

The present volume collects papers and write-ups of two panel discussions from the 2009 conference Mini meets Mini organised by the Universities of Bochum and Dortmund at the Kulturbahnhof Langendreer. The event, aimed at both academics and the general public, was meant to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Mini Cooper. It developed into a veritable “mini-event” celebrating via the conference and the book at hand not only the car but also the mini-skirt, another icon that cultural memory likes to connect with the notion of a swinging Britain of the 1960s.

Mini & Mini provides an equally enlightening and enjoyable read and demonstrates what fascinating results the epistemological lenses of Cultural Studies may yield when it comes to the analysis of material cultural objects. The editors of Mini & Mini map the field in their concise introduction and briefly summarise the theoretical underpinnings of the articles to follow; this focuses foremost on the meanwhile classic circuit of culture model developed in the late 1990s for the Open University Course Culture, Media and Identities, whose chair was Stuart Hall. The five major cultural processes: representation, identity,
production, consumption and regulation, which the model unites often form the basis for the negotiations of the multifaceted meaning potentials the two minis have, as the articles demonstrate. Other theoretical pointers that come up in a number of contributions are Roland Barthes’ investigations into naturalised meanings via myth, Jean Baudrilliard’s explorations of hyper-reality and in the context of retro, Frederic Jameson’s studies of postmodernism focussing on the tension between surface and depth. Some of the most evocative contributions in this volume try to recover what Raphael Samuel in *Theatres of Memory* (1994) called “unofficial knowledge” about the minis, when we can hear the voices of the members of the German Mini Cooper fan clubs or learn about the individual memories of women wearing mini skirts in the 1960s.

In the following I will briefly introduce the individual contributions to this volume and end with a personal summary of the insights I gained from the book.

The book opens with the introduction and is then divided into three main chapters. Chapter one, *Materialitäten & Mentalitäten*, starts with Jürgen Kramer’s “Der Mini und der Anfang vom Ende der britischen Autoindustrie”, which contextualises the Mini Cooper in the British motor industry and traces the car’s history in the 1960s from its initial commercial flop to its glamorisation as cool celebrity accessory and rally race winner. Viola Hofmann in “Their own teenage look?” introduces us to the miniskirt as one of the most easily recognisable signifiers of the 1960s in collective memory, which firmly belongs to what we could call in analogy to Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community” an “imagined spirit” of a decade. Hofmann shows how long-standing stereotypes in collective memory can be deconstructed by careful re-contextualisation of the material objects in question. Christian Werthschulte in “Talking Shop” delineates the versions of authenticity regarding both minis when it comes to re-signifying processes that happen when material artefacts labelled sub-cultural travel into the mainstream. Cyprian Piskurek in “Moral außer Mode?” focuses on negotiations of permissiveness in the 1960s with examples from audiovisual culture, the new dominant medium of the decade.

Chapter two, *Zeichen & Zirkulationen*, has signifying and re-signifying practices concerning the two minis at its centre. Hans Peters in “Der Mini im Rock” gloriously fails to track down the miniskirt in 1960s British rock music, a gap he manages to fill with examples from French Chansons and German Schlagermusik, where the skirt is very much present. Iris-Aya Laemmerhirt in “Mini conquers Hollywood” explores codings and re-codings of the mini car via filmic examples, such as *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *The Italian Job* 1969 and *Austin Powers in Goldmember* (2003) or the Madonna video clip “American Life” (2003). Heinrich Versteegen in “Mr. Bean und sein Auto” points us to the comic and affective potential of “something small that shows all the qualities of something big”. He also investigates the psychological powers of cuteness inherent in the design of the Mini when its big headlights look at us and trick us into strong emotional bonding. Similar topics are explored in Martina Krebs & Peter Osterried’s “Maximising Minimisation” with a focus on the dialectics of maxi and mini.

Chapter three, *Retro & Appropriationen*, has the cultural processes of consumption and identity at its centre and also includes some of the most compelling contributions to this book. Claus-Ulrich Viol, a conference-co-organiser, reports in “Vom Machen und Mögen der Minis” on a study he conducted among members of German classic Mini Cooper clubs. His contribution starts with a brief overview of theories of consumption as social practice, such as Michel de Certeau’s distinction between hegemony-based ‘strategies’ and negotiated or oppositional ‘tactics’ or John Fiske’s very optimistic and almost naïve notions of empowered, subversive and creative consumers. Viol continues to persuasively elucidate popular
cultural and sub-cultural markers of distinction prevailing among German classic mini fans. Stefan Schleusen in “Du bist Retro!” also starts off with some welcome reminders of theoretical pointers, such as Elizabeth Guffey’s Baudrilliard-based definitions of retro and, most appreciated by the reviewer, Raphael Samuel’s monumental study Theatres of Memory. Past and Present in Contemporary Culture. He then centres his argument around Samuel’s concept of “unofficial knowledge”, which shows similarities to the notion of social memory as developed in the work of Jan and Alaida Assman on memory culture. He continues to trace the history of mutoscope pin-ups via present day adverts for the Daihatsu Trevis and Gizeh cigarette paper. Sadly the two minis have left centre stage in this otherwise very convincing article. The mini skirt, however, triumphantly returns in the final contribution to this volume, Ingrid von Rosenberg’s “Mini Memoirs”. It is convincingly argued that “unofficial knowledge” or “social memory” of women living through the 1960s and wearing miniskirts differs widely from present day collective memory of the 1960s. The mini skirt as icon of permissiveness is not remembered as such but rather as an item of clothing that was simply there.

In chapter three we also find the write-ups of the panel discussions on the two minis. So which insights did I gain? Well many, deep and profound ones and quite a number of them had to do with versions of femininities that car and skirt encouraged. A number of articles pointed to the fact that the Mini was one of the first motorcars actively promoted for female drivers providing them with new forms of mobility. Some aspects of this feminine coding are kept well into the 2000s when Charlize Theron in The Italian Job (2003) is accessorized with a red BMW Mini she vigorously test-drives. Femininities and the mini skirt seem an obvious issue at first sight but, as the articles collected in this volume clearly show, it becomes far more complex when we take a closer look. The articles draw our attention to the strong link between fashion and the body and the fact that the new garment of the sixties also implied a new body. Spindly models like Twiggy, whose name says it all, promoted a waifish body with the mini skirt revealing and sexualising the dangly legs of the female teenagers wearing them. Whether the mini skirt was liberating in any way, as Mary Quant keeps reiterating, remains to be answered. Subversive activities, we should never forget, undermining dominant masculinities were happening elsewhere and were linked to another item of clothing – the trouser suit: Lenelotte von Bothmer holding a speech in the German Bundestag wearing a beige trouser suit caused a public scandal and major uproar in the Germany of 1970. The two minis never did. The cute little car and the skimpy little skirt were far too endearing to develop any subversive potential. Retroactively, however, both keep on performing the swinging 1960s in collective memory as this volume beautifully demonstrates.

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