


\(^{104}\) In 2005 Uta Poiger already called for such a perspective on consumer culture with respect to German history, see Poiger, “Imperialism and Empire in Twentieth Century Germany”, especially 118 and 134-137. See also Cristina Lombardi-Diop, “Spotless Italy. Hygiene, Domesticity, and the Ubiquity of Whiteness in Fascist and Postwar Consumer Culture”, *California Italian Studies* 2:1 (2011).

The influence of postcolonial studies is now felt strongly all over the discipline of history, not the least in the debates about “modernity” as a guiding concept.\textsuperscript{106} An increasing awareness of the problems engrained in the concept of “modernity” and its naturalized connection to “the West” seems to open up a space to develop new perspectives also for the postwar period. Meanwhile, and on a par with the latter, scholars have begun to study different forms of “enchantment” as a significant, if not constitutive, part not only of non-Western but also of Western cultures of modernity.\textsuperscript{107}

The enchantment of mass-produced commodities as markers of a modern and Western way of life formed an indispensable ingredient of postwar political imaginary. French intellectuals in particular were puzzled and fascinated by what they saw as the overdetermination of consumer objects in their time.\textsuperscript{108} Roland Barthes’ call to examine the “decorative display” in popular culture of the “what-goes-without-saying” strongly influenced the rise of cultural studies in the following decades. Although Barthes stated in his “Mythologies” that every myth “transforms history into nature”, he himself refrained from studying the myths of his own time historically by tracing their genesis back in time.\textsuperscript{109} The ghostly aspects of the Volkswagen’s meanings in West Germany can teach us, however, that, if we want to expand our understanding of the powerful myths and

\textit{America} (Amherst, 2010); Dianne S. Harris, \textit{Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America} (Minneapolis, 2013).
\textsuperscript{109} Roland Barthes, \textit{Mythologies} (London, 2009), xix, 154 and 163.
miracles of the postwar period, we need to study up close their concrete emergence in time and in a – not yet – post-colonial space. For this, we need genealogies that systematically bridge the 1945 threshold and we need to develop an awareness of the possible effects of haunting, including on us as scholars.\textsuperscript{110}

Such an approach would involve revisiting consumer imaginaries in the postwar West more generally and could include the production of meaning around the Volkswagen in different countries. When reading a New York Times article from 1956 reporting that an “uncanny word-of-mouth campaign” in the USA had “helped to raise [Volkswagen] sales with a minimum of advertising” we could pause and ask what this “uncanny” might have referred to.\textsuperscript{111} Is there any relationship between this “uncanny” and the Jewish picket lines in front of the 1949 German Industries fair in New York chanting “Today People’s Car – Tomorrow Death Car”? And why was there a Volkswagen advertising in French that showed a family of five sitting in a ghostlike transparent version of the vehicle up in the sky accompanied by the tagline “Yesterday’s dream… Today’s reality.”\textsuperscript{112}

When Aimé Césaire reflected in 1955 about what the experience of Nazism meant for his contemporaries he stated provocatively that Europe and the whole of “Western” civilization experienced it as a “choc en retour”.\textsuperscript{113} According to Césaire, Europeans recognized an aspect of themselves in the horrors of the Nazi empire, an aspect which their own frameworks of perception

\textsuperscript{110} Esther Rashkin, \textit{Unspeakable Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Culture} (Albany, 2008), 1-24.
\textsuperscript{112} “Rêve d’hier… Réalité d’aujourd’hui”. A photo of this advertising motif can be found on the website \url{www.kdf-wagen.de} and on pinterest. In both cases, it is attributed to the year 1948.
\textsuperscript{113} Aimé Césaire, \textit{Discours sur le colonialisme} (Paris, 1955), 13. The expression was translated into English as “boomerang effect” which lacks the psychological aspect of “shock”, see Césaire, \textit{Discourse on Colonialism}, translated by Joan Pinkham (New York, 2000), 36.
had rendered invisible before, yet they simultaneously hid this realization from themselves. Césaire’s insight invites us to ask how postwar societies may have developed and cultivated certain forms of “colonial aphasia” specifically in reaction to the Third Reich’s “choc en retour”. This might enable us to get a better grip on how the postwar economic recovery, its accompanying dreamscapes, including the symbolic role of a rebranded West Germany, produced their own subcutaneous, and ongoing, effects of haunting.