

What is it with this *predator* styling? Why is it fashionable to make cars look like creatures that want to kill and then eat you? I suppose cars get off to a bad start by having their main lights — their ‘eyes’ — on the front ‘looking’ forward, as this is the mark of a predator whereas the prey, they have their eyes on the sides of their heads to get the best possible all-round view. Not a good place for headlights however, you’ll agree. So no doe-eyed cars, which is almost a shame. But a car’s eyes-forward pre-condition doesn’t explain the sinister, scowling menace of so many contemporary designs. And it’s getting worse: one by one even small hatchbacks and baby cars are swapping last season’s benign cuteness for vogueish, beady-eyed frowns and sneers. MPVs, once the stronghold of matriarchal, caring good manners are being reborn as scary fighter-cruisers — witness Ford’s S-Max, handsome indeed but clearly a vehicle that would go down a storm in the Evil Empire.

If you want to see a three-dimensional definition of the word ‘ironic’, just take a look at Audi’s mammoth SUV, the Q7. Most people want to be loved but if he or she drives an SUV this can be difficult. In parts of California, and London, you get hate mail and empty tires. That’s why the Range Rover is so popular: who can hate someone with such immaculate good taste even if they are choking the rest of us with CO₂ and pulverizing the bones of wayward pedestrians with its bluff façade? But the Q7? It’s vast, it’s an SUV — and it is quite simply the most evil-looking car on the road. It doesn’t just want to do irreparable damage to our planet — it wants to eat your babies too, and spit out the bones. So if you’re driving this car you’re not only upsetting a few of the greener folk, you’re saying ***** you through a PA system while you do it. Amazing, really.

There was a time not long ago when we could all rely on the German premium brands to be sensible and level headed when it came to design. Of course that’s all so much history now, in the post-Bangle universe. Mercedes, BMW and Audi has each in its own way discovered *emotion* and, somewhat like a middle aged corporate accountant who in the space of a few days acquires a mistress *and* a taste for marijuana, gone slightly off the rails. These brands once commanded absolute respect, even though their design was predictable and a little complacent, but in today’s niched-up, ultra competitive marketplace the old strategies probably wouldn’t work. So they had to change but the change could have been managed a whole lot better. Mercedes could have retained the authority and majesty of its historic designs and still hugely broadened its user demography. BMW didn’t have to go from the automotive equivalent

of a Saville Row pinstripe suit to a kind of John Travolta, flares, lapels and platforms trash-flash. And poor Audi — bastion of German Bauhaus tradition — could have avoided this (to my mind) inappropriate, gasoline-fuelled aggressiveness.

You can bet someone's been fired for this, but even so, the Audi Q7 press material said it was a car for people who "... enjoy nature but are not concerned with the environment." A stupid mistake but look at the car and you could believe it's true.

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