

1968: A Global Perspective

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Peter Kovacs <kovacsp@mail.utexas.edu>
The University of Texas at Austin

The Grinch and Capitalism: How Volkswagen America Stole the Spirit of the 1960s

One of the often overlooked functions of advertising is to defuse social and political crises that threaten capitalist expansion. This 'side effect' of advertising can be observed in Volkswagen's legendary Beetle campaign, spanning fifteen years from 1959 to 1974. In those turbulent times, Volkswagen's advertising did not only make the Beetle palatable for the American consumer; promoted capitalism as a way of life; and ascertained the Volkswagen owner with a distinct social position: it also waged a two-front ideological war in defense of the evolving capitalist system. By scrutinizing the dialogue between the marketing activities of Volkswagen and the period's economic, social and political developments, this paper will argue that Volkswagen America in effect "campaigned" for what we call today "late capitalism" by attacking obsolescent consumption practices and use values with the help of the annuated "revolutionary spirit" of the 1960s. By 1959, some of the conservative social values of the post war years that once had aided US corporate interests jeopardized the economic growth by standing in the way of emerging multinational capital dependent on global trade. The Beetle campaign had to discard outdated associations of the American public with "automobile," "consumer," "foreign" and "Germany." On the other end of the political spectrum, the radical reform ideas of the 1960s were just as worrisome for the ruling elite. By co-opting counterculture for its sales effort, Volkswagen helped defusing the revolutionary potential of the protest movements and managed to dominate the import auto market in the US for two decades.