**Belonging and rebuilding through the car: The Volkswagen Beetle in German-language novels of the 1950s**

Scholars have long identified an “inability to feel” in the immediate post-WWII period in Germany. This approach is largely inspired by psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich’s 1967 study *The Inability to Mourn*, which contended that Germans were both unable to mourn the object, Hitler, and unable to experience true melancholia. The study further suggests that, had Germans been able to experience melancholia, they would not have been able to so actively create the postwar *Wirtschaftswunder* (“economic miracle”) and rebuild their country. According to the Mitscherlichs, postwar West German citizens were suffused by an emotional rigidity that made them unable to express or value emotions such as guilt or empathy, emotions concomitant with democracy. They were, instead, obsessed with economic reconstruction.

Anna Parkinson’s recent monograph counters the well-known Mitscherlich paradigm and seeks to “reveal the dynamics of an intense psychic energy at work in the postwar landscape” (p. 5) in Germany. Still, much research remains to be done on the role of specificobjects and technologies in the development of affective structures in the postwar era.

This presentation summarizes aspects of my research on salient representations of the Volkswagen Beetle in German-language novels of the 1950s. The texts that make up the corpus for this project all depict the overinvested emotional attachment developed by various protagonists to the original Volkswagen. These texts also evince emotional behaviors from protagonists that reinforce a sense of belonging to a community. The Beetle thus features in many texts as a key object enabling individuals and groups to feel that they belong to the West German society of the 1950s. I argue that the relationship with the Volkswagen serves as a metaphor for emotions and related conduct that the authors view as valuable in the context of Germany’s post-WWII reconstruction and the return of the “democratic subject.”

My presentation here focuses on two representative novels. Rather than resorting to affect theory or psychoanalysis, as some recent scholarship has, I emphasize the value of motivational theories of emotions for the analysis of post-WWII Germany.

Sybille Schall’s 1954 novel *Madame am Steuer* (“Madame at the Wheel”) recounts the story of a woman who finds learning to drive a real struggle. Despite being the worst student at her driving school, she perseveres and decides to buy herself a Volkswagen, contrary to everyone’s advice. Having bought her Volkswagen, the novel turns into a travelogue through Switzerland and the Netherlands, her travels made possible by the profoundly intimate relationship established between “Madame” and her vehicle, nicknamed “Peppino.” I quote (translations throughout mine): “I love Peppino, its loyalty, its reliability, its benevolence, and the strength with which it responds to my bad habits.” On the road, Peppino is said to “continue tirelessly” and allow “Madame” to feel that she can truly be herself on this harmonious journey: “It is not up to him, it is not up to me,” says Madame, “it is up to us both, it is always up to both of us, and the common ground achieved is beautiful” (p. 71).

A close study of the ascriptions of emotion in language found in *Madame am Steuer* reveals that the terms used often allude to “dispositions to behave” rather than to feelings as such, something which is consistent with the motivational tradition. This is evident in the following passage: “I don’t want to charm with feminine weakness (or yes?), but it’s true. Like Peppino, I can only be directed with patience and love, and it is only through growing empathy and sympathy that Peppino and I became friends in the end, friends who can unconditionally count on each other.” Here, “I can only be directed,” using *zu lenken* (“direct to; guide to”), could also be translated as “I can only be oriented,” suggesting a propensity for a certain pattern of behavior. Furthermore, because it evokes the idea of “orientation,” this expression can be read through the prism of Robert Plutchik’s definitional model of emotion. Plutchik states that in order to provide a general definition of emotion, we need to use the functional or adaptational language rather than the subjective or behavioral language. In his model, associated with the motivation tradition, “an emotion is a patterned bodily reaction of either protection, destruction, reproduction, deprivation, incorporation, rejection, exploration or orientation, or some combination of these, which is brought about by a stimulus.” Plutchik defines “orientation” –one of his eight prototypes for emotional behavior in humans and other animals – in their struggle for survival as follows:

Orientation is the pattern of behavior which occurs when an organism contacts a new or strange object. This reaction is typically quite transient and exists so long as the object remains unevaluated in terms of harm or benefit, pain or pleasure. As soon as the object or stimulus is evaluated (without, necessarily, self-consciousness), this pattern of surprise changes to one (or more) of the other patterns. If the object produces pain, the pattern becomes protection; if it produces pleasure, the pattern may change to incorporation or reproduction.

Several novels of the 1950s portray strong emotional bonds between protagonists and Volkswagen Beetles and, much like Schall’s *Madame am Steuer*, deploy functional language that initially points to a behavioral pattern of orientation, but then shifts to one close to that of reproduction (mating). We find this in Martin Beheim-Schwarzbach’s 1953 *Der geölte Blitz: Aus den Aufzeichnungen eines Volkswagens* (“The Oiled Lightning: From the Notes of a Volkswagen”), a novel in which the relationship between the Volkswagen and its owner is consistently likened to a long marriage. The novel is told from the perspective of a “thinking” Volkswagen who, thanks to her profoundly intimate symbiosis with her driver husband, with whom she has lived for several years, is able to become a living being. She is able to make her own observations, form her own opinions, and genuinely philosophically reflect on cyclists and pedestrians, among other things. As in *Madame am Steuer*, empathy and sympathy define the relationship between the Volkswagen and her owner: “Back in the day, my companion made the remark that he felt every little rock on which we drove, whether with good or bad tires, as if he himself stepped on his own thin leather soles. I call this empathy!”

Notably, both novels, in depicting their protagonists’ highly emotional relationships with VW Beetles, integrate key concepts and terms from Nazism and from the post-WWII years related to “reparations” and debts that must be paid to its victims. *Der geölte Blitz*, for example, prominently employs the word *Rasse* (“race”), a term absolutely central to National Socialism, but radically subverts the meaning it had under the Nazis, as this passage shows:

The Volkswagen is the ideal wagon for highwaymen, bank robbers, street bandits, vultures who rob truck trailers, and other rascals, and everyone who is thinking about taking up such a path is recommended to obtain such a vehicle. I say this from my point of view and from my race pride (*Rassenstolz*), despite the fact that the human point of view appears to forbid one helping the occupations of scallywags along with good advice.

The way *Rasse* (race), which was the supreme pillar or value of the Nazis’ world view, illustrates the novel’s promotion of both technology and diversity in postwar Germany. Cornelia Schmitz-Berning reminds us, in her *Vokabular des National-Sozialismus*, that in 1937, the Nazi Party instructed the press that the word *Rasse* would thenceforth enjoy special protection as a key word of National Socialism (p. 489). The Ministry of Propaganda ordered advertising departments not to use it in advertisements: “It is prohibited,” its directive stated, “to promote a modern hat or a particular auto industry motor with the key word *Rasse*.” Thus, we see that Beheim-Schwarzbach, in the passage cited above, adopts a perspective that is the opposite of the Nazi *diktat*. In fact, the term *Rasse* is more than once used in this novel to express an appreciation of the car, this technological object. Furthermore, in the passage cited, Beheim-Schwarzbach’s protagonist states that his Volkswagen speaks to his *Rassenstolz* (“race pride”), an exact antonym of *Rassenschande* (“race shame; race defilement”), the juridical term the Nazis devised to designate sexual relationships between Jews and “Aryans.” In Beheim-Schwarzbach’s book, the union between the Volkswagen and her husband-owner is consistently depicted as symbiotic, even as a marriage. This suggests a deliberate use of *Rassenstolz* to utterly subvert the concept of *Rassenschande* by expressing a positive evaluation of unexpected unions and partnerships, thus promoting both technology and diversity in postwar Germany. In fact, the use of *Rassenstolz* here directly refers to Plutchik’s idea of “reproduction” in his definition of emotion through functional or adaptational language.

For Plutchik, all basic adaptive or prototype functions – protection, destruction, reproduction, deprivation, incorporation, rejection, exploration, and orientation – “have the same general properties as human feeling states but they represent a more general, non-subjective language to talk about feelings.” As we can see in Table 1(taken from Plutchik’s article “Emotions, Evolution and Adaptive Processes”), “joy and ecstasy” are terms from the subjective language, and “mating” and “possessing” terms from the behavioral language that Plutchik approximates with the functional language of “reproduction.”

Throughout *Der geölte Blitz*, a subjective language is generally preferred for describing the emotional relationship between the Volkswagen and its owner. However, in passages specifically alluding to key concepts of Nazism, we find functional language to describe the union between the car and its owner. If, as Plutchik suggests, basic emotions have proven more useful than others for resolving evolutionary challenges, it is unsurprising to find functional or adaptive language in the rare excerpts that evoke Germany’s Nazi past. Dealing with the latter was still undoubtedly Germany’s major developmental challenge in 1953, when the novel was published.

The description of the protagonist’s emotional relationship with her Volkswagen in *Madame am Steuer* also incorporates key vocabulary from the postwar years. Focusing on the relationship with the Volkswagen, the novel alludes to the reparations payable to the victims of Nazism, and its use of the word *Wiedergutmachung* (“reparation”) encourages ordinary Germans to reflect on forms of individualresponsibility and guilt in relation to Nazi crimes:

All that I had perceived was stubbornness and malice, bad habits and opposition in Peppino. I had to record all of this as a debit in my account and acknowledge the following: the keener I was and the harder I tried to pay off my debts [*Schulden*] to him, to make up for [*Wiedergutmachen*] my mistakes, the more he became tolerant, good-hearted and willing, all the more efficient and indefatigable.

The use of *Schulden* and *Wiedergutmachen* here evokes associations with postwar reparations German governments were obliged to pay to victims of the Nazis. In *Madame am Steuer*, we find a conception of *Wiedergutmachung* close to that put forward by the German psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers who, in his 1946 *The Question of German Guilt*, presents the idea of reparation as a private virtue. Constantin Goschlerstates that *Wiedergutmachung* was used slightly differently in East and West Germany in the early years after the creation of these states:

Common ground between East and West can also be found if we look at the sociopolitical function of the *Wiedergutmachung*: Both in the West and in the East, the decision was made early on to avoid as much as possible the notion of *Wiedergutmachung* as a medium for the examination of the individual liability/guilt in Nazi crimes (pp. 123-124).

In associating this vocabulary evocative of postwar debt and reparation with the protagonist’s highly emotional relationship with her Volkswagen Beetle, Sibylle Schall firmly situates her analysis of emotions in 1950s Germany within an adaptive context in which emotions help to solve fundamental adaptive tasks and problems.

Furthermore, at the very end of the book, “Madame” reflects on the Volkswagen Beetle as the ideal car for both escape and return. She chooses to end her travels and return to Germany from Holland and speaks of her travels at the wheel as an “evasion, but actually no evasion, because it presupposes the intention to return, and that why it is moral.” Learning how to drive, which the protagonist consistently depicts throughout the novel as a huge challenge, is an accomplsihment she finally achieves in its last pages. Thus, her relationship to driving and the Volkswagen are metaphors for the immense task of rebuilding Germany, and the use of the adjective “moral” in this context is far from trivial.

Lastly, it is notable that both novels explicitly construe the Volkswagen as craving the expression of emotions. In *Madame am Steuer*, for example, we read: “He only wants my feelings, because he knows that only these will never betray him.” Historian Frank Biess has very convincingly illustrated how “the dominant emotional regime of the postwar period was one of restraint and anti-intensity” (p. 34). In Germany in particular, “this emotional regime was characterized by a deep suspicion toward the open expression of strong emotions and resisted their injection in politics and public” (p. 43). Emotional refuges, however, were found in the private sphere, claims Biess, and allowed for the expression of emotions that were unacceptable in the public space. In the works I have examined here, the Beetle certainly seems an “emotional refuge, which is particularly interesting since the car is generally perceived as a key symbol of Germany’s postwar economic miracle. Particularly strong emotions are associated with the relationship with the car in these two texts in a way that invalidates the dominant general conception of this object as the most vibrant example of Germany’s quest for normalcy and the Mitscherlich paradigm. In consistently highlighting the importance of sympathy and empathy while depicting the relationship between the Beetle and their owners, the texts anticipate the more permissive emotional culture that emerged in 1960s Germany and in which more empathy with the victims of National Socialism could take shape.