

The Technology of the Cute Body

Abstract:

This article considers the appeal of the cute body and its ambiguous relationship with the lovable. While cuteness is an aesthetic that is subjectively determined and expressed, it can also embellish a body with features that are standardized by systems of commodification. The cute body possesses a diminutive and vulnerable charm, but it is also an object that is augmented to solicit the subject's love and control. Hence, the aesthetic of cuteness may seem to disempower the object, but it is likewise, an acute seduction that bears witness to the craft or *technē* that captures the subject. Developing a framework for cuteness as a stylistic device or technology embedded in the subject-object relationship, the article argues that the qualities and experience of the lovable constitute a condition of the affected subject, who must bear the paradox of embracing and effacing the object's difference.

Keywords:

Aesthetics, affection, cuteness, design, technology

Introduction

It is said that the fragmentation of dominant narratives in postmodernity has resulted in the proliferation of minor preferences and trends that are increasingly determined by the felt experience of the individual human subject. To a significant extent, this assumption is in tandem with the cultural shifts in aesthetic reception, in which one's judgement of art and/or beauty is not so much the result of established rules within an institution, as it is a response to how the object has corporeally affected the subject.

A rather prominent example of this relationship can be found in the aesthetic of cuteness. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word "cute" is an adjective used to describe an attractive and endearing thing or

person. Sociocultural nuances notwithstanding, the cute body is often recognized for its rounded, infantilized physical structures and clumsy demeanor, but it is possible to identify three principles that are intrinsic to the aesthetic. First, cuteness places an emphasis on smallness, whereby the object is either physically or socially in a position of dependence on the subject. This social difference often implies that the object assumes the form or body of a child-like, tyke-sized other with a tangibly more diminutive exterior, while qualities that evoke fear and disgust are removed or rendered innocuous.¹

Second, cuteness solicits indulgent control, which means that the affection for the cute object is experienced as an accessible form of gratification. In the field of product design, this gratification pertains to an appeal that solicits tender affection from the subject. On the one hand, the affection engendered by cuteness is an opportunity, or relational space for the subject to become a “nurturer through consumption”² as observed in the commercialization of toys and pets; on the other hand, this solicitation exemplifies a certain craft on the part of the object and/or its maker, which is associated with the eighteenth century English definition of “cute” as one who is shrewd and clever.

And third, cuteness leverages on simplicity to design and develop objects that are open to varied interpretations. Besides resonating with a broad audience, cute bodies and designs are used as a medium of self-expression for users to project their own desires and aspirations.³ Compared to the complexity of paintings, classical sculpture or circuit boards, the visible lack of detail in the cute object allows it to be easily appropriated by those who lack specialist knowledge in aesthetics or cute design.

Taken together, these principles seem to indicate that cuteness functions as “shorthand” for positive emotional states that are otherwise more difficult to express. In the area of character merchandising, the aesthetic of cuteness is configured as a basic template to develop and produce objects palatable to the target market. This configuration shows that cuteness is not simply a felt experience, but is regarded as a stylistic device with an intrinsic vocabulary that fosters an affectionate subject-object relationship.⁴ In contrast to an idea conceived from the creative impulse of a designer or artist, the vocabulary of cuteness suggests that it is comprised of certain features that are accessed, applied, and appreciated within a specific sociocultural space.

In addition to the embellishment and interpretation of consumer objects, cuteness can be represented as a repertoire of attitudes and behaviors. Taking this performative aspect into account, it becomes clear that cuteness is a medium of communication primarily concerned with how one is affected to connect with, and care for the other. This relation is programmable as well as dynamic, as observed in the ways cute features are standardized as a simulation of the lovable in mass culture (e.g. video games, cartoons, social robotics), and as a means for the subject to feminize and even counter established expectations of adulthood and affection.

Using prominent as well as contrasting examples in mass culture, this article brings together the standardized and subversive bodies of cuteness, to consider how we may understand the aesthetic as a particular technology of the lovable. It compares experiences of cuteness in various social contexts, before evaluating the possibilities and problems of this particular stylistic device. This analysis will be derived from objects relevant to the restrictive processes of commercialization, as well as the infantilism subjectively performed by various cute

1) Joel Gn, “Designing Affection: On the Curious Case of Machine Cuteness,” in *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, ed. Joshua Paul Dale et al. (London & New York: Routledge, 2016), 177.

2) Gary Genosko, “Natures and Cultures of Cuteness,” in *Invisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture* 9 (2005), <http://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/cute-technics-in-the-love-machine/>.

3) Brian J. McVeigh, “How Hello Kitty Commodifies the Cute, Cool and Camp: ‘Consumutopia’ versus ‘Control’ in Japan,” *Journal of Material Culture* 5, no. 2 (2000): 234.

4) Gn, “Designing Affection,” 177.

bodies. Regardless of the tensions between standardization and subjective performance, I argue that the sentiment of cuteness is not just an emotional response to relate to the object of our affections, but a significant basis for us to understand the aesthetic as a *technē* of seduction that circumvents the object's embodied difference.

“Natural” and Artificial Contexts

Although cuteness can be experienced with numerous artificial objects, there seems to be a sociobiological basis for some of its exemplars and features, especially with respect to the relationship between adult mammals and their young. John Morreall, for instance, claims that the word “cute” is mostly used on human infants and other mammals like dogs, cats and bears. Observing their physical similarities, he argues that “the recognition and appreciation of the young” is advantageous for the species' survival.⁵ This approach frames the notion of cuteness as an ethological issue, whereby the appearance of the young is a stimulus for the attachment between a parent and child.

However, this perceived difference of infants introduces other ambiguities regarding the value of cuteness. Infants and children have visibly different body structure, and an explicit, and perhaps comical, lack of spatial awareness. Physically “de-formed”, they lack the maturity and functionality of their adult counterparts, yet this makes them endearing to their parents and caregivers. The significance of this sentiment can be observed in the evolution of Walt Disney's cartoon icon, Mickey Mouse. According to Stephen Jay Gould, the softening of Mickey's physical features (e.g. chubbier face, rounder eyes and nose) is an example of a “reversed ontogenetic pathway” that increases the appeal of the character.⁶ Drawing from the work of Konrad Lorenz, Gould argues that the experience of cuteness is derived from “features of juvenility” that catalyze a tender response to the object.⁷

Gould does not determine if these features are genetically inherited or acquired through experience. Instead, he speculates that humans do not respond to the totality of the image in a Gestalt, but are affected by specific features triggering innate emotional and behavioral mechanisms. Other commentators have disputed Gould's position. For Gary Genosko, the appreciation of cuteness is in response to the “sum of heterogeneous attributes.”⁸ This means that the cuteness of an object is not a collection of discrete features, but is brought about through the arrangement of features making up a body. While Genosko's remarks differ from earlier socio-biological analyses, they are firmly centered on the subject's perception, insofar as a small, plump and clumsy object can elicit unbridled affection, even if it is not explicit about its intents or purposes.

In another sense, the perception of cuteness characterizes a particular relationship between the subject and object, even in situations where this relationship blurs the line between the natural and artificial. Albeit inanimate, teddy bears and social robots are widely regarded as cute toys, and one would not be surprised to see children conversing with them *as if* they were friends. This particular relationship highlights two effects associated with our regard for the cute body: first, cute appearances or aesthetics are not just a nurturing factor, but an invitation to sociality; and second, the experience of cuteness inevitably includes an anthropomorphic response where the subject interprets, or understands, the object to possess similar thoughts and actions.⁹

5) John Morreall, “Cuteness,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 31, no.1 (1991): 39–40.

6) Stephen Jay Gould, *The Panda's Thumb: More Reflections in Natural History* (London and New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1980), 97.

7) *Ibid.*, 101.

8) Genosko, “Natures and Cultures of Cuteness.”

9) Gary D. Sherman and Jonathan Haidt, “Cuteness and Disgust: The Humanising and Dehumanising Effects of Emotion,” *Emotion Review* 3, no. 3 (2011): 246.

As theorized by Daniel Dennett, this attempt to comprehend the motivation and behavior of non-human agents is an expression of the intentional stance, which is a cognitive strategy that is used to resolve the complexity of an object. Contrasting this strategy with two other approaches, Dennett argues that many objects do not just work according to physical laws of cause and effect (e.g. water becomes hot when placed under the fire) or their designated function (e.g. doorbell rings when a visitor arrives), but are derived from patterns ordered for our subjective concerns.¹⁰ Given this basis, the cuteness of an object is not simply a mechanistic function or result, but the performance of cues and gestures that convey positive or even lovable sentiments to the subject.

Different approaches to cuteness notwithstanding, one may observe how individual and sociocultural preferences shape the appearance of the cute object and our subjective affection for it. In my view, the appeal of teddy bears and other cute characters is not only linked to our evolutionary dispositions, but has a bearing on how our aesthetic endeavors represent the condition of lovable; for if we follow Martin Heidegger's claim that technology is both "a means to an end" and "a human activity,"¹¹ then it will likewise be possible for us to conceive of the cute aesthetic as a means to render a body worthy of our affection.

Technology of the Lovable

So how is the experience of cuteness an effect of a specific technology? As discussed, cuteness is a mode of perception which engenders the lovable, and this points to a way of seeing, or a framing of the object that brings forth an intimate subject-object relationship. One can thus claim that cuteness – when applied either as an interpretive lens or a stylistic device – amplifies a view of the lovable, similar to how the device of the microscope magnifies cellular matter for our vision, or how the use of certain words in our language may accentuate feelings we otherwise have trouble articulating. Yet, this line of explanation does not adequately account for the transformations that result from the experience of the device. In other words, to perceive a thing as cute entails other phenomenological implications that fundamentally alter our own notions of whom or what can be loved, insofar as cuteness denotes an appeal to our endearment.

Responding to these broader phenomenological questions, Don Ihde notes that the experience of using technology is not neutral because of how its applications or devices simultaneously amplify and reduce the objects they are directed toward.¹² This mediation of the device in our relationship with the world underscores subjective intent (a point derived from Merleau-Ponty's view of how our involvement in our external reality is paired with how we "see" ourselves in such an environment), as well as an experience of the object in and through the device.¹³ For Don Ihde, devices embody our subjective intent, but they are also partially transparent, since they *extend* our experience of the object, rather than impede it with their distinct presence.¹⁴ In my view, this transparency constitutes the mode of perception or revealing, for it is the amplification and reduction of the object that has a bearing on the user's interpretation. As Heidegger explains:

10) Daniel C. Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 16–17; 39.

11) Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," trans. William Lovitt, in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), 312

12) Don Ihde, *Technics and Praxis* (Dordrecht, D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), 21.

13) *Ibid.*, 6.

14) *Ibid.*, 8.

...what is decisive in *technē* does not at all lie in making and manipulating, nor in the using of means, but rather in the revealing... It is as revealing, not as manufacturing, that *technē* is a bringing forth.

[...] Technology is a mode of revealing. Technology comes to presence in the realm where revealing and unconcealment take place, where *alētheia*, truth, happens.¹⁵

For Heidegger, the intervention of technology is synonymous with understanding, or a bringing forth of a particular idea or truth. Cuteness, through its use in language and its application in design, brings forth and consequently highlights a notion of the lovable that does not replicate a physical body, but modifies features of the artificial counterpart, in order for the subject to be attracted to, or positively affected by it. To elaborate on this modification, consider the iconic female rabbit Miffy created by Dick Bruna. With a minimalistic design, Miffy is not modelled after an actual rabbit – her body does not conform to the anatomy of a living specimen, she has no sudden protuberances, and her contours exhibit smooth, gradual variation. Relative to the physical appearances of an adult human and rabbit, Miffy certainly does not have the ideal body; nevertheless, her cuteness is effectively communicated through the combination of simplicity and disproportion in her design.

Like many other popular caricatures, Miffy is neither drawn nor animated as a real rabbit, but her appeal and anthropomorphism are derived from her simulation of human behavior. She walks on two legs, wears clothing and interacts with similar characters in a very “human manner.” It should not be surprising that those who consume Miffy’s merchandise do not regard her as an indifferent creature, but readily associate her with sentiments of intimacy, familiarity, and even friendship. Miffy’s production and consumption precisely illustrates the amplification and reduction from cuteness as *technē*; the lovable is artificially highlighted by simulating positive human sentiments in a non-human body, while all other physical differences between human and animal are effectively minimized, if not effaced.

This modulation, however, does not necessarily mean that the device of cuteness will consistently exclude negative features, as this assumption would inevitably fall back on earlier sociobiological generalizations and overlook the contemporary diversity of the aesthetic. Japanese broadcaster NHK’s mascot Domo-kun is an example of how cuteness may transform abject or aggressive bodies. An “anti-cute” innovation that has enjoyed considerable popularity both in Japan and abroad, Domo-kun’s small rectangular body with rounded edges may not seem controversial, but its dark brown exterior and saw-toothed mouth make it more threatening than the conventional cute character. Oddly enough, Domo-kun’s appearance may have the overall effect of a parody, given that his mouth can be interpreted as a loud greeting, with saw-like teeth that are rounded at the ends.

Rather than claim Domo-kun’s body juxtaposes aggression and cuteness, I contend that it is a cute “re-mix” of aggression that apprehends and imposes a particular interpretive frame on the object. On the one hand, such an arrangement includes conventionally undesirable features like aggression into the purview of cuteness; yet on the other hand, it draws attention to a stark difference between the subject and object, wherein the former excessively imposes his or her affection onto a relatively disempowered object that should, but is not able to retaliate.¹⁶ So despite the fact that a character like Domo-kun displays features that are known to be repulsive, the visible dissonance does not undermine the overall effect of his cute design. Domo-kun does not perform “naked” aggression, but conforms to the expectations of cuteness. With reference to Ihde, the coherence of the object is to a significant extent driven by the hermeneutic position established by the device, as he describes in the following excerpt:

15) Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 319.

16) Sianne Ngai, “The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde,” *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 4 (2005): 828.

The symbiosis here is not so much between the observer and that which is observed, as between the veracity and reliability of the “text,” the representation produced by the instrument which is always presumably *of* the world. The instrument in this relation occupies a hermeneutic position. I must “read” it and its result. The immediacy of embodied relations is here displaced by the necessity of a hermeneutic process.¹⁷

More than just a label of subjective preference, the cute aesthetic elicits certain effects in perception, because it both fabricates and conveys a particular sentiment of affection that augments the intimacy between subject and object. Such an augmentation can also be applied to expressions that lie outside the conventional frame of the lovable, thus reinvigorating the novelty of cuteness and its associated metaphors. According to Paul Ricoeur, a metaphor emerges through the pairing of contrasting traits in “a pole of singular identification” (e.g. a thing, person, character), and “a pole of general predication” (e.g. property, relation, attribute).¹⁸ By linking the concept of the lovable with a different object as a point of identification, cute metaphors such as Miffy and Domo-kun interpolate the image of a fictional character onto a frame of reference that is humanly defined as “cute.” As we will observe later, this stylistic device can systematize selected versions of cuteness into a programmable structure, as well as open spaces for subjective, and even subversive affections.

Structure and Play

So how exactly is cuteness construed as a programmable structure? While the role of subjective experience cannot be ignored, it should be noted that such a perception is also premised on a sociocultural consensus of the lovable. Hence, cuteness is not strictly an individual opinion about a body, but is tied to shared notions of the lovable. It will no doubt be possible to find a different way of being “cute,” but these differences are, to varying degrees, derived from the cute body’s legibility, which in my view is a basis for the systematization of the aesthetic. Systematization, in this context, refers to the formalization of an idea, theme or aesthetic that is subsequently utilized as symbolic resource. Since cuteness refers to the embellishment of a physical object, it will be useful at this juncture to consider its function as a consumable sign within the structure of the commodity form.

In his critique of use-value’s replacement by the exchange value of the consumable sign, Jean Baudrillard argues that these seemingly fluid meanings that are attached to commodities can be used to elicit the most rigorous forms of naturalization and consensus. The consumption of the sign, Baudrillard adds, is more vital than the consumption of the object, because it is the construction of signs that determines the ideological status of the consumer. Objects are thus “no longer tied to a function or a *defined* need,” but interminably “serve as a fluid and unconscious field of signification.”¹⁹ With respect to the decoration of consumer objects, the aesthetic of cuteness is located within this field of signification, which is not tied to any absolute physical need, but materializes in response to socially constructed expectations. The notion of the lovable that is communicated by a cute body does not represent an immutable love object, but varies according to the consumer’s sociocultural situation, and is perceived as lovable not through the physical object itself, but by the composition of signs decorating it.

17) Ihde, *Technics and Praxis*, 33.

18) Paul Ricoeur, “Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics,” *New Literary History* 6, no. 1 (1974): 97.

19) Jean Baudrillard, “Consumer Society,” trans. Jacques Mourrain, in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 44.

Although Baudrillard's thesis provides a reasonable basis for cuteness to be applied as a design scheme, it should be noted that the iconic simplicity of the aesthetic also results in two other commercial advantages. Firstly, the iconicity of cuteness is adaptable, which allows a particular design to be reproduced easily using a rudimentary set of variables; and second it possesses a high degree of differential mobility, which means the same design can be used on different forms or bodies, thereby expanding the design's affordances for interaction.

These advantages can be observed in the media ecologies of cute characters designed by toy companies like Disney and Sanrio. The iconic Hello Kitty, for example was initially drawn and animated for the television screen, but her image can be reproduced and experienced in a wide variety of physical objects. As Brian McVeigh remarks, products of different form and function can be brought together through a "unifying theme, emblem or motif."²⁰ By being branded with the image of Hello Kitty, these essentially disparate objects can be thematically linked and made coherent to consumers, who purchase them not for their sheer utility (e.g. a mug for drinking, a T-shirt for clothing), but primarily for their representation of Hello Kitty.

As such, the repetition of the cute body across different media enhances its ubiquity and accessibility. While this mode of diffusion is not restricted to bodies or images with cute features, I suggest a drawn character – and in particular a simply drawn and affable character like Hello Kitty – displays a greater propensity to counter "some of the heterogeneity between media types in favor of consonance or convergence around the character image;"²¹ for apart from its appeal to our affection, the cute body is also simple enough to leave space for other connotations. By standardizing various media with the image of the cute body, insipid objects are programmed as symbolic goods within an image-based network, allowing primarily visual images to be enjoyed in other non-visual ways.

Yet these mechanisms of distribution are not without complications. On the one hand, the appearance of the cute body is a matter of design, which opens itself to its own "de-signing" and innovation; and on the other hand, images of the cute body inevitably become resources of a particular technique that builds and commercializes a world impervious to movements not processed according to its commodity-based logic. It should be noted that the "technique" of interest here is qualitatively different from the more ambivalent "technology" discussed prior – for critics like Jacques Ellul, modern technique has evolved from being a means to an end, to a near-absolute end in itself. Pervading all areas of human endeavor, Ellul explains this technical arrangement, is broadly comprised of two characteristics. First it is rational, for it not only systematizes and pre-determines all processes of production and consumption, but entails a "reduction of facts, forces, phenomena, means, and instruments to the schema of logic."²² As commercialized objects, cute bodies are designed according to the calculations of such reductive models, and are administered according to programs that place commercial profit above creative interest.

Second, modern technique is dislocated from the natural world. According to Ellul, the artificiality in question is not just in reference to what is made, but also refers to the system of means at humanity's disposal, that "destroys, eliminates or subordinates the natural world, and does not allow this world to restore itself or even to enter into a symbiotic relationship with it."²³ Besides character-based media, this hermetic artificiality is also observed in the use of emoji, messaging stickers and other paralinguistic devices in computer mediated communication. Lightening the overall mood of our digital exchanges with their cute designs, these visual

20) McVeigh, "Hello Kitty," 228.

21) Marc Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 84.

22) Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Vintage, 1964), 79.

23) *Ibid.*

objects can inform the receiver of the sender's emotional intent, and on occasion be used for constructing basic propositions. While these affordances may have enhanced user agency within computing platforms, these para-linguistic devices are nevertheless products of commercial rationality and standardization. As Luke Stark and Kate Crawford point out, emoji operate within a relationship in which "affect is captured by capital through proprietary cultural representations."²⁴ So although connections online are enhanced via the cute design of an emoji character or an application's sticker, they remain an abstraction of our physical interactions, and are a means to "lure consumers to a platform, to extract data from them more efficiently, and to express a normative, consumerist and predominantly cheery world-view."²⁵

From these examples, one may understand how the revealing of *technē* as theorized by Heidegger takes a negative turn that is similar to Ellul's thesis, insofar as systematization denotes a "challenging" and technical process of ordering. In Heidegger's terms, the symbiotic relationship between nature and the artificial is negated when nature fulfils the role of "standing reserve" that is employed according to the imperatives of a technical system, or as he calls it, enframing:

Enframing means the gathering together of that setting-upon which sets upon man, i.e. challenges him forth, to reveal the real, in the mode of ordering, as standing reserve. Enframing means a way of revealing which holds sway in the essence of modern technology and which is itself nothing technological.²⁶

Heidegger no doubt acknowledges the significance of instrumentality, but he also argues that enframing engenders a pervasive rationality that manages the world as standing reserve. The programmable structure of cuteness is implicated within such an order, because it undermines the difference of other innovations for a pre-determined and calculable sameness. Certain representations of cuteness consequently become more visible with the commercialization of mass culture, even if these representations do not qualify as an absolute claim of what the lovable is or can be.

As both an aesthetic sensibility and a form of technology, however, it must also be stressed that cuteness can also be used as a subjective and even politicized form of self-expression. Sharon Kinsella's study on the development of *kawaii* culture in early post-war Japan offers much documented insight into the complexities, as well as controversies, of cuteness and its development within a specific cultural context. Japanese cute culture, as observed by Kinsella, first emerged as a means for youths, especially teenage girls, to subvert adult social relations. This form of expression, she adds, could not be mainstreamed initially, because it idealized childhood and stood in sharp contrast to the austerity of tradition.²⁷ Using the fashion magazine *CUTiE* as an example of these embodied subversions, Kinsella comments that the pursuit of cute fashion and child-like behavior reflected a "rebellious, individualistic, freedom-seeking attitude."²⁸

24) Luke Stark and Kate Crawford, "The Conservatism of Emoji: Work, Affect and Communication," *Social Media + Society* (2015): 3, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2056305115604853>.

25) *Ibid.*, 8.

26) Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 329.

27) Sharon Kinsella, "Comments on McVeigh (1996)," *Journal of Material Culture* 2, no. 3 (1997): 384–385.

28) Sharon Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan," in *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan*, eds. Brian Moeran and Lise Skov (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 230.

Accompanying the popularity of cute fashion was the subculture of cute handwriting, which hybridized rounded Japanese characters with English words and iconic symbols like hearts and stars.²⁹ While some would argue that this stylization of the written word is a precursor to the more standardized emoji, cute handwriting – with its horizontal alignment and emotive nuance – was indelibly a notorious disruption of the vertical and considerably more traditional writing convention of early post-war Japan. These cultural practices demonstrate that the aesthetic of cuteness is not simply used to decorate or describe inanimate objects, but can also be a self-directed performance of infantilism. For the young people in Japan of that time, cuteness was arguably a means to recover a child-likeness that was perceived to be more pleasurable and authentic than the artifice of adulthood.

Comparing the commercialized standardization with its counter-cultural performances, one may observe relatively fluid spaces where the technology of cuteness can either challenge or transform prior assumptions of the lovable, for if structure corresponds to the production and consumption of cute bodies within a system, then agency can conversely be found in the bodies that subjectively affect and are affected by cuteness. Both the production and perception of the cute body are attempts to define the lovable, but these endeavors are arguably confounded and altered by the fluid play of the aesthetic. To a significant extent, this failure in authenticating the lovable resonates with the work of Jacques Derrida, who writes that the idea made present by the form is not its point of origin, but an effect of writing. In contrast with Heidegger, who continues to seek some metaphysical ground upon which one may understand the essence of the object, Derrida argues that meaning is placed within the quotation marks assumed by the form. This argument presents two critical implications: First, the movement from perception to representation is yet determined by another structure of representation.³⁰ Second, the form of representation presiding over this transition is elliptical, which means that it both differs and defers from itself in repetition.³¹

These notions of difference and deference (i.e. *differance*) as theorized by Derrida are not confined to literary works, but encompass any object of representation, including the cute body. Cuteness is a stylistic device that communicates the lovable, but if the lovable cannot be defined in the absolute, then it can be argued that the cute body is brought forth, or crafted via a play of signs culminating in metaphors that mark a detour of the transcendental love object, as explained by Derrida:

Signs represent the present in its absence; they take the place of the present. When we cannot take hold of or show the thing, let us say the present, the being-present, when the present does not present itself, then we signify, we go through the detour of signs.³²

The lack of an absolute definition of the lovable presents a detour or play of cute features that are assumed and performed by embodied subjects. For example, Japanese fashion model and singer Kyary Pamyu Pamyu's performances are characterized by a colorful combination of camp, infantilism and electronic music. Particularly for consumers of kawaii culture, Kyary's deliberate reproduction of cute tropes is arguably a deliberate maneuver to attract male fans and socialize with female followers.

Kyary's appeal introduces other ambiguities to the interpretation of the pubescent sex object, and to attribute a solely pornographic function or effect to her image would be an extremely reductive assumption.

29) *Ibid.*, 224.

30) Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison and Newton Garver (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 117.

31) *Ibid.*, 128.

32) *Ibid.*, 138.

Although the sexualization of these images enables deviance, Japan in the 1980s also witnessed a shift from the image of the “loliconised” girl as a sex object for older men, to a desire for “girl-ness”, as expressed in the cuteness of animated and hand-drawn images.³³ Given this basis, it can be argued that Kyary’s image is less of a sexualized body than a conscious parody of gendered norms that resonates and connects with both male and female consumers. The relationship fostered between Kyary and her audience would, in my view, cohere with the sociality of cuteness and its appeal outside the confines of paternal and erotic relations.

Similar implications can also be inferred from the cuteness of internet micro-celebrities, whereby the varied, subjective presentation of cuteness and femininity can be construed as a performative strategy. These individuals often use social media to deliberately craft a public-facing image, document experiences, and monetize content either as advertorials or click-through advertisements.³⁴ As commented by Crystal Abidin, there are three subversive implications with some of these major cute performances (i.e. Japanese *kawaii*, Korean *aegyo*, Chinese *sajiao*): First, they manipulate attention to raise popularity; second, these expressions imply an inversion of gender hierarchy, as masculine characters or figures are either effaced, or objectified as props for the performance; and thirdly, these performers consciously shift the focus from the “exchange of commercial services to endearing infantilism.”³⁵ In sum, these self-directed gestures constitute an individualized exploitation of cuteness, and are a means for subjects to fashion their own bodies and personas.

Acute Seductions

Common to both these commercialized structures and exercises of agency is not just the contention of who or what can be loved, but traces of cuteness as a *technē* of seduction, where its appeal involves a play of conditions that respond to the problem of defining the lovable. This line of thought situates cuteness within the domain of appearances, for we are drawn to the cute body, precisely because of its perceived inferiority and lack of utility. As vividly illustrated in the examples discussed, the cute body is objectified through the performance of weakness that in turn incites the subject’s concern, care and even mastery. To quote Baudrillard: “To seduce is to appear weak. To seduce is to render weak. We seduce with our weakness, never with strong signs or powers. In seduction we enact this weakness, and this is what gives seduction its strength.”³⁶

Seduction does not refer to the assertion of an identity, but to render or stage it as weakness. This parallels the social positioning of cuteness and its appeal to the subject’s eventual control and objectification, which in turn connects the three aesthetic principles delineated in the introduction. That is to say the cute body, through a display of its smallness, appeals to the subject’s indulgence, which brings about an objectification according to his or her interests.

This pull of the subject towards the object points to a seductive movement of bodies, for the motivations of the subject in this case are not about what the object can do on its own, but how its appearance specifically affects him or her. We have witnessed how the appeal of cuteness renders the actual nature of the object inconsequential – it does not matter if the character is physical or artificial, or if the celebrity harbors pecuniary intentions. And more tangibly, we can never be sure of what infants or toddlers truly desire, but they are nevertheless adored, and even protected for their cuteness. This subject-object relationship emerges through

33) Patrick W. Gailbraith, “Lolicon: The Reality of Virtual Child Pornography in Japan,” *Image & Narrative* 12, no. 1 (2011): 102.

34) Crystal Abidin, “Agentic Cute (^.^): Pastiche East Asian Cute in Influencer Commerce,” *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* 2, no.1 (2016): 36.

35) *Ibid.*, 44.

36) Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 83.

the crafting and playing out of the object's appearance, a seduction that transposes the object from mundane reality to the realm of artifice, as Baudrillard aptly describes:

Immediately obvious – seduction need not be demonstrated, nor justified – it is there all at once, in the reversal of all the alleged depth of the real, of all psychology, anatomy, truth, or power. It knows (this is its secret) that there is no anatomy, nor psychology, that all signs are reversible. Nothing belongs to it, except appearances – all powers elude it, but it “reversibilises” all their signs... There is no need to play being against being, or truth against truth; why become stuck undermining foundations, when a *light* manipulation of appearances will do.³⁷

While much can be said of the inequities wrought by these commercialized structures of cuteness, the attraction of the subject for an object fashioned in such a systematic way reveals a symptom of our technological condition that is as intrinsic to our relationship with the other, as it is susceptible to the superficiality of representation. Applying the ideas of Baudrillard and Derrida, I maintain that the cute body is a manipulation of the passions that sets the subject on a detour from the otherness or person of the object, for it is through this play of appearances that the subject manifests the conditions of the relationship that are apart from the otherness of the object. Instead of a singular encounter where love is quite distinctly made or brought forth by one and the other, the cute body – be it an anthropomorphic object or a human farce – is in effect, a response to *what* deserves our love and affection, rather than *who* the other is.

In another sense, this complexity still carries echoes of “cute” as the aphetic variant of “acute,” which is associated with mental sharpness and shrewdness. Renaissance painters depicting Cupid as an adorable but crafty cherub were certainly not off the mark, for it was through the God's arrow that one became struck, wounded and hence moved to love the other. This divine intervention symbolized the opening to a transformative relationship, for once the lovers were pierced they would seek one another, while the God remained hidden from them. *Technē* was both the craft of attraction and relation, insofar as both subjects had to meet, embrace and even struggle with each other's differences. Underlying this earlier definition of cute was the preamble to inter-subjectivity, where the meeting of lovers was conceived as a divine contrivance, in which one's own person would be inextricably altered with the other.

The contemporary fixation with cuteness observed in the earlier examples, however, is arguably an excessive preoccupation with the conditions for love, rather than the transformative movements of love itself, for it is the object's appearance that captures the subject by perpetuating the pleasurable clichés of sociality. The cute body may be a humanized body, but it is also for the most part, a static object purged of features that are undesirable in human terms. This stylized ideal may entice the subject to care for and control what is assumed to be lovable, but there is no embodied difference to speak of – the rationalization that ensues from the subject-object relationship is an outcome of an increasingly transparent technique of self-delusion, where one only sees his or her own desires and anxieties reflected in these devices of affection.

Conclusion: Synthetic Sentimentality

On this note, the key question concerning the technology of the cute body is not about subjective appreciation, but the sentimentality alluded by a hyper-mediated, mass produced view of cuteness. With its perceived infantilism or child-likeness, the cute body represents a moment in the subject-object relationship that is both absent

37) Ibid., 10.

from and extended by our technological milieu: the innocence of companionship with the other. For even as the cute body may seduce the subject with a model of innocence, the production and projection of meaning on the part of the subject are in effect an imposition of power and a revoking of such innocence. The deformity of the cute body does not lie in its visible caricature of its biological counterpart *per se*, but in the way it simultaneously screens and abrogates this innocence of being with the other.

And despite subversive innovations, we remain inundated by images of this sentimentality, which apart from residing in all things cute, is just as evident in the techniques of contemporary mass culture. The commercially exchangeable bodies of celebrities and cartoons consistently tell us that there is youth without aging, beauty without blemish, and friendship without conflict. From cinema to the social networking site, it is this sterilized nostalgia, or sentimentality that is systematically abstracted, stored and re-applied as information capital. This systematization may, on the surface, be an attempt at a common language for affection, but it is also an effective pre-determination that places its own parentheses on what the lovable ought to be.

Nevertheless, the aesthetic of cuteness continues to play with the ambiguities of subjectivity and structural consensus, making way for others to arbitrarily refer to a thing or person as “cute”, while questioning established reference points or ideas previously normalized. While these approaches may often be divisive, they can also be regarded as an on-going negotiation that broadens the limits of cuteness and its bodies. Cuteness, therefore, is not strictly in reference to the repetition of features that are socially recognized as “cute”, but is bound to include experiences that result from the subject’s personal affection for a different body.

So what then of our relation with the other? Like any other form of mass-produced objectification, cuteness has been used as a frame to deny the messy, embodied differences of our persons. This limitation, in my view, does not suggest a crisis in the discipline of aesthetics, but is an accurate description of the condition pervading our mediated relationships. If the synthetic imperative of cuteness is the sentimental refrain, where one turns away from all that is disconcerting towards the predictably lovable, then love – like the serendipity and suffering from Cupid’s arrow – is quite possibly the acquiescence to the embrace, struggle and even risk of losing one’s self and one’s own notions of who or what can be loved.

Perhaps in this regard, the transformations produced by cuteness may paradoxically be the undetermined but affective space that is between one and the other, for even as the structures of mass culture repeat the codes of the lovers’ discourse, we should also remember that our affections are subjectively, if not singularly, vulnerable to an inexplicable encounter with the other. The acceptance of the cute body makes it a potent deception, but is it not also a call to craft, make, or even love after that moment in the encounter? For, if love – as praised by the ancients – is divine, then cuteness, I believe, would be the crafty little thing that christens our sojourn in love.

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