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Cute as a Weapon of Mass Seduction

Cute is colonizing our world. But why? And why, so explosively, in our times?

We might think Cute so trite as not to merit attention, and certainly not to be a worthy subject of investigation. Or so perverse, in the clichéd helplessness it foists on its objects, and perhaps relishes in them, as to deserve little more than scorn. So that it would be pointless at best to try to dig into something as superficial as the feline girl-figure Hello Kitty; Pikachu, the Pokémon monster; E.T., with its gangly shrunkenness; the ugly Cabbage Patch Kids; and the strange

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evolution of Mickey Mouse after the Second World War. Or perhaps we have become so accustomed to Cute that we don't notice its ubiquity—for example, in the proliferation of emojis, embraced by people of almost all ages and backgrounds; or in the abundance of cute-sounding brand names such as “Google” (and, for that matter, “Apple,” whose logo teasingly links the personal freedom afforded by its devices to a primal symbol of rebellion: biting into the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden). All of which might be why so little has been written on the phenomenon and meaning of Cute and the relentless succession of faddish objects that give voice to it. We are strangely uncurious about it.

But what if Cute speaks of some of the most powerful needs and sensibilities of our contemporary world? What if, to adapt a phrase of Nietzsche, it is indeed superficial—but out of profundity?¹ What if Cute isn't just about powerlessness and innocence but also plays with, mocks, ironizes the value we attach to power—as well as our assumptions

about who has power and who doesn't? What if it mesmerizes precisely because it isn't (or isn't seen as) only harmless, innocent, and cuddly, and therefore comforting in an impersonal world full of danger, but can also—as we find with the intentional distortion and ugliness of so many cute objects—express something richer, and truer to life: something that at the same time is experienced as unclear, unsafe, uncanny, defective, knowing—albeit in a playful register? What if this faintly menacing subversion of boundaries, this all-too-human indeterminacy—between the clear and the obscure, the wholesome and the irregular, the innocent and the knowing—when presented in Cute's lighthearted, teasing idiom, is central to its immense popularity?

What if, moreover, the explosion of Cute reflects one of the great developments of our age, at least in the West: the cult of the child? For the child is, I suggest, the new supreme object of love, which is, very gradually, replacing romantic love as the archetypal love,

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the must-have love, the kind of love without which no human life is deemed to be fully lived or maximally flourishing. And childhood is the new locus of the sacred—and so the place where, as a society and as an age, we most readily find desecration.

As we will see, there has been a remarkable coincidence between the rise of Cute since the mid-nineteenth century and the increasing valuation of childhood over almost exactly this same period—with both trends accelerating in tandem after the Second World War. Which, I will argue, in no way means that the craze for Cute is driven merely, or even primarily, by an urge to regress to childhood, to an imagined world of safety and simplicity; or that its motivation and aim are necessarily infantile.

Indeed, we must ask whether Cute doesn't also speak of a loss of faith in sharp distinctions between childhood and adulthood. For isn't childhood experience increasingly seen as determining everything important about adult life, as at work in all its key emotions

and choices and doings? And, conversely, isn't the contemporary adult world—in particular, its intense concern with self-expression, authenticity, and sexuality—increasingly taken to pervade the child's?



Cute objects, I am therefore proposing, aren't just infantile distractions from the anxieties of today's world, where breakneck competition and change are displacing people from their jobs, communities, and identities overnight. They aren't just sources of safe and reliable intimacy in an era that seems to be racing towards an explosion of fears, furies, grievances, and historic injustices, too many and too great to address or redress all at once. They aren't just avatars of soulless commercialism, or ways of escaping into a self-indulgent, empty, uncommitted existence. They aren't just ways of personalizing the artifacts of an impersonal world. Nor are they necessarily screens onto which stereotypes

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of innocence—especially of young feminine innocence—are projected. Though Cute can be, and, as we will see, has been widely accused of being, all these things, and though like most sensibilities—including most virtues, appetites, aesthetics, goods, and gods—it can be misused for unacceptable ends and its motives can become pervaded by cynicism, self-gratification, power-seeking, and violence, none of these features are intrinsic to it.

Instead Cute, I will suggest, is above all a teasing expression of the unclarity, the uncertainty, the uncanniness, the continuous flux or “becoming” that our era detects at the heart of all existence, living and nonliving. It is palpably ephemeral in the ever-changing styles and objects that exemplify it, which are nothing if not transient and lack any claim to lasting significance. It exploits the reality that when indeterminacy is pressed beyond certain points it becomes menacing: a reality that Cute is able to render beguiling precisely because it does so trivially,

charmingly, unmenacingly—indeed, in a self-consciously laid-back style. It expresses an intuition that life has no firm foundations, no enduring, stable “being”; that, as Heidegger intimated, the only ground for living lies in the acceptance of its nongroundedness.² And it often does so with something like the “artifice and exaggeration,”³ expressed in a manner that “dethrones the serious,”⁴ or that fails in its seriousness, which Susan Sontag attributes to Camp.

This “unpindownability,” as we might call it, that pervades Cute—the erosion of borders between what used to be seen as distinct or discontinuous realms, such as childhood and adulthood—is also reflected in the blurred gender of the many cute objects that appear hermaphroditic or indeterminate. (What gender is E.T., or Jeff Koons’s *Balloon Dog*?) It is reflected, too, in their frequent blending of human and nonhuman forms. And indeed in their often undefinable age. For though cute objects might appear childlike, it can be strikingly hard to say, as with E.T., whether

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they are young or old—sometimes seeming to be, in human terms, both young and old. (E.T.'s wrinkled skin is “simultaneously that of a newborn and an elderly person.”⁵)

In such ways, *Cute* is attuned to an era that is no longer as wedded as it once was to hallowed dichotomies like masculine and feminine, sexual and nonsexual, adult and child, being and becoming, transient and eternal, body and soul, absolute and contingent, and even good and bad—dichotomies that once structured great ideals but that are now taken to be less hard-and-fast, more porous than had been traditionally assumed.

Moreover, *Cute*'s celebration of indeterminacy is reflected, too, in its incompatibility, as a sensibility, with the modern cult of sincerity and authenticity, which has its origins in the eighteenth century and which assumes that each of us has an individual self—or at least a set of beliefs, feelings, drives and tastes—that uniquely identifies us and that we can both clearly grasp and know to be truthfully expressed. As we will see, the spirit of

Cute steps entirely aside from our prevailing faith that we can know—and control—when we are being sincere and authentic, let alone that others can know when we are being sincere and authentic.

And, although Cute can become hijacked by a desire for power, it also articulates, perhaps more fundamentally, a nascent will to repudiate the ordering of human relations by power, or at least to question our assumptions about who has power and to what end. This is a will that Cute can vividly convey precisely because it usually involves a relationship to a vulnerable object or to an object that flaunts, or flirts with, vulnerability. It is a will to liberation from the power paradigm that many, especially in the West and Japan, but perhaps ordinary Chinese people too, might be expected to affirm as an antidote to a century and more of unparalleled brutality.

In short: What if Cute isn't a frivolous distraction from the zeitgeist but rather a powerful expression of the zeitgeist?



We are clearly talking of an ever-growing phenomenon that has already colonized large tracts of the globe and of our contemporary imagination. The axis of Cute has capitals in California and greater Tokyo, a rapidly increasing presence in China (very much including Hong Kong)—which might one day take over from Japan and the United States as the global engine of Cute—and outposts dotted about the rest of East Asia, for example, in Thailand, Singapore, and Taiwan, as well as in various European countries. Advertisements, consumer products, corporate names and logos—not to mention contemporary art—exploit its edgy charm, its self-conscious innocence, its spooky play on playfulness, its ironizing of itself, its seeming refusal of both hard reality and great ideals. Countless products, from computers to phones, from guns to food, from children's toys to calendars, from stockings to airplanes, from condoms to contact lenses, can be, and have been,

branded with a cute logo. Even Lady Gaga saw fit to do a photo shoot in garish Hello Kitty garb.

Jeff Koons's famous "balloon dogs" perfectly exemplify the spirit of Cute, and show how it can be darker, more uncertain, and more ambiguous than mere sweetness.⁶ *Balloon Dog (Red)* seems both powerful (made of stainless steel) and powerless (it lacks a face, a mouth, and eyes; its "balloons" are hollow). Its "innocence" is melancholic; its innocuousness arresting; its vulnerable demeanor offset by its huge size. (See fig. 1.1.)

Global hits like Bambi, Pokémon, E.T., Hello Kitty, and So Shy Sherri; artists like Takashi Murakami, Yoshitomo Nara, Jeff Koons, Mark Ryden, and Brecht Evens; cute modes of self-presentation such as emojis—all speak to our age with peculiar force, and not just to young people but to legions of adult fans, male and female, such as engineers, politicians, investment managers, doctors, and media celebrities. The core consumers of Hello Kitty are women aged eighteen to



FIG. 1.1 Jeff Koons, *Balloon Dog (Red)* (1994–2000).
© Jeff Koons. Photo: AFP/Getty.

forty, running the gamut from performance artists to punk rockers, Wall Street bankers to porn stars;⁷ and the cat-girl features in top-end fashion collections from New York to Milan and Tokyo. Adorable babies, puppies, and polar bears are cooed over by millions of grown men and women on innumerable websites devoted to all things cute. In Washington, DC, a panda cub born in the Smithsonian's National Zoo becomes an instant celebrity. All thirteen thousand tickets to see him are snapped up within a couple of hours, with many more fans waiting their turn in freezing temperatures. Soon afterwards, a movie about the severely cute emperor penguin is one of the greatest box-office hits ever for a documentary.⁸ Over in Berlin, a polar bear cub dubbed "Cute Knut" attracts a global following of tens or hundreds of millions overnight, while back in early 2011, Heidi, a cross-eyed opossum whose large black-and-white eyes squint demurely towards her pointed pink snout, is front-page news in Germany's mass media,

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commanding almost as much attention as the world-historical “Arab Spring” then unfolding in Tunisia and Egypt.



Yet such reflection on Cute as exists tends to miss the point by seeing its essence as helpless and easily exploitable vulnerability. And much of this reflection, especially in the West and Japan, though far less so in other parts of Asia, goes on to lament its infantilizing of the viewer (or else its expressing a will to be infantilized: to regress to a perhaps mythical childlike existence of unchallenging simplicity and pampered safety), its power to arouse a sleazy blend of pity and pleasure, its sly invitation to both caregiving and sadism, its sexualized aesthetic, as well as its subordination to—and fostering of—rampant consumerism.

This is certainly the dominant understanding of Cute. Thus Sianne Ngai, in a landmark essay, sees it as an “aestheticization

of powerlessness,” an “affective response to weakness,” that revolves “around the desire for an ever more intimate, ever more sensuous relation to objects already regarded as familiar and unthreatening.” Such affective responses to weakness can easily become brutal or deforming, one reason why Ngai, like others, says that violence is “always implicit in our relation to the cute object.”⁹

Christine Yano, in her book tracking Hello Kitty’s trek across the Pacific from Japan to the United States, characterizes Cute as “innocent, playful, guileless, appealing, and ultimately marketable”¹⁰ and cites others who decry its “fake mall-bought conformity.”¹¹ Gary Cross sees it as “wondrous innocence.”¹² Natalie Angier, reporting the views of Denis Dutton, a philosopher of art, laments that the “rapidity and promiscuity of the cute response makes the impulse suspect, readily overridden by the angry sense that one is being exploited or deceived.”¹³ Sharon Kinsella, writing on “Cuties in Japan,” sees the pervasiveness of *kawaii* (roughly the Japanese

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equivalent of cute) as reflecting “fashionable infantilism.”¹⁴ Daniel Harris, in a widely quoted essay, lambastes it as an “antiquated religion of infantilism” that has governed parents’ attitudes towards their offspring: a “portable utopia” of innocence and guilelessness and other fetishized states that “we would *like* to see in children,” who are forced “not only to be cute [in themselves] but to recognize and enjoy cuteness in others, to play the dual roles of actor and audience.” “Because it aestheticizes unhappiness, helplessness, and deformity,” Harris also remarks, “it almost always involves an act of sadism on the part of its creator, who makes an unconscious attempt to maim, hobble, and embarrass the thing he seeks to idolize.”¹⁵

Indeed, Harris continues, “the cute worldview is one of massive human chauvinism,” which forces human qualities onto non-human things. So that children’s books, for example, impose on “dogs, cats, bears and pigs . . . the clothing and demeanor of human beings.” The “narcissism of cuteness” means

that “the cute vision of the natural world is a world without nature, one that annihilates ‘otherness,’ ruthlessly suppresses the non-human, and allows nothing, including our own children, to be separate and distinct from us.” Cuteness, Harris maintains, “is ultimately dehumanizing, paralyzing its victims into comatose or semi-conscious things.”¹⁶

That is quite a charge sheet. Aside from the almost unchallenged article of faith that human relations, including here between a child and a toy bear, are to be understood, first and foremost, as relations of power (a legacy of a very particular philosophical tradition fostered in modern times by figures such as Nietzsche and Foucault, which is itself overripe for questioning), surely even the harshest critic of Cute could see some merit in it insofar as it cultivates the nurturing and self-giving instincts?

Indeed, there is a school of thought, following the pioneering work of Konrad Lorenz, which we will consider in chapter 2, that regards cuteness as a prime trigger of precisely

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those instincts. Thus, the cultural theorist Joshua Paul Dale argues that “cuteness is fundamentally an appeal to others: an invitation to sociality,” in responding to which “one discovers oneself *already* drawn into the orbit of a lovable and intimate other.”¹⁷ And the social psychologists Gary Sherman and Jonathan Haidt go so far as to consider the cuteness response a “moral emotion” par excellence: a “direct releaser of human sociality” that draws cute entities into our circle of moral concern—concern for the welfare of others—which is, in turn, a condition for maximizing “caring, altruism, and prosocial behavior towards strangers and towards animals.”¹⁸

In any event, the spirit of condemnation—which is increasingly all the rage in the West—will not, in the case of Cute, as in so much else, enrich our insight, but will rather impoverish it. And so my aim here is to resist the urge to censure the craze for Cute—and instead to seek a wider understanding of this fascinating phenomenon and the diverse roles it plays in today’s world.

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