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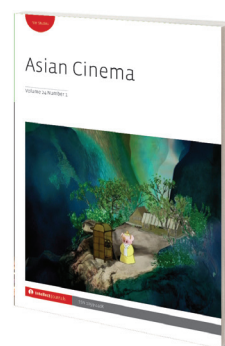
Asian Cinema

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- Official journal of the Asian Cinema Studies Society
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Whether understood in terms of traditional (celluloid) or cross-media (digital) formats, Asian cinema has a wide geographical dispersion, and diverse practices and histories. Asian Cinema offers a platform for scholars, teachers and students who seek to form and promote communities of Asian cinema studies within Asia and beyond. Articles explore specific (well-known or neglected) films, individual directors, generic trends and cycles, debates in Asian film theory, historical trends and movements, and sociological analyses. Contributions also trace patterns of continuity and change across different Asian cinemas, and cross-reference styles, practices, and industrial undulations in distinct but related territories.



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GENERAL EDITORIAL

KATE TAYLOR-JONES, ANN HEYLEN AND JOHN BERRA

It is sobering to consider how quickly time passes as we release our first issue of 2016. The year 2015 saw a range of wide-reaching events on the East Asian sociopolitical landscape. On the political front, Singapore's general election results were greeted with some surprise as the ruling People Action Party (PAP) increased with the share of the vote by 10 per cent, despite expectation that the Worker's party would continue the successful upward trend that was seen in the 2011 elections. December 2015 saw the first apology from Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo to the tens of thousands of Korean women used as comfort women during the war. South Korean President Park Geum-hye noted that this apology finally removed one of the biggest obstacles existing between the two nations, as Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio commented, marking the beginning of a new era of Japanese and South Korean relations. The effect this new understanding and friendship will have remains to be seen but it was a remarkable change in approach that will clearly impact both political and cultural fields. On a less positive note, we are over one year on from the events that have become known as the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, and yet tensions remain high between Hong Kong and the PRC. With the PRC showing no signs of moving forward on reform, political activists still face imprisonment and persecution, and events here remain key in inter- and intra-Chinese and East Asian relations. As this editorial is being written, Taiwan is about to go to the polls, and the results, however they turn out, will undoubtedly be felt around the East Asian region.

East Asian popular culture has continued to grow in diverse and fascinating ways throughout 2015 and into 2016. From fashion to film, from art to museum studies, new and old voices presented a variety of products. In cinema, Tsukamoto Shinya's redux of Kon Ichikawa's 1959 classic *Fire on the Plains* played across film festivals. In South Korea, Yoon Je-kyoon's historical drama, *Ode to my Father* dominated the box office, and the PRC released home-grown cinematic works dominating even Hollywood. Asian influence

and inspired fashion products have taken the world stage. *Vogue* and the Metropolitan Museum New York devoted an exhibition to Chinese fashion influence around the globe with 'samurai'-inspired outlines, mandarin collars and East Asian prints being seen in all the major designer brands. The rise of the digital music industry witnessed East Asian music from Japan, South Korea, China and Taiwan break into new markets.

The interplay between economics, production, distribution and receivership of East Asian popular culture more broadly means that this is a collection of fields of study that still requires further academic engagement to push its global importance and our understanding of this important area. This edition engages specifically with one very important and influential area of East Asian popular culture, namely Cute Studies. Guest editor Joshua Paul Dale has assembled a series of fascinating articles all engaging myriad and diverse approaches with this burgeoning field of study. Augmenting this impressive collection of articles we have included a feature article examining a related area of adolescence in the work of influential Japanese director Oshii Mamoru. Focusing on his 2008 film *The Sky Crawlers*, Lindsay Nelson engages with the affective presentation of Kildren (cloned adolescents) as they fight for public entertainment. Nelsons illustrates that this world sees spectacle overtake everything and places adolescence itself in servitude to it. We end with a special extended book review by Jing Jamie Zhao who debates and explores four recent texts all devoted to Chinese television.

We once again encourage any other people interested in reviewing books (in any language) and cultural events to get in touch, we are always interested in hearing from new voices!

Kate Taylor-Jones, Ann Heylen and John Berra have asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the authors of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.

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SPECIAL EDITION EDITORIAL

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Cute studies: An emerging field

WHAT IS 'CUTE'?

Cuteness is a phenomenon widely experienced yet little understood. It is first of all a physical, affective response – a feeling we may refer to as the 'Aww' factor – to the set of visual and behavioural attributes outlined below. When this response is manipulated for artistic or commercial purposes, it becomes an aesthetic category. This aesthetic first appeared in European and North American popular culture in the nineteenth-century, but had an earlier expression in Edo-era Japan (1603–1869), when kawaii images often appeared in paintings and prints (Museum of Fuchu City 2013). Kawaii flourished in the 1970s and dominated Japanese popular culture by the 1980s (Kinsella 1996: 220), when it began to spread around East Asia beginning with Taiwan (Chuang 2005: 21).

Now cuteness is a rising trend in global popular culture, and much of it is flowing in, around and from East Asia. Yet little critical attention has been paid to this trend as a broad cultural phenomenon: a lack that the articles in this 'Cute Studies' issue address. In parts of the East Asian region, cuteness enjoys a growing public presence far in excess of other areas of the world.¹ Its global rise has been more gradual and incremental, yet far-seeing scholars have already declared cuteness to be a dominant aesthetic of the digital culture (Wittkower 2009) and consumer culture (Ngai 2012) of the current century.

KEYWORDS

cute
cute studies
cuteness
cuteness studies
kawaii
cute aesthetics

1. One example of a recent development of cuteness in the public arena would be the road construction barriers that depict cute characters in Japan. A Google image search returns many results.

This themed issue of the *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* explores this widespread trend with the goal of establishing cute studies as a new academic field.

Although the success of commercial products from Mickey Mouse to Hello Kitty testifies to the ease with which the category of cuteness crosses national and cultural boundaries, there are key differences in its specific linguistic usages. The English word 'cute', derived from 'acute', has negative connotations such as 'cunning' and 'shrewd' that are not found in continental European nor Asian languages. The history of two iconic North American products, the teddy bear and Mickey Mouse, reveal these hidden qualities. Both began with sharper, adult features and more dangerous tendencies – an early teddy bear from 1903 wore a muzzle, and when Mickey Mouse debuted in the animated cartoon *Steamboat Willie* (1928) he was mischievous to the point of cruelty – yet over the years the appearance and behaviour of both softened and became more conventionally cute (Gould 1979; Hinde and Barden 1985).

However, a certain suspicion aimed at the cute still remains, appearing often in English-language journalism, scholarship and essays alike. For example, in 'The cult of cute', *Newsweek* declares that this new trend is snowballing out of control before declaring the arrival of 'the creepy world of *too cute*' (Schoemer and Chang 1995, original emphasis). The eminent scholar Sianne Ngai finds our response to this aesthetic to be imbued with aggression and violence directed towards – and stemming from – an object whose strong effect on us may be meant to deceive (2012: 85). Finally, essayist Daniel Harris flatly declares our desire to master the cute object to be sadistic (2001: 5). I believe this common stance is informed by a linguistic bias in English that fundamentally misreads the connection between subject and cute object. While aggression well may accompany the feeling of being overwhelmed by cuteness (Aragón et al. 2015), I argue that our response to this feeling has a built in safety mechanism that displaces this aggression, bending it back towards the subject in order to preserve a helpless, unthreatening object from harm: thus, the pleasure felt by a subject overwhelmed by cuteness is not sadistic, it is masochistic (Dale 2017).

Through a focus on cuteness in East Asia, particularly Japan, the articles in this issue offer alternative readings of this phenomenon from non-western cultural traditions that disrupt the negative connotations contained in the English word 'cute'. They examine the implications of commercial attempts to manipulate consumers through this affective register, but also explore the subversive possibilities when it operates as a strength – even as a form of rebellion. They attempt to locate the boundary between cuteness as a cultural aesthetic and the biological underpinnings of our affective response to a cute object. In addition, the articles in this 'Cute Studies' issue explore participatory cuteness from a broad range of perspectives. What does it mean to embody cuteness, for oneself and/or for others? What modes of agency are possible when operating within an aesthetic usually characterized by helplessness and passivity? Before addressing the substance of these articles in detail, I will outline some of the core concerns of this new field of cute studies with reference to the scholarship contained within this issue.

THE TWO PILLARS OF CUTE STUDIES

'Nature or nurture?' is a question that has long resonated in intellectual discourse, and the study of cuteness began by considering a particular synthesis

of this binary: the hypothesis that it is in our nature to nurture. Charles Darwin proposed that human children must possess some quality that prompt adults to care for them (1872). Studies of the biological basis of cuteness began in 1943 when Konrad Lorenz elaborated his *Kindchenschema*, or 'child schema', which listed the juvenile features – present in animals such as puppies, bunnies and birds as well as children – that trigger a cuteness response (1943). Subsequent studies have been unable to determine whether the underlying causes of this reaction are genetic or activated by learned signals. However, the efficacy of Lorenz's 'child schema' in eliciting this particular affect has been verified by decades of research in the behavioural sciences (see Nittono in this issue). Objects tend to be perceived as cute if they have the following characteristics: large head and round, soft body; short and thick extremities; big eyes and chubby cheeks; small nose and mouth, and a wobbly gait (Lorenz 1943).

The affective reaction to such stimuli accounts for the feeling of being overwhelmed by cuteness: the 'Aww' factor. The fact that a relatively small set of attributes elicits the feeling that something is cute yields a precise and useful analytical concept. This is the first pillar of cute studies: an affective register that defines the scope of the field and gives scholars working in this area a shared palette to employ. In addition, recent research goes beyond Lorenz's 'nurturant care' hypothesis to propose that this affect is triggered by the desire to engage with a cute object as much as to care for it. Sherman and Haidt make a convincing case that cuteness is an elicitor of pro-social, affiliative behaviour in general (2011). Hiroshi Nittono, in his contribution to this issue, finds that the desire to approach cute objects ranks higher in his surveys than the desire to nurture them. Locating the source of cute affect under the umbrella of social engagement and 'approach motivation' in general, rather than nurturing alone, is of great use to scholars. It opens up the field of cute studies by demonstrating that we are not travelling a one-way street, in which a passive object waits to receive care or a manipulative object seeks to coerce it. Cooperation and communication become important pathways to explore within this new paradigm.

Whether our affinity for cute things is a result of nature or nurture, it is more than a mere instinct as Lorenz claimed. It also involves cognition, which takes into account our relationship to the cute object. The result is a feeling for which everyone has the capacity, but not one that everyone feels at the same moment or in the same situation. Quantitative studies in this area focus on the attributes that provoke this affective reaction in most people. In other words, the scientific study of cute affect is organized around sameness. This work tends not to address the fact that our response to cuteness, because it involves cognition, is also affected by difference. One person may find something to be cute, while the same object leaves another unmoved, and our individual responses are affected by other differences such as race, ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality. Therefore, studying cute affect in terms of sameness – how it affects everybody – is not nearly enough.

The relationship between the subject and a cute object involves a fundamental power differential (Ngai 2012: 54) that is not separate from the other structures of power constructing us as subjects in society (Merish 1996: 185). For example, An Nguyen's article in this issue explores how an idealized western girlhood as interpreted by Japanese designers of Lolita fashion is crucial to how the women who wear this fashion establish and explore their difference from mainstream Japanese society. Recognizing and accounting for difference

as Nguyen does requires a turn to the second pillar of cute studies – namely, cuteness as an aesthetic category. It is here that the flexibility of this concept comes into play.

As I wrote above, cute affect is triggered by a definable set of attributes that results in a desire to approach and engage with a cute object. Scholarship on the aesthetic of cuteness has extended this finding, noting that this affective reaction serves to blur the boundaries between subject and object (Merish 1996: 186, 188). This flexibility allows cuteness to appear in combination with a host of other qualities, including such oppositional categories as the grotesque, the ugly, the disgusting and so on. In this issue, Joel Gn explains how the alliance of anti-cute and cute allows for the continual generation of new forms from the limited set of attributes that provoke cute affect. By studying the aesthetic realm, we open up the field to the myriad cultural productions that employ cuteness to many ends, from commercial to participatory. It is the latter to which I now turn.

In my view, to experience the ‘Aww’ factor is to participate in a performative act that expresses affinity. Cuteness is an appeal to others: an invitation to engage in social behaviours including companionship, cooperative action/play and communication through emotional reactivity (Dale 2017). When we feel that an object is cute, we are responding to its appeal to be perceived as approachable, engaging and lovable. Whether this appeal exists as part of an object’s design or as an element of its self-presentation, its expression facilitates the move from affect to aesthetics. Directed outwards and aimed at others, this performative act may be manipulated, combined with other qualities and appreciated on either side of the occasion: that is, as either an audience affected by cute, or as ‘performers’ seeking to provoke cute affect. Through this approach, we may extend the phenomenon of cuteness beyond passive infantilism and into the realm of agency. Among the several authors in this issue who engage this trope, Crystal Abidin offers an especially thorough analysis of cuteness as a calculated, adult performance.

THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF CUTE STUDIES

When I conceived of this themed issue of the *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*, I googled ‘cute studies’ and ‘cuteness studies’ and was surprised when my search returned merely one result – namely, ‘Kitten declares “Cute Studies” as college major’ posted on the satirical blog The Fluffington Post (lastquest 2012). The lack of scholarly resources available in this new area prompted me to curate and launch the ‘Cute Studies Bibliography’ as an online resource for the scholars whose work appears in this issue, and others interested in this new field (Dale 2013). Since then, a few forays into cute studies have arrived or are about to be published. *M/C Journal’s* issue on Internet cute, edited by Ramon Lobato and James Meese, arrived in 2014. *The Retro-Futurism of Cuteness*, edited by Jennifer Boyle and Wan-Chuan Kao, is forthcoming from Punctum in late 2016. Finally, *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, of which I am a co-editor along with Joyce Goggin, Julia Leyda, Anthony P. McIntyre and Diane Negra, is forthcoming from Routledge Press in 2017. However, none of these works focus on one of the most important influences on cuteness around the globe – that is, East Asian cute.

Though the scholarship on Japanese kawaii – thoroughly referenced by the articles within – is much more developed, work on South Korean, Taiwanese, Singaporean and mainland Chinese cuteness is rapidly accumulating. In this

issue, Crystal Abidin's article furnishes a useful overview of how gendered cuteness has been theorized across East Asia. Overall, the articles collected in this issue demonstrate the flexibility of cuteness as an analytical category, and the wide scope of the insights it generates. The authors hail from a variety of disciplines from anthropology to behavioural psychology, media studies to philosophy. Their efforts comprise a significant step towards the formation of cute studies as a newly arrived, yet very topical academic field. I am delighted to outline their achievements below.

An Nyugen conducted three years of interviews and participant observation with current and former Japanese wearers of Lolita fashion for her article 'Eternal maidens: Kawaii aesthetics and otome sensibility in Lolita fashion'. Her focus on Lolitas who have given up wearing the fashion yet still retain a Lolita sensibility – to which they refer as otome or maidenhood – is vital to Nyugen's argument that kawaii is more than just a visual aesthetic for these women. Lolita fashion is often referred to as 'Gothic Lolita', and Nyugen argues that the connection of the innocent and the grotesque thus implied testifies to the understanding, among Lolitas, of the fragility and harshness of human existence. Though both kawaii and cute are often associated with consumer products that are small and weak, Nyugen joins authors Botz-Bornstein, Aoyagi and Yuen in this issue in viewing kawaii as a source of strength and agency rather than weakness. Nyugen defines kawaii not only as an aesthetic through which Lolitas exercise individual choice, but also as a personal philosophy. She also makes a useful comparison to the beautiful, finding it to be a distant aesthetic defined by top-down patriarchal institutions of authority compared to the attainable ideal of kawaii. Lolitas use the power of kawaii to express their individual affinities and desires, quite apart from attracting men, in a way that refuses to conform to the institutional oppression of women in Japan. In this way, they are engaged in a 'kawaii revolution'.

Crystal Abidin's article 'Agentic cute (^.^): Pastiching East Asian cute in influencer commerce' is a result of interviews with and participant observation of Singapore's most popular professional lifestyle bloggers, now called 'influencers'. Abidin focuses on the various ways these pivotal figures deploy cuteness as a form of self-expression that attracts and affects their audience. Whereas Nyugen's Lolitas define and design their own individual kawaii worlds, Abidin's cultural influencers create worlds for others to consume. As I wrote above, cuteness is a performative appeal to others, and Abidin's discussion of these adult influencers and their manipulation of this appeal contributes greatly to the expansion of cuteness as an analytical category. Abidin's article is an example of how the unique connotations of the English word 'cute', which include 'cunning' as detailed above, may be deployed in the analysis of cuteness in East Asia. The influencers she analyses wield cuteness as a form of soft power for both professional and personal gain.

In his article 'A lovable metaphor: On the affect, language and design of "cute"', Joel Gn takes cuteness as a metaphor for the lovable, concentrating on the traits and behaviours that make a cute object seem approachable and affectionate. He presents three intersecting domains – of affect, language and design – that exist in tension with one another. Affect is what the cute object communicates – the 'engine' of the lovable. Language is the shared vocabulary of this communication, and thus depends upon the cute object conforming to a known set of characteristics. Design, or de-sign, as Gn also writes it, allows for the rearrangement of this shared vocabulary and enables the production of new iterations of cuteness. For something to reliably elicit the 'Aww' factor

in a large number of people, it must conform to the systemized language of cute: yet such standardization stifles the creativity that is the lifeblood of new design. However, as Gn points out, subcultures often form around new ways to experience cute affect, a process that encourages and inspires designers in their efforts to expand the aesthetic. In this way, the lovable is continually reinvented within the confines of the systemized transmission of affect that is cuteness.

Debra Occhi's article 'Kyaraben (character bento): The cutesification of Japanese food in and beyond the lunchbox' continues Gn's focus on cute design to investigate the implications of the bento lunchbox in terms of consumption both economic and alimentary. In research conducted over 30 years ago, Anne Allison concluded that making bento helped train Japanese women to conform to standard gender roles, interpolating both mothers and children as productive citizens of a capitalist state. In contrast, Occhi demonstrates that the cute characters that increasingly adorn contemporary bento boxes represent a victory of market-driven aesthetics over nutritional values, inserting mother and child into the cycle of production and consumption of kawaii that has dominated Japanese popular culture for decades and is still expanding. In this they join a trend of cute foods that is proliferating globally (Whyman 2014). Yet, as Occhi points out, the literal meaning of kawaii, 'able to be loved', means that the Japanese word incorporates maternal feelings in a way that the English 'cute' does not. The next article in this issue extends Occhi's insight by offering a thorough analysis of the etymology and usage of kawaii.

Hiroshi Nittono collected survey data from hundreds of respondents for his article 'The two-layer model of "kawaii": A behavioural science framework for understanding kawaii and cuteness'. Nittono's article is the only scientific report that appears in this issue. Though written in a different style than the other articles, his insights are key to the development of this new field. In addition to providing valuable data on how Japanese people use the word kawaii today, Nittono also argues that this concept may productively reorient the way that cuteness is thought of globally. Based on his data, Nittono concludes that 'kawaii' has broader associations than 'cute', and thus may shed light on the general psychological phenomenon of the cuteness response as it moves across cultures and languages. Nittono's model expands the 'child schema' proposed by Konrad Lorenz to propose other attributes that may be appraised as kawaii, including: friendly smiles; harmless rounded shapes; and certain colours. Furthermore, Nittono argues that kawaii may play a role in improving personal relationships in a process he terms the 'kawaii spiral'. When one person feels that something is kawaii and another sees his or her smiling face, the feeling is transmitted and amplified between them. Nittono thus offers an explanation for how affect is transmitted from subject to subject through the mediation of an object perceived as kawaii. By broadening the definition of kawaii and proposing it as a fresh new word to describe a cross-cultural phenomenon operating globally, Nittono's work has important implications for cute studies as a whole.

Co-authors Hiroshi Aoyagi and Shu Min Yuen's article 'When erotic meets cute: Erokawa and the public expression of female sexuality in contemporary Japan' explores the contentious connection between cuteness and sexuality. The advent of an 'erotic-cute' fashion style called erokawa among young women has provoked a conservative backlash in Japan. Like Nyugen's work on Lolitas, Aoyagi and Yuen's study considers not only women who

currently follow the style but also those who have ‘graduated’ and reflect back on their younger selves. Though the authors take seriously the claims of their informants that erokawa fashion is liberating and confidence-building, Aoyagi and Yuen also consider the limits of women’s empowerment contained in this hypersexual and heteronormative fashion style that constructs women as specular objects in Japan’s patriarchal society. Aoyagi and Yuen argue that the erokawa style enables young Japanese women to perform a balancing act that allows them to be cute without seeming helpless, and sexy without appearing – by their own lights – too sexual. In this way, the authors contend that by embracing erokawa fashion, women are able to question the traditional binary opposition of innocent/sexually aware by unifying it on their own terms.

In the final article on this theme, ‘Kawaii, kenosis, Verwindung: A reading of kawaii through Vattimo’s philosophy of “weak thought”’, Thorsten Botz-Bornstein presents an innovative reading of the power of kawaii. Like Nittono, he finds broader associations, and this more flexibility, in the concept of kawaii as compared to cute. Botz-Bornstein suggests that kawaii contains elements of ‘cool’, usually thought of in European and North American culture as the opposite of cute. Like Nyugen, Aoyagi and Yuen, he sees kawaii as a subtle form of rebellion against social norms. Botz-Bornstein then proceeds to read the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo’s concept of ‘weak thought’ through the Christian concept of kenosis to explore kawaii as a strength that remains based on weakness. His analysis is reminiscent of Abidin’s discussion of the strategies of Singaporean influencers, who also attain strength through their manipulation of the tropes of cuteness. In Botz-Bornstein’s reading, kawaii does not overcome weakness, but rather distorts it in a process he describes using the German concept of Verwindung (twisting). His extended analysis of gender and kawaii uses this concept in a very fruitful way. For Botz-Bornstein, Verwindung gives kawaii a creative power to transgress gender norms that is accomplished through the playful character of this aesthetic – namely, its embrace of instability and creative insubordination. As I wrote earlier, the move from infantilism to play, from passivity to social engagement, is a crucial aspect of cute studies. Botz-Bornstein pursues this idea by identifying the ways that kawaii plays with gender under its own rules of aesthetic performance. By twisting and turning existing power structures without overturning them, kawaii finds its métier as a true alternative: a decentred form of soft power.

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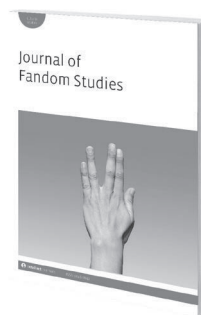
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Independent Scholar

Eternal maidens: Kawaii aesthetics and otome sensibility in Lolita fashion

ABSTRACT

Originating in Japan, Lolita is a consumer lifestyle fashion unrelated to the Vladimir Nabokov novel. The concepts that inform Japanese words like kawaii (cuteness), shōjo (young girl) and otome (maidenhood) are complex and varied. These keywords are explored through interviews with Japanese women from their teens to mid-40s who wear or have worn Lolita fashion. Participants in this study were asked to define and discuss these concepts and their responses provide an example of how women outside the age range of young girlhood build an identity and a space removed from social and familial obligations through a fashion movement that cultivates a specific vision of cuteness. By surrounding and adorning themselves with the things they adore, Lolitas assert their individuality and personality through a kawaii revolution. Otome and shōjo are the backbone concepts that drive this personal sense of kawaii, while its incarnation as Lolita provides a site for a lived practice and performance in which happiness is built through feelings, affects and states of becoming.

KEYWORDS

clothing
ethnographic research
fashion
Japan
material culture
shōjo culture
women studies
youth culture

Originating in underground rock and fashion youth circles since the 1980s, Lolita is a Japanese subculture fashion that is connected to an ongoing narrative stemming from pre-World War II shōjo culture and post-war kawaii culture. Shōjo has a variety of possible meanings in English, including 'little girl',

1. The majority of Lolitas are cis women, but cis men, trans men and trans women also wear the fashion.
2. Permission has been given by the interviewees to allow portions of the interviews to be quoted in this article. Unless noted, all names have been changed to protect the identity of research participants. Quotes have been translated from Japanese to English by the author.

‘maiden’, ‘virgin’ or ‘young lady’, none of which completely encapsulate its many nuances. Likewise, *kawaii* can be translated as ‘cute’ or ‘cuteness’ but its meaning is much more complex and contested.

The Lolita clothing aesthetic borrows from an idealized interpretation of western history and historical costume, but it is also about creating, living, being and challenging a certain sense of girlhood or ‘shōjohood’ (Aoyama 2005: 56), that developed from the context of Japan’s modernization since the Meiji era. Borrowing elements from Goth, Punk and the Rococo and Victorian eras, the style is feminine and modest, utilizing frills, lace, ribbons and a bell-shaped skirt supported by a petticoat. Unique prints depicting sweets, fairy tale motifs, art or floral patterns recall an imagined western girl’s childhood as interpreted by Japanese designers. Wearers of the fashion call themselves Lolitas, and the fashion style is worn worldwide with Lolita communities in various cities across North America, Europe and Asia. For Japanese Lolitas, the fashion’s name has no connection to the 1955 Vladimir Nabokov novel. In fact, many are unaware of the book and film adaptations. Instead, the fashion is connected in their minds to ideas of girls and girlhood.

Drawing from interviews with Japanese Lolitas from their teens to their 40s, this article explores concepts of *kawaii* (cuteness), *shōjo* (young girl) and *otome* (maidenhood) as defined by Japanese wearers of Lolita fashion (Nguyen 2012).¹ Data were collected from 2007 to 2010 using ethnographic research methods such as participant observation. A total of 29 semi-structured interviews lasting from one to three hours were conducted in Japanese in Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto and Nagoya.²

This article explores how female-centric fashion movements and cute cultures become strategies employed by women who lie outside the age range of young girlhood to build an identity in a space removed from social obligations. Though it may have threads connecting it to *shōjo* sensibility, a *shōjo* identity is not embraced by women who wear Lolita. Instead, many choose to describe themselves as *otome*, a concept they see as ageless and genderless, extending beyond fashion and defined by an individual taste for what is *kawaii*. If *otome* and *shōjo* are the backbone concepts that drive this personal sense of *kawaii*, then Lolita is its incarnation, providing a site for practice and performance in which these concepts can be lived and happiness built through feeling-girl.

THE PERFECT LOLITA: SHŌJO AESTHETICS AND AFFECT

Lolita is a way of living. I think it is a life, someone’s way of living, a principle of thinking. To put loving *kawaii* things at the forefront, to live under a self-created rule to which one applies the things that one finds *kawaii*. I think that is what would be called in Japan a Lolita.

(Chisato 2010)

In this quote by Tokyo-based Chisato, it is apparent that Lolita is about more than just clothes. Interviewees see it as a way of life, a philosophy or a feeling close to the heart with an emphasis on understanding and advancing a personally defined concept of beauty that includes a sense of *kawaii* deviating from mainstream tastes. Lolita combines an appreciation of *kawaii* with *shōjo* sensibility. *Shōjo* is ‘not so much a literal description of any individual girl’s consciousness’ as a ‘cultural logic’ accessible to writers and artists and the people who enjoy these works (Mackie 2010: 199). Since its beginnings in the

Meiji era, *shōjo* has provided a repository of images, tropes, feelings and motifs accessible to generations of girls and women. It provides a valuable resource and common language for certain kinds of expression in literature and art that convey senses of liminality and distance from the conventional gender lines of Japanese society in covert feminist resistance (Dollase 2003: 740).

In examining the aesthetics, ideas and objects that inform the concept of 'girl' in North America, Swindle argues that:

Many of the objects of girl culture are not products at all, but aesthetics (pink, polka dots and poodles), relationships (girlfriends and crushes), movements (dancing and hopscotch), rhetorical modes (gossip and diary writing) and affects (most notably, happiness).

(2011: 30)

Objects create collectives of feeling, sensing and experiencing, bringing people together through shared affect. Aside from understanding girl as a discursive subject, a gender and an age position that moves in linear fashion towards the position of woman, girl as an affect comprises an embodied knowledge and experience that can be revisited and recalled. It may both circulate unconsciously and be self-consciously employed to engage in feeling girl (Swindle 2011: 19).

Some *Lolitas* describe *Lolita* clothing as being *fuwafuwa*, expressing something fluffy and bouncy, like the visual movement and tactile feeling of a bell-shaped *Lolita* skirt with a full petticoat underneath as it sways with each step. Other words are sometimes paired with *fuwafuwa*, such as *hirahira* (flutter), a notion that is also important in describing *shōjo* feeling in Honda Masuko's influential essay about *shōjo* aesthetics ([1982] 2010). *Hirahira* is found in the movement of objects like ribbons and frills that 'flutter in the breeze as symbols of girlhood' (Masuko [1982] 2010: 20). *Hirahira* imagery transcends materialistic realities and crosses 'sensual boundaries', blurring the border between the ordinary and the imagined (Masuko [1982] 2010: 35).

Both words invoke a sense of movement, and Honda describes *shōjo* as 'rejecting the intervention of everyday logic' in its alogical and unworldly nature as it sways and drifts ([1982] 2010: 36). The construction of girl and *shōjo* is ongoing and incomplete in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari's 'becoming-'.

Girls do not belong to an age group, sex, order, or kingdom: they slip in everywhere, between orders, acts, ages, sexes; they produce *n* molecular sexes on the line of flight in relation to the dualism machines they cross right through.

(1987: 277, original emphasis)

Becoming-girl is movement that constantly traverses borderlines of childhood and adulthood, innocence and disenchantment, naivety and wisdom. Becoming-girl has a liminal status that allows a girl the ability to break off from established molar identities and to travel in the in-between yet also makes her a subject for concern and control. She may be perceived as dangerous, deadly and delinquent or, even worse, frivolous and unimportant. However, there are also people who borrow the mask of the girl or *shōjo* so that they too can try to move like she does.



Figure 1: Dresses in regimental stripe fabric inspired by schoolgirl uniforms and the 1868 novel Little Women from small independent brands Moon Afternoon (left) and Sincerely (right) who both focus on a Victorian-inspired classical and literary approach to Lolita fashion (photo courtesy of Moon Afternoon and Sincerely).

The following profiles of three Lolitas provide examples of how these theories surrounding aesthetics and becomings are realized in the lives of actual people:

Nagisa

Nagisa from Osaka started going to punk rock shows wearing Lolita when she was in middle school in the early 1990s. When I met her, she was wearing a stuffed animal print dress, various Vivienne Westwood accessories and a pair of ballerina rocking horse shoes with high wooden heels that added 7cm to her (already) above average height. Smoking a cigarette using a long Vivienne Westwood cigarette holder, her own hair dyed blonde and curled in soft ringlets instead of wearing a wig, Nagisa stands out wherever she goes.

I had asked her, 'In your opinion, what do you think Lolita is?' It was a difficult question for her and Nagisa mumbled to herself, 'Lolita – Lolita – What does it mean? The more I think about it the more I feel I don't even know any more...'. After a moment, a bit flustered, she turned to me, 'Have you ever met a Lolita who was really, truly Lolita-like?' – that is, the Perfect Lolita (risō no Lolita).

'Well, in your mind, what image do you have of the Perfect Lolita?'
'Completely covered in white – like an angel. In other words, someone who is not like me'.

(2010)

Despite having a long history wearing the fashion, Nagisa does not see herself as a Lolita or even as cute. She wears Lolita fashion but holds a concept of an idealized Lolita form that she will never be able to become. Though Nagisa coordinates each Lolita outfit with these images in mind, she is also keenly aware it is an impossible ideal. Her 'becoming-Lolita' process is ongoing and never quite complete. An all-white Lolita outfit conjures images of innocence and purity, something Nagisa, as an adult woman, feels she cannot claim to embody. Yet she has a desire to recall these ideals even if she is unable to completely achieve them: an act she accomplishes through Lolita fashion that allows her to walk the line between girlhood and womanhood.

Minami

When asked if she thought she was a Lolita or not, Minami gave a similar answer to Nagisa's, saying:

My friends call me otome (maiden) and that makes me happy. I would like to be called Lolita too, but in terms of fashion, I don't really wear knee length skirts and rarely wear panniers. I wonder if it's a little rude to proper Lolitas.

(2010)

According to Minami, someone like Sachi, the violinist of music duo Kokushoku Sumire, or Kamenō from Kusumoto Maki's manga *KISS XXXX* (1989–1991), or even her friend who wears head to toe pink, fluffy dresses and dyes her hair pink, are all more authentic embodiments of Lolitas. Minami describes Sachi as her ideal image of a princess. She has been a fan ever since she saw photographs of Sachi in magazines like *KERA* and *The Gothic & Lolita Bible*.³

Minami, 26 years old, lives in Ibaraki prefecture and commutes to Tokyo where she works in the marketing department of a cosmetics company. Starting in middle school, she went to Harajuku on weekends to hang out at Jingubashi, a bridge near the Harajuku station, with band cosplayers⁴

3. *KERA* is a youth subculture fashion magazine published by INDEX Communications, LLC.
4. Short for 'costume player'. Cosplay involves wearing a costume that pays tribute to a favourite character in an anime or member of a rock band.

and other Lolitas. A fan of visual rock bands like Raphael and Malice Mizer but unable to frequently go to concerts, she found friends who mailed her letters filled with concert and event reports. Minami continued going to Jingubashi for eight years before gradually becoming too busy with work and losing interest as fewer people hung out there on Sundays. Still in contact with the friends she made, she feels a deeper connection to the people she met in Harajuku compared to friendships made with her high school classmates.

The very first piece of Lolita clothing she ever bought was a red velveteen hair bow. Minami felt special when she wore velveteen as it represented the epitome of luxury to her. She wore sweet and classical style Lolita clothes until one day she decided to stop. Recalling the particular day she made her decision, she says:

One day, when I was 20, still in vocational school – as I wore my favourite skirt – one with a rose print – all of a sudden I felt, ‘It doesn’t look right! Why?!’ I suddenly felt cold towards it. [...] It was strange. I looked in the mirror and just felt, ‘something’s changed’.

(Minami 2010)

She sold most of her Lolita clothes to used clothing stores, like many others who eventually decide to ‘graduate’ from Lolita. Many years later she has repurchased a small number of the same garments through online auction sites, but Minami has largely closed this chapter in her life.

Despite not wearing what she considers to be standard Lolita style clothing such as knee-length fluffy skirts, Minami’s fashion style has evolved and become subdued over time as she adapted her style to a work appropriate wardrobe. However, she still expresses Lolita influences through a combination of vintage and used clothing. Ever since Minami started working, she has had less time to dress up and hang out with friends, causing her to feel she was beginning to forget the things that were important to her during her high school days. She has a small collection of Blythe dolls that she displays in her room along with other kawaii objects. Looking at these kawaii things every morning calms her down and makes her feel relieved. It helps her to remember ‘I am a Lolita’.

Minami sees Lolita as a lifestyle or a way of living. Stating that ‘it’s the same as waking up in the morning, washing my face and eating breakfast every day’, she believes that Lolita is an aesthetic form involving an appreciation for a certain sense of beauty and emotion. By framing it as distinct aesthetic and an approach to life, Minami continues to claim and have access to the Lolita of her youth while participating in mainstream society as an unmarried, working woman. As someone who started as a ‘proper Lolita’ in her teens, Minami is similar to the number of women who evolve their engagement with Lolita over time as they grow older, finding ways to carve spaces for themselves to protect and access precious affects and aesthetics from their teenage years.

Noriko

Shōjo aesthetics and Lolita fashion have largely been situated in urban landscapes and connected to consumer culture and the acquisition of objects. Noriko, however, grew up in a small village in Iwate prefecture’s countryside before

moving to Tokyo several years ago. Noriko recalls her childhood and school days as a time when she was unable to know or feel that she was a girl. She paints a picture of a childhood that seemed grey and colourless when talking about the clothes she used to wear. Unlike girls living in the city, she never had kawaii clothes as a child. In middle school and high school, boys and girls still basically looked the same, wearing what she called 'inaka fashion', or countryside fashion, consisting of shirts, trainers and pants. Lolita clothes are important for Noriko who, despite feeling her appearance is not kawaii, is able to feel kawaii when she wears Lolita, affirming the existence of a feminine side she lacked growing up in the countryside:

I'm now able to believe that I'm a girl. That's a valuable feeling. Because I spent a childhood in which I didn't really know I was a girl (onna no ko), clothes that make it possible to feel that I am a girl are important. It's important because it lets me live as a woman. It's a spiritual backbone for my being able to believe I am a girl, that I am a cute girl. That's why Lolita clothes that are intensely cute are so important. It's my identity as a girl. To say if I changed or not, I think that the person that I was before never changed, but as a result of these clothes I can gain more confidence, so they are important.

(2010)

As one of the few girls to leave her home town to go to Tokyo, Noriko was able to find different opportunities from her female high school classmates who remained and are now married with children. Unlike Nagisa and Minami, Noriko was older before she started to wear Lolita fashion and had no interest in subculture music scenes. Entering life in an urban area gave Noriko access to a colourful girl's culture she was unable to experience growing up. In Tokyo, she has been able to take on the mask of a shōjo and explore the world of kawaii. Wearing Lolita clothes, revelling in their cuteness, helps her to reclaim her femininity, gain self-confidence and build an identity in a way that would not have been available to her if she had stayed in the countryside.

Shōjo is a key, granting access to the experiences of knowing and feeling kawaii. Lolita provides a more specialized kawaii sense that is achieved through the practice of wearing, making and living kawaii in and through the body via clothing. Lolitas cultivate knowledge over years of living as a girl and woman in Japanese society. With a refined sense of these concepts, they utilize and adapt ideals of femininity to work within their own lives and personal philosophies.

LOLITA AESTHETICS IN PERSONAL VISIONS OF KAWAII AND BEAUTY

Talking to Japanese Lolitas, I became more aware of the subtle emotive and affective nature of kawaii things and people and how their understanding of kawaii informs their engagement with Lolita fashion. The following section examines how terms such as kawaii, utsukushii, shōjo and otome are defined by Lolitas. Though Lolita fashion is heavily connected to shōjo culture, Lolitas do not want to be called shōjo. Instead, many prefer otome (maiden), a genderless term that offers similar modes of liminality and mobility in-between the lines as shōjo but without the childish image and with a stronger sense of agency and awareness.

5. This is also the motto for the Takarazuka Revue Troupe and the associated Takarazuka Music School. It can be literally translated as 'be pure, be proper, be beautiful'.

Within Lolita fashion there are a multitude of sub-styles and genres ranging from sugar sweet to morbid and Gothic that have different standards for what can be considered kawaii. A Sweet Lolita might think that stuffed animals and cakes are kawaii, but a Gothic Lolita believes that bats, skulls and coffins are kawaii. Lolita aesthetics display elements of the innocent and of the grotesque, both of which may be understood as beautiful in different ways. Their propinquity within the same aesthetic exhibits an understanding of the fragility and harshness of human existence. Despite their differences, each style sense is built on the importance of adhering to one's likes and dislikes regardless of what others may think or say.

Kawaii culture started as a widespread phenomenon embraced by young men and women in the 1980s. Unlike pre-war shōjo culture, kawaii is conceived as pop and plastic, disposable and commodifiable – a descendant of shōjo for postmodern times. Leaving behind pre-war shōjo's ideals framed by 'pure and righteous beauty (kiyoshiku, tadashiku, utsukushii)',⁵ young girls nowadays are instead embracing kawaii culture as a symbol of youth and being youthful (Koga 2009: 33). Kawaii describes objects (or people or animals) that are loved and are lovable, that exist to be loved, that one may feel close to, and that provoke laughter without thinking. Linked with the childish, weak and fragile, it makes one feel at ease, peaceful and may become a form of healing.

Cute fashion during the 1980s and 1990s drew on 'neo-romantic notions of childhood as an... unmaligned, pure sphere of human life' (Kinsella 1995: 241). 'Moratorium people', a term coined by Okonogi (1978), was used to describe youth who rejected mainstream adult culture and avoided social obligations and responsibility by engaging in play, cuteness and childhood



Figure 2: From the 'Luminous Night Carnival' fashion show by Angelic Pretty, a black dress with crosses, jewels and tulle overlay (left) and an intricate one-piece with princess sleeves, rows of frills, lace and ribbons (right) are examples of the brand's sweet and pop kawaii style (photo courtesy of Angelic Pretty).

nostalgia (Ōtsuka 1989: 16). The combination of shōjo and kawaii created a New Wave of shōjo, one that became a symbol for ‘Japanese late model, consumer capitalism’ as subjects that consumed but did not produce, constituting a completely different gender category ‘detached from (the) productive economy of heterosexual reproduction’ (Treat 1993: 362, 364). This is the Young-Girl, removed from production and engaging in pure consumption within a capitalist system in which bodies are commodified and objectified through hegemonic images and marketing industries that place value on appearance over creation (Tiqqun [1999] 2012: 48).

From the viewpoint of adult society, kawaii is a sensibility rooted in consumer culture and removed from reality because it is associated with things that are small and weak, projecting an aura of needing to be loved and protected (Koga 2009: 210). In contrast, I believe girls exhibit agency when they exercise individual choice in what they determine to be kawaii and what objects they own. Surrounding oneself with kawaii things is a way to adore oneself, to see oneself as kawaii by being in close contact with other kawaii things. Kawaii is ‘the ultimate individualistic doctrine, a narcissistic value system’ that cuts one off from life and existence in ‘reality’ and ‘real’ society (Koga 2009: 214).

As such, kawaii is best understood as an affect that expresses an aesthetic describing things one wants to be surrounded with or bring within reach. Affect is an intensity that escapes consciousness and is a movement yet is also a suspension in linear temporality – a process of being that is underway rather than a position taken (Massumi 2002: 27). It is a gradient of bodily capacity that arises in the midst of an ‘in-between-ness’ (Seigworth and Gregg 2010: 2). ‘Affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values and objects’ (Ahmed 2010: 29). Happiness, as an affect, puts us in intimate contact with objects, not only material or physical, but anything that induces happiness, including sense of values, practices, and styles in a ‘horizon of likes’ (Ahmed 2010: 32, 41). Affects can be contagious and groups are formed around a shared orientation towards certain things as being good and bringing happiness.

Table 1: Definitions of kawaii and utsukushii from interview data.

Kawaii	Utsukushii
- cute	- beautiful
- small	- grown-up
- weak	- perfection
- youthful	- symmetrical
- energetic	- expensive
- endearing	- noble
- imperfect	- sacred and distanced
- disposable	- long-lasting
- of the moment	- landscapes
- attainable and reachable	- paintings
- personally defined concept based on an individual’s likes and dislikes	- classical
- consumer culture, popular culture, and mass media	- requires a lot of money to obtain or achieve
	- placed in high regard

Unlike *utsukushii* (beautiful), *kawaii*'s imperfection makes it endearing and lovable. *Kawaii* may be connected to the disposable, consumerist and postmodern, but most important of all, it is an attainable ideal. *Utsukushii* things and people seem noble and far away, placed on pedestals for viewing but not for touching or close contact. Landscapes, paintings and other objects that exhibit a balance and perfection are all considered forms of *utsukushii*. People who are beautiful (*bijin*) are seen as grown-up (*otonappoi*) in contrast to the childlike cuteness of *kawaii*. Some research participants, like Noriko, expressed a desire to retain a sense of youthfulness and believe that the standard for *utsukushii* is too high to even fathom attempting:

I would be happier being called *kawaii*. If I wanted to be beautiful I would wear other clothes. If I wanted to dress beautifully, I think it would cost a lot of money. Going to the beauty parlour, getting my make-up professionally done – those are ways to make myself beautiful. But, wearing Lolita-type clothes, I feel like I am *kawaii*. Frankly speaking, I can never be beautiful because of my body type and shape.

(2010)

Utsukushii was given a special status by interviewees, who consider it to be an aesthetic or appreciation of beauty that is not personally defined like *kawaii* but rather adheres to standards set by higher authorities such as scholars, art historians, philosophers or religious principles. In contrast, *kawaii* is a form of beauty that removes the overarching influence exerted by authoritative institutions like 'tradition' or patriarchy, granting young girls and women an aesthetic they have the power to define. Things that make girls' hearts go a-flutter like pretty flowers or cute ribbons, 'things that men don't pay attention to, don't notice' are what girls call *kawaii* (Asuka 2010).

Though definitions of *kawaii* as found in Lolita fashion are heavily influenced by *shōjo* culture, *Lolitas* do not claim *shōjo* as a physical state, subject position or identity. However, some express a desire to foster a *shōjo* heart – that is, to gain access to *shōjo* affect and emotion. Affects and experience connected to *shōjo* may be recalled and felt regardless of one's current physical age. *Lolitas* do not relate to a *shōjo* identity because they perceive it to be infantile, suggesting a young child who is unable to do anything by herself:

A *shōjo* doesn't know very much, even more than a Lolita. A Lolita is – well, it's like she somehow knows something. If a wolf like in Little Red Riding Hood came close, a Lolita would know that it was a wolf when she came near him, but a *shōjo* would continue to believe the wolf was her grandmother.

(Minami 2010)

Others viewed *shōjo* as embodying childhood purity and innocence without any connection to the media products associated with *shōjo* culture – even if they consume these motifs on a daily basis. This sentiment is described by Asuka, designer for the Lolita fashion brand Angelic Pretty:

Personally I haven't really thought about tying Lolita and *shōjo* together [...] It's a little bit childlike. Not *shōjo*, but in my mind, it's something even – even more innocent (*junsui*). During childhood, everyone is pure, like extremely pure. As people become adults, they come under

different kinds of circumstances and gradually their thinking changes and they become less pure. Maybe a Lolita is someone who can hold on to that purity.

(2010)

Table 2: Definitions of *shōjo* and *otome* from interview data.

Shōjo	Otome
- young girl aged 14 to 15	- ageless and timeless
- childish	- elegant and graceful
- teenage adolescence	- lady-like
- carefree	- describes a personality
- dreamy	- beautiful not only in appearance but also in character
- cute	- someone keeping alive the appreciation and love for kawaii things regardless of or in spite of their age
- pure feelings	- a sensibility not connected to a physical state or outside appearances, thus men can also claim this identity
- middle to high school age girls	
- limited by physical age	
- cannot be used for anyone over 20 years old	
- can only be applied to girls	

As mentioned, many Lolitas interviewed prefer to describe themselves as *otome* (maiden). *Otome* are well spoken, elegant and graceful, beautiful both inside and outside. Regardless of gender and age, the word can be used to describe someone who keeps alive their appreciation for kawaii things. Innocence, purity and dreams can still be remembered and upheld without being bound by a child's body and mind. *Otome* is not a category unique or inherently connected to Lolita fashion, but it could be said that Lolita informs and influences an individual *otome* sensibility in ways specific to those who currently are or formerly were involved in Lolita. *Otome* temperament combined with the lived practice of wearing Lolita forms a concept of kawaii that is defined not only by commodities but also by feelings and affect.

WALKING BETWEEN THE LINES OF GIRL AND WOMAN: A KAWAII REVOLUTION

Girls encounter a crisis when they move from adolescence to adulthood and find that things associated with womanhood depicted as pleasurable in the media, such as boyfriends or careers, are sometimes less so in reality (Swindle 2011: 33). This realization is one of many that marks a transition during which girls put away objects of girlhood and align themselves towards objects of womanhood (Swindle 2011: 23). 'Affect aliens' are those who experience disappointment from something that should have caused happiness and, feeling alienated from 'the affective promise of happy objects', imagine alternative trajectories for what may count as a good or better life (Ahmed 2010: 50).

Lolitas are affect aliens. Their aesthetic and philosophy may seem curious to those around them as these qualities form a dissatisfaction or disconnection with what Lolitas perceive to be mainstream society. Scholars like Kawamura (2012) and Arita (2013) have noted how Lolita fashion, *shōjo* culture and girl-centric subculture fashions have been used to subvert or reject dominant ideologies of gender. Lolitas form counterpublics where 'they can express

6. Otaku is someone with obsessive interests. It usually refers to anime and manga fans, but as in this context the label can also be applied to any hobby or interest.
7. A 'Lolita name' is a name used when wearing Lolita. In Japan, many people will use a name different from their legal name when interacting with others in a subculture-based group.

their own desires and interests outside of the male-dominated public sphere', creating something that has become part of 'the discourse of the "dangerous" female youth cultures' as labelled by news media (Gagné 2008: 131).

Their reaction to Japanese society aligns with McVeigh's theory of *kawaii* as 'resistance consumption' in which 'adorning or associating oneself with cuteness positions one, if only temporarily, outside the demands of the highly ordered regimes of labour' (2000: 167). It is a soft resistance that provokes and ignores dominant structures but does not violently threaten or seek to overthrow them. Likewise, looking at the asexual 'Alice in Wonderland'-inspired costumes of mainstream female pop singers, Monden argues that *shōjo* clothing and gestures 'allow Japanese women to present themselves in ways that can prevent them from being objectified and sexualized', suggesting that Lolita fashion is one strategy out of many that women may employ in a 'delicate revolt' (Monden 2014: 266, 268).

In Japan, people have a lot of stress, so in a way, everyone is a kind of otaku,⁶ creating a fantasy in their head to escape from daily life. I'm like that too, except I can't contain it inside my head.

(Rumiko 2010)

Rumiko, from the Kansai region, sees Lolita as a form of anarchy in which one stands outside of society and is self-assertive in preserving one's own soul and beliefs. Engaged in what she calls a *kawaii* revolution (*kawaii kakumei*), Rumiko wears Lolita as a 'reaction' to current society by living according to her own standards as to what is *kawaii*. Works on Japanese culture have highlighted the conflict between individuality and group solidarity or public ideology with private interest (Befu 1990: 214). In response to these pressures, Lolita fashion offers a way to be individualistic and think about one's own desires.

Unlike Rumiko, most Lolitas interviewed were reluctant to voice their opinions about politics and did not explicitly discuss Lolita as a rebellion. Most said they wear Lolita for themselves, defining it as a fashion unconcerned with attracting men. Though not explicitly framed as a response to gender inequality or as a feminist critique, many saw wearing Lolita as working against mainstream social expectations as well as offering a haven from the constrictions and stresses of their everyday lives. Lolita is not an attack against or an attempt to change the institutions that constrain women but rather an outright refusal of them. It is an endeavour to find meaning that lies outside the confines of work and marriage, one that resonates with Malatino's (2011) suggestion that the North American Riot Grrrl movement is an exit from the building instead of an attempt to break the glass ceiling.

Lolita fashion offers a site for play, fantasy and a chance to express a part of oneself that is impossible in other venues. The fashion tends to attract certain kinds of people including those who are self-reflexive, those who were bullied, those who feel they do not fit mainstream standards of beauty, those who feel like they are social outsiders, and those who feel they are not normal and thus question what is normal.

Justine is a Japanese Lolita from the Kansai region who wanted to be called by her 'Lolita name'.⁷ When thinking about how people around her often tell her she is strange, Justine said: 'Normal things like getting married, having a child, having a household – that kind of future is something I can't completely imagine. I want to forever remain otome. What I consider normal

is different' (2010). She wanted to remain an 'eternal girl'. Lolita fashion is fleeting and transient and Lolitas are frail and prone to narcissism – all properties that she feels differentiate her from other people. She feels that because they carry these personality traits, Lolitas are drawn to fairy tales or stories filled with misery, sorrow, pain and cruelty.

Lolitas recognize their feelings of alienation in regards to mainstream society and deal with it through consumption. By reappropriating shōjo innocence and its space of lack, otome and Lolita use hyperfemininity as means to transform shōjo into what Bergstrom calls 'wilful antisociality' and 'girly criminality' (2011: 35). Matsūra discusses Lolitas' fascination with death or desire to create a death-like state that would allow them to freeze time and dwell within a sense of stillness and suspension (2007: 170–77). Through nostalgia and collecting objects and narratives of the past, Lolitas create a situation in which others, especially men, cannot oppose the sense of 'self' they have built with their own hands (Matsūra 2007: 172). Likewise, Nishimura draws a connection between Gothic Lolita and porcelain dolls, suggesting that Gothic Lolitas are an embodiment of 'static, eternal realities', performing an 'innocence' already lost (2004: 35). This death-like nostalgic state is similar to the idea of protecting and remembering the 'eternal'. It is something that escapes an orientation towards the future by remembering and protecting aspects of the past and suspending them in time.

Lolita fashion is not only a way to release stress but is a clear statement to oneself that mainstream society and mores are not all there is to life. Lolitas reach for something that they feel they have lost in making the transition from girl to women, and feel a desire to preserve some space that may protect that precious and important quality. Rumiko was the only Lolita to talk about *kawaii kakumei*.⁸ But her mentality is in sync with many other interviews as quoted throughout this article. Lolita fashion is a revolution of the self, fermented when a Lolita makes a conscious decision to break from social mores and embrace the power of *kawaii*, the power of making and upholding personal choice. This decision is displayed – and a statement made – through wearing Lolita in the street and preserving a certain mentality when the clothes are not worn.

Lolita fashion is a reaction to and rejection of mainstream society that stems from the assertive power of claiming personal definitions of *kawaii*. Removed from and uncaring of the opinion of those in positions of power, *kawaii* is as powerful as it is personal and individual. Even if *kawaii* culture cannot directly challenge the existing patriarchy or lead to a complete upheaval of the current system, it offers girls and women a way to create and participate in a world that men are not allowed to access. Lolita fashion offers a way for people to cope with and to reach outside the realities of their day-to-day lives. It is a world that cis-gendered men cannot enter because they were not born or raised as girls.

Lolita should be thought of as a state of potential and a becoming that can be donned at will. It is reaffirmed and engaged in through buying and wearing clothes. At the same time, this state that may be called Lolita or otome depending on the person is backed by an ideology and aesthetic that is connected to more than fashion and material things. Like the world of 'Alice in Wonderland', filled with contradictions, enigmas and riddles from which Lolita fashion designers draw inspiration, Lolitas too are filled with opposing forces: they are both fragile and strong; they possess sensual bodies yet also want to protect a corner of innocence and pureness; they like sweet and

8. Aside from Rumiko, I have only encountered the idea of *kawaii kakumei* in two instances, and a quick Internet search suggests that the term is not widely used by Lolitas.



Figure 3: Tokyo-based Enchantlic Enchantilly is a small Lolita fashion brand known for their elegant and Gothic approach to the style. This dress, called 'Ibara-hime' or 'Little Briar-Rose', in purple and black tones is an example of the exclusive print textiles many Lolita brands create in-house for their clothing designs (photo courtesy of Enchantlic Enchantilly).

cute things yet are fascinated by death and the grotesque. Fairy Wish designer Kobayashi Alice conceives of otome as a spirituality, giving it a sense of flexibility and adaptation:

Over the years I've seen many maidens (otome) who decide to 'graduate' (sotsugyō) or say 'I'm going to graduate from Lolita'. But otome isn't something that one can graduate from. I believe it is a spirituality that goes beyond fashion. Fashion is just one means of expressing it. [...] the essential thing is to accept the parts of yourself that are changing. [...] Your radiance develops when you can accept your body and spirit. Even if you grow older, even if you become an old woman, you can still feel otome. That is the pathway of otome, treaded lightly, like a flower.

(Twitter post, February 2012)

Lolita is the fashion, clothing and material expression of a unique kawaii sensibility that combines otome affect and becoming. If the Young-Girl and shōjo are at times thought of as co-opted by patriarchy, the capitalist mentality, infantilization and the social ills of postmodernity that seek to deny young

women control over their bodies and how they are represented, then Lolita and the otome sense connected to Lolita represent a counter-force. Lolita gives girls back their bodies and minds, acknowledges that these bodies grow and change over time and creates a space to evolve and engage in practices to develop beyond gender binaries and narratives of normativity. Like the movement expressed by the notions of hirahira and fuwafuwa, Lolita move between becoming-girl and woman, in which the recollection of girlhood memories through rose-coloured glasses – in other words, the nostalgia for a girlhood that may never have been their lived childhood experience – is crossed with molar women's bodies built and constrained by social conventions and expectations. Lolitas and otome travel between becoming-girl and woman powered by the fuel of kawaii.

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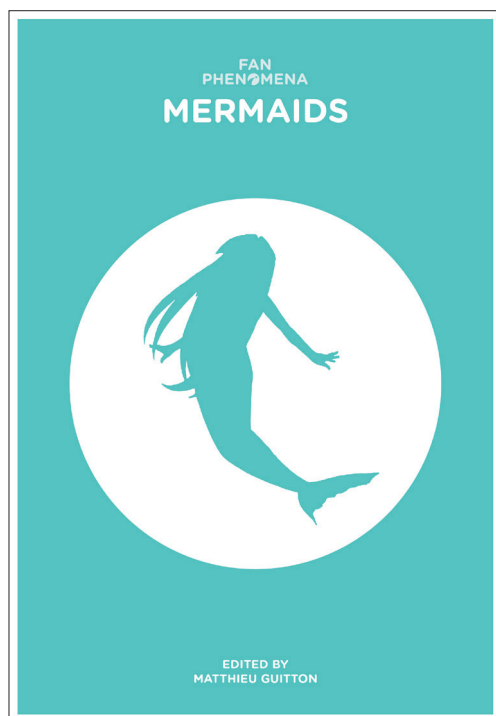
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An Nguyen completed her doctorate degree in sociocultural anthropology at the University of Western Ontario. Her dissertation was a cross-cultural

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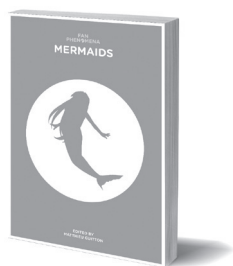
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Matthieu Guitton is associate professor at Laval University, Canada, and a fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute. He is associate editor of *Computers in Human Behavior*.



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Agentic cute (^.^): Pastiching East Asian cute in Influencer commerce

ABSTRACT

There has yet to be a definitive study of cute culture that is organically Singaporean. Drawing on existing work on East Asian cute culture and the regional popularity of commercial social media microcelebrities or 'Influencers' in Singapore, this article annotates three modes of agentic cute used to obscure the soft power that Influencers hold. Through the qualitative textual and visual analysis of content from three popular Singaporean Influencers, and their associated blogs and social media, this article examines how three tropes that I term 'the Doll', 'the Darling' and 'the Dear' are enacted as cute femininities among adult woman. It argues that the subversive power of this performative cuteness is obscured by the corresponding sensual delight, romantic docility and homosocial desire that the Influencers develop in tandem with their cute self-presentations. By continually emphasizing stereotypical gendered relationships with their male partners, and relations with their followers, these Influencers are able to position themselves as non-threatening and submissive, when they are in fact quietly subverting these hierarchies for personal gain.

KEYWORDS

Influencers
bloggers
microcelebrity
social media
coupling
cute
East Asia
Singapore

PASTICHING EAST ASIAN CUTE

Within East Asia, cuteness in adult women has been theorized and studied as Japanese kawaii, South Korean aegyo, and Taiwanese and mainland Chinese

sajiao. In her study on Japanese cute, Yano posits that the cute consumption Tokyo women partake of is 'assertively in-your-face kawaii', referencing the Hello Kitty-clad youths parading their 'cute overload' fashion while posing for cameras in Harajuku. Some genres of kawaii include 'Sweet Lolita', which involves Victorian-era dress styles fashioned after porcelain dolls in baby pink hues (Yano 2009: 681, 685); 'Gothic Lolita', which takes a punk spin on Sweet Lolita with dark make-up and black lace; and 'Cosplay', where women may role play characters from manga, anime, games or movies. Kawaii also entails the cultivation of behaviours and mannerisms such as adopting a higher pitched 'baby' voice or emulating the syntax of a child by referring to oneself in the third person. This genre of performance is known as *burikko*, where adult women feign childlike behaviours. Drawing on her work among Japanese high school girls, Allison suggests that kawaii is associated with *amae*, 'a sweetness connected to dependence', and *yasahii*, a 'gentleness' (2010: 385). This kawaii normatively corresponds to 'girls and girlishness' (2010: 385) and is actively pursued by girls who desire protection and care from their male partners. Despite its attention commanding propensities, kawaii is still primarily associated with a 'feminized position that is born in passivity' (Yano 2009: 686) because its eye-catching performance is meant to solicit affect from the viewer.

In South Korea, *aegyo* encompasses both 'linguistic and non-linguistic, non-verbal behavior' that is 'charming', 'cute', and indicates 'qualities associated with childhood' (Strong 2013: 127). *Aegyo* speech registers tended to be higher pitched with a higher repetition of sounds (Strong 2013), a 'nasalized and ventriculated voice quality' that 'demonstrates femininity' (Harkness 2013: 24), and a 'distorted child-like voice' with vocabulary choices that imply 'helplessness or confusion' (Puzar 2011: 99). In text-based communication, this learned vulnerability may be expressed with 'sad and crying emoticons' (2011: 99). Puzar expands on the non-verbal behaviour of *aegyo* as:

acting charming yet childish, vulnerable and volatile, pretending sudden surprise or unmotivated sadness or anger including pounding of feet, lighting kicking the partner with closed fist, pout, bloated cheeks [...] along with the highest regard for physical appearances, including cosmetic and surgical interventions, wearing circle eye lenses, etc.
(2011: 99)

More crucially, Puza's preliminary findings have discovered that *aegyo* is androcentric, given that this speech register is used substantially less within female-only schools as compared to co-ed environments (2011: 99).

In Taiwan, *sajiao* is a type of register variation (Hudson 1980) with vocal inflexions that model after babytalk or a vocal feature known as *fadia* or *wawa yin* which literally translates as 'babyish voice' (Yueh 2013: 166, 171). *Wawa yin* is commonly associated with the Mandarin concepts *ke-ai*, meaning cuteness, and *wugu*, meaning innocence, which when performed together reflects an ideal Taiwanese woman who is 'tiny', 'childish' and 'controllable' (Yueh 2013: 167–68). In her study on babytalk and the voice of authority among young children in Taiwan, Farris borrows from Ferguson (1978) and specifies the modifications of babytalk as 'prosody (e.g. higher pitch), grammar (e.g. shorter sentences), lexicon (e.g. special vocabulary – 'doggie', 'pee-pee'), phonology (e.g. simplification of consonant clusters), and discourse (e.g. more questions)' (Farris 1992: 188–89). Similar to the linguistic features of

the Japanese *kawaii* and South Korean *aegyo*, *sajiao* borrows from archetypal Chinese babytalk that is slow, soft and nasal, references others in a deferential first person, and uses sentence-final vocal particles such as *ma* and *la* to 'soften' one's delivery (Farris 1992: 197). Yueh, a native speaker of Taiwanese Mandarin, further expands on the gendered and infantile appropriation of *sajiao* to include: the reduplication of short phrases and monosyllabic words; first person 'directness' when displaying a verbal expression; the 'transliteration' of non-Mandarin words such as vocalizing 'baby' as *běibi*; and hypocrisies (2013: 161).

Non-verbal characteristics of *sajiao* may include 'pouting', 'smiling' and 'shoulder twists' (Farris 1992: 197), and is best enacted by women who are 'small', 'tiny', 'thin', 'seemingly controllable' and 'helpless' (Yueh 2013: 171) to maintain visual congruence with the infantile vocal inflexions performed. *Sajiao* is a skill that women can develop through socialization (Yueh 2013: 169), and serves the secondary uses of intimate exchange between lovers (Ferguson 1978), or stylized courtship behaviour (Farris 1992: 206). Following from this, *sajiao* can be read as an expression of the dynamics between masculinity and femininity (1992: 187), and adulthood and childhood, and is commonly employed by Taiwanese women to solicit 'love' and 'attention' (Yueh 2013: 170) from a male partner by positioning themselves as 'subordinate' or 'pleading' (1992: 196) for soft 'manipulation' (Farris 1992: 197; Yueh 2013: 162) and 'persuasion' (Yueh 2013: 159), to 'evoke dependency and help' from a carer (Farris 1992: 200). *Sajiao* is a 'powerful weapon' (Yueh 2013: 170) for women to exaggerate emotive expressions, evade tensions, and direct others through the exercise of soft power (Nye 1990).

Sajiao culture in mainland China is similar to that of Taiwan. In her study of Chinese urban female youth and the online *feizhuliu* (non-mainstream) culture, Qiu defines *sajiao* as 'deliberately act[ing] like a spoiled child in front of someone because of the awareness of the other person's affection' (2012: 232), and that '[t]o be *jiao* is to be delicate, dependent and vulnerable' (2012: 232). Such infantile yet coquettish behaviour is meant to incite gentle affection, towards which Qiu notes most Chinese men respond favourably. In addition to these facets of Taiwanese *sajiao*, Qiu lists additional mobilizations of Chinese *sajiao* enacted by women who are of marriageable age such as to 'coo in a baby voice, bat their eyelashes or pout using big puppy eyes' (2012: 232) as some mobilizations of Chinese *sajiao*.

INFLUENCERS IN SINGAPORE

It has been argued that Singapore is 'culturally a rather defensive space, constantly vigilant against 'polluting' influences from the 'constitutive' outside' (Chua 2000: 135). Perhaps it is for this reason that the Singaporean cute in the Influencer industry does not draw singularly from Japanese (Jpop), Korean (Kpop), Taiwanese or Chinese cultures, but instead refashions and localizes emblems from across East Asia. At present, there has yet to be a definitive study of cute culture that is organically Singaporean. Studies have looked at the influence of Hello Kitty (Ng 2001) and Japanese media and cultural products (Hao and Teh 2004) in Singapore, but not yet on Singaporeans per se. Drawing on existing work on East Asian cute culture and the regional popularity of Influencers in Singapore, this article annotates three modes of agentic cute as femininized strategies performed by adult woman Influencers to sustain their viewership. It argues that these three modes, the Doll, the

Darling, and the Dear, emerge as somatic visual cues and behavioural patterns pastiching from East Asian cute, and can be strategically enacted as a practice to solicit compliance, empathy, care or desire.

Since 2005 in Singapore, many young women have taken to social media to deliberately craft microcelebrity (Senft 2008) personae as a career role known as 'Influencer'. On their blogs, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, AskFM, and other social media, they document their everyday lives from the trivial and mundane to exciting snippets of the exclusive opportunities provided by their line of work. This form of blog and social media publishing falls within the 'lifestyle' genre, where a woman's life 'as lived' is the central theme of the output. Those with a strong enough viewership are able to monetize their social media platforms in three ways: (1) by selling advertising space on their sites in the form of a click through image or URL; (2) by writing personalized advertorials, which are advertisements in the form of an editorial opinion; and (3) by taking on sponsorships for various brands and companies (Abidin 2014b).

In fact, these women are increasingly substituting for mainstream television and cinema celebrities as spokespersons and ambassadors for a wide variety of campaigns and initiatives. Outside of the entertainment industry, the women have also been co-opted into the education industry, being engaged by secondary schools, junior colleges, and polytechnics to give talks on topics ranging from entrepreneurship to mental and sexual health (Abidin forthcoming). They have even appeared on the fringes of politics, being invited to have tea sessions and webcast dialogues with ministers in the cabinet, to name a few. While there are male participants, Influencers in Singapore are predominantly women aged between 15 and 30. In reflection of Singapore's national ethnic make-up, the majority of them are Chinese and predominantly use English.

Within East Asia, the Singaporean Influencer industry is one of the most established since its first 'commercial lifestyle blogger' (predecessor of 'Influencer') debuted in 2005. Several Influencer management firms were set up specifically to groom talents and upcoming social media microcelebrities, as well as to broker business deals between advertisers and these young women. For Influencers, this social media commerce is mediated via a commercial persona that the women carefully craft to portray only selected aspects of their lives (Abidin 2014a). Among the social scripts that these Influencers 'role-model' (Abidin and Thompson 2012) for their audience are the gendered scripts encountered by the author during extensive fieldwork between December 2011 and July 2013. Data captures from blogs and social media platforms were taken between June 2012 and March 2014, and are part of a larger ethnographic research project undertaken by the author since 2010.

Much of the analysis is shaped by personal interviews and participant observation conducted with these Influencers in the flesh, allowing for an in-depth understanding of agentic cuteness as strategic performance. A grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) was adopted in the thematic coding of all content in a bid to theorize cuteness in the Influencer landscape in Singapore. All three Influencers belong to the 'lifestyle' genre. Charmaine has been blogging since 2010, Denise since 2005, and Penelope since 2011. They belong to the 16–19, 20–25 and 26–30 age groups, respectively. In the discussion that follows, each Influencer is observed simultaneously deploying performances emblematic of all three agentic cute tropes, given that the modes of the Doll, the Darling and the Dear are flexible strategies

(as opposed to static personae) that can be enacted and emphasized as needed. In my analysis, I explain how each trope is best embodied by a particular Influencer, and how the other two Influencers perform other aspects of the tropic performance, in order to fully explicate the workings of the agentic cute trope in question. Pseudonyms are employed and lengthy direct quotes are avoided to reduce the traceability of their social media content that is public.

Chua (2000) argues that while “cute” may be a term of endearment [...] “cuteness” in behaviour and configured appearances [...] signal[s] immaturity’ (2000: 138) among Singapore youth. Japanese-influenced ‘cute’ is therefore shunned by some teenagers who may prefer to be read as ‘tough’ or ‘street smart’ (Chua 2003: 90). To counter this perception of immaturity, Influencers appropriate a ‘fragile, helpless and playful’ (Granot et al. 2014: 75) persona in tandem with underlying performances of sensuality, romantic docility and homosocial desire as a strategy for their business. More specifically, the cuteness these Singaporean Influencers engage in is thus ‘consumer-oriented, contrived, cultivated, artificial, bought and sold’ (Granot et al. 2014: 71), and can be understood as a script of femininity that is made coherent via ‘regulatory practice’ and repetitious performance (Butler 1990).

1. See Soh (2013) and MODE Entertainment (2013) on the Korean Gwiyomi trend in Singapore.

THE DOLL AND SENSUAL DELIGHT

The Doll is characterized by a visually infantile cuteness, which, insofar as it panders to ephedophilic tendencies (i.e. adult attraction towards teenagers), becomes simultaneously sexually desirable (cf. Yano 2009 on Lolita fashion). Konrad Lorenz’s (1943) canonical work on Kindchenschema posited that specific paedomorphic facial features that are characteristic of infants tend to evoke affective caregiving responses. Participants in one scientific study have defined this cuteness as ‘babyish’ or ‘pleasing to look at’, with the ability to ‘receive pleasure from a cute person’ (Alley 1981: 650, 653). In a later study, Golle et al. specify these features as ‘a relatively large head compared to the size of the body, a relatively big cranium compared to the facial bones, large eyes that lie below the horizontal midline of the skull, a soft-elastic surface texture, and round and protruding cheeks’ (2013: 1).

In Singapore, some of this cuteness is characterized by the ‘Jpop’ wave of the 1990s to early 2000s, and the more recent ‘Kpop’ wave¹ of the 2010s. To achieve this cute look, the Doll adopts cosmetic and apparel fashions inspired by Jpop and Kpop singers and actresses, as popularized on the Internet. For instance, Charmaine is known for her distinctive ulzzang (literally ‘best face’) style eyebrows, which are shaped to be thicker than natural eyebrows, extend from her inner eyelid past the corner of her eyes, and coloured in with a dark brown eyebrow pencil. She regularly puts on pupil-enlarging contact lens that are ornamental rather than prescriptive (see also Qiu 2012: 234). Charmaine is also fond of adding layers of baby pink blusher to give the illusion of rosy cheeks and a slimmer face. When she takes selfies, Charmaine tilts her head downwards so that her forehead and eyes seem larger, her cheeks appear rounded, and her chin smaller, thus taking the form of the paedomorphic features described in Lorenz’s Kindchenschema.

In his study of dollification in South Korea, Puzar adds that ‘doll images and objects, including dollified female bodies and the language of dollification’ seems to have infiltrated K-pop production (Puzar 2011: 91), often appropriating an ‘infantile cuteness merged with budding sexuality’ (2011: 92) such as when Kpop female stars model themselves after mannequins or dolls

that 'come alive' in music videos. He discovered that there is a broader use of East Asian doll imagery and metaphors among YouTubers borrowing from the South Korean pop idol *uljjang*, *ulzzang* and *eulzzang* (best face) styles than that of the western Barbie, where 'dollified Asian femininity' (2011: 90) is based on a 'docile and malleable yet exotic and eroticized femininity' (2011: 90) drawn from the intersection of a western occidental gaze and local patriarchal systems.

Similarly, Penelope unabashedly declares her love for 'pastel' and 'delicate' fashion in colours resonant of baby apparel. She often adorns herself in lilac, baby pink and mellow yellow tones in soft fabric with lace trimmings. More explicitly, Penelope also dresses herself in 'baby doll dresses' that trapeze from the shoulder and hide her feminine figure, and 'rompers' that are similar to the jumpers toddlers wear. Taking the mode of the Doll to an extreme, Denise literally embellishes her physical appearance to resemble a life sized human doll. Professionally shot in a studio, her blogmast is a photograph of herself lying on the ground, wide-eyed with lips pouting and parted to reveal her front teeth. Her ankle, knee, wrist, elbow and neck joints are wrapped tightly with black rubber bands and plastic wires to simulate the rigid joints of a plastic doll, and brushed with a gloss to attain a 'certain plastic-like and waxy texture' (Puzar 2011: 100) akin to a realistic doll, albeit one that is coquettish with covert sex appeal.

The Doll inflates her sense of purity and childlikeness by pouting or pursing her lips, and staring wide-eyed into the camera (cf. *saijao* culture in mainland China in Qiu 2012: 234) to fashion an innocent infantile doll image, akin to the Japanese 'Sweet Lolita' *kawaii* (Yano 2009). Qiu argues that this 'fundamentally passive position' (2012: 235) demotes women to the status of mere sexual objects despite initially seeming to perform an agentic form of cute, since their desire to be looked at panders to an assumed masculine spectator (Mulvey in Qiu 2012: 235). In other words, the Doll is reduced to an object of desire for the male gaze (Mulvey 1975), a phallogocentric scopophilia that derives pleasure from admiring women bodies on display. However, upon considering statistics from the managerial backend of Influencers, which indicate that around 80 per cent of Influencers' followers are women (personal communication), I have extended Mulvey's notion of the gaze and redefined it as a 'refracted (fe)male gaze' (Abidin and Thompson 2012: 468). Through this concept, I argue that those who look upon Influencers like the Doll are in fact fellow women who have internalized the male gaze and who now enjoy both this voyeurism and the ability to evaluate other women based on presumed heterosexual masculine desire.

Charmaine's performance of the Doll extends beyond visual imagery to include language. Ngai asserts that cuteness has become attached to 'a feminine and nationally specific way of using language' (2012: 60) in which the cute object utilizes discourse to publicize her feelings. On her social media, the Doll does this by adopting a combination of font styles, tone and vocabulary to emphasize her angelic childlikeness – Denise does this by employing multiple font colours in a single blog post, and steering towards more playful font types such as **Comic Sans**, **Sketch Rockwell**, and **Chalkduster**. Charmaine once customized her blog's click arrow into a mini rainbow and shooting stars, so that a string of sparkly animation greeted followers as they manoeuvred through her site. She also uses emoji and emoticons in a whimsical permutation of punctuation symbols to form cutesy expressive 'faces' in her text (cf. Puzar 2011: 99).

As the Doll, Denise also tends towards cooing expressions – as if speaking to a baby – when speaking about herself or addressing followers (cf. Farris 1992: 188–89; Ferguson 1978). In a post in which she thanks followers for their support, Denise uses the expression ‘Awww...’ to denote a sense of bashful appreciation. She also frequently textualizes her inner thoughts to followers with interjections such as ‘Aoooh’, ‘Mmmm’ and ‘Hmmm’ (cf. fadia and wawayin as Taiwanese saijao in Yueh 2013: 171). In describing her own physique when she tracks her weight loss and gain, Charmaine uses ‘small sized adjectives and diminutive ejaculations’ (Ngai 2012: 60) such as ‘precious’, ‘tiny’ and ‘delicate’ to describe her body. In addition, all three Influencers adopt playful pet names when referring to their partners as ‘diminutives and forms of baby-talk’ (Morreall 1991: 44; Strong 2013: 127), in a bid to position themselves as winsomely infantile. In particular, Penelope uses hypocorisms and terms of endearment such as ‘babe’, ‘baby boy’, ‘hunny’ and ‘sugar’.

It is crucial to note that in these three instances, the performance of the Influencer’s cute persona is meant to communicate romantic desirability to potential partners. She is, after all, enacting scripts of femininity in which heterosexual gender roles are being modelled for her followers. Hence, while the Doll portrays a cherubic and innocent childlikeness to solicit followers’ affection and protective instincts, she also conveys a sexual desirability that is meant to appeal to hegemonically masculine men. Such a jarring juxtaposition of cherubic innocence and sexual desirability seems provocative in that it suggests some sense of a perverse ephebophilic sensuality inherent in the Doll.

THE DARLING AND ROMANTIC DOCILITY

The Darling is characterized by her relative vulnerability and desire to be pampered by her romantic partner, and this delicateness and dependency complements her archetypal hegemonically masculine partner who is strong, protective and able to provide for her. She is a ‘darling’ in the sense of being both beloved and important, and endearing enough to solicit the affection of others. The first way the Darling performs romantic docility is by carefully crafting her photographs. On their social media, Influencers often post ‘couple’ photographs featuring them and their partner. While some of these are clearly professional photo-shoots in which Influencers are modelling for a product or advertising for a photographer, most of the photographs are ‘candid’ shots. These may be taken by a third person, via a self-timed camera set up on a tripod, or selfies.

However, this is not to say that there is no ‘staging’ involved in these images. After all, in his study *Gender Advertisements*, Goffman posits that photographic expressions are ‘not instinctive but socially learned and socially patterned’ (1979: 7). This applies when photographs are ‘faked’ or ‘realistically mocked-up’ such that as actors, we ‘wordlessly choreograph[h] ourselves relative to others in social situations with the effect that interpretability of scenes is possible’ (1979: 20–21), or when we are photographed in genuinely ‘caught’ or ‘candid’ images, which can be carefully angled, framed, photographed and disseminated for a specific effect (1979: 13).

The Darling visually displays her relative smallness and vulnerability to complement her masculine partner by adopting various modelling poses. The most basic of these is the careful angling of the Influencer’s face and body to emphasize her relative physical smallness (Yueh 2013: 171). For instance,

when Charmaine operates in the mode of the Darling, she is fond of crossing her legs at the knee and holding her arms close to her torso when she poses for ‘couple’ photographs with her partner. This gives the impression of her occupying a much smaller space within the photographic frame, especially since her partner usually positions himself closer to the camera to appear larger in build. This is unlike Charmaine’s stand-alone photographs in which she prefers to tiptoe and extend her legs forward to give the illusion of extra height, and dramatically raise her shoulders and protrude her chest to emphasize her bust line.

When Penelope acts as the Darling, she fancies standing with her back to her partner’s torso with his arms wrapping her in embrace, as if in a ‘spooning’ position. She often angles the top of her head to touch his chin, and also crosses her legs at the knees in front of her partner who stands with legs apart. Her wrists also hang loosely, as if to emphasize the delicateness of her small frame. The body language between both partners immediately suggests that Penelope’s partner is strong and protective of her dependent and fragile person, thus evoking dependency (Farris 1992: 200) and drawing attention to ‘an imbalance of power’ (Ngai 2012: 54) between the Darling and her partner. The romantic docility performed by the Darling is meant to obscure the winsome manipulative power that the woman holds over her male partner.

The second way that Influencers operating in the mode of the Darling perform romantic docility is via conscientious accounts of their partner’s acts of service. To underscore her fragility and docility in relation to her masculine partner, the Darling publicizes vignettes that showcase her partner as a pampering provider and over-protective lover. A variant of this discourse is to overtly pine after a partner who is temporarily absent, displaying what McIntyre terms ‘a certain neediness and inability to stand alone’ (2014: 4). In enacting the Darling, Charmaine routinely dramatizes her partner’s little acts of service for her, such as taking her out to her ‘favourite’ restaurant – which she claims he had to save up for – or buying her a simple trinket that was ‘hard to find’, ‘out of stock’ or took ‘weeks of searching’. Such blog posts obscure the facts that Charmaine also dines at fine restaurants with her family – meals presumably paid for by her parents – and the relative cheapness and low quality of her partner’s mass-produced gift. On her Instagram and Twitter feeds, Charmaine also catalogues the mundane routines in which her partner indulges her, such as blow-drying her hair for her as she lays on the bed playing on her phone, because ‘he knows [she is] tired’. She also Instagrammed her ‘feeding time’ where her partner literally spoon-fed her dinner as a display of his pampering affection.

In her most recent relationship, Penelope elicits the Darling when tells her followers that her partner has managed to ‘break down her walls’ and ‘soften’ her – something she claims her previous romantic interests have not done. In writing about his affectionate displays, she positions herself as voluntarily ‘allowing’ her partner to incite feelings of vulnerability and dependence in her, because of his overwhelming protectiveness. As a veteran in the industry who is among the oldest continuing Influencers, she ironically portrays a learned helplessness about herself when it comes to matters of romantic love. This is despite her being a rather successful entrepreneur with her own business, and an independent Influencer who has managed to clinch advertorial deals without the help of a management or advertising broker – a self-dependency she has, on several occasions, said she takes pride in.

As the Darling, Denise is occasionally queried about the gifts from her partner that she conspicuously displays and the venues they dine at. She unabashedly tells followers she ‘does not know’ details about the gift, such as its commercial value, and where it was bought, because it was a ‘surprise’ from her partner. This is contrary to some of her social media posts in which she talks at length about desiring particular material goods and the fact that she has ‘done some research’, ‘wishing [she] could own them’. When followers ask for details of the dining places she blogs about, Denise sometimes says she ‘cannot remember’ the address, booking arrangements, or average cost because her partner ‘took care of everything’. The discourse about her relationship is one of subservience and obedience in which she does not seem to question her partner’s decisions or take interest in the seemingly mundane details of her own lifestyle. She frames herself as being consciously wide-eyed and unaware most of the time, accentuating the couple’s power differential and her docility towards her partner.

On the flip side of her docile, dependant and fragile persona, the Darling seems to open up herself to bullying and exploitation by the very partner she claims is protective of her. Thus, the third way the Darling performs romantic docility is by highlighting her vulnerability as a result of this obedience. This behaviour is what Ngai refers to as ‘an eroticization of powerlessness [that] evok[es] tenderness’ (2012: 3) from the more powerful actor. During squabbles with her partner, Denise usually takes to writing about her ‘plight’ in a melodramatic fashion, appealing to followers to take her side. She uses phrases like being ‘taken advantage of’, being ‘unknowingly’ deceived, and being ‘too blind to see’ the faults in her partner earlier.

Denise positions herself as a subservient and compliant girlfriend whose trusting and dependant persona was misused and ‘abused’ by her partner who holds significantly more power in the relationship. While playing the victim, however, Denise’s passive-aggressive accounts are an attempt to buy herself some bargaining power by appealing for the ‘protection’ of her followers and other potential suitors. She has been known to shame her previous partners for their misdeeds in explicit detail, complete with photographs of the couple’s time together and personal photos of her partner to complement her narrative. In the ‘tell all’ blogposts of her last three breakups, Denise even juxtaposed her victim narrative with old photographs of the couple in seemingly happier times. She tells followers that ‘no one understands’, that there is ‘pain hidden beneath her smiles’, and that ‘things are not what they seem’. At times, she claims that the praises she previously sung of her partner were ‘not always true’, and occasionally feels like she was ‘acting’ in order to maintain the ‘facade’ of a happy relationship. This is accentuated by the selfies she includes in the narrative, in which she wears a helpless and innocent expression – doe-eyed, staring into the camera and pouting, or feebly lying in bed with a close-up on reddened eyes and tears running down her cheeks.

THE DEAR AND HOMOSOCIAL DESIRE

As the Dear, Penelope emphasizes the physical and emotional labour and monetary costs involved in maintaining her persona. Through this, cuteness becomes a commodity one may purchase to consume and to nurture the self (Allison 2010: 385). For this reason, the Dear’s extravagant lifestyle makes her the envy of many women who yearn to model themselves after her high-maintenance consumption practices. By sharing her private knowledge of

self-care practices to which less successfully feminine women are not usually privy, she also gains the affection of followers as evidenced by the hundreds of thousands of comments left on her Instagram, Twitter and blog profiles signalling their admiration and envy (as opposed to jealousy) and desire to emulate (as opposed to compete with) her.

The Dear incites homosocial desire among women followers by depicting herself as having a fragile body, requiring intensive upkeep that she accomplishes through the conspicuous consumption of 'self-care' products and services. In this, she prizes herself as the epitome of the female consumer whose femininity is maintained with luxury products and the leisurely consumption of services that are not always accessible or affordable for the average consumer. These consumer behaviours can take many forms, from physiological maintenance such as a quality diet and waxing; to the emotional rest gained from frequent holidays; to esteem-boosting physical adornment with luxury goods and services. When enacting the Dear, Penelope 'swears by' a monthly Brazilian wax, manicure service and expensive (but sponsored) facial dermatologist that she says she 'cannot do without'. She speaks of these services as a basic necessity in her life to keep her body 'young', 'supple' and 'desirable', and to care for her 'sensitive skin'. On the rare occasion that she is unable to keep an appointment, Penelope laments about feeling discomfort over her ungroomed and untamed body, and urges her followers to labour over their bodies in order to maintain and sustain their feminine appearance and desirability to men.

When performing the Dear, Denise is a conspicuous consumer of travel experiences, citing her 'need' to 'get out of the country' regularly in order to 'breathe' and have 'more space'. She describes her travels as a necessity rather than a leisurely luxury, in which her emotional and mental well-being is looked after and 'recharged'. Denise also frequently plays up her travels to even the most banal destinations (i.e. Johor Bahru in Malaysia, which is across a highway from Singapore; Sentosa Island, which is a resort island connected to Singapore) within South East Asia by attempting to exoticize her experiences as 'exclusive'. She tells followers that her body 'requires' travel in order to 'de-stress' and unwind from 'suffocating' Singapore. Similarly, in several selfies posted on Twitter, Charmaine is photographed in a car or taxi. She claims that her 'weak body' is unable to cope with the 'stress' of 'rushing' and jostling for public buses and trains, and reserves exaggerated exhortations for her parents and partner who regularly chauffeur her around. Charmaine seems to set herself apart from the average commuter – and indeed the average Singaporean youngster – or what she refers to as 'most other people', and reflexively speaks of herself as a 'pampered' child or girlfriend whose vulnerability requires extensive care and dedicated service.

As mentioned earlier, while comments left by followers on Influencers' social media tend to be envious, they are nonetheless mostly presented in an affectionate tone that indicates the follower's desire to emulate the Influencer. This homosocial desirability is carefully curated by Influencers who, while maintaining the display of their middle-class consumption, continually redirect followers' foci towards the role modelling or teaching of these practices. In some instances, this role modelling may reveal the backstage of keeping up with appearances. For instance, through the instruments of intimacy and girltalk (Abidin 2015), followers who may not be able to afford extravagant luxuries are at least able to give the 'appearance' of

middle-class consumption through Influencers' role modelling practices. Some Influencers may share the knowledge of where to purchase imitation branded goods, or enjoy similar but slightly inferior beauty and care services at a discounted price. This openness to sharing 'beauty secrets' and 'bargain buys' steers envious followers towards appreciation and support for the Influencer.

Influencers expressing the trope of the Dear also encourage homosocial desire by obliging followers' requests. In doing so, they draw the affection of followers and become cherished as a valued member of a community. It is not always immediately clear if the Influencer is truly inconvenienced in accommodating her followers, or merely staging an imagined 'sacrifice' to inflate the value of her gift. However, the focus is the Influencer's astute ability to overstate her 'giving in' to followers in order to reaffirm their upper hand in the relationship and solicit their approval. For example, although she spent months publicizing 'couple' photographs depicting her and her (then) new partner on dates, Charmaine did not explicitly share details on how her relationship started. She would divulge a few facts every few blogposts and Instagram posts, as if hesitant to be intimate about her bliss; on a practical level, however, such snippets were a 'click bait' (Blom and Hansen 2015) strategy used in the Influencer industry as teasers to encourage followers to keep reading. Charmaine says she was 'not ready' to talk about her relationship, but decided to 'give in' after 'many requests' accumulated from followers over the month. She briefly mentions having to overcome previous 'bad experiences' in order to produce her post, signposting some level of sacrifice she is making so her followers will be 'happy'.

Another way for an Influencer to emphasize the importance of her followers is by highlighting her obvious dependence on them for maintaining her persona and livelihood. She thanks them for reading her blog and following her on social media, for fulfilling her self-actualization needs through supportive encouragement and praise, and for validating her performance through 'liking' her posts. Charmaine tends to adopt a humble tone towards her followers to show her appreciation. She thanks them for 'keeping [her] going' and 'supporting her' in her career. She says she 'wouldn't be here without you guys', referring to the extent of her success in the Influencer industry, and also talks about how blogging and being an Influencer has 'changed her life'. Similar to the way in which she recounts her excessive dependence on her romantic partner, she adopts a meek and subservient vocabulary to underscore her relative powerlessness if not for the engagement of her followers.

Through role modelling scripts of femininity and being the arbiter of gender performance knowledge for her followers, the Dear insidiously becomes capable of holding power over her followers (Ngai 2012: 64). This is despite her apparent reliance on followers for her livelihood. The Dear easily commands the attention and curiosity of followers when she chooses to withhold or extend much sought-after private knowledge. Many flaunt themselves as being gatekeepers of information when they employ teasers, reveal partial and incomplete information, or choose to divulge tips only to an exclusive segment of their audience. In the long run, her 'appeal of powerlessness' (Ngai 2012: 59), coupled to an orchestrated dependence on her followers' validation and support, subtly disguises the Dear's ability to influence and manipulate her audience.

(EN)GENDERING CUTENESS ON THE SINGAPOREAN WEB

The Doll, the Darling and the Dear are three variants of a cute femininity that some Influencers enact in their commercial personae. Through the narrative accounts and visual depictions published by Charmaine, Denise and Penelope, this article has revealed and analysed some strategies Influencers employ in order to successfully perform these cute femininities, in an attempt to better their chances in the dating market (Ouellette and Hay 2008: 119; Peiss 1996) through highly feminized (Basnyat and Chang 2014), domestic (Pugsley 2007) and sexual scripts (Kim and Ward 2004).

The Doll attempts to solicit affection through the somatic schema of Lorenz's Kindchenschema through cosmetic and apparel selections, and carefully staged language. However, this angelic innocence and appeal is ironically used to incite a sensual desirability found in the Doll's childlike appearance. She is in fact a grown, mature adult playing the role of an infantile child in order to play up her delicateness. The Darling attempts to solicit protection through visual cues pointing to her relative smallness, as well as her inclination to be pampered, and her propensity to be exploited by others. However, the enactment of her cuteness is necessarily maintained by the liminality she occupies between demanding attention and playing the victim. The Dear attempts to solicit favour through an extravagant high-maintenance consumption of goods and services for the purposes of self-care and preservation, and through demonstrating a complaisant nature dedicated to eagerly fulfilling obligations. However, her ostensible sacrifice and powerlessness becomes a clever guise for the bargaining power and capacity to manipulate that she insidiously exercises over followers.

Drawing from the cultural milieu of East Asian cute culture, specifically that of Japanese *kawaii*, Korean *aegyo* and Taiwanese and mainland Chinese *saijao*, Singaporean Influencers have constructed a pastiche of cute femininities typified by a coherence of infantilization, self-diminution and submission, in order to solicit favour and affect from heterosexual male partners and homosocial female followers through sensuality, romantic docility and middle-class desirability. Be it the Doll, the Darling or the Dear, performing cuteness has become an explicitly feminine strategy that Influencers in order to secure different gains. First, they deploy cuteness in a display of agency that allows these Influencers to manipulate and redirect sustained attention to themselves, thus increasing their readership and following, which in turn increases their advertising revenue. Second, their performances mask these women's counter-hegemonic inversion of the gender hierarchy, since male partners are featured as 'props' or 'arm candy' to play into their 'cute' persona. Third, their performances obscure the power hierarchy between Influencer and follower by shifting the focus from the exchange of commercial services to endearing infantilism. As a performance strategy, cuteness allows Influencers to reinforce stereotypical power relations that position them as non-threatening and submissive, when they are in fact quietly subverting these hierarchies for personal gain as a form of soft power.

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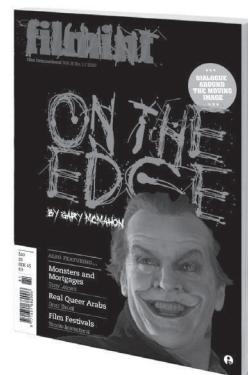
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Rejecting the dichotomies of 'high' and 'low' cinema, *Film International* embraces debate on how film interacts with the broader culture, history and economy of society. This magazine aims to encourage critical study and public discussion of the role of moving images in our society, bridging the gap between academics and cineastes.

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Film International welcomes contributions that deal with any aspect of international film culture and moving images. In addition *FINT* welcomes reportage and investigative journalism, interviews, festival reports, and reviews of recent films, books and DVD releases. Our website also publishes shorter comments, debate articles and alternative reviews.



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A lovable metaphor: On the affect, language and design of ‘cute’

ABSTRACT

Approaching the cute object as a metaphor for the lovable, this article provides a survey of the different approaches to the study of cuteness and uses their intersections to map out a three-domain approach that incorporates the dimensions of affect, language and design. When considered in isolation, these domains highlight specific facets of cuteness, but their intersection underscores an important etymological tension that continuously transforms the metaphors of cuteness. These changes do not compromise the primary meaning of cuteness, but lead to a reinvention of the lovable, whereby the cute object continues to represent an abstraction of a particularly affectionate connection to the other. Therefore, the arguments presented will demonstrate that the notion of cuteness emerges through a particular etymological tension embedded in the idea of ‘cuteness’ that reifies aesthetic concepts through the relationship between the individual’s affective experience and the operation of language through culture.

KEYWORDS

aesthetics
affect
character design
cuteness
language
metaphor

INTRODUCTION

What makes a thing cute? The question suggests that cuteness is a quality that may be defined and attributed by one person, then communicated to another. This function of naming links cuteness to relationships, a point closely aligned

1. The use of 'affect' is derived from the ideas of the Dutch philosopher Benedict Spinoza, who first conceptualized affect (Latin *affectus*), as a state of the body by which its capacity to act is diminished or enhanced (2001: 98). Affect is traditionally applied in the context of emotion, but it more specifically refers to a relationship or action between bodies, insofar as one body can be affected by another. As taught by Spinoza, a body would project similar states on an external body that is like it (2001: 118). Given that the subject is likewise capable of projecting certain 'states of mind' or personalities onto an object, this concept of affect will be useful in resolving the verisimilitude of cute objects.

with the primary dictionary definition of 'cute', which is a 'person or thing that is attractive in a pretty or endearing way' (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2015). Cuteness is affective because it allows the subject to relate to and be positively affected by the object.¹ In another sense, cuteness is an outcome of sensory perception: an adjective one uses in order to express a sentiment felt for an intimate other. For example, teddy bears are endearing because they have an appearance that evokes sentiments of tenderness and affection. They are made lovable not because of their utility, but for the fact that they elicit a willingness on our part to be close to them.

This particular affection informs the premise behind all objects that may be called cute. It also denotes a connection between subject and object that, in my view, introduces two crucial ambiguities regarding cuteness. First, the aesthetic of cuteness may be applied in a non-anthropocentric space. That is, the objects of affection need not be human, but may be anything different from the subject, such as animals or other non-living things. In fact, difference is arguably an important basis for affection, since identical bodies do not affect but are rather, in phenomenological terms, one and the same. Therefore, cuteness affects because of its difference to the subject, a difference which, as teddy bears attest, may be artificially brought forth with the intention of eliciting positive sentiments.

Second, this connection to the other also situates cuteness within a consensus. Cuteness is not merely a matter of individual taste, but rather is comprised of particular features: rudimentary criteria with a certain degree of flexibility. Therefore, even as interpretations of cuteness depend on personal as well as cultural nuances, its prevalent characteristics may still be identified. These include, but are not restricted to: rounded physical features; infantilized or child-like body structures; and behaviours that convey a sense of simplicity, weakness and clumsiness (Lorenz [1950] 1971: 154). Considered together, these characteristics describe a non-threatening object that is in need of the subject's care and attention. From teddy bears to video game characters, cute objects involve a stylization denoting a lovable personality.

Concerning this stylization, however, it is significant that a cute object often appears as a caricature of the human body rather than a direct replica of its biological form. Due to its apparent simplicity and lack of detail, the design of a cute object is in effect a comical deformity brought about through an augmentation that suggests 'greater malleability and thus a greater capacity for being handled' (Ngai 2005: 816). Additionally, common negative anatomical features such as excremental organs are also omitted, giving the object a smooth, sanitized exterior. Hence, cuteness simultaneously humanizes both the artificial and the non-human, while selectively augmenting and 'deforming' the biological human. If the cute object encourages intimacy, this transmission of affect also occurs within a controlled distance, meaning that the object not only lacks properties that are repulsive, but is also made to seem dependent on the subject's care. In other words, cuteness simulates positive social cues that are fundamentally concerned with the 'manipulation of the human tendency to anthropomorphise' (Black 2008: 39).

With these issues in mind, this article proposes that the aesthetic of cuteness may be studied along three distinct, yet intersecting domains (Figure 1). First is the affect that proceeds from the difference embodied by the cute object. Traditionally used in the context of emotion, the term 'affect' may also refer to a relationship between bodies, insofar as one body may be affected by and transformed by another. On this basis, a subject would be able to project

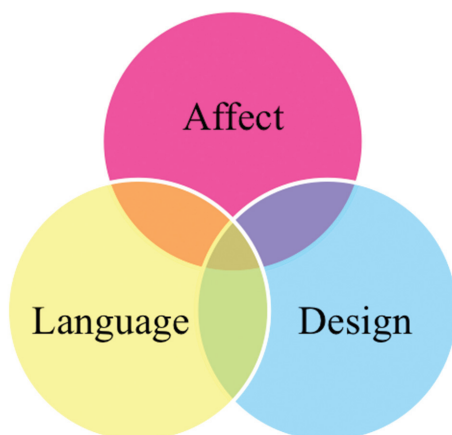


Figure 1: A three-domain approach to cuteness.

affect onto objects that are similar to those which had affected the subject before. Hence, when one claims that the experience of cuteness is an anthropomorphic gesture, it is assumed that subjects, in varying degrees, project certain 'states of mind' or personalities onto artificial and/or non-human objects. To call a thing cute, in other words, is to allude to an approachable, affectionate other.

Second there is the language of cuteness, comprised of features standardized into templates or styles that communicate the lovable. For example, illustrators for Japanese comics or manga often employ a relatively homogenous repertoire of features to design their characters. These characters, it should be noted, are less an expression of individual creativity than a representation of a particular style with an intrinsic visual vocabulary. A lovable character or product in this sense is not assessed for its originality, but for its conformity to a particular structure. This structure, I contend, reifies the aesthetic as a language, allowing it to be used as a medium of communication.

The third domain is the design/de-sign of cuteness. This encompasses the arrangement of the cute object's features and the potential of these arrangements to bring about alternative perspectives and images of cuteness. Besides posing a challenge to the systematization of cuteness, I posit that the arrangement of features is transformative, insofar as these features may be regarded as mobile signifiers that serve to repeat, and in turn differentiate, prior expressions of cuteness. Contrary to the aims of standardization, the composition of a cute object is not an immutable process, but to a large extent relies on contested spaces where interactions between, for example, subcultural and mainstream trends occur. These interactions are a primary factor in accounting for the fluidity of cuteness in mass culture, but one must bear in mind that 'novel' iterations of cuteness are only produced and consumed as outcomes of a systematized affection.

Separately considered, these three domains prove useful for understanding how cuteness may be regarded as an aesthetic principle, but I also argue that the intersection of these domains denotes an etymological tension that gives a cohesive account of the changes in the metaphors of cuteness. Such changes do not in the least negate the primary meaning of cuteness; rather, they bring about a reinvention of the lovable, whereby the cute object continues

to represent an abstraction of a particularly affectionate connection to the other. Hence, I advance the notion that the etymological tension embedded in the idea of ‘cuteness’ is a stark symptom of the subjective turn in the language of aesthetic concepts, insofar as these concepts are not given absolute definitions, but are reified through the relationship between the individual’s affective experience and the language of culture.

AFFECTIVE ANTHROPOMORPHISM

Before the domain of affect may be properly contextualized within the aesthetic of cuteness, some clarification on the relationship between cuteness and the subject’s tendency to anthropomorphize is necessary. One may take for granted that ‘cuteness’ is synonymous with the lovable, but to claim that such a stance involves a form of humanization entails a conceptual leap. Though not all cute objects are humanized, they are all perceived as intimate others that the subject wishes to hold close. This is because the underlying attraction of cuteness is not predicated on the sublime, but rather on sentiments like tenderness and affection.

For example, cute typography or icons may not be humanized, but they are still used to embellish objects that have a connection to other cute images such as cartoons and infants. Thus the cute aesthetic complements rather than precludes an anthropomorphic stance, which is to also claim that cuteness functions as a trigger point for social engagement. This is an important argument, for instead of narrowly defining cuteness as set of physical and behavioural characteristics that stimulate an instinct for parental care (Lorenz [1950] 1971: 154–55), its intrinsic compatibility with anthropomorphism allows us to broadly consider cuteness as a primer for sociality.

Furthermore, this social connection derived from cuteness is closely aligned with intentionality, whereby humans attempt to ‘understand the behaviour of other agents in terms of unseen mental properties’ (Sherman and Haidt 2011: 246). Besides actively making inferences about the thoughts and actions of others, this mode of perception also refers to experiences in which an object is regarded *as if* it has a conscious mind. As such, the social value of the cute aesthetic accrues when the opacity of the object is reduced to a level where one experiences an interactive moment with a humanized other.

For an elaboration on the relationship between cuteness and anthropomorphism, consider the iconic Hello Kitty from Sanrio. On the surface, she appears plain, simple and diminutive. Relative to a cat’s anatomy her body is visibly deformed, but she has no sudden protuberances and her contours display smooth, gradual variation. Hello Kitty is certainly not an ideal image according to standards of proportion, yet this very combination of simplicity and disproportion contributes towards her cuteness, allowing her to be easily anthropomorphized in turn.

Hello Kitty is not drawn or animated as a real cat. Rather, her anthropomorphic attraction lies in her simulation of human behaviour. She walks on two legs, wears clothing and interacts with her friends in the most ‘human’ of ways. In this sense, Hello Kitty’s cat-like form becomes a metaphor for the human rather than the animal. According to a Sanrio spokesperson, Hello Kitty is in fact a girl: ‘a personification done in the motif of a cat’ (Hongo 2014). It is not surprising that people who are affected by and subsequently driven to consume Hello Kitty merchandise do not treat her as an indifferent creature, but actively associate her with sentiments of intimacy, familiarity and friendship.

To recapitulate, the difference (i.e. artificiality) of the cute object is key to enabling the transfer of affect, while anthropomorphism is a means to humanize and make sense of such a difference. This humanization, I argue, is likewise framed as the transformation of a non-human object into a personalized other via metaphor. Furthermore, if cuteness communicates a sense of endearment, then it is crucial to ask if this form of endearment may be construed as a language, especially with respect to the ways in which the relevant features are systematized and configured to reproduce similar affections. This linguistic turn departs from the simplistic definition of cuteness as merely offering a stimulus for human caregiving, instead moving towards a consideration of cuteness as a relational quality that may be tied to commercial interests. I do not deny the claim that cuteness triggers caretaking behaviour. However, bringing the relational quality of cuteness to the forefront opens the aesthetic to a dynamic territory of socialization: albeit one that is increasingly regulated according to commercial concerns that further rationalize the aesthetic into more stable systems.

LANGUAGES AND SYSTEMS OF CUTENESS

While anthropomorphizing an inanimate object is a subjective experience, cuteness as a relational system depends upon the object communicating a comprehensible idea to another person. Cuteness denotes a communicable idea that expresses the lovable by and within certain groups of people. If cuteness were a purely individual experience, then the word 'cute' used on its own would not make sense to anyone, since no one other than the individual concerned would understand. In order for cuteness to be formalized as an aesthetic category, one must be aware of the processes that not only transform, but also legitimize the features that make up cuteness. Even though there is always a different way of representing 'cute', these differences (for the most part) are predicated on the arrangement of certain essential features in the structure of the aesthetic.

Simplicity is a key feature of cuteness. Returning to the example of Hello Kitty, the simplicity of her design enhances her multivocality, insofar as a lack of detail affords users and consumers the space to project their own feelings and desires onto Hello Kitty's image. As Brian McVeigh points out, it is precisely this simplicity, or plainness, in Hello Kitty that 'characterises her as a cryptic symbol waiting to be interpreted and filled with meanings' (2000: 234). McVeigh adds that the projectability of cuteness resonates with individuality, given that consumers purchase different iterations of Hello Kitty as a form of self-expression (2000: 234). Self-expression also constitutes the personalized, anthropomorphic response users display whenever they are interacting with cute objects, as anthropomorphism is a means for the subject to direct his or her own interpretations towards the object itself. This space for multiple interpretations is also the basis for Hello Kitty's polysemy, whereby her image points to a spectrum of meanings.

Hello Kitty's iconic appearance collapses multiple meanings within a single image or overarching theme. In other words, Hello Kitty distils relevant ideas and features into an iconic object in order to be easily understood and consumed by her audience. It should also be noted that commercial interests are often embedded in the design and development of these major themes, as producers may profit by marketing an array of products centred on a single idea. The diversity of Hello Kitty merchandise not only highlights the obvious

advantages of such commercialization, but also reveals the 'bourgeoisie obsession with rationalisation and order' (McVeigh 2000: 229). This obsession points to broader issues regarding the systematized relationship between mass culture and aesthetics, as the legibility of Hello Kitty's image entails extensive predetermination and control. That is, the reductive iconic appearance of characters such as Hello Kitty constitutes a formalization that tends to exclude other possibilities of the lovable.

To formalize and attempt to define what cuteness should and should not be is but one aspect of rendering it as a language, but language inevitably compromises on the possibilities of the aesthetic itself. This is because the language of cuteness easily becomes predetermined as it is co-opted by the imperatives of consumerist logic whereby 'imagination is replaced by a mechanically relentless control mechanism' that determines and hence normalizes one version of reality over others (Adorno 2001: 64). Besides accentuating and reproducing an idea of the lovable, the iconic simplicity of cuteness also conceals opposing, or alternative ideas that may possibly redefine established assumptions of cuteness.

Insofar as cute objects are mechanically reproducible, cuteness operates as a simulation, where copies lacking an original are produced and consumed. This is evident in the proliferation of cute characters in both Japan and the West. Besides the ubiquitous Hello Kitty, other cute characters like Miffy (a female rabbit illustrated by Dick Bruna) also adopt a similar visual vocabulary that is compatible with the logic of affective consumerism.

One case illustrating how the language of cuteness systematically conditions affection involves the specific methodology employed in the creation of interactive characters by animation studios. Although storylines are essential to the development of such characters, a consensus on value that translates into an 'operating system' for the characters, premises and world-settings is crucial for market success as well (Condry 2009: 145). Building such a personality within a given cultural backdrop is important for producers because characters like Miffy and Hello Kitty may sustain consumer engagement and indirectly open up more merchandising opportunities.

The engagement afforded by the production of an animated character is useful to characterize the relationship between consumers and brands precisely because such relationships 'put to work the capacity of consumers to produce a common social world through autonomous processes of communication and interaction' (Condry 2009: 148). Building social worlds from common cues drawn from affection, brands and characters reinforce the positive sentiments that consumers develop towards these things. Simply put, consumers are less likely to purchase character goods for their functionality than for the idea behind them, which is made more pleasing and recognizable due to its cuteness. In this sense, cuteness is important for the operating system of character design because its augmented physical features and sociable character traits are a standardization of the lovable that socializes the subject into the predetermined 'world' or space inhabited by the character.

By elaborating on the system behind cute design, I argue that the language of cuteness is less an original creation than a stylistic device with an intrinsic vocabulary, which is to say that cuteness does not lend itself to the work of a single creator, but is an open-source aesthetic made accessible within a commercial space. Indeed, this systematization of cuteness means that for a character to sell well, character designers often have to comply with the rules of a formalized structure to the point of bypassing their own creative

interests. This standardization is fully complicit with the logic of mass culture, for instead of attending to the creative impulse, it 'simply identifies with the curse of predetermination and joyfully fulfils it' (Adorno 2001: 72). Therefore, the drawback of the language of cuteness is that it underscores a version of the lovable that is often rationalized according to commercial imperatives, in which consumers' love for an object is equated with the quantity of products sold in the market.

Because it is both culturally and mechanically reproducible, cuteness may also be a form of *kitsch*. For Jean Baudrillard, kitsch has the potential for ubiquity, but it is also artificial, 'a simulation, a copy, an imitation, a stereotype' (1998: 110). On account of its visual and affective appeal, cuteness is a locus for intimacy, care and affection. Cute characters, insofar as they are positively humanized, are considered cute because they *refer* to and repeat a prior human experience, but as Baudrillard remarks:

To the aesthetics of beauty and originality, kitsch opposes its *aesthetics of simulation*: it everywhere reproduces objects smaller or larger than life; it imitates materials (in plaster, plastic etc.); it apes forms or combines discordantly; it repeats without having been part of the experience [...].
(1998: 111, original emphasis)

Applying Baudrillard's thesis to the aesthetic of cuteness, it is clear the characteristics of cuteness function as imitations of forms, meaning that cuteness is an abstraction that was never part of an original thing or experience in the first place. Rather, cuteness entails a calculated embellishment of the commodity in the context – and interest – of commercialization. One may conclude that cuteness is merely a label identifying attributes arbitrarily put together, thus paradoxically opening up a space where design may both repeat and differentiate representations of cuteness. It is this paradox that allows me to relocate my argument within the etymological tension of cuteness. This tension reveals that the systems that set out to predetermine cuteness are not immutable, but rather are still susceptible to design-based differences.

BETWEEN DESIGN AND DE-SIGN

I have established that cute objects share common features in varying degrees. These features do not independently denote cuteness, but rather have to be arranged in a particular fashion to communicate the lovable. As such, it follows that the difference between one cute object and another involves the design or arrangement of the parts that make up the whole. This arrangement opens up a space for what I refer to as the 'de-signing' of cuteness, which pertains to the deconstruction of any established system of reference, while incorporating attempts to remix alternative sensibilities with other more systematized models.

How may the arrangement of cute characteristics or features be linked to the production of novel, different characters? Since cuteness is merely an abstract process in which signs are repeatedly reiterated, I contend that the excess that results from this process may also provide an avenue of possibilities for a fascination with the new, whereupon the need for novelty is driven by the ludic. The ludic in this sense, 'consists of a play with combinations, a combinatorial modulation: a play on the technical variants or potentialities of the object – in innovation a playing with the rules of play' (Baudrillard 1998: 114).

2. The evolution of cute culture in Japan is significantly more complex than what is described in this article. The aesthetic has experienced a shift from a subcultural expression to a highly commercialized style often used to market Japanese cultural products, but comparisons between mainstream and alternative versions of cuteness show that the aesthetic of cute continues to be a product of contested spaces.

The design of commercial cute objects is manipulated so that certain forms and sensations are reproduced endlessly in order to produce and sustain the fascination of the consumer. Within this context, cute design refers to the recombination and arrangement of features that are arbitrarily categorized as lovable. I use the term 'arbitrarily' to stress that novel designs are not an outcome of an absolute alignment with a particular system of cuteness, but are largely synthesized in a ludic fashion, in which features outside convention may both disrupt and be subsumed within established systems.

At the same time, however, there is also appropriation – even perversion – in more fluid subcultural contexts, where cute expressions first assume the form of subversion or politicized self-expression. The development of cute culture in Japan, for example, offers extensively documented insights into the complexities of this aesthetic. According to Sharon Kinsella, cute (*kawaii*) culture first emerged as a means for youths to emancipate themselves from adult social relations. Cute culture, Kinsella notes, could not be mainstreamed because it was an idealization of childhood with minimal references to the realities of Japanese society (1995: 245).

Together with the popularity of childish fashion in the early 1970s, Kinsella points out that a cute style of handwriting was also common among Japanese youth at that time. Mixing stylized, rounded Japanese characters with English and other iconic symbols like hearts and stars, cute handwriting was written horizontally as a stark and arguably subversive contrast to the traditionally vertical Japanese script (1995: 222). Without delving too much into the socio-historical circumstances of early post-war Japan, it is notable that this cute typography expressed both an idealization of youth and an opposition to the expectations of adulthood.

Furthermore, the reception of this particular design object arguably marked a shift from individual, subjective expression to an alternative culture that challenged social expectations of adulthood. As Kinsella observes, cute handwriting was not a developmental disability, but a deliberate demonstration of the influence of youth culture. Her observation suggests that these early applications of cute design were in fact innovative disruptions of more traditional or 'adult' forms of decorum (1995: 224).

Juxtaposing the emergence of cuteness as counter-cultural expression with the standardization of cuteness via commercialization reveals fluid spaces within this apparently systematized structure where new features are able to challenge and transform the images that represent cuteness. Moreover, following Kinsella's analysis that cuteness may be derived from rifts in ostensibly monolithic social structures, the claim that this aesthetic retains a subversive potential proves tenable.² This paradoxical state implies that on one hand, the prevalence of a given repertoire of features establishes cuteness as a stylistic device with an intrinsic vocabulary; and on the other hand, that the structure of cuteness remains open to representations outside the purview of established categories. While affect does interface with the 'language' of cuteness, it should be remembered that the synthesis of images is an intervention of design, and it is by taking the domain of design into consideration that such contested spaces (i.e. standardization vs subversion/cute vs anti-cute) within the etymological tension of cuteness become visible.

Comparisons between warped or anti-cute characters and the more mainstreamed versions of cute merchandise in mass culture show how these contested spaces contain possibilities for innovation. Moving away from the relative dominant forms of cuteness, the characters from *Kobito Dukan* or

the Encyclopaedia of Dwarves (Figure 2) are an example of how objects may express certain conventions of cuteness even as they are imbued with alternative sensibilities. On the one hand Kobito Dukan characters have small, deformed body structures like Hello Kitty, yet on the other their faces are contorted and wrinkled. At first glance, the grotesque expressions of these characters seem to evoke sentiments that contradict the positive affect common to other, conventionally cute characters, but these objects – by being loved for their ugliness or lack of beauty – represent a play of features that may subvert, yet broaden the denotational semantics of cuteness.

On the surface, the character designs in Kobito Dukan seem to enact a contradiction, for how is a wrinkled, contorted character cute, when such characteristics typically invoke disgust and refer to the abject? The answer lies in the Gestalt of these characters formed by the arrangement and remixing of cute and anti-cute features. As discussed earlier, the affect of cuteness is linked to an anthropomorphic gesture; however, I also contend that anthropomorphism is not solely a process of affectionate humanization where the object is treated as having intentions and feelings, but also a form of identification, in which it is reminiscent of the subject's disposition. In the case of Kobito Dukan, the characters' overall design, while in some senses grotesque, also conveys both satire and a compromised self-worth that affords the subject to show affection to them.

NHK's mascot Domo-kun (Figure 3) is another anti-cute modification that has attained a considerable level of popular recognition, both in Japan and abroad. Although Domo-kun has a small rectangular body with rounded edges, it does not exactly look like an amiable creature: its dark brown exterior and saw-toothed mouth make it more menacing than the average cute character. There is however, a distinctly parodical edge to its appearance, for Domo-kun's mouth may also be read as expressing a loud greeting, while the saw-like teeth are in fact, rounded at the ends.

Hence, this apposition of aggression with cuteness points to an 'exaggerated power difference' that positions the subject as one who excessively imposes the affection of cuteness onto a disempowered object that should but *cannot* retaliate (Ngai 2005: 828). In other words, Domo-kun not only 'cutifies' aggression, but points to an aphaeretic tension within the word cute. For while words like 'alone' or 'raccoon' do not lose their meanings when shortened to



Figure 2: Some characters in Kobito Dukan (Photograph by Wiebke Liwak).
Reproduced with permission.



Figure 3: Domo-kun (Photograph by Vinh Le, vinhdesigns.com). Reproduced with permission.

'lone' or 'coon', 'cute' as a derivative of 'acute' experiences a dialectical reversal – that which was sharp, alert and quick is now rendered as small, passive and disempowered. Thus the arrangement of cute and anti-cute features in these characters not only signifies a lack of agency, but also encodes the drastically uneven distribution of power between subject and cute object.

Despite the fact that both the characters of Kobito Dukan and Domo-kun include features that put off, rather than encourage the subject to be positively predisposed to the object, this dissonance hardly makes them less lovable or unpopular. On the contrary, these more enigmatic objects join the ranks of other grotesquely cute commercial successes that are deemed to be no less cute by those who consume them. So as much as I concede that this assimilation of anti-cute into cute undercuts and depoliticizes the resistance of the former, this play of categories within the domain of design is noteworthy for a couple of reasons. First, it corroborates the fluidity of cuteness by introducing different features and second, it constitutes a reinvigoration of cuteness that again is tied to the etymological tension within the concept that is responsible for repeating, as well as differentiating, representations of cuteness.

METAPHORICAL TRANSFORMATIONS

How is this etymological tension connected to the incorporation of the anti-cute into the cute? To review the premises established thus far: first, the experience of cuteness entails an affect aimed towards difference; second, cuteness may be construed as a language due to the repetition of a given repertoire of features; and third, this structure is amenable to changes based on the arrangement of features via design.

Although the intersection of these three domains of affect, language and design helps to systematize the fluidity of cuteness, it fails to spell out the precise link between cuteness and the other. Hence, I argue that this intersection of domains comprises an etymological tension that presupposes a *lovable* connection between subject and object, as interpreted through the aesthetic

of cuteness. But before we may arrive at a more cohesive framework for this connection, we must first attend to the communication of the lovable in the representations – or more specifically, metaphors – of cuteness.

Any metaphor of cuteness is first and foremost, a metaphor for the lovable. Metaphor is defined as the giving to a thing a 'name that belongs to something else', and begins with an 'improper' meaning, which means that it is the site where two seemingly incongruent signs are positioned together to represent what may be read as a common signified (Harries 1978: 74). In naming, or arguably making a thing cute, we are in effect juxtaposing different entities (i.e. a lovable other with another object) with the aim of affecting the meaning-making sensibilities of the subject.

In his study of metaphor, Paul Ricoeur draws attention to a few qualities that are essential to an account of the changing representations of cuteness. It should be noted that Ricoeur is referring to literary works, but I posit that these same textual properties are no less applicable to the study of cuteness. In other words, I argue that any cute object may be read and studied like a text, insofar as it affects, or communicates a particular sentiment between subject and object.

First, metaphor – unlike the systematization in language – is not a direct predetermination, but has an 'instantaneous existence' (Ricoeur 1974: 97). In the case of cute objects, this means they are only perceived as lovable *after* the fact of perception. Second, metaphor involves a pair of contrasting traits between a 'pole of singular identification' such as a thing or a person and 'pole of general predication' such as a property, relation or aesthetic attribute (Ricoeur 1974: 97). Cuteness, for example, links together a humanized, lovable other with another object as a point of identification. In other words, when we encounter and interpret a character like Hello Kitty, we are in effect, witnessing an interpolation of the image of a cat onto a frame of reference that is defined, in human terms, as cute.

And third, metaphor implies the polarity of sense and reference, which Ricoeur distinguishes as what is said (sense) and the *reference* to what is said (1974: 94). Cute objects, regardless of their immediacy, are apprehended in reference to the lovable, but the matter is made more complex when certain characteristics incompatible with cuteness seem to make an identical reference to the lovable. For example, since ugliness and aggression are initially incompatible or antithetical to cuteness, it is possible for an object like Domo-kun to be perceived as a logical absurdity. Ricoeur, however, clarifies this term as such:

Logical absurdity creates a situation in which we have the choice between either preserving the literal sense of both the subject and the modifier and concluding to the meaningless of the whole sentence – or attributing a new meaning to the modifiers such as the whole sentence makes sense.

(1974: 102)

When cute and anti-cute objects are perceived as meaningful, anthropomorphized objects by those who consume them, these objects no longer constitute a binary opposition. The system in the language of cuteness is therefore not a closed one, but keeps itself open to innovations that may lead to new expressions of cuteness. However, this process from innovation to standardization is far from straightforward, given the plausibility of logical absurdity.

That is to say, an idea of cuteness may either cause one to conclude that the object is meaningless, or conceive of the object as a thing to be loved.

To reiterate, the relative consistency of the vocabulary of cuteness makes it a legible social construct that controls and predetermines the lovable; yet such machinery, however rigorous and predictive, relies on innovative designs that are in part, subjectively conceived. Hence, changes in the metaphors of cuteness may be analysed at the intersection of affect, language and design, but underlying these domains is an ellipsis of the lovable that places them in an interminable tension.

CONCLUSION: THE QUESTION OF THE LOVABLE

Affect is the 'engine' that repeats and differentiates the aesthetic of cuteness. Cuteness precisely denotes the lovable, but what may be loved involves an affective response that challenges and reinvents its metaphors. As such, cuteness does not merely communicate the lovable; it *animates* it to the extent that the subject is given an unambiguous summons to show affection to the object. Hence, there is effectively a simulation of love within the experience of cuteness, though there is no absolute definition concerning what may or may not be loved.

Indeed, an etymological tension not only underscores the artificiality of cuteness, but also poses a distinct challenge to the primacy of major aesthetic concepts, for does not the appreciation of the lovable undermine one's engagement with the sublime? In studying cuteness, we realize that cute objects are not rationalized or deemed lofty and unapproachable, but are presented as affectionate and in need of intimacy. As such, cuteness allows us to observe how affect, language and design are integrated to represent and transform the lovable across various systems and objects.

To conclude, the social reality of the lovable is represented in part through the structure of cuteness. Yet, the prevalence of a given set of features does not indicate an absolute definition of the lovable that applies universally since cuteness is a limited medium of communication that renders any object as a thing that may be loved. Of course, it remains to be seen if the experience of cuteness is a transformative precursor or a pre-determined condition of the lovers' discourse; but as the change in metaphors aptly demonstrates, that which is made 'cute', will by any other name be attractive and intimate.

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Kyaraben (character bento): The cutesification of Japanese food in and beyond the lunchbox

ABSTRACT

The recent boom in cute characters (kyara) has permeated Japanese popular aesthetics to the extent that character-shaped foods have displaced the former emphasis on recreating natural objects in bento (packed lunches) created for preschoolers. Prior to this development, Anne Allison described bento as an 'ideological state apparatus'. Under this rubric, learning to make a proper bento was a part of training women to be proper mothers of preschoolers, just as eating it quickly and completely helped train the children as model citizens. Contemporary mothers of small children, having been reared on Hello Kitty and her ilk, are now no longer simply the targets of character merchandizing, but the promulgators. Performing the domestic and educational rituals of kyaraben encourages women's and children's production and consumption of 'character culture'.

KEYWORDS

cute
characters
mascots
Japan
gender
cuisine
kawaii
bento

INTRODUCTION

A good Japanese mother makes her child a good bento (Japanese box lunch). A good bento contains a variety of foods, often reshaped to resemble natural

1. Having reared two non-Japanese children partly in Japan over the last twenty years, I see bento-making as part of an intertwined set of practices operating beyond the institution of school per se that not only socializes mothers and children but normalize the mother as one whose primary orientation is towards her children and domestic life.

objects (e.g., an apple slice cut to resemble a rabbit). However, the permeation of contemporary popular Japanese aesthetics by cute anthropomorphized characters (kyara) nowadays displaces the traditional re-creation of natural objects in bento. This article traces that evolutionary path.

Anne Allison made bento using cookbooks from 1981 and 1987 while her young son attended preschool as she conducted anthropological research in Japan. She described bento as an 'ideological state apparatus', training mothers of preschoolers, and communicatively, through its consumption, training their children as model citizens (Allison 1996).¹ The trend towards increased cuteness in preschoolers' bento and especially the rise of *kyaraben* 'character bento' emerging since then involves homage to the marketplace as well. This echoes the long-term growth trend of *kyara* popularity in Japan, documented by Aihara (2007) as well as Inuyama and Sugimoto (2012) and discussed mostly in an international context by Tobin (ed., 2004) for *Pokemon* and by Yano (2013) for *Hello Kitty*. Some contemporary mothers of small children, having been reared on *Hello Kitty* and her ilk, are no longer simply the targets of character merchandizing, but the promulgators. This trend can be tracked by observing the rise in *kyara*-like foods in bento recipe books, in the context of rising *kyara* popularity overall, including mascots that represent particular Japanese localities such as prefectures, or towns, known as *yuru kyara* or *gotōchi kyara* (Occhi 2012). Processed foods are easily moulded in the *kyaraben* art form, leading to changes in the foodstuffs used in lunchboxes. *Kyaraben* thus reproduces some of the established communicative, gendered rituals of good motherhood while shifting the aesthetic away from a focus on nutrition, instead tying parents and children to contemporary icons of soft power.

Though we currently see critiques and even backlash against *kyaraben*, conversely, its aesthetic has spread into the preparation of foodstuffs more generally, and provides pleasure for its makers and consumers. This article will focus on recent changes in bento aesthetics and their contents, especially bento created for consumption by preschool children. Trends in production of cutely shaped foods for general consumption will also be discussed. I have employed data from used cookbooks as well as popular women's magazines purchased in Miyazaki, Japan, to track these trends. I have also analysed a selection of other popular media that include bento as a theme. The word 'cute' in this article is a placeholder for the Japanese term *kawaii*, whose entailments differ from the English term. Meaning 'able to be loved', *kawaii* invokes the Japanese sense of *ai*, which includes nurturance (influenced by Buddhism), and not the broader English category of 'love' (Shibamoto Smith 1999; Occhi 2014b).

THE BENTO AESTHETIC

Bento, the focus of this study, is a Japanese box lunch, portable and easily consumed. Given what the food historian Katarzyna Cwiartka (2008: 417) calls the Japanese 'aesthetic preoccupation' regarding its cuisine generally, convenience is not bento's only feature. Bento is inherently intended to be visually appealing. Even the simplest box of rice with pickled plum is arranged to resemble the national flag and is named after it: the *hinomaru bento*. A typical bento is much more elaborate, nestling several side dishes of different colours, tastes and means of preparation in the box, either atop or alongside the rice. In a memorable essay on non-character bento, a Japanese student

once wrote 'Bento is an amusement park', expanding this metaphor to discuss the variety of tastes and colours they enjoyed as well as the pleasure of receiving such a meal.

Bento is a form of communication, both directly from the maker to the consumer, and inferred via the witnessing of fellow lunchmates. A surprise gift of handmade bento can be construed as a romantic come-on. The so-called *aisai bento* (wife's love bento, again showing the particularity of *ai* in its sense of nurturance) is a marker of newlywed status. Visual media exploits this potential in Japanese dramatic narratives to reveal the state of the maker/consumer relationship, or the state of the individual, in the case of *bentō* made for oneself. 'Obento tte seikaku deru nā...' (Personality comes out in bento) says Kurita Minori, a fictional 28-year-old female office worker whose aspirations to make herself a proper lunchbox are the topic of a recent manga (Morishita 2013: 13). Another recent manga, *Daily Bento* (*Nichinichi bentō*), relies heavily on this trope as a means for exploring the characters' differences. 'It's really exciting to peek at others' bento; it feels like a slightly naughty thing to do ♥', states the narrator (Sano 2012: 7). Its main character, the plain and straightforward 32-year-old designer Kiriko Tani, enjoys simple traditional fare such as boiled seaweed on multigrain rice from her 20-year-old cedar lunchbox, as she did during her childhood in a Zen Temple.

Bento in manga as a vehicle for sentiment may even bring families together where little connection exists, as in *Takasugisanchi no obentō/The Takasugi Family's Bento* (Yanahara 2010). The award-winning Belgian film



Figure 1: *Nichinichi bento*, © Sano Mioko / Shueisha Creative Inc.

Bento Monogatari/Lunchbox Story (Dirkx 2010), even employed these qualities attributed to the Japanese lunchbox in a context of global flow in Belgium, as a symbol of sentiment from a desperate wife to her uninterested husband. Indeed bento in general, and *kyaraben* as an art form, enjoys global attention at present.

The practice of ‘doing-cooking’ as an everyday life activity in Japan entails gender-based social differences. The changes in bento preparation described in this article do not extend to an underlying role change. Food preparation in Japan is, as Girard found in France, ‘repeated in time and space, rooted in the fabric of relationships to others and to one’s self, marked by the “family saga” and the history of each, bound to childhood memory just like rhythms and seasons’ (de Certeau et al. 1998: 157). Cwierka describes Japanese foodways as nationalized by the mid-1960s, through which ‘the family meal was transformed into a cult of domesticity, and an ability to cook was promoted as a key symbol of adult womanhood’ (2008: 424). Women are still the typical bento makers. Memories of bento are easily evoked in Japan, including comparisons of one’s own lunchbox – and by extension, the mother who created it – made by peers in the schoolroom or office. As cooking skill is a valued part of a woman’s personal capital, bento-making is key, displayed in a public arena in which potential spouses may abide (and after marriage, displayed in the spouse’s and children’s bento). The women’s magazine *MORE* included a pullout cookbook in its May 2014 issue entitled *Kekkon dekiru ♥ Joshiryoku UP Bentō BOOK/Bento book to increase female power (and) ♥ marriageability* (Shueisha 2014). Indeed, in the manga described above, Minoru, the aspirational bento maker, watches enviously as her female coworkers’ lunches are praised by male colleagues (Morishita 2013: 10).

Bento is described domestically and worldwide as a significant symbol for the Japanese. Allison, following Althusser, takes the aesthetics of preschool bento as an unstated metaphor through which the transformation process of an apple slice into a rabbit, or of a weiner into an octopus, is produced by a woman and consumed by a child, both of whom are themselves transformed through these rituals of bento into culturally acceptable roles. In a later book, Allison (2006: 16) describes *kyara* such as *Pokemon* as comprising what Walter Benjamin terms an ‘enchanted commodity’ namely, one that encourages fantasy play and bonding between object and owner while blurring the line between market and affective value. The current trend towards greater expectations of cuteness in bento further transforms them into such an enchanted commodity. In doing so the cute bento also transforms mother and child, through production and consumption, into the realm of cute loveableness, *kawaii*rashisa (appropriate loveability), whose grip on popular culture has gradually increased since the 1970s.

In the cookbooks Allison used for her analysis from 1981 and 1987, foods are shown transformed into shapes reminiscent of other foods, animals and even people (1996: 100), though she does not mention or show the replication of manga-style or mascot characters such as we see in contemporary *kyaraben*. Indeed, the bento images from these cookbooks shown in her chapter depict food cut into bird shapes, smiling faces added to round rice balls, and a bento arranged to resemble a flower patch. We can also see foodstuffs manipulated into a variety of shapes: a Brussels sprout flower, a carrot ribbon, and even a potato made into the form of an insect.

The *kawaii* cuteness trend was already well underway in Japan when Allison published her assessment of bento, as documented by Kinsella (1995),

who discusses the rise of ‘fancy goods’ that included imagery of famous and anonymous cute characters. Sanrio’s Hello Kitty goods had been on the market since 1974. As Aihara’s market research has revealed, the coming of adulthood to a generation who grew up with cute character goods has not stopped them from continuing to consume cute things, and now many are parents (2007). Increasingly, kyara fill the Japanese mediascape, not only on TV and in print but also in public events held in everyday spaces such as shopping malls where local and national kyara embodied by humans wearing kigurumi mascot suits interact with their audience (Occhi 2012). It is difficult to simply convey the contemporary ubiquity of kyara imagery in everyday Japanese life, though I have seen its continual expansion over this new century with my own eyes.

The generation of women who grew up with Hello Kitty in their milieu is the same group who elaborated the already cute bento aesthetic into the kyaraben. A survey of books on preschool bento-making published and used since Allison’s analysis shows us the path of transformation, while at present any online search for kyaraben cookbooks shows that this trend is not over. The cookbook data presented here derive from a sample of convenience comprising used preschooler bento cookbooks purchased secondhand in Miyazaki, Kyushu - this area boasts one of the higher birthrates in Japan over the period studied - since I felt it crucial to survey recipes that may have actually been used.

EVOLUTION OF KYARABEN

My first example is contemporary to Allison’s data: a 1982 bento cookbook, *Yōchien taipu betsu no obentō/Different types of preschool bento*. Notable is the section called rebā girai (liver aversion), with recipes for cooking chicken liver in ways children may enjoy. The images accompanying these aspirational preparations include a fancy cut apple and a tiny face made with black sesame seed eyes pressed into a cut hard-boiled quail egg. The only decorative goods shown are flag toothpicks (United States and United Kingdom), flexible plastic grass-like dividers known as baran, and plastic toothpicks whose handles resemble umbrellas. Tools for shaping food include a handy rice mould for small cylinders of rice, and flower-shaped cutters for sliced carrots or ham.

In the preschoolers’ bento recipe section of this book, however, these decorative devices rarely appear. The lunches resemble contemporary adult bento more than the cute non-kyaraben bento Anne Allison was taught to make. Of 139 total bento recipes, only two show flower shapes, while picks are used in eight lunches. The so-called ‘rabbit apple’ decorative cut is used twice, fancy cut cucumbers appear twice, and a fancy cut weiner appears once. Nori (dried seaweed) is laid on rice in a cross pattern three times. The only truly pictorial bento is a tree with scrambled eggs for foliage. Time frames for preparation of these tiny meals are set at ten minutes in the evening followed by ten to fifteen minutes the following morning. As discussed in Allison 1996, the focus for 1982 mothers is getting the preschoolers to eat liver (and a variety of other challenging foods including broccoli) in bento. There is an evident progression from the plain lunches of the 1980s to the cute lunches of the 1990s and from those into the kyaraben lunches of the twenty-first century. Such evolution includes not only a move away from making wee tots eat liver and the like, but also a shift from including modified nature imagery (e.g., rabbit-shaped apples) in an otherwise undecorated meal, to surrounding food with cute kyara goods, to actually putting the kyara into the bento itself.

In a 1991 bento cookbook we discover a method for creating flower-shaped hardboiled eggs using five chopsticks, a slice of daikon radish and a rubber band. (Nowadays we have plastic gadgets for shaping eggs.) A 1992 cookbook for baby-weaning shows sandwiches and cooked carrots cut into shapes of animals, trains and boats with metal cookie cutters. Let us consider a hypothetical case. If the mother/cook was aged 27 at the time of this cookbook's publication (and Tanaka [1992] reports the average marriage age for Japanese women in 1990 as 25.8 years with childbirth soon after), then she would have potentially been exposed to fancy goods, including Hello Kitty, since birth. Following this timeline, her baby would go to preschool around 1996, which is around when cutesification of bento cookery takes a more serious turn. Following Aihara's market research model, this is where we observe the roots of the generational shift that sees adults as well as children maintaining interest, consumption and, in bento, possibly even production of kyara goods.

In 1996 the brightly colourful *Yōchien no obentō/Kindergarden bento* cookbook sports cute Hello Kitty bento boxes and Snoopy napkins along with readymade potato cakes resembling AnPan Man, nestled along homemade rice balls decorated in the motif of AnPan Man's sidekick Omusubi Man. Including other faces on rice balls as well as on quail eggs, this text predicts that its bento will take twenty minutes to prepare. Solutions for the aforementioned 'liver hatred' include ketchup, teriyaki skewers, deep frying, or sweet-and-sour sauce.

An explicit visual statement of the shift in focus from nutrition to aesthetics appears in a 1998 cookbook that appears to be the tipping point in this paradigm shift. The Shogakkukan publication *Pokemon to ninkimonotachi kantan kawaii kyarakutā bentō/Pokemon and Other Popular Ones' Easy Cute Character Bento* contained instructions not only for the titular heroes, who had made their television debut the prior year, but also for the characters of the still-popular An-Pan Man, Doraemon, Tamagocchi, Kureyon Shinchan, Ultraman and Thomas the Tank Engine. The Nintendo Mario game characters appeared as well. Character bento examples of several other kiddie narrative franchises now off the air included Spūn hime (Spoon Princess), Seijū sentai gingaman (Star Beast Squadron Gingaman), Fushigi mahō fan fan faamashii (Mysterious Magic Fan Fan Pharmacy), Shirubania famirii (Sylvania Family), Hare toki-doki buta (Fair, Then Partly Piggy) and Mahōdukai sarii (Sally the Witch). The bento is graphically accurate, but the replication of the character shapes from various food products was still performed by manual manipulation in the case of rice balls and other three-dimensional malleables, while flat ingredients like ham or nori were cut with ordinary kitchen utensils, and thus retained rough edges. Perhaps this effect was created on purpose so as not to intimidate the aspiring kyaraben makers.

By 2003, when the housewife magazine *Sankyu!!* 'Thank you!' included photographs of bento from students in a Kitakyushu preschool, many of them contained cute food with faces – including AnPan Man, soccer balls, flowers and other shapes – as a lead-in to a bento recipe article. In 2004 we also saw books produced with the aim of training mothers in the production of kyarakutā bento called such, and looking very similar to commercial kyara, but without licence or attribution. By 2008 the shift was complete, with professional-looking results resembling marketed characters. Explicit gendering of bento was also represented, with flowers, pink rabbits and girl faces in the pink-boxed girl's bento, while airplanes and automobiles, along with fish and other sea creatures, filled the blue bento box for boys. The basics,

as well as the social imperative of making *kyaraben*, were also laid out in a cookbook insert titled *100 yen decoben* placed in the November 2009 issue of *Shufu no Tomo/Housewife's Friend* magazine. It was also around this time that the smiley-faced Dear cookies made by Morinaga became popular, with the product website encouraging decorative play for mothers and children (Ochi 2010).

PROBLEMATICS OF PRODUCTION AND PROFESSIONALIZATION

Besides imagery, the content of the *kyaraben* differs in non-trivial ways from its plainer predecessors. Whereas the bento has traditionally provided means to use up leftovers – and in the preschool versions hitherto focused on, to train young children to eat all the nutritious foods they are served – the *kyaraben*'s reliance on processed meats and cheese shows the dominance of market-orientated aesthetics over nutritional and traditional values. Processed meats (bologna, weiners) and sliced processed cheese are the media of choice used in creating the cute cutout figures that define *kyaraben*. Furthermore, what does one do with the oddly shaped cutout remains of ham and cheese after the *kyaraben* is made? Contra the thrifty origins of bento as a vehicle for leftovers, with *kyaraben* creation aesthetically unappealing remnants must be eaten as is or incorporated into another dish. I was convinced of this and other problematic aspects during several months' practice trying to make cute cookbook-style bento for myself during the initial stages of this research project. My experimental refusal to use sliced ham or processed cheese (and the tendency of natural cheese to crumble) put me in search of flat-surfaced foods that could easily be cut into shapes. I came to rely on not only the obvious carrots but also broccoli stems skinned and sliced, which became harder to find throughout the year as broccoli went out of season. Other potentially useful ingredients such as colourful peppers resisted easy cutting even with the tiny metal cookie-cutters I acquired. The lack of variety of nutritious food-stuffs that could easily be rendered cute became a problem. In addition, preparation time increases concomitantly with the amount of decoration needed. Though I enjoyed doing decoration, I do work outside the home full time. These problems eventually outweighed any praise I earned for extra aesthetic efforts, and I was glad to end the experiment.

The shift in production that has rendered contemporary *kyaraben* all the more a product of third-wave capitalism includes the rise in speciality goods for creating the particular shapes necessary for professional-looking results. This increase in kitchen paraphernalia is reminiscent of that described by Luce Girard in her examination of French cooking:

a series of tiny metal instruments have come along to help the housewife, or rather, to give 'professional' perfection to the presentation of her dishes, and that is a pity because it is as if she has to mimic the production of a caterer or an industrial cookie factory in order to please her guests.

(de Certeau 1998: 210)

Licensed characters are among the most desired professionally created objects for bento-making women to assemble from foods by using an increasingly varied range of tools, beyond the ubiquitous colourful picks and containers. Kumamon, currently the most famous Japanese *yuru kyara*, is a common

theme for yuru kyara bento recipes on the Cookpad website, enjoying a twenty percent share as of May 2014. Everyday items such as scissors, straws and tweezers along with specialized nori cutters and small shape cutters are needed for accurate replication of kyaraben. These specialized objects were first available only in limited areas, such as in the kitchen section of Tokyo's Tokyu Hands variety goods franchise. However, by 2010 even the 100 yen shops carried a range of goods to enable and encourage the production of kyaraben, along with a cookbook called *Bukicchosan no kyaraben bentō urawaza zukan/Bukiccho's Encyclopedia of Character Bento Secrets* with recipes and photography by a 'charisma mama' bento blogger, Chi-mama. Among these secrets we learn to use mayonnaise for gluing tiny cut-out nori bits to rice balls to make facial expressions (a very fiddly process in my experience), and to boil and then toast spaghetti for use in lieu of picks to attach foods unobtrusively (Kobayashi 2010).

Chi-mama, the kyaraben cookbook author Kaerenmama, and Muku, the star of an iPhone kyaraben application, are among a growing number of Japanese women who derive fame from blogging about their skills in various aspects of domestic labour, achieving a fan base, print publications, and other accretions of fame from their self-promoted professional housewife status. Muku (Yuko Tokumitsu) was born in 1976; it appears that the age of these karisuma (charismatic) kyaraben makers is around that of Hello Kitty herself, in line with the predictions discussed above. Kyoko Sugawara, aka Kaerenmama, is a kyaraben designer who has spun the blogs she has used to document the bento made for her two sons into several books. Feeling that I could not ignore an author of her level of fame, I purchased the one book of hers that was available used online (Sugawara 2009), departing slightly from the strategy of depending on local on-shelf availability for acquiring the used texts mentioned thus far. Kaerenmama's recipes include the following: picture book characters, original characters, animals, seasonal events and character sweets. When the cookbook arrived at my workplace, I unwrapped it and flipped through it together with a male office staff member who at the time had a 3-year-old daughter. His response was, 'If I showed this to my wife, she would cry!', because of the time and labour required to create these kyaraben.

Owing to these problems and others, including competition and teasing among children, opposition to kyaraben has emerged. One Catholic preschool in my area had a mothers' meeting soon after kyaraben started to appear there in the mid-00s, at which they banned the practice. Other contestations of kyaraben have appeared in both Japanese and English media. Makiko Ito, a successful Japanese food blogger (justbento.com and justhungry.com), argues against cute bento-making for hygienic and aesthetic reasons, in favour of preserving food's natural appearance (Ito 2008). She is not creating preschooler bento, however. The 2009 film *Nonchan noriben/Nonchan's Seaweed Bento* used this dichotomy as the titular character brings her mother's special layered – but undecorated – noriben as she transfers to a new kindergarten. By declaring its superiority and sharing its taste when faced with her classmates' fancy kyaraben, she easily convinces them that substance is better than style.

Detractors aside, the thriving practice of amateur kyaraben blogging is documented in Seddon's analysis (2011). These communities of expertise and enjoyment (created on the Internet by making public evidence of one's domestic skills) parallel other genres of imitative popular expressive media

in Japan, e.g., cosplay and dōjinshi (amateur manga), that may be enjoyed online as well as at conventions like Comiket. The disparaging label of 'otaku' (nerd) has often applied to people who engage in such behaviour. However, I am more tempted to compare them positively to the popular gatherings of hobbyists inspired by product conventions dating back to the mid-eighteenth century Edo era in Japan. Foster (2009) describes these events as intersections of encyclopaedic knowledge and ludic enjoyment that themselves hearken back to the neo-Confucian enthusiasm for natural history.² The kyaraben cookbook itself forms a kind of zukan 'encyclopaedia' of playful images. Getting back to the subject of hobby bloggers, the capacity for anonymity the Internet offers has also been exploited by the makers of shikaeshi bento (revenge bento), which boasts unsavoury combinations of food, awful or embarrassing imagery (e.g., a bare-breasted woman or a weiner made to look like a severed finger), or are inscribed with expressions of anger rendered in nori (seaweed), such as aho (idiot) or noroi (curse), aimed at errant husbands.

2. Comiket certainly shares aspects of both; alongside the better-known popular media simulacra I have found a range of speciality publications on various nonfiction topics.

CUTE FOOD ESCAPES THE BENTO BOX

Whether kindergartens are allowing them or not, kyaraben techniques and the promotion of cute food have entered the realm of everyday food preparation. A cookbook insert, *Everyone's 100 Praiseworthy Recipes*, in the January 2010 *Sankyu!* magazine includes readers' recipes for kyara replication along with dishes decorated in the nature-for-culture aesthetic. The booklet promises that 'the recipes are easy, delicious, and cheap, and can be made all year round without getting into a rut'. These include Pikachu sushi (thin omelette, nori, processed cheese, and carrot are used for the features) and teddy bear roll sushi made with three smaller soya sauce-tinted tan rice rolls inside it that shows a face when cut with each slice further decorated with nori facial features. Notably, the teddy bear sushi contains only rice, nori, soya sauce and seaweed, even though 32 years earlier moms were taught to make brown roll sushi with chicken liver. Other cute recipes include the following: round sushi balls of rice coloured with pink starch, decorated with nori strips and processed fishcake to resemble juggling balls; roll sushi made with nori, cucumber and wieners that depict two cherries on their stems with a leaf when cut; heart-shaped and decorated sushi; hand-roll sushi made in a cone shape from nori enclosing smoked salmon or ham cut to look like a flower bouquet; sushi made to resemble donuts or a parfait; and rice flour dumplings decorated with faces to resemble baby seals. The dishes are displayed on platters as if at a 'home party' where adults may also consume cuteness. Serendipitously, on the ANA flight from Tokyo to San Francisco for the 2010 conference where I presented some of these data, my meal included a flower-shaped carrot slice, another example of cute food intended for adult consumption. This trend continues. The March 2011 issue of *Suteki na Okusan! Wonderful Wife* magazine shows 'very easy ways to make roll sushi and decorative sushi', twelve recipes relying heavily on vinegared rice coloured with hard-boiled egg yolk or pink starch. The *MORE* magazine insert mentioned above includes recipes for pineapple-shaped wieners with broccoli for leaves, heart-shaped rolled omelette, fashioned flowers, boat shapes, and other artsy morsels. If food is a message of ai from the creator to the eater, then kawaii foodstuffs have become a superfluous element of distinction, much like the 's' added to third-person singular verbs in English. The pleasant reaction elicited by a simple handmade bento is no longer enough.



Figure 2: *kodomo mo daisuki na hamu & chiizu o ribon de omekashi shite* 'dressing up the ham & cheese that kids also like with a ribbon' (Shufu to seikatsusha 2011: 61).

CITY-SPONSORED KYARABEN-MAKING WORKSHOP: STATE SUPPORT OF FOOD CUTESIFICATION

Beyond these suggestions of popular media, institutional support for *kyaraben* also exists. In November of 2010, Kanzaki City (2007, population 33,537) in Saga prefecture introduced two local mascots, *yuru kyara*: a dog named Kunen Wan, and Kunen Nyan, a cat (*wan* and *nyan* are onomatopoeic for barking and meowing, respectively). Like the local garden called Kunen An, these *yuru kyara* wear straw hats resembling the garden's straw-roofed buildings, and capes that represent leaves from its maple trees (Kanzaki Masukotto 2014). In December 2011 the Central Kanzaki City community centre sponsored a free *kyaraben* course taught by students of Western Kyushu University starring Kunen Wan and Kunen Nyan (Kinohara 2011). Attendees created *yuru kyaraben* for which the student-teachers had cut facial features from nori seaweed ahead of time. This certainly saved time at the event and probably created a sense that the *yuru kyaraben* were less difficult to prepare than if that fiddly task had been done on the spot. Children who attended with their mothers read picture books, played games and made simple rice balls that they presented to their mothers with thanks. This exchange reiterates the normative distribution of labour in the family, since the simple rice ball is no equal for the fancy bento nor for the greater effort expected of mothers in daily food preparations. Though I was told that local mascots were used in favour of commercial characters in order to avoid *mejia izon* (media dependence), the replication of Kunen Wan- and Kunen Nyan-shaped foods (as opposed to a plain bento) orients makers and eaters towards the city's media promotions and towards *kyaraben* generally. And even the Japanese government-sponsored programme *Kagayaku josei ouen kaigi*/Conference to support

sparkling women included an article promoting kyaraben on its official blog in February 2015. In this post the apron-clad kyaraben blogger and book author momo tells us that ‘her accomplishments in becoming a wife, a mother, and of all things, a book author, are like being in a dream’ (Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet 2015). One wonders how the promotion of such time-consuming domestic labour could possibly mesh with Abe’s stated intent to promote women in the paid workforce.

CONCLUSION

By comparing the evolution of kyaraben to Allison’s (1996) findings on preschooler bento from a previous era, I have discovered notable differences in the content and appearance of bento. However, the social imperatives that underlie their creation remain basically the same; i.e. women are still the bento-makers whose role is to prepare something special for their little ones to eat completely. Allison concluded that bento replicates broader Japanese culinary tradition by emphasizing the *manipulation* of foods into different objects (e.g., apple to rabbit) while maintaining *order* by keeping items separate. In this orderly fashion, the child is manipulated into a student, and subsequently a future worker: a progress evidenced by the tidy and speedy consumption of this symbolic meal no matter what foods it contains. In Allison’s analysis the *process* of transformation was more important than the *form created via that process*. However, the strict adherence of today’s kyaraben to replicate specific, even copyrighted, forms that are far more complex than the apple-rabbits found in her data leads us towards different interpretations. In its current style of replicating specific kyara with nori and processed foods, *form* in kyaraben has gained prominence, and liver is off the menu. While form and content has changed, the process remains.



Figure 3: kyaraben of the U900 ukulele band characters.

3. Yuru is part of the phrase yuru kyara, a subset of cute characters representing localities, including Kunen Wan and Kunen Nyan described above.

The broader social context in which kyaraben emerge includes an increasing overall attention given to kyara and the cute kawaii aesthetic they embody. As Goldstein-Gidoni (2015) points out, women's magazines underwent a similar shift since the 1990s towards encouraging young mothers to remain cute and fashionable. This trend continues, incorporating aspects of the burgeoning phenomena of cute characters. Along with this, the word yuru, meaning 'wobbly' or 'loose', has emerged in advertising copy as a desirable aspect of women's clothing, diet and even house-cleaning practices. The port-manteau yuru kawa (loosely cute), incorporates both tropes: yuru relaxation with the more well-worn kawaii (Occhi 2014a).³ In these neo-liberal days in which people are seen all the more as products on offer in a precarious labour market, the necessity to shape a loveable persona is imperative. Shaping food as kawaii allows us to consume that aesthetic.

The underlying choice of whether to embrace or to resist this kawaii aesthetic is an act of personal distinction, one of many choices that adults make through their consumption and production, and communicate to their children. Allison's second point was that in bento production women's labour not only creates a pleasing meal for her young child but also constructs women as champions of the existing social order in which men work for money and women's greatest labour investment is in the domestic sphere. Resistance manifests in the increased participation of women in wage labour and in the rise of so-called ikumen (child-rearing men), but the norm Allison (1996) described persists, and has not been overthrown to any meaningful extent (North 2014). Male consumption of kyara-decorated goods appears to be on the increase generally, though it remains to be seen whether this trend, along with PM Abe's plans to get more women into the workforce, will encourage these ikumen fellows to take on the production of kyaraben. It does not seem likely at this moment. Further resistance includes the reactions on the part of some potential consumers of cute food that such creations are mottainai (a waste); in addition, they note the practical and aesthetic difficulties of eating a character rendered in the medium of food.

When comparing Allison's terse conclusions with the bubbly self-presentations of kyaraben bloggers, we must keep in mind that the former was writing not as a full-time housewife seeking recognition for her domestic labour but as a visiting American anthropologist. For a mother to invest energy in the culinary reproduction of kyara in bento is to engage in replication of a market-orientated (though nonmarketable) commodity already invested with affective values by virtue of its links to mother and home, already imbued with the fantasy of culture-as-nature, and now invested with market value through its links to commercial cute character culture. Furthermore, mothers choosing not to construct kyaraben and yet wanting to put kawaii touches on a lunchbox may now purchase kyara-shaped food products. These include fishcakes that depict a multicoloured image when sliced, or even precut nori that renders a kyara outline when placed on rice. State and public sponsorship of kyaraben-making, as well as the commercial interest in goods and foods, pushes the cute food ideal despite resistance. Moreover, hobbyist bento bloggers delight in the joy their efforts bring to the recipients of their food and their readers. Kyara-shaped foods have become an arena for communication beyond the bento's original symbolic value: cute shapes have entered the grammar of Japanese cuisine just as heart shapes (as seen in the quotes above) and other cute emotive marks have become part of the grammar of Japanese women's informal writing (Kataoka 2002).

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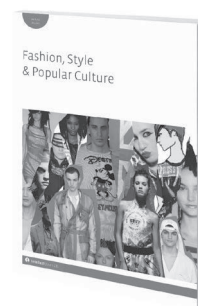
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The two-layer model of ‘kawaii’: A behavioural science framework for understanding kawaii and cuteness

ABSTRACT

‘Kawaii’ is one of the most popular words in contemporary Japan and is recognized as representative of Japanese pop culture. It is often translated into English as ‘cute’, but a subtle difference of nuance seems to exist between the two words. In this article, a framework for research on kawaii from a behavioural science perspective is put forward. After introducing the dictionary definition, history and current usage of kawaii, this article reports survey results of Japanese students and office workers about their attitudes towards kawaii. These findings and past psychological and behavioural science research lead to a two-layer model that consists of kawaii as an emotion and kawaii as a social value. This model postulates that the basis of kawaii is a positive emotion related to the social motivation of watching for and staying with preferable persons and objects, which is typically observed in affection towards babies and infants, but not limited to them. This culturally non-specific, biological trait has been appreciated and fostered in Japan by certain characteristics of Japanese culture. Because previous research on cuteness has been almost exclusively associated with

KEYWORDS

baby schema
cognition
culture
cuteness
emotion
psychology

infant physical attractiveness and baby schema, using the relatively fresh, exotic word 'kawaii' may be helpful to describe this broader psychological concept.

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INTRODUCTION

Many scholars have argued that 'kawaii' is a key concept characterizing modern Japanese culture (e.g. Botz-Bornstein 2011; Kinsella 1995; Masubuchi 1994; Yomota 2006). For instance, Hello Kitty is a typical kawaii character created in Japan in 1974 that is still beloved by many people across borders and generations (Belson and Bremner 2004). This concept attracts attention even outside Japan from various fields such as aesthetics (Ngai 2012) and engineering (Cheok and Fernando 2012). From February 2009 to March 2010, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan designated three young women who were active in the field of fashion as 'Kawaii Ambassadors' to promote the understanding and propagation of Japanese pop culture around the world (2009), meaning that 'kawaii' is now officially recognized and used as a foreign policy tool. Roughly speaking, kawaii means cute, lovely, pretty, adorable, etc. and this word is used in many daily situations to express the speaker's favourable evaluation towards an object or a person. Like other everyday expressions, 'kawaii' has a unique connotation and is thought to be not fully translatable into other languages. Moreover, as this article demonstrates, the applicable scope of the word seems to be expanding, with its true meaning unclear even to Japanese people.

This article provides a research framework for understanding kawaii from a behavioural science perspective. Although 'kawaii' is an adjective, hereafter I also use it as a noun to represent the concept of this word. Many journalists and academics have considered the reasons why 'kawaii culture' has developed in Japan (e.g. Masubuchi 1994; Sakurai 2009; Yomota 2006). These discussions are mostly based on subjective impressions and qualitative analyses respectively and, therefore, tend to emphasize cultural specificity rather than commonality. Beyond this tradition, I have proposed that the feeling of kawaii is based on human psychology with biological underpinnings, and that this feeling is especially popular and socially accepted in Japan because the Japanese culture has certain characteristics that foster this trait (Nittono 2009). Because some of the previous kawaii-related studies from my laboratory have been published in Japanese for Japanese audiences (Ihara and Nittono 2011, 2012; Nittono 2009, 2011), this article aims to introduce the overview of these data for international audiences with an update of the theoretical framework. First, I provide an overview of kawaii, including its dictionary definition, history and current usage. Then, I report the results of surveys of Japanese students and office workers on their attitudes towards kawaii. Based on these findings and past research, I introduce a two-layer model of 'kawaii' that combines both a biological basis and cultural determinants. In particular, I elaborate the kawaii-as-emotion perspective using recent findings about the psychological and behavioural effects of kawaii. Finally, I propose that the word 'kawaii' is helpful to describe this broader psychological concept that goes beyond the concept of cuteness, which has been almost exclusively associated with infantility in past scientific research.

WHAT IS 'KAWAII'?

Because 'kawaii' is an attributive adjective in modern Japanese, it is usually assumed to be an attribute of a certain object. However, this definition often causes confusion, because the same object may or may not be perceived as kawaii depending on the situation and one's personality. To think about this issue more deeply, we can start with the dictionary definition of kawaii. The following citation is my translation from the largest Japanese dictionary, *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten*:

kawai-i (adjective)

- (1) looks miserable and raises sympathy. pitiable. pathetic. piteous.
- (2) attractive. cannot be neglected. cherished. beloved. (3) has a sweet nature. lovely. (a) (of faces and figures of young women and children) adorable. attractive. (b) (like children) innocent. obedient. touching.
- (4) (of things and shapes) attractively small. small and beautiful. (5) trivial. pitiful. (used with slight disdain).

(2000)

As this definition shows, kawaii has various, somewhat contradictory meanings, which may be understood from looking at the history of this word. Figure 1 illustrates the genealogy of 'kawaii' and related words according to this dictionary. 'Kawaii' appeared as an altered form of 'kawayui' in the Edo era (c. seventeenth to nineteenth centuries). The origin of 'kawayui' is thought to be from 'kawa' (face), '-hayu' (flushing) and '-shi' (adjectival suffix), which meant 'ashamed' or 'to feel like blushing due to a twinge of conscience'. In medieval times (c. twelfth to sixteenth centuries), 'kawayui' was used in the sense of pitiable or piteous, with the connotation of something that one 'could not bear to look at'. Later, the word was also used to suggest the sense of affection that derived from feelings of pity towards weaker members of society, such as women and children. In the late Edo era, the connotation of pity disappeared and only the sense of love and affection ('can't leave someone alone', 'care for') remained. Moreover, 'kawaii/kawayui' came to be used for describing lovely small things as an attributive adjective. Incidentally, in ancient times, this meaning was taken on by the archaic word 'utsukushi', the meaning of which changed to 'beautiful' ('utsukushii') in early modern times. Originally, kawaii signified the affection of superiors towards inferiors, but the meaning of any word varies across historical ages. Nowadays, kawaii is also

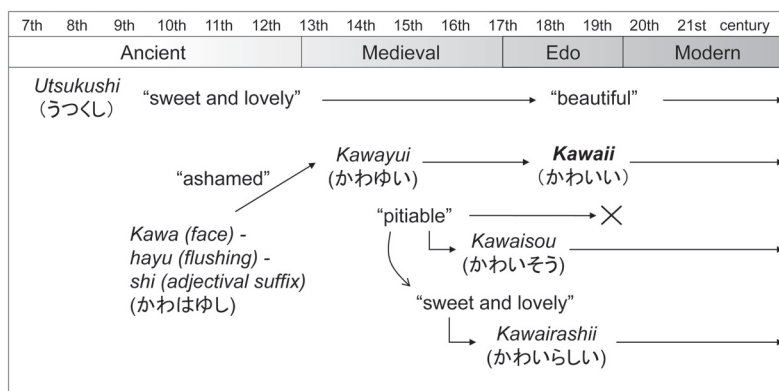


Figure 1: Genealogy of the word 'kawaii' and related words.

used for describing some elderly people as a kind of compliment. Although the classic meaning is lost today, it is still useful to conceptualize *kawaii* in connection with an affective state and regard *kawaii* as an affective adjective.

To learn about its contemporary usage, an exploratory search was made on a large Japanese language database, *NTT Database Series on Lexical Properties of Japanese* (Amano and Kondo 1999, 2000). In this corpus of newspaper articles published between 1985 and 1998, '*kawaii*' was used 2263 times – much less frequently than the related words '*utsukushii*' (beautiful, 8094 times) and '*kirei*' (neat, 6147 times). In contrast, standard word familiarity ratings (1='low' to 7='high') included in the same database showed that '*kawaii*' (6.438 and 6.625 for spoken and written words, respectively) was rated as more familiar than '*utsukushii*' (6.281 and 6.531) and '*kirei*' (6.125 and 5.906 or 5.156, depending on the kanji characters used). These results suggest that '*kawaii*' is a word that does not appear very frequently in official print publications, but is quite familiar in daily life. That is, '*kawaii*' is a word that is private and informal in essence.

Then, the connotations of the word were examined by distributing semantic differential questionnaires to Japanese university students. Three surveys were conducted on different occasions with different samples. The first survey was conducted in July 2008 ($N = 169$, 71 men and 98 women, 18–21 years old) to compare the words '*kawaii*', '*kirei*' and '*kakkoii*' (cool). The second survey conducted in November 2009 ($N = 101$, 46 men and 55 women, 18–22 years old) compared the three words, '*kawaii*', '*kawairashii*' (small, sweet and lovely) and '*kawaisou*' (pitiable), which appeared in the word history (Figure 1). The last survey was conducted in July 2011 ($N = 288$, 144 men and 144 women, 18–22 years old), and compared '*kawaii*' in different Japanese writing systems (hiragana letters and katakana letters), and a related word, '*kyuto*', which is the Japanese pronunciation of 'cute' in katakana letters. Hiragana letters are mainly used in contemporary Japanese in combination with kanji characters, while katakana letters are usually used for transliterating foreign words in the Japanese writing system and for onomatopoeic expressions. '*Kawaii*' is predominantly written in hiragana letters, but katakana letters are also used in the fields of fashion and pop culture. Figure 2 shows the mean rating scores for these words on 13 rating scales. Note that the semantic profile of '*kawaii*' is similar across three surveys. For each adjective pair, the mean rating scores of the words were compared by two-tailed paired t tests. To keep the overall significance level at $p = 0.05$ for each adjective pair, the comparison-wise significance level was set to $p = 0.016$, i.e. $p = 0.05$ was divided by 3 comparisons using the Bonferroni correction. The relative characteristics of the words can be summarized as follows. In Survey 1, '*kawaii*' is helpless, weak, small, loose, slow, lightweight, approachable and familiar. '*Kirei*' is calm and beautiful. '*Kakkoii*' is dependable, strong, large and fast. There were no differences in the good–bad and interesting–uninteresting dimensions: all of the words have positive meanings. Survey 2 shows that '*kawaii*' and '*kawairashii*' are similar, although helplessness and weakness are emphasized in '*kawairashii*'. On the other hand, '*kawaii*' is felt to be more familiar than '*kawairashii*'. '*Kawaisou*' is qualitatively different from the other words despite the same word origin. Survey 3 shows that the meanings of '*kawaii*' differ slightly between hiragana and katakana writings. '*Kyuto*' is similar to '*kawaii*' in katakana. Using katakana letters, the original connotation of '*kawaii*' (weak, small, loose and slow) is weakened and the word is felt to be noisier and less beautiful. General positive evaluations (like, good, interesting, approachable and familiar) also decrease for '*kawaii*' in katakana.

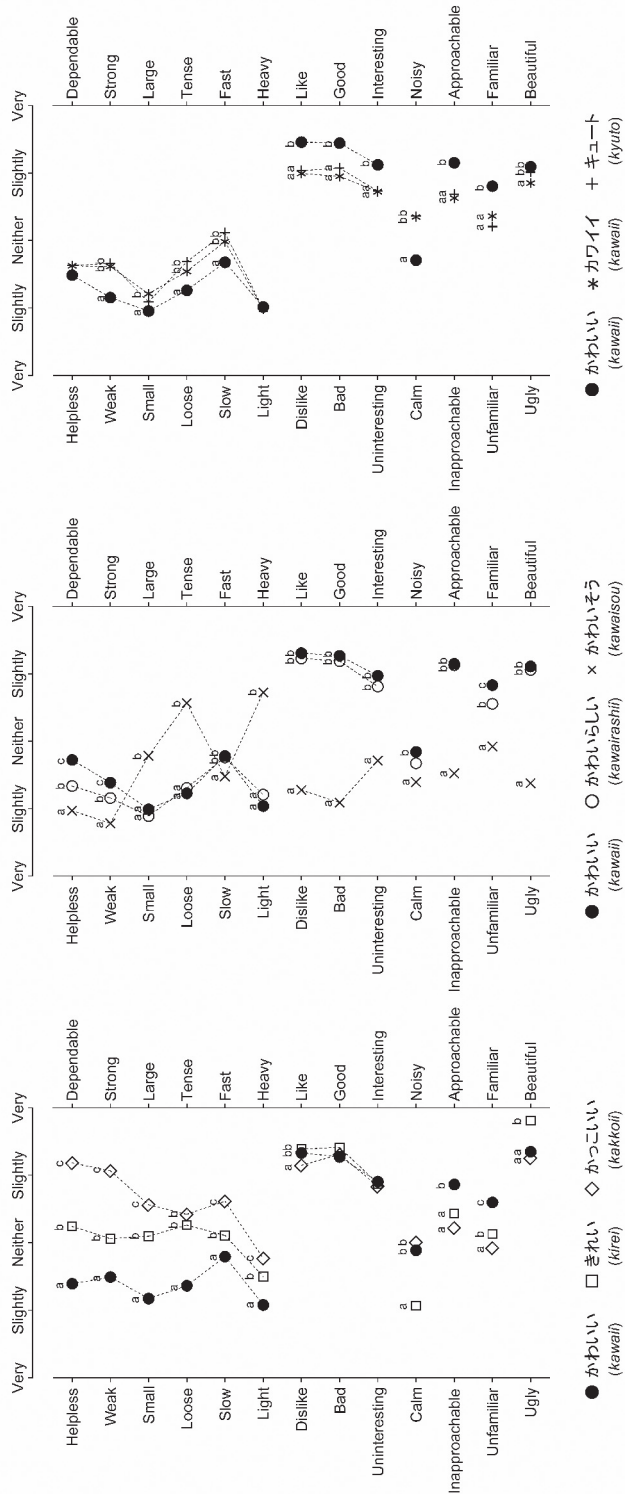


Figure 2: Nuances of the word 'kawaii' as compared to related words. The data are based on the mean rating scores of 169, 101 and 288 Japanese university students for the left, middle and right panels, respectively. The data points that do not share the same letter differ significantly ($p < 0.05$).

The latter result may depend on the composition of the survey panels. If the same questionnaire was administered to fashion-oriented people, for example, more positive evaluations towards 'kawaii' in katakana may be obtained.

The next survey assessed attitudes towards kawaii by sampling 363 Japanese students (173 men, 190 women, 18–22 years old, January and April 2009), 54 male office workers (age range from 20s to 50s, December 2009), and 100 female high-school students (15–16 years old, November 2014). Unfortunately, no data were obtained for female workers or male high-school students. Figure 3 shows the question items and the mean scores of each category of respondents. There are large gender differences: namely women were found to be more positive and sensitive to kawaii. In contrast, age differences are small. Two-tailed t tests did not show any significant differences between the responses of male students and office workers ($p > 0.24$). The responses of female university and high-school students were similar ($p > 0.17$), except for Question 4, 'Kawaii objects draw my attention' ($p = 0.011$). High-school students scored lower on this question, and their mean score did not differ from the scores of male university students and office workers ($p > 0.12$). The overall results can be summarized as follows. Respondents had a strong interest in and preference for kawaii objects. They thought they were sensitive to, drawn to and excited by kawaii objects, and they also believed kawaii objects brought positive feelings of comfort. Generally, female students scored higher on these questions than male students and office workers. Two-tailed t tests showed significant gender differences except for Question 6, 'I feel better when I have contact with kawaii objects'. The largest difference, found in the frequency of the use of the word kawaii, showed that women use this word more often than men. Another interesting finding is related to Question 9, 'I often judge a thing based on whether it is kawaii or not'. This question was included because the existing literature on kawaii phenomena takes it for granted that kawaii is highly valued as a behavioural standard among Japanese youths, especially among girls (e.g. Masubuchi 1994; Sakurai 2009; Yomota 2006). However, the survey results indicated that this assumption is

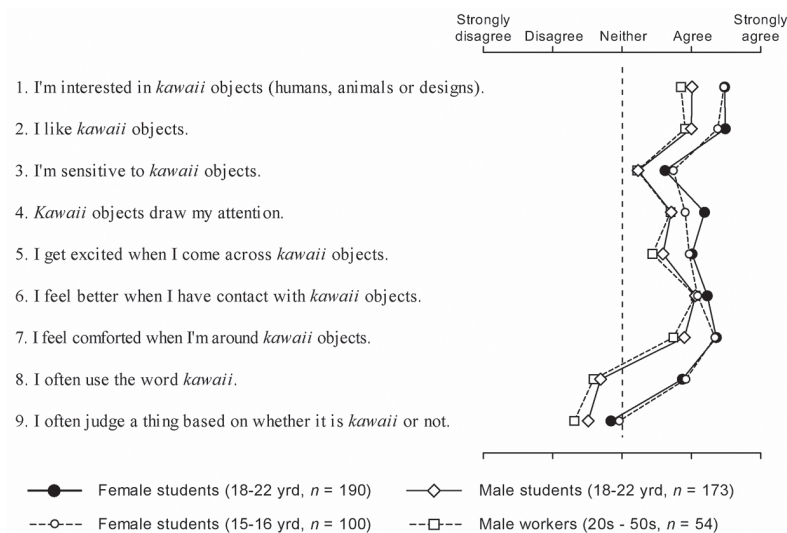


Figure 3: Attitudes towards 'kawaii' in Japanese people.

not warranted. Although this may also depend on the demographic characteristics of the respondents, the finding can be seen as further support of the idea that the word *kawaii* is private and informal in essence, which was suggested in the analysis of the Japanese language database mentioned above.

KAWAII AS AN EMOTION

Because the meaning of *kawaii* varies by generations and social groups, it is difficult to understand *kawaii* according to specific characteristics, such as smallness and roundness, which are common attributes of *kawaii* objects. We experience *kawaii* through the concrete objects we encounter in daily life. The visceral feeling of *kawaii* at that moment is the starting point and what we want to investigate. Therefore, *kawaii* can be better conceptualized as an emotion.

The scientific research on cuteness began with the concept of Kindchenschema ('baby schema' or 'babyishness') proposed by an Austrian ethologist, Konrad Lorenz, as a part of his theory of animal behaviour (1943). The baby schema is a set of physical features, such as: (1) a large head relative to body size, (2) a high and protruding forehead, (3) large eyes below the horizontal midline of the skull, (4) short and thick extremities, (5) a plump body shape, (6) soft body surface and (7) chubby cheeks. Lorenz assumed that living things with these features are perceived as cute, and tend to be approached, nurtured and protected by other individuals. Although it is not widely known, he created this list of the elements which he felt to be cute by his own intuition, rather than by empirically measuring infant physical shapes. This was because the concept of the baby schema was originally proposed as a human example of specific innate behavioural responses to specific elements of environmental stimuli, which were central to his theory of ethology. Lorenz stated that these features induce a distinct feeling that can be best described as 'herzig' in German (meaning 'sweet', 'lovely', 'charming', etc.). Empirical research has been conducted since the 1960s (e.g. Glocker et al. 2009; Hückstedt 1965) to examine Lorenz's assumption that humans show characteristic responses to the baby schema.

It is noteworthy, however, that the baby schema is not the only element that elicits the feeling of *kawaii*. In a survey conducted in January 2010 (Ihara and Nittono 2011), 166 Japanese university students (71 men and 95 women, 18–22 years old) were asked to rate the degree of *kawaii* and the degree of infantility of 93 animate and inanimate objects (described by either words or short phrases) that are sometimes described as *kawaii* on a five-point scale (1 = 'not at all' and 5 = 'very much'). Figure 4 shows the scatter plot of the mean rating scores of the 93 items. A cluster analysis was conducted on the basis of the *kawaii* and infantile scores of the male and female students for each item. Although the two ratings were moderately correlated ($r = 0.50$), there was a cluster of items that was rated as *kawaii* but not infant. That cluster, high in *kawaii* and low in infantility, included items such as 'flowers', 'sweets' and 'accessories'. In particular, 'smile' got the highest *kawaii* rating, means = 4.43 and 4.73 for men and women, respectively, among the 93 items. The values were higher than the rating scores for 'baby', which is usually thought to be the best representative of cuteness, means = 4.36 (second place in the 93 items) and 4.58 (fourth place) for men and women, respectively.

The idea that infantility is not a necessary condition for the feeling of *kawaii* is supported by other lines of research. Komori and Nittono (2013)

used a set of synthesized faces made from real infant and adult face pictures and showed that the evaluations of kawaii and infantility do not always covariate: the most infantile faces are not judged to be most kawaii. This result is consistent with the findings that newborn babies are perceived less cute than 9- or 11-month-old babies (Hildebrandt and Fitzgerald 1979) and that preterm infants who require more care are rated as less cute than full term infants (Maier et al. 1984). Moreover, only a minor structural abnormality, i.e. a cleft lip, in an infant's face can lower preference and motivation towards it and disrupt specific neural responses in the orbitofrontal cortex that is related to reward and affective processing (Parsons et al. 2011, 2013). Hildebrandt (1983) showed that a baby was rated cuter when he or she was photographed with a positive facial expression (happy, excited, cheerful, etc.), than with a neutral or negative facial expression, although the effect of facial expression was smaller compared to the differences across infants (see also Sprengelmeyer et al. 2013). These findings suggest that infantility is not central to kawaii or cuteness feelings. Based on a similar discussion, Sherman and Haidt (2011) suggested that the cuteness response is not directly related to caregiving and nurturance, but rather to human sociality that motivates people to interact socially with a given agent by priming affiliative, friendly tendencies and imbuing mental states in the entity, i.e. mentalizing. In a survey conducted in Tokyo, Kinsella reported that 'respondents used kawaii when they felt that warm *emotional contact* between individuals had been expressed' (1995: 238, original emphasis). Although she argued that 'cute sentiments were all about the recovery of a childlike emotional and mental state' (1995: 240), the social aspect of kawaii can be separated from infantility and childlikeness. I will go further and propose that the baby schema is only an example, not the essence of the factor that induces the feeling of kawaii. In fact, at least one Japanese psychologist conceived this possibility (Maeda 1985), although she did not delve into the details.

To explore this idea further, subjective psychological responses to four different objects that were sometimes described as kawaii were measured by

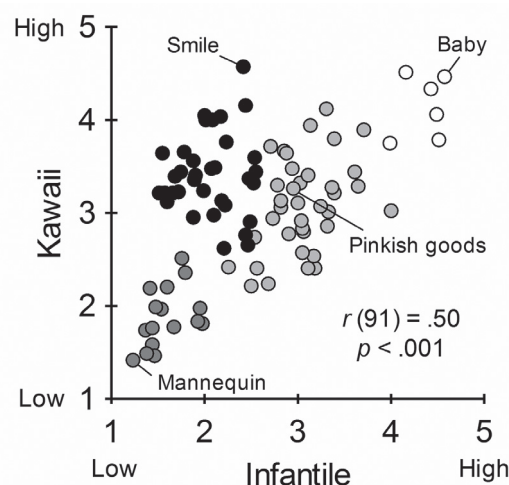


Figure 4: A scatter plot showing the relationship between kawaii and infantility ratings of 93 items (Adapted from Ihara and Nittono 2011).

questionnaires (Ihara and Nittono 2012). This study was conducted in April 2011 to search for common psychological factors in the feelings of kawaii towards different types of objects. Both male and female university students ($N = 180$, 86 men and 94 women, 18–21 years old) rated their feelings on six five-point scales after imagining a scene in which they encountered each of four types of kawaii objects: objects with baby schema, e.g. infants, baby animals; human objects, e.g. women, smiles; inanimate objects, e.g. accessories, sweets; and idiosyncratic objects, e.g. lizards, mushrooms. The scales consisted of two adjectives ('kawaii' and 'infantile'), two scales of approach motivation ('want to be closer to it' and 'want to keep it nearby'), and two scales of nurturance motivation ('want to help it when it is in trouble' and 'want to protect it'). Figure 5 shows the profiles of the four types of kawaii objects. The shapes differ considerably, which means the patterns of psychological responses to these objects are different. In general, kawaii ratings and the ratings of other aspects are moderately to highly correlated. However, as shown in Table 1, when a partial correlation between kawaii and each of the five other variables was calculated by removing the effects of the other variables, higher kawaii ratings were associated with higher approach motivation, but not with higher nurturance motivation, across the four categories. The findings were inconsistent with the baby schema hypothesis, which holds that the feeling of kawaii is linked with caregiving and protection for the young and the weak. Rather, the results suggest that the scope of kawaii is not limited to infantility and baby schema and that the feeling of kawaii can be better conceptualized as a positive emotion with strong approach motivation. Beyond living things, for instance, rounded objects are often

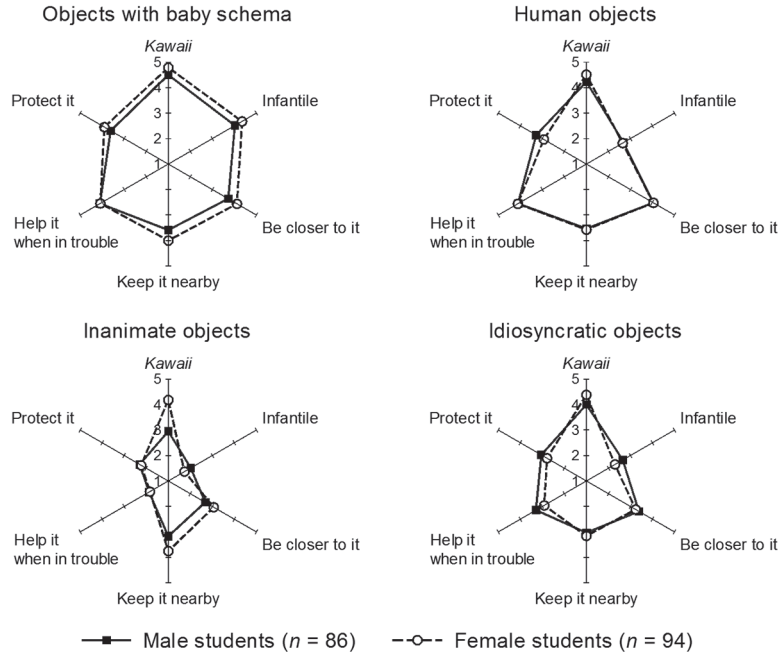


Figure 5: Rating profiles of four different objects that are described as kawaii (Ihara and Nittono 2012).

Table 1: Partial correlation coefficients between 'kawaii' and other question items.

	Objects			
	Baby schema	Human	Inanimate	Idiosyncratic
Infantile	0.17*	0.21**	0.22**	0.11
Want to be closer to it	0.28***	0.35***	0.13	0.27***
Want to keep it nearby	0.04	-0.05	0.30***	0.13
Want to help it when in trouble	0.11	-0.01	0.04	0.08
Want to protect it	0.04	-0.09	-0.11	-0.11

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Adapted from Ihara and Nittono (2012).

Note: The degree of freedom is 174.

described as kawaii. This may be related to a human nature that prefers rounded objects to sharp objects because the former are less threatening (Bar and Neta 2006, 2007). Certain types of colours are also described as kawaii, although this is modulated by personality and lifestyle (Kiyosawa 2014). These stimulus attributes are perceived as cute, friendly, harmless, pretty and so on, and when they are evaluated as significant through cognitive appraisal processes, a psychological state that can be collectively described as kawaii occurs.

Figure 6 shows a schematic representation of the 'kawaii-as-emotion' model. This model holds that kawaii is not simply a feature of a stimulus. Rather, it views kawaii as a psychological state indirectly induced by the perception of certain attributes of a stimulus and the cognitive appraisal of the relationship between the person and the stimulus. This view can explain why the same object may or may not be perceived as kawaii depending on the time and circumstances. This model has several important implications. First, the baby schema is just one factor that may elicit feelings of kawaii. Therefore, the study of kawaii is neither a subdivision of the study of human reactions to baby stimuli and parental behaviour, nor the study of the baby schema effects. This does not only mean that the feeling can be triggered by objects that are not animate, which is within the scope of the baby schema hypothesis. Rather, what this model postulates is that there are factors other than the baby schema that can elicit the same feeling of kawaii and that the baby schema is an example of the broader category of stimuli that can induce kawaii feelings. Second, the feeling of kawaii is not automatically evoked by the physical attributes of the eliciting entity, but is induced through a cognitive appraisal process. For example, the same object may be felt to be more kawaii with a touching cover story than without it, our own child can be more kawaii because we share his or her life history, etc. Last but not least, this model does not claim that 'kawaii' in Japanese is a distinctive psychological concept that cannot be expressed by 'cute' or similar words in other languages. Rather, a common, culturally non-specific psychological mechanism is expected at this layer. Because previous research on cuteness from science to aesthetics has been almost exclusively based on the baby schema hypothesis, using a relatively fresh, exotic word such as kawaii can be helpful to describe this broader psychological concept that goes beyond infantility.

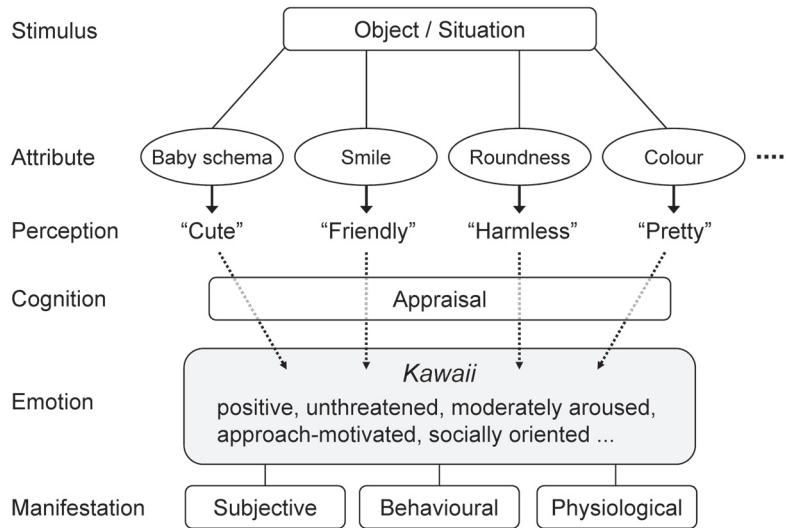


Figure 6: The concept of *kawaii* as an emotion.

Therefore, as an emotion 'kawaii' may be characterized as: positive, unthreatened (in that the subject does not feel under threat), moderately aroused, approach-motivated and socially oriented.

In psychology, emotions have three aspects or manifestations: subjective feelings, behaviour and physiology. For negative emotions, e.g. sadness, anger, fear, each distinct emotion is known to be associated with distinct subjective, behavioural and physiological changes. On the other hand, distinctions among positive emotions, e.g. satisfaction, enthusiasm, awe, remain unclear (Griskevicius et al. 2010; Shiota et al. 2011). Further research is required to determine whether *kawaii* can be seen as a distinct emotion (see also Sherman and Haidt 2011). In the next section, I will summarize the current findings about the effects of *kawaii* or cuteness on subjective feelings, behaviour and physiology to support the *kawaii*-as-emotion view.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND BEHAVIOURAL EFFECTS OF KAWAII

Draws attention and interest

Several studies have suggested that infant faces capture attention at an early stage of visual processing (Brosch et al. 2007, 2008). Although the idea is intriguing, controversy exists over how robust this effect is and whether it has a biological, evolutionary basis. Attention is generally captured by threatening stimuli, e.g. angry faces and sharp edges (Larson et al. 2007), but baby schema involves rounded shapes. One recent study showing that this effect is limited to babies in the viewer's own race (Hodsoll et al. 2010) suggests a cultural bias at work. In addition, non-human primates (Japanese macaques) did not show attentional prioritization to newborn monkey faces (Koda et al. 2013). Further careful investigations are needed to examine if this attention capture effect at early visual processing really exists and whether it reflects baby schema perception. On the other hand, cute pictures are viewed for longer periods of time than less cute pictures (Hildebrandt and Fitzgerald 1978, Sprengelmeyer et al. 2013). This positive correlation between *kawaii*/cute and viewing duration

is consistent across studies and can be extended to other kawaii objects besides babies, e.g. sweets, dress, accessories (Nittono and Ihara submitted).

Induces positive feelings

A large number of studies have shown that viewing pictures of human and animal infants invokes a positive feeling in viewers and induces a larger activity of facial muscles related to smiling, i.e. zygomaticus major and orbicularis oculi (Hildebrandt and Fitzgerald 1978; Kimura et al. 2012; Lang et al. 1993; Nittono and Tanaka 2010). This tendency can be extended to inanimate objects. Miesler et al. (2011) showed that the fronts of cars in which baby schema features are emphasized, e.g. larger headlights/eyes and small middle grille/nose, elicit a larger zygomaticus major activity than the original ones. Viewing human and animal infants moderately increases the viewer's subjective arousal level compared to neutral stimuli (Kimura et al. 2012; Nittono 2011), and increases heart rates and respiration rates (Shiota et al. 2011). However, these physiological responses are not specific to kawaii stimuli. For example, the increase of smiling for kawaii stimuli is not as high as for comedic movies with a high degree of humour (Kimura et al. 2012).

Increases carefulness and narrows the focus of attention

Recent behavioural experiments have shown that viewing pictures of baby animals improves performance in a task that requires behavioural carefulness, possibly by narrowing the breadth of attention to focus on details (Nittono et al. 2012; Sherman et al. 2009). Because kawaii is a positive emotion associated with approach motivation, we are motivated to get closer to a cute object and know it further. This action tendency appears to persist for a while and influence subsequent task performance. One study suggests that this tendency is most prominent for prosocially oriented women (Sherman et al. 2013). Further investigation is required to determine the size and the scope of this effect.

Improves interpersonal relationships

Many studies in various fields show that babies and pet animals (both actual and photographed) influence the social behaviour of the people around them. For example, people were more willing to answer a self-administered survey in a shopping mall when a picture of a baby or a live puppy was on the interviewing table (Bellfield et al. 2011). Similarly, when accompanied by a dog, people received a higher rate of helping behaviour and higher compliance with their request, e.g. soliciting money, from strangers (Guéuen and Ciccotti 2008). In a related study, people were found to be more willing to comply with environmental conservation messages in the presence of an anthropomorphized illustration, such as a light bulb, a dust bin or a tree with a face, which looked kawaii, than in the presence of a similar but non-anthropomorphized illustration (Ahn et al. 2014).

Part of this social effect of kawaii may be mediated by smiling. Figure 7 shows a conceptual drawing of the effect. When someone feels kawaii, this feeling is expressed by the facial expression of smiling. Another person sees the former person as kawaii (remember that a smile is a powerful factor of kawaii) and also smiles. This response becomes feedback to the first person, mutually amplifying the feeling of kawaii. Such reciprocity may be termed the

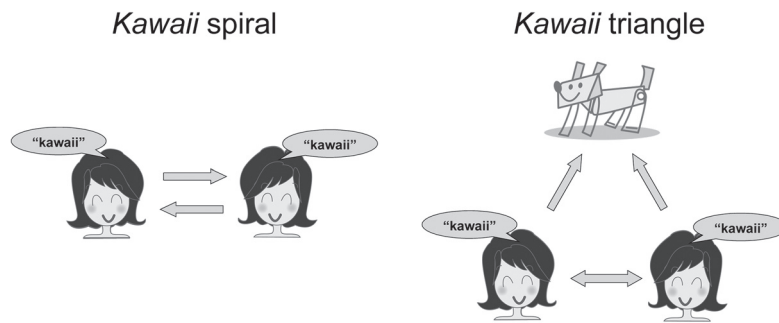


Figure 7: Social effects of kawaii.

'kawaii spiral'; and furthermore, this type of interaction may be mediated by an object in what I call the 'kawaii triangle'.

CONCLUSION

The two-layer model of 'kawaii' postulates that the basis of kawaii is a positive emotion related to the social motivation for engaging and staying with preferable persons and objects, which is typically observed in affection towards babies and infants, but not limited to them. Although it is associated with approach motivation, kawaii as an emotion involves the wish to exist together with the object, rather than consume or conquer it. The model also assumes that this culturally non-specific, biological trait has been amplified by certain characteristics of Japanese culture. Compared to the layer of kawaii as an emotion, the layer of kawaii as a social value has little empirical support thus far. Several explanatory factors may lie beneath the Japanese culture of kawaii. Here I name only a few concepts that have been suggested as characteristics of Japanese culture in general: 'amae' (Doi 1971/1981), 'chizimi shikou' (Lee 1982/1984) and 'ou-gata' culture (Haga 2004, 2013). Amae is a behaviour or motivation that aims to gain love and acceptance from others. Chizimi shikō means the orientation towards miniatures, small and touchable things. Ō-gata (the literal meaning is 'concave-type', but it is often translated as 'tender-minded type') is a cultural value that appreciates preserving harmony and agreement rather than fighting and overreaching others. These cultural characteristics may have been fostered by the climatic and geographical conditions of Japan, i.e. an agricultural island nation with mild weather surrounded by ocean that prevents invasion by other people. Many issues remain to be elaborated in future research.

The 'kawaii-as-emotion' approach can change the direction of kawaii-related research and applications dramatically. This approach is useful both for basic science researchers and for practitioners who wish to incorporate kawaii into their product and system designs. First, it allows us to think about kawaii or cuteness as a broader psychological concept that goes beyond the traditional framework of baby schema and infantility. Second, the research goal is not merely to explain how the word kawaii is strongly tied to Japanese culture, but to analyse the presumably universal psychological state expressed by this word and specify its functions beyond linguistic definition. From a practical point of view, introducing the concept of kawaii in product design is not an attempt to make a product with distinct kawaii features. Rather, it is an attempt to give cues to guide people to feel the positive emotion collectively called

kawaii, with the expectation of the psychological and behavioural changes I mentioned above. It is not important whether the word kawaii is used as a descriptor of a product or not. Although this naming strategy, e.g. kawaii clothes, kawaii cosmetics, is often used in the commercial world in Japan, it only targets a niche market. People who are not familiar with the word kawaii or have a negative image of it may not be drawn in. Rather, taking the 'kawaii-as-emotion' approach without claiming it as kawaii is potentially useful in wider fields of design, especially in fields that involve human interactions. Taken together, the two-layer model described in this article can transform a local cultural phenomenon, kawaii, into a unique window shedding light on all human nature that involves sociality and affiliation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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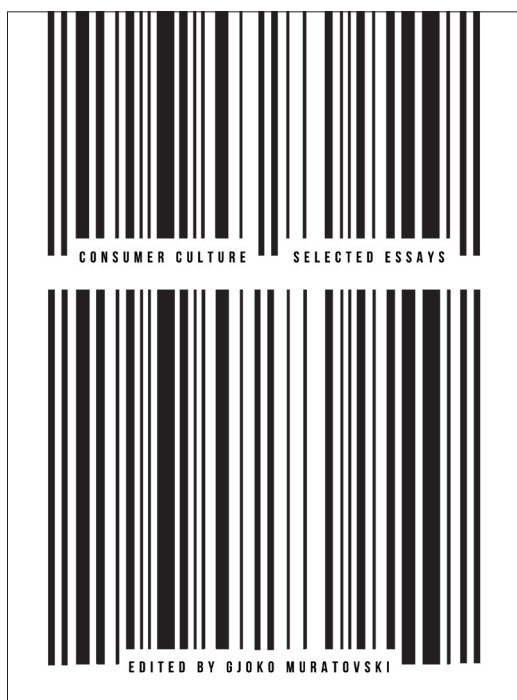
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Consumer Culture

Selected Essays

Edited by Gjoko Muratovski



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We live in a society that defines us by what we consume and how. Every day we make purchasing decisions that express our sense of belonging, our commitments to the environment, and our systems of belief. We often choose to buy things, not necessarily because we need them, but because we believe that these things will help us express who we are - in our own eyes and in the eyes of others. Whether we like it or not, consumerism is the prevalent ideology of our time. Led by Gjoko Muratovski, *Consumer Culture* is the ideal starting point for an investigation into the social construction of the global economy.

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When erotic meets cute: Erokawa and the public expression of female sexuality in contemporary Japan

ABSTRACT

This article addresses a conspicuous phenomenon within the burgeoning cute cultures of contemporary Japan – namely, pre-adult women adopting a fashion style that is simultaneously cute and hyper-sexy. While both cuteness and hypersexuality stand in contradiction to the norms of Japan's patriarchal gender system, public amalgamations of these two elements constitute a trend initiated by and for some contemporary young Japanese women. Through a series of ethnographic observations and theoretical reflections, the authors aim to uncover how the initially subcultural cute fashion phenomenon was brought to public attention by incorporating hyper-sexy elements into a 'sexy' facade that publicly signalled these young women taking control of their own sexuality. Such a transformation not only works to reclaim these practitioners' sexual identities as women, but may also destabilize

KEYWORDS

erokawa
erotic-cute
hypersexuality
femininity
empowerment
Japanese fashion

1. The authors referred to an online article by Diana Lee for modal descriptions here: (<http://uniorb.com/ATREND/Japanwatch/eroticcool.htm>).
2. The authors found that the difference in nuances between 'erotic-cute' (erokawaii) and 'erotic-cool' (erokakkoi) largely depends on the attitudes and stance of their practitioners: erokawa enactors tend to dress in frilly fashion and appear to be meek and sweet, whereas erokakkoi enactors tend to adopt a cool, classy and sophisticated look. These preferences are often mingled, making evaluations dependent upon the perception of those who wish to classify. In the past, the distinction between kawaii and coolness (classy) tended to be based on gender and age, wherein the image of kawaii was mainly applied to pre-adult women, and coolness to pre-adult and young adult men. Apparently, such a classification is currently outdated.

prevailing perceptions of acceptable (or desirable) feminine behaviour through the very instruments of sexuality that are readily produced and made available in the heterosexual consumer market.

The historical fact cannot be considered as establishing an eternal truth; it can only indicate a situation that is historical in nature precisely because it is undergoing change.

(*Women's Life Today* quoted in Beauvoir 1989: 714)

In December 2012, Hiroshi Aoyagi (one author of this article) found himself involved in a long conversation with three of his university colleagues about a new fashion popular among some students. The chat revealed to Aoyagi the acute sense of discomfort felt by middle-aged (and frankly, sexist) men of high-social status in Japanese academia with the increasing number of young urban Japanese women who had begun to dress in overtly sexy outfits constituting a style called erokawa (エロかわ) or 'erotic-cute' fashion. One of these colleagues said that, in his eyes, these trendy young women of Japan today resembled 'call girls'. It seems that these female students had undermined his gender expectations by emphasizing their sexuality to a point beyond his ability to accept it.

The clothing to which these male professors were referring encompassed bareback dresses, tube tops, low-rising hot pants, tight jeans, and/or hyper miniskirts. In her observation of the way these fashion items are embodied, fashion analyst Diana Lee notes that those who wish to stay on the cutting edge of the erokawa style try to express 'transparent looks' by donning the so-called 'revealing bras' (misebura) and 'revealing panties' (misepan) that are made available in exclusive boutiques. Bright coloured bras are worn with plunging necklines, and G-string panties are designed to show from underneath hip-hugging jeans.¹ Some young women permanently adopt these erotic-cute – and by extension erokakkoi or 'erotic-cool' – styles, while others adjust the sexiness of their appearance according to the social settings in which they are situated (Figure 1).²

Hearing the way his colleagues viewed the overtly sexy-fancy self-ornamentation of their female students, Aoyagi's mind flashed back to a passage he had read years ago in Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe/The Second Sex* (1989), which suggests that prostitutes play an important social role from the standpoint of feminist critique in that these women who have been pushed to the periphery of society by gender politics in fact mirror how subserviently enslaved housewives could be. The very construction of this category of marginalized women also reveals how a male-dominated social system tries to justify and reinforce the secondary positioning of women by setting up a class of scapegoats that violate men's expectations on how their sexualized others should behave in the universalized territory called 'modern society'.

This brief observation recalls Linda Duits and Liesbet van Zoonen's (2006) analysis of the public discourses in contemporary Europe on controversial girls' clothing such as headscarves, G-strings and crop tops. They point out that, in the context of contemporary multicultural Europe, girls' bodies have become a site on which 'power – of Islam, capitalism or "men" – is inscribed' (2006: 114). Girls are now expected to navigate through the 'virgin/whore binary' and find a middle ground on the decency continuum – 'neither showing too much of it (G-string) nor denying it (headscarf)' (Duits and van Zoonen 2006: 111). Young women in contemporary Japan are no less spared

from this 'schizophrenic phenomenon' – namely, how to assert individuality and yet fit in; how to express sexual autonomy and yet not be viewed as overtly sexy/sexual – that has come to plague most late modern societies.

As Kaja Silverman notes, clothing 'draws the body so that it can be culturally seen, and articulates it as a meaningful form' (1986: 145, cited in Steele 1996: 186). Duits and van Zoonen take her argument a step further when they ask, 'what are girls *saying* with their garment?' (2006: 115, emphasis added). The tasks of our current investigation, then, are to determine the following: the characteristics of the erokawa style and its embodiment; the reasons that the style appeals to the taste of those who follow it; and the extent to which erokawa fashion is in fact self-authorizing for those who embody it. Incorporating studies on women's fashion, body and power with media analysis and ethnographic interviews, we argue that when erotic meets cute, a hybrid – and contradictory – style emerges, which provides a space for young Japanese women to locate themselves beyond the binaries of virgin/whore and passive/overt that inform the sexualization of femininity. Contrary to Aoyagi's male colleagues, who perceived the erokawa fashion style to be indecent and immoral, we read this media-promoted trend as a collectivizing practice conducted by and for pre-adult and young adult women in Japan's urban centres to publicly empower themselves by means of hyperbolic self-styling. More significantly, the erokawa phenomenon makes visible the tensions between the patriarchal regulation of women's sexuality and young women's attempts to assert agency and autonomy in contemporary Japanese society.

Ethnographic surveys for this study started in the spring of 2007, and continued until the summer of 2014. A total of 32 pre-adult and young-adult female participants whose age ranged between 18 and 27 were interviewed. The authors asked these participants about their lifestyle, public positioning and attitudes towards men. They were also asked what associations they would draw between these issues and their erotic-cute outfits. Relevant segments of these interviews are incorporated into the following discussion.³ Pseudonyms are substituted for the names of participants, whereas the names of public figures are left as such.

THE EROTIC-CUTE ERA ARRIVES IN JAPAN

The term erokawa, which is an abbreviation of 'erokute kawaii' or 'erotic-qua-cute', became popularized from around the mid-2000s. While the exact origins of the term are unclear, early usage of the term can be found in discussions among the gaming communities in the online forum 2chaneru in reference to female game characters that the fans labelled as 'moe' (cute; possessing affective elements). Erokawa came into circulation in the mainstream, especially in the fashion world, from around 2004 when pop singer Kumi Kōda used the term to describe her sexy fashion style (Shikata 2008). Although the term is commonly written as 'erokawa' in English, 'k' is often replaced with 'c' in Japanese popular media – in much the same manner as 'cawaii' has been popularly used in place of 'kawaii', and 'caccoii' in place of 'kakkoii'.⁴ Such a popular transcription aims to signify the eccentric, trans-traditional fanciness of the erotic-cute style. The jarring usage of 'c' instead of 'k' is akin to the shocking nature of the erotic-cute fashion itself, and it is in this spirit that we frame our discussion on the erokawa style. However, in order to remain consistent with the other articles in this issue, we have chosen to use the conventional English expression of 'kawaii' – and, thus, 'erokawa' – instead.

3. While the age of maturity in Japan is 20, to be considered a full-fledged adult (*ichininmae*) in contemporary Japan commonly connotes the shouldering of social responsibilities such as attaining full-time work, marriage and reproduction (Dasgupta [2005: 172] and Hidaka [2010: 84]). In this chapter, we use the term 'pre-adult' to generally refer to persons who are below the age of 20, and more specifically, to flag the 'pre-social-being' status of these young persons, which more or less coincides with their age.
4. Some examples include the now discontinued Japanese fashion magazine *Cawaii!* (1996–2009), and the CD compilation *Sparkle Erokawa Hits* released in 2007 by Universal International (a subsidiary of Universal Music Japan).



Figure 1: Examples of erokawaii fashion (street photos taken by the author).⁵

5. For other examples of the erokawa fashion, see the online fashion stores Terracotta (<http://item.rakuten.co.jp/terracotta/qso-y55303/>) and Wich (<http://item.rakuten.co.jp/wich/cl-308-107/>).

6. For more on 'womenomics' in Japan, see, for instance, Komine (2008).

In the erokawa style, cute elements are often visually incorporated by hanging fancy accessories onto dresses and bags. These accessories feature animated characters such as Rilakkuma (the contemporary Japanese equivalent of Teddy bear), Hello Kitty and Mickey Mouse (Figure 1, right).

In the long-standing mainstream discourse of Japanese patriarchy, kawaii has been one of the most influential signifiers of pre-adult femininity. The kawaii style is epitomized by the performances of young media-promoted personalities and their wannabes, who typically strike coy poses and publicly construct a persona that presents them as sweet, meek, benevolent subjects of sexual cultivation by adult men (Aoyagi 2005: 73–78, 81, 82). In 2009, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs selected three women, then in their 20s, as 'Ambassadors of Cute' (kawaii shinzen taishi) as part of its Cool Japan campaign. In Laura Miller's critique of the Schoolgirl, Lolita and Harajuku teen 'looks' that the ambassadors embodied, she argues that the appropriation of such forms of 'sanitized frilly Japanese girlhood' by the Cool Japan rhetoric not only essentializes Japanese girls and women and denies them agency, but also 'tells the story of masculine desires, fantasies and identities' (2011: 24, 27). At the same time, kawaii has also been used as a subcultural index for young Japanese women to develop their own alternate sphere: a domain representing a subjective stance that romanticizes remnants of childhood in order to resist growth, celebrates an immature mode of sexual purity, and stays aloof from the industrious but often filthy world of adult politics (Kinsella 1995: 241).

With the intensification of globalization, followed by the post-Enron Shock recession since 2001, the nation of Japan not only embraced collective inclinations towards internationalization, cultural diversity and individualism, but encouraged greater participation by women in the economy as well, in an effort known as 'womenomics'. In this new social climate, the monotonous imagery of kawaii began to take on a new twist, bringing to the fore previously repressed and/or submissive aspects of kawaii as instruments for juvenile women to collectively transform themselves from sexual objects to active participants in this new era.⁶ In effect, the young women of Japan today are

said to have generally become externally fancy, internally tough, and more independent – even selfish – than ever before.

In this context, many abbreviated hybrid buzzwords evolved around the extant, socially celebrated imagery of *kawaii* in the first decade of the twenty-first century, such as *erokawa*, *kirekawa*, and *kawakakkoi*, which combine the term *kawaii* with *eroi* (erotic), *kirei* (beautiful) and *kakkoii* (cool), respectively. Seemingly derogatory derivatives such as *busukawa*, *kimokawa* and *gurokawa* also appeared, juxtaposing the image of *kawaii* with words that signified unattractiveness such as *busu*, which is an abbreviation of *busaiku* meaning ‘ugly’, *kimoi*, which is an abbreviation of *kimochiwarui* meaning ‘disgusting’ and *guro*, which is an abbreviation of ‘grotesque’.

One of our participants Ruri (25-year-old boutique worker) explained that the emergence of these derogatory derivatives is a result and symbol of this era in which all young women can transform their public selves through a manipulation of their sexuality:

I think that words such as *busukawa* and *kimokawa* indicate this era in which even those [young women] who may be considered unattractive can creatively transform their public appearance into sexually attractive beings if they are willing to do so.

Another participant, Mina (27-year-old boutique manager), one of Ruri’s colleagues, added that these derivatives aptly symbolize an era in which young women are more sexually liberated than ever before:

Kawaii used to symbolize the passivity of premature women to be seen and characterized by those who adore them in public. I think that such a situation is passé by now. Even as an adorable girl, one has to actively set up and act out her public self-staging to be attractive these days. You can no longer be simply *kawaii* today, and therefore you need to arrange yourself in erotic, beautiful, or classy fashion. Buzzwords such as *erokawa*, and by extension *kirekawa* and *kawakakkoi* correspond to these manners of public self-staging.

In her blog, Maiko Kino alias MuteKino (age withheld), a self-proclaimed blogger, therapist, gravure idol, singer-songwriter, and analyst-qua-model of the *erokawa* fashion, addresses female readers to exhort them to stop caring about pleasing men and instead establish an independent place in Japan’s public sphere.⁷ As she elaborates:

Instead of trying to acquire ways to please men, you should be exploring ways to please yourself. Men are sexual beings that can please themselves by watching women being pleased. The admirable women of this era are those who can come to realize, and tell men, what pleases them – not only in the matters of sexual intercourse, but in every aspect of one’s life. Let us stop being male-committed girls, and instead become erotic-cute women who can earn male devotion. Such a stance will enable you to attain a good romance, a harmonious partnership, prosperity, and even a peaceful world.⁸

Such a view resembles Laura Miller’s argument on the proliferation of the *kawaii* aesthetic, which contends that the ‘warped cute or anti-cute aesthetics’

7. This personality adopts MuteKino as her Internet handle name, which puns on the term *muteki* meaning ‘almighty’ in Japanese. In doing so, Kino implies that she is a powerful woman, or one of the main actors of this era in which young women ought to be powerful and independent.

8. Originally cited from Kino’s blog profile page. The original citation is no longer available although excerpts of it can be found in the blog entries of Kanatsu Mieko (2014) and Tsubaki (2014).

such as kimokawa and gurokawa are more than mere manifestations of a contemporary fashion style or a product of consumer culture (2011: 23). Rather, these 'twisted forms of cute' make visible the 'resentments and anxieties circulating in girls' culture' (Miller 2011: 25). Our interviews reveal that erokawa is not perceived by our participants as merely a fashion style, but is tied to these young women's determination to focus on the joy of expressing themselves autonomously. The erokawa fashion can be seen as an accelerator of the general inclination in the popular realm of Japan today towards transforming the conventional public imagery of femininity from sexually passive objects to active agents of sexual self-empowerment wherein young women themselves are expected to take the initiative.

CONDITIONS OF EROTIC-CUTE EMBODIMENT

Two examples from our interviews conducted in March 2014 amplify the distinction our participants make between social settings in which the erokawa style could and could not be worn; or, rather, is seen to be appropriate or inappropriate. Marina (26-year-old office employee), who used to dress up in erokawa street fashion as a college student, contends that one should only apply the erokawa style outside of work. As she elaborates:

I would not wear to work things that may be considered to be erotic, however adorable they may appear to be. But then, I do enjoy styling myself in what you call the erokawa fashion outside of my work, on occasions such as going out after work and on holidays [...] If I worked in a company without a strict dress code and I found my coworkers wearing fancy clothing, I would definitely come to work in my erokawa style. Unfortunately, this is not the case with me now.

Ruriko (26-year-old office employee) who also dressed in erokawa outfits when she was attending college suggests a link between age and the erokawa style:

As a student I was free to wear pretty much anything I wanted, and all that mattered to me was the way I looked on campus. I think that you are entitled to such a degree of freedom in fashion as a pre-adult. With maturity, however, you are no longer entitled to such a privilege. It is like graduating from being a student [...] Now, I feel a kind of generation gap between myself and those students who are younger than me: they appear aggressive, often senseless and even vulgar at times [...] I think that as a girl matures, she needs to know herself, and how she should dress in various settings.

It is clear that Ruriko has established a boundary between a premature and thus socially less sensitive stage, and a mature and thus more socially sensitive stage of personal development in reference to the social viability of erokawa fashion and style. Being a mother with two children, Ruriko additionally identifies motherhood as a potent line of cognitive division for the appropriateness of her donning the erokawa style. As she elaborates:

In my case, having a child was a big turning point in my life. As far as the way I dressed up was concerned, I can say that I became less

interested in the erokawa type of self-presentation with exposed legs, tanned skin, and fancy ornaments, and more concerned instead about my outward presentation as a parent. The kind of people with whom I interact shifted from pals on campus to other mothers of various social backgrounds. Once my eldest child entered kindergarten, I became even more conscious about the way I appear in public spaces such as PTA meetings. Naturally, I am no longer as carefree in the way I look and behave as I was in my student days.

These data demonstrate that the erokawa mode of self-expression is socially acceptable only when it is performed within certain boundaries: that is, within the realm of one's private life. A woman's age and corresponding stage in life is a significant factor in determining her social status and hence the social settings in which she would usually find herself. The participants' toning down of, or even complete withdrawal from, their erokawa dress styles and behaviour once they leave university and embark on another stage in life reveals that erokawa fashion is largely confined to pre-adults who are not yet full-fledged members of society as workers, wives and mothers, and who have the luxury of time and money to invest in such a hyper-sexy-cutesy mode of self-styling. The irony here is that such a style is, or at least is expected to be, kept outside the realm of socially responsible adulthood despite its embrace of the visual characteristics of adult hyper-sexuality.

MEDIA SOURCING ON THE EROTIC-CUTE STYLE

A survey we conducted in August 2008 involving fifteen then university students (out of our 32 participants) identified Kumi Kōda (active since 2000), Namie Amuro (active since 1995), and Ayumi Hamasaki (active since 1998), better known by her abbreviated given name AYU, to be three of the most celebrated embodiments of the erokawa style in the media. All fifteen adored these pop divas, and considered them to be symbols that stood for Japan's neo-femininity. These participants also avidly followed Kōda, Amuro and Hamasaki's careers through media sources.⁹

In a group interview, six of these female participants (all in their early 20s at the time) offered a shared legend of Kōda's personal achievement that runs as follows: this self-willed talent nearly failed an audition contest due to the fact that she was 'overweight', but she did not give up. She underwent intensive dance training, tightened up her body proportions, and endured nearly two years of unmarketable adversity. She took advantage of this career lull to develop her skills and acquire mental toughness. Kōda subsequently managed to conquer both Japanese and American hit charts through her energetic singing and dancing performances, and in the end, became one of the most well-established erokawa pop divas in Japan (Figure 2).¹⁰ Our participants also pointed out that Kōda's promotion videos generally depict the diva's refined body postures along with her beautiful, empowering voice as she sings tragicomedies associated with fancy romance from the perspective of a young urbanized woman. The then 22-year-old participant Machi added a comment:

Kumi-chan is so sensitive and attractive in every way that she captured my attention, then my heart, in whichever way she performed in all of the videos and CDs that I have checked out so far!¹¹

9. Our interview data reveal that for our participants, the three major sources of idol profiles are: articles in fashion magazines; variety shows and other television programmes; and rumours heard from acquaintances.

10. Refer to Kōda's official website (<http://rhythmzone.net/koda/index.html>) for further examples of Kōda's erokawa embodiments.

11. The suffix 'chan' is applied after a name to denote one's sense of familiarity with the mentioned subject.

Together these data point to the fact that the symbolic cues that Kōda disseminates inspired these participants' sentiments, causing them to bestow Kōda with the title of the 'classiest figure of our time'. For these students, Kōda represents an ideal they wish to emulate in constructing their own image of selfhood.

These participants not only shared their tastes for the erokawa style but also the social stances that this style suggests. That is, they see themselves as self-reliant and self-controlled urbanites, emphasizing that they know what they want to do, along with when and why. Their ultimate slogan is 'to live in fun and fancy ways', which displays the general inclination that these pre-adult women have towards an 'elegant' lifestyle that consists of: decorating their bodies, living quarters and social environments with elegant ornaments; investing much of their time, money and energy in shopping, sightseeing and attending public events; and socializing with like-minded friends in classy urban centres such as Shibuya and Harajuku. Rather than blindly committing themselves to social obligations such as partnership, family, school and work, these young women prioritized ego-centrism – i.e. choosing affairs that captured their interest, and committing themselves to these activities so long as they were appealing.



Figure 2: The cover of a fashion guidebook featuring Kumi Kōda in erokakkōii style. The title of the book codifies the erokakkōii mode as the 'Kōda Style'. The cover reads: 'Dreams will come true!! All girls can definitely become pretty!! I can't help but believe this!!' Kōda's sentiments aptly capture the essence of erokawaii/erokakkōii. (Image reproduced with permission from Magazine House.)

Then 23-year-old Chika, another one of the fifteen participants interviewed in August 2008, worked part time in a small but ambitious and well-established apparel outlet for women in Shibuya. She was a connoisseur of fancy accessories, with which she was allowed to adorn herself at her workplace as a way to attract customers: a part of her job to which she attended with pleasure. Chika admired Ayumi Hamasaki for offering 'guidelines for life', in particular ways to publicly stylize and manage oneself.¹² In a separate interview conducted in the early summer of 2009, Chika said:

Like so many young women who loved AYU, I learned from this great model almost everything I could – from how to be pretty and cool and cute and clever to how to work with pride. AYU gave us a lot of energy [through her performances]! AYU provided us with confidence that we could [socially] establish ourselves if we are willing to do so, and that we don't have to be shy about going after our dreams!

Here, Chika confirms that AYU operates as a major referent in life for the purpose of her public self-expression and corresponding self-transformation. Chika's erokawa style routines took the form of listening to AYU's songs, screening the singer's performances on her iPod, analysing AYU's image as portrayed in fashion magazines, and attending as many AYU concerts as possible. Not only by imitating AYU in appearance (make-up, clothing and body postures), but also by adopting AYU's personal qualities and life values as they were transmitted by accessible media sources, Chika joined thousands of similar 'AYU-type girls' in the public construction of neo-femininity.

In Fritzsche's analysis of female fans' mimetic behaviour towards the Spice Girls, she argues that the Spice Girls, as an 'attractive point of reference', function as a 'toolbox' whose media images are appropriated by fans in the crafting of their individual identities and personal styles (2004: 159–60). Imitating the Spice Girls and associating themselves with the Spice Girls' appearances and attitudes, Fritzsche argues, enable the fans to navigate through societal norms vis-à-vis their own identities, which are often unconventional and nonconformist:

The mimetic approach toward the Spice Girls obviously allows them to negotiate social expectations about the ways girls are expected to move and display their bodies. In this way, they can experiment with finding their own position between not being fashionable enough and being too fashion-oriented, between being too plain and too sexy, dressing too poorly or showing off, and so on.

(2004: 157)

In a similar vein, stars like AYU and Kōda provide a template for young women like our participants to deal with the tensions between the prevailing gender norms in contemporary Japanese society and their personal identity choices, which are often against societal expectations. The interviews revealed that participants adopted the erokawa style with the intention of heightening their self-expression, self-control and self-empowerment in Japan's heterosexual public space that had long signified femininity as an object of heterosexual idealization, where women are positioned as the object of the male gaze and are judged by how well they conform to men's gender expectations. Through the embodiment and performance of the erokawa style via consumption and

12. For kawakakkoi images of AYU, refer to Ayumi Hamasaki's official website (<http://www.avexnet.or.jp/ayu/index.html>).

imitation of their erokawa idols, participants generally felt as if they were able to take their sexuality into their own hands; and the stars provide legitimation for such 'unconventional' acts of hyper-sexuality.

EROTIC-CUTE PERFORMANCES AND THE QUESTION OF YOUNG WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Our interview data highlight how young Japanese women feel themselves to be empowered, independent, and in control by adopting the erokawa fashion. Our point resonates with Katherine Mezur's argument on 'ero-porn' as an enactment of democratization by 'bad girls' as a means of sexual deterritorialization in globalizing Japan (2005). While Mezur's discussion encompasses 'bad girls' of various eras, we are specifically interested in what is happening in Japan today in terms of the praxis of erokawa styling.

Yet, the tones of optimism that appear in these analyses of popular feminism are overshadowed by the Frankfurtian view of critical sociology in general and Habermas' idea of the ecliptic transformation of public spheres in particular, which suggest that commercially embedded configurations are all parts of a false consciousness that contributes to the erosion of the democratic public sphere (1989). 'Pseudo-differentiation' (so to speak) of fashionable commodities, associated lifestyles, and the sense that the choices offered in the market result in an empowered consuming subject are in many ways a daydream created by the cultural industry. In such a light, one may argue that a transcendental style of new femininity would not in fact alter the existing heterosexist system of production, power and control. Like Habermas, de Beauvoir, as cited at the beginning of this article, was also interested in critiquing the modern course of humanity that was being obscured by emerging systems of ideological compulsion (e.g., see 1989: 556). Be it by bureaucracy, polity, corporate networks, mass media and/or heterosexual apparatuses of various kinds, our modern ways of life are mediated, controlled, tamed, subordinated, indebted and exploited by institutions that limit our ability to express what we are or what we want to be. In the same way that media advertisements tell us what to buy, eat, wear, listen to, watch or how to make our living, young women are required to coordinate their behaviours and lifestyles by means of the array of commoditized choices in the market that aim them towards the extremes of becoming either socially admirable wives and mothers or perceived as outcast backstreet prostitutes.

Similarly, Emma Renold (2008) argues that in today's neo-liberal, late capitalist societies, young women are able to exert choice and autonomy in the construction of their individual, feminine subjectivity, and even *expected* to do so, but only if they stay within the boundaries of heteronormativity. This is the paradox that informs contemporary feminine subjectivities, which Renold calls 'schizoid femininities' (2008: 130). On the one hand, the fact that 'one has to be self-willed and choose from a diverse palette of fashion and style possibilities became a normative expectation in itself' (Fritzsche 2004: 160). On the other hand, however, 'girls can invest in culturally "diverse" femininities (thus exercising choice) so long as they project coherent intelligible heterosexualized femininities (upholding the logic of sameness)' (Renold 2008: 130). Seen in this light, the erokawa style can be said to be a product of the 'schizoid condition' in which post-industrial Japan finds itself. In other words, while opening up a new space of sexual expression, the erokawa phenomena might only be a case of young women trying to find ways to come to terms with

male-dominated tropes of femininity by adding other symbolic elements onto the kawaii tradition in a way that ends up simply reaffirming the submissiveness of women under patriarchal rule.

The observations and interviews presented thus far do not escape the implication that practitioners of the erokawa style might merely be fighting for symbolic capital and difference within the existing capitalist system and heterosexist structure of power.¹³ If liberation, in a truly de Beauvoirian feminist sense, may only be achieved through the destruction of the very structure of compulsory institutions that entrap women in their material-, relational-, and cultural matrix of self-configuration, then the erokawa phenomena may arguably be said to effect no changes to the prevailing gender/sexual norms and male (sexual) domination of women.

However, as Duits and van Zoonen point out, dismissing women's fashion choices as mere consumer culture denies 'the cultural and political statements girls make with their garments' (2006: 113). Furthermore, in this current neo-liberal, post-feminist historical moment where 'schizoid subjectivity is a contemporary norm' (Renold and Ringrose 2008: 318), we argue that it is pointless to look for a grand revolution or a total decomposition of the gender regime. Rather, it would be more useful to locate moments of ruptures and subversion within the very structures of the heterosexual matrix, as Renold and Ringrose, following Deleuze and Guattari, assert (2008: 318). On one level, the mutation involved in presenting kawaii with an erotic edge may appear to be just one of the many ways through which women in Japan choose to perform their femininity 'differently', which arguably only brings about a false sense of empowerment. However, when erotic meets cute, the contradiction and ambiguity that result from the coming together of two seemingly incompatible heteronormative styles can be read as a moment of rupture that has the potential to rearticulate the meanings of 'erotic', 'cute' and by extension, 'femininity'.

In Masafumi Monden's reading of the contemporary performances of Lewis Carroll's fictional character Alice by three popular female Japanese singers, he views such performances as a form of soft subversion, or as he calls it, a 'delicate revolt' (2014: 279). In Japanese popular culture, Alice is often taken to be the exemplar of the *shōjo* (girl) who is innocent and asexual on the outside, but independent on the inside. Focusing on their appropriation of the Alice figure in their fashion styles and performances, Monden argues that Alice functions as a vehicle for three singers (Arisa Mizuki, Tomoko Kawase and Kaera Kimura) to 'maintain an intricate balance between infantile cuteness, asexuality and a sense of independence, which, delicately and implicitly, points to the construction of a girlish yet not necessarily passive or objectified mode of female appearance' (2014: 281). Like Miller's 'twisted forms of cute' and Monden's notion of 'delicate revolt', we can observe a similar mechanism at work in the erokawa style where notions of innocence, powerlessness and asexuality – the key characteristics of cute – are combined with overt sexuality, promiscuity and freedom, simultaneously infantilizing *and* sexualizing the practitioner. One is at once an adolescent and an adult, weak and strong, dependent and independent. One can be cute without the taint of helplessness, and be sexually attractive without being too sexual. Combining these codes of heterosexual femininity that have placed Japanese women on opposite ends of a scale – innocent sexual objects on one side and hyper-feminine, autonomous sexual subjects on the other – may throw such binary categorizations of young women into question. In erokawa fashion, the images

13. On this note, the authors wish to direct the readers' attention to Gabriella Lukacs' analysis of Japanese celebrities or *tarento* since the 1990s as being carriers of lifestyle choices. This seems to resonate strongly with the authors' findings that erokawa idols can be situated in the political economy of the post-1990s that emphasized the 'semiotic game' of production and consumption (Lukacs 2010).

14. Interestingly, immediately before the publication of this article, Kōda revealed in an interview with the online entertainment newspaper *Oricon Style* that at the time of her debut fifteen years ago, she in fact did not intend to market herself as an erokawai personality; rather, it was her producers who came up with the image of a 'sexy Kumi Kōda who sings and dances'. While this clearly points to the (male) constructed and commercialized nature of the erokawa style as embodied by Kōda, the influence of Kōda as a role model for many young Japanese women—as testified by our participants—also gestures at the agency that young Japanese women have in crafting their self-images, regardless of the (commercialized) nature of the 'original' image that they are emulating (Hoshino 2016).

of 'cutesy=innocent girl' and the 'sexy=malicious girl' are conflated into a symbolic unity.

In conclusion, the erokawa phenomena may be characterized as a dense site of sexual signification that simultaneously contains and transgresses the heterosexual classification of gender stereotypes. This fashion comprises a praxis through which women and (non-judgemental) men can reassert non-reductive relations between gender and sexuality, and together engage in a modal remapping of power that interrogates the formation of womanhood in the specific, geopolitical space called Japan today.¹⁴ While this may appear to be a redundantly small step towards gender democratization from the perspective of critical sociology, it could nevertheless be a counter-hegemonic leap in the direction of sexual liberation for young women who put the erokawa style into practice. Whether de Beauvoir would be delighted by such an inference or not may depend on what course for humanity this erokawa engineering will ultimately carve out for those who are inevitably drawn into it.

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Kawaii, kenosis, Verwindung: A reading of kawaii through Vattimo's philosophy of 'weak thought'

ABSTRACT

Kawaii is different from the western cute because it may also include 'cool'. The paradoxical coexistence of weakness and strength, of cute and cool, is interesting in philosophical terms. Kawaii is not simply weak but equipped with its own kind of strength. In this article, I explore kawaii by using philosophical ideas linked to the paradigm of 'strength out of weakness' that appears in the so-called 'weak thought' philosophy of Gianni Vattimo. The Heideggerian term Verwindung (twisting) as it is used by Vattimo, is at the centre of this analysis. Vattimo's philosophy is also based on the Christian idea of kenosis, a classic theological term that can be translated as 'weakening'. Feminist theologians use the concept of kenosis in order to 'feminize' theology. It is in this context that kawaii can be shown as bringing together such antagonistic qualities as submission and subversion. Vattimo's Verwindung describes the effect of distortion to which gender distinctions are submitted through the impact of kawaii. As a result, kawaii should be seen as femininity without meta-narratives because kawaii strips feminist gestures of their metaphysical features.

KEYWORDS

Kawaii
Japanese popular
culture
Gianni Vattimo
kenosis
Verwindung
weak thought
feminist theology

1. The world kawaii can be written with the Chinese characters 可愛 (ke'ai), meaning roughly 'which can be loved'. It appears for the first time in the eleventh century in Murasaki Shikibu's *Genji Monogatari* as the root word kawai. The phonological resemblance to the Chinese pronunciation of ke'ai seems to be merely coincidental.
2. See also Haruka Kanaï who explains that the original meaning of the related word kawayushi has five meanings:

(1) shy or embarrassed, (2) pitiful and vulnerable, (3) poor or sorry, (4) loveable and cute and (5) small and beautiful [...]. Even in today's dictionary, the first meaning is same as the old one. Here, it is obvious that the last two minor meanings of kawayushi are now meant when people say, 'Kawaii!' (2007)

'Kawaisō,' an expression that has the same root word as kawaii, means 'pitiable' or 'poor and pathetic'. On the link between kawaii and kawaisō see also Burdelski and Mitsuhashi (2010: 82) who explain that both words express 'omoiyari (empathy), broadly meaning a capacity to be thoughtful and considerate of others, to have sympathy for their feelings and present condition, and to understand and guess their will, desire, and emotions'.

STRENGTH THROUGH WEAKNESS

The aesthetics of kawaii developed rapidly in Japan since the 1980s, and in the late 1990s, turned into an explicit culture of which Pokémon animals and Hello Kitty are the most famous symbols. Since around 2006, Japanese contemporary popular culture has become fashionable worldwide. In my book *The Cool-Kawaii: Afro-Japanese Aesthetics and New World Modernity* (2011) I have noted important parallels between cool and kawaii. This is difficult to understand if one considers that the word kawaii is normally defined as cute, childlike, sweet, innocent, pure, gentle and weak.¹ The association with cool is particularly surprising if one considers that kawaii is derived from an archaic Japanese word meaning a person whose face turned red from embarrassment. Nittono et al. explain that kawaii 'was originally an affective adjective derived from an ancient word, kawa-hayu-shi, which literally means face (kawa) flushing (hayu-shi)' (2012: n.p.).² Embarrassment is definitely not cool. At first sight, cool and kawaii appear as opposites. Cool seems to be masculine while kawaii seems to be feminine. Cool is based on a *dissimulation* of emotion, while kawaii is focused on an ostentatious *display* of sentimentality. Cool is defined by a gang's leader, while kawaii seems to be an option expressed by women who have decided not to grow up. However, in the Japanese context in particular, and elsewhere to an increasing degree, the relationships and interactions between cuteness and coolness are much more complex. Most of the time, in mainstream European and American cultures, cool and cute are defined as opposites. However, kawaii unites them. One reason for this is that both kawaii and cool are elastic: they are able to unite contradictory elements and can thus cover larger fields of aesthetic expressions.

The classical definitions of Dick Pountain and David Robbins identify the aesthetics and ethics of coolness as the 'passive resistance to the work ethic through personal style' (2000: 41). The driving force of cool is seen as a 'defence mechanism against the depression and anxiety induced by a highly competitive society' (2000: 158). It is not difficult to locate this force behind Japan's kawaii culture as well. Japanese women still face significant gender-based oppression. Workplace equality is often still a dream. Traditional Confucianism teaches women to be humble and reverential in relation to men; and these ideals of submissive women and firmly assigned gendered roles in families still dominate in modern Japanese society.

Kawaii cannot be reduced to mere submissiveness. It is also a form of protest, especially against the traditional ideals described above. Like cool, it may also function as a liberation project supposed to have an effect on the real world. 'Cute is a virtue and, in an oddly paradoxical way, it is strength', says Shiokawa (1999: 107). Many researchers have emphasized the 'strong' aspect of kawaii. For Sharon Kinsella, cute is 'weakness transformed into strength' (1995: 249). In the imaginary world of manga and anime many female characters play strong and leading roles and, since the 1980s, they fight increasingly alongside their male companions. The 'strength through kawaii' theme popular in manga appears in reality in various forms, one of which is the 'school-girl phenomenon', which has produced a new generation of 'manipulative, choosy, cute young women' ready to humiliate men (Kinsella 1995: 249). Tzu-I Chuang has analysed the position of kawaii in Taiwanese society focusing on 'parasite girls' who simply profit from cuteness. Her research very clearly challenges the assumption that cuteness is a feature of the weak, concluding that: 'the conventional association of cuteness with vulnerability seems to be

slowly wearing out' (2005: 26). She provides the example of a female politician who acts cute when appearing on television talk shows in pursuit of popularity, which shows that 'professional maturity does not necessarily preclude girlish behaviours' (2005: 24). Yano even speaks of 'Pink Power' as the kawaii version of post-feminist girl power embracing both feminism and femininity, and distinguishes it from consumer-oriented girl culture (2013: 202–03).

VATTIMO'S PHILOSOPHY OF WEAK THOUGHT

The paradoxical coexistence of weakness and strength, of cute and cool, is interesting in philosophical terms. Kawaii is not simply weak but equipped with its own kind of strength. In this section, I explore kawaii by using some philosophical ideas linked to the paradigm of 'strength out of weakness' as it appears in the so-called 'weak thought' philosophy of the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo. One of the reasons why kawaii is strong in such paradoxical terms is that kawaii is supposed to *seduce*; and seduction is never a matter of mere strength, but rather of strength implemented through weakness. Accordingly, the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard has explained that anything able to seduce can do so only because it is weak: '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' (1990: 83).

A certain kind of weakness is thus strong by definition. Conversely, the same is true for cool, which some people mistakenly interpret as a mere gesture of strength. Coolness is also supposed to seduce and therefore depends on an intrinsic weakness. It is a strength that can be weak and in addition, like kawaii, a strength that derives a part of its power from weakness. 'To be cool' rarely signifies the straightforward accumulation and indiscriminate use of power, because such behaviour would be rather 'uncool'. On the contrary, very often cool also insinuates an apparent lack of control, strength, stability and confidence. Gloor and Scott believe that 'it's cool to give power away' (2007: 27) because one who is able to give up power manifests strength by doing so. Another important point is that the displayed weakness is often only 'apparent' and not real. It should never be forgotten that both cool and kawaii pose as poses, which may allow a strength contrary to their weak appearance to shine through.

Gianni Vattimo has explored the 'strength of weakness' theme like no other philosopher. His 'weak thought', developed since the 1980s in Italy and internationally, represents an important current of postmodern thought. It has managed to remain distinct from the philosophy of deconstruction, with which it is often associated, in several key respects.

Kenosis

Perhaps surprisingly, Vattimo's philosophy is based on the Christian idea of kenosis, which is a classic theological term that can be translated as 'weakening'. It is possible to enter the kawaii discussion via a reflection on kenosis, especially considering how this concept is employed by feminist theologians. Literally, kenos means 'to empty' in Greek and St. Paul uses the word in the Philippians 2:5–9, where he writes that 'Jesus made himself nothing' and 'emptied himself taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient [even] unto death, yea, the death of the cross'. Kenosis is the weakening

and the self-emptying or self-renunciation of Christ: that is, Christ's giving up the form of God and taking the form of a servant and ultimately dying on the cross. Kenosis has also been used in various other contexts. In more general terms, kenosis can refer to people who willingly humiliate and debase themselves. Sometimes (e.g. with regard to some characters in Dostoevsky's novels), the self-humiliation takes place in order to receive exaltedness in return.

Philosophically, kenosis can be understood as a particular form of nihilism: that is, as the project of negating certain values. Vattimo derives much of his philosophy from Nietzsche's assumption that 'it is the moderate that are ultimately destined to triumph, as are "those who do not require any extreme articles of faith; those who not only concede but love a fair amount of accidents and nonsense"' (Nietzsche 1968, Aphorism 32, Summer–Autumn 1888, quoted from Vattimo 1997: 29). The moderate and apparently weak, in other words, will ultimately overcome and rule over those who appear to be strong.

Weak thought inspired by kenosis prevents all kinds of 'fake strengths' such as fanaticism, which is a typical example of weakness convinced it is strong. In *After Christianity* Vattimo writes: 'In the Babel-like world of pluralism, cultural and religious identities are destined to move toward fanaticism unless they explicitly develop in a spirit of weakness' (2002: 100). Taken to an extreme, atheism may become fanaticism. A fixation on the power of science and technology may go the same route. In a world where every person who thinks 'differently' can be labelled a terrorist, weak thought has a useful function in practically any political or cultural field. By refusing theological and scientific rigidity in philosophy, theology and real life, a kenosis-based approach to thinking turns out to be more humane because it opposes all simplistic physico-mechanical visions of social life as well as all authoritarian structures. Weak thought insists on the interrelatedness of things and sees the world in terms of organic, and not 'metaphysically established' linear and hierarchical structures. Finally, being less anthropocentric, weak thought criticizes the view that humans are made in the image of God.

As may be expected, the elements of the 'strong' and the 'weak' as they appear in Vattimo's philosophy have quickly been identified as gendered metaphors. Weak thought can conveniently be interpreted as a 'rationality [that] must de-potentiate itself' (Borradori 1987–1988: 39). Reiner Schürmann speaks of compassion (another translation of kenosis) as 'a forte of the so-called weak sex, [...] and a foible for the so-called strong sex', and worries 'about the revolution Vattimo foment: will [the revolution] come from the bad weakness of the strong sex in need of standards [...] or will it come from the good weakness of the weak sex?' (2006: 126)

FEMINIST THEOLOGY

These issues have also been of interest to feminists and, since weak thought involves the concept of kenosis, to feminist theologians in particular. In general, feminist theologians criticize the link between Christianity and patriarchy, sometimes questioning whether women should not leave Christianity behind, or suggesting to replace God with a Goddess in order to cause a metaphoric shift in how we view the world (cf. Christ 2004: 82). Most of the time, Christian kenosis has not been recognized as being of any value for feminist thought, but has instead been described as mere 'obedience, humility, and self-sacrifice [...] used throughout the history of Christianity to maintain

women in situations of oppression' (Papanikolaou 2003: 41). From a feminist point of view, kenosis can easily appear as 'a model which men need to appropriate' (Hampson 1990: 155), while any self-emptying or self-abnegation of women runs counter to the project of empowering women. Even more, 'kenotic feminism' sounds like an oxymoron (cf. Frascati Lochhead 1998: 159).

KAWAII AND WEAK THOUGHT

Here we come back to kawaii. As I wrote above, kawaii is strength out of weakness. Kawaii is a contradiction because it is not merely an aesthetic of the 'powerless in need of subversion... but instead an enfant terrible that could complicate, as much as lubricate social relations' (Hjorth 2003: 160). By posing as weak, kawaii women speak the language Japanese men want to hear, thus gaining a quantity of freedom that perhaps no open feminist confrontation could have obtained. In this sense, kawaii culture challenges the idea that institutionalized sexism renders Japanese women completely powerless. While the western 'cute' is merely helpless and weak, 'teddy bears frozen in mid-embrace, the stubs of their pawless arms groping for hugs', as Daniel Harris writes (2000: 2), kawaii is known for its aggressive tempers and violent tendencies, so well illustrated by the dynamism of female manga and anime heroes. The typical kawaii figure of the *shōjo* (girl) is very often demonic as much as she is cute.

The paradoxical fusion of opposing qualities is typical for other aspects of Japanese culture. While Disney heroines are one-dimensional and usually centred around certain character qualities, the *shōjo* represents a sort of decentred femininity able to unite, among other things, the erotic with the sexless, or childlike freedom with the formalism of adults (cf. Momus 2001). The childlike behaviour of kawaii women suggests a renunciation of sexuality, but at the same time it hides the opposite underneath its visible, cute surface. Kawaii is constantly informed by mature and at times calculating identities. This means that kawaii can join together even such radically antagonistic qualities as submission and subversion.

In feminist Sarah Coakley's classical argument, freedom and submission need not be mutually exclusive, and a language of humility and vulnerability is not necessarily the nullification of power. Coakley calls this idea the 'paradox of power and vulnerability' (2002: x) and believes that this paradigm is difficult to popularize because 'power is in vogue, submission is not' except for people interested in S-M sessions (2002: xii). In the case of kawaii, the so-called 'vulnerable female' develops a weak style and a weak behaviour that can function as feminist weapons. For Yuko Hasegawa, *kawaiisa/cuteness* is therefore an 'undefined or indeterminate state in which "determination" (maturity) is never reached, [and which] has the potential to perform a political function of undermining current ideologies of gender and power' (2002: 140). This kind of feminism does not *overcome* the submissive state of the feminine by transforming the latter into a powerful masculinist attitude. Rather, as I show below, it employs an improper and distorted method of overcoming the vulnerable.

VERWINDUNG

Vattimo calls the improper way of overcoming strength 'Verwindung'. Verwindung is a German term originally coined by Martin Heidegger, who used it – though rather sparingly – in discussions of overcoming traditional

3. Heidegger uses the word *Verwindung* is a passage in 'Anaximander's Saying' (in *Off the Beaten Track*), in 'Overcoming Metaphysics' (in *The End of Philosophy*), and in *Identity and Difference*.

metaphysical ways of thinking.³ According to Vattimo, it is Nietzsche's philosophy that most efficiently enacts the idea of *Verwindung*. *Verwindung* does not refer to a straightforward overcoming (which would be *Überwindung* in German), but rather to a twisted, distorted and ironical adoption of the element to be overcome. It is thus a tortuous kind of overcoming. For Vattimo, *Verwindung* represents the 'declination of difference into weak thought' (2012: 45) and marks 'the attitude which characterizes post-metaphysical thought in relation to the tradition handed down by metaphysics' (2012: 46). This does not mean that *Verwindung* and weak thought are identical terms, but rather that *Verwindung* is one of the patterns that drives the latter. Metaphysical, religious and scientific thinking (all three of which depend upon each other) represent 'strong thought' present in the form of progressivist or universalist conceptions of truth or of history, of fixed identities as well as traditions and monotheistic theologies. Those forces should not be 'overcome' through more progressive thinking, more universalism, etc.; nor should one fall into the other extreme and become reactionary or purely individualist. Weak thought implies the twisting (*verwinden*) of those existing tendencies until they have turned into something different: something more humane and more acceptable.

It has often been pointed out that Japanese, as opposed to westerners, are more inclined towards a way of thinking that is able to unite binary oppositions that western metaphysical thought declares incompatible. Sumiko Iwao, for example, writes:

Dichotomous values or categories – private/public, good/bad, happy/unhappy, winner/loser, male/female – are not seen by Japanese as the only options: Between the two ends of the scale there is usually a broadly perceived zone of yet further options. Between absolute goodness and evil, for example, is a wide territory that contains both the good and the bad. Happiness is always marred by some difficulty or unhappiness, and unhappiness is never completely devastating.

(1993: 10)

Iwao's account looks very much like a description of weak thought bound to deconstruct metaphysical thought patterns determined by the absolutes of good and evil. Ian Buruma has observed that in the West 'a hero must ultimately be on the side of virtue. Even anti-heroes never turn out to be as bad as they look' while Japanese heroes 'need not have any goodness in them; they are as they present themselves. [...] Badness is accepted as part of the human condition' (1984: 130). One point that makes possible such a *Verwinden* of metaphysical notions is the shift from the rigid realm of ethics to the more flexible realm of aesthetics. Buruma observes: 'Japanese heroes are judged aesthetically rather than ethically. The bad man can be a hero as long as his behaviour, however murderous, has a certain kind of style; as long as he is *kakkoii*' (1984: 130). *Kakkoii* (格好いい) means cool, and the model of weak thought and *Verwindung* indeed provides an appropriate description not only of *kawaii* but also of coolness in general. Jazz, for example, one of the most classic expressions of cool, functions by appropriating existing material and twisting it through improvisation and rhetorical innovation.

The straightforward overcoming (*Überwindung*) based on a Platonic-Aristotelian identification of being with *physis* (nature), is a cornerstone of western metaphysics and science. Frascati Lochhead detects this old pattern

of overcoming in early feminist theology, which 'often attempted to replace a strong metaphysical androcentrism with an equally strong metaphysical gynocentrism' (1998: 9). Lochhead, on the other hand, accepts Vattimo's understanding of Verwindung and employs it in a feminist context as 'acceptance, resignation, distortion [and] healing. In the transformation envisioned in the emancipating words of women, there is a sense of richness, of fullness, of flourishing, an appeal to a new and fuller life' (1998: 172).

Verwindung is a post-metaphysical alternative and it is appropriate in social contexts where dichotomies (weak-strong, feminine-masculine), rather than being *overturned* (by turning the weak into the strong, the feminine into the masculine), are better opposed by being 'twisted' and torn. Kawaii implements such a process of Verwindung, which becomes clear through Macias and Evers's description of the kogal fashion subculture: 'While previous Japanese schoolgirl tribes, such as the Sukeban and the Lady's, tried to break from societal norms by acting tougher and older than they actually were, the Kogals (kodomo) went in the opposite direction. They flaunted their youth (the class uniform functioned as a kind of badge of authenticity of school age) and wanted to look as adorable as humanly possible' (Macias and Evers 2007: 49). Kawaii functions within an anti-metaphysical context as it overcomes, through its innate elasticity that is so reminiscent of Verwindung, precisely those dichotomies that Vattimo would identify as metaphysical and typically Christian.

It has often been noted that clear limits between the sexual and the non-sexual, so important for monotheistic religions, do not exist in the same way in Japan. According to Mari Noguchi, Judeo-Christian culture makes sexuality incompatible with childishness and sexually interested women are supposed to shed anything childish when becoming adult. She affirms that in Japan such a dichotomy does not exist (Noguchi 1997, quoted in Lebra 2004: 87). Furthermore, Christine Yano writes that 'kawaii is not a negation of responsibility so much as the spinning of those responsibilities back into what looks like child's play' (2004: 70). Even the marketing of Hello Kitty plays 'with desire and ambiguity' (Yano 2013: 37). This sounds like a blueprint of Verwindung, and not only because of the metaphorical use of the word 'spinning' reminiscent of twisting. The element of play, central to hermeneutics (of which Vattimo is one of the main contemporary representatives) is also part and parcel of kawaii, which relies on instability, metamorphosis and is thus an 'ideal artistic vehicle for expressing the postmodern obsession with fluctuating identity' (Napier 2005: 12). Through kawaii, sexual elements can be integrated during the process of 'spinning responsibilities into child's play' just like other elements that metaphysical dichotomies would normally exclude.

The idea that kawaii is the product of an act of Verwindung is reinforced when looking at kawaii's genesis. Shiokawa explains that when men drew *shōjo*, they depended on the classic notion of kawaii, which has the meaning of 'tragic' and 'helpless'; but in the 1960s, as women comic artists participated more and more in the production of manga, *shōjo* heroines became active, tenacious, but still cute, characters (cf. Shiokawa 1999: 100). In this fashion, women distorted the initial meaning of cuteness and transformed it into a sort of strength that remained based on weakness. Very clearly, the initial cuteness was not overcome (rejected) but twisted (*verwunden*). Through creative transgressions and fundamentally ambivalent mimicry, kawaii could develop as a sort of decentred soft power.

4. See the Brony research website www.bronyresearch.com.

WEAK THOUGHT AND GENDER IDENTITIES

Schürmann asks the question: 'Does a kenosis-based philosophy preach the feminization of the male or rather the virilization of the female?' (2006: 126). Of course, the latter option is not the desired one because it would produce, in the words of Schürmann, 'more of the same in the West: more standards, more universals, more metaphysics' (2006: 126). I demonstrated above that kawaii is produced through a *verwindende* gesture, gaining power by turning straightforward strength into 'strong weakness'. As a result, we can speak neither of feminization nor of masculinization. By its nature, kawaii is not exclusively feminine, just like it cannot be equated with mere infantilization. One reason for this is that the definition of kawaii also includes the a-sexual in the form of, the childish non-sexual. Though it may be sexualized in its reception, the initial androgyny of kawaii makes it extremely flexible in terms of gender.

This becomes clear by examining the ways in which gender identities are affected by *Verwindung*. Superficially speaking, it looks as if kawaii acts to feminize the masculine. However, this process is more complex than most people would assume. Schürmann's question about the relationship between the masculine and the feminine, once the philosophy of weak thought is really implemented, is interesting in any context, but especially so in the context of kawaii. There is no doubt that cross gender tendencies do appear in Japanese kawaii culture. In general, kawaii possesses a synthetic power of hybridization and to western observers, the gender identities of young Japanese often appear blurred. 'Equal proportions of men and women use kawaii to customize their phones' writes Hjorth (2003: 56) and Yano has identified cute 'character goods' for both male and female customers (2013).

Furthermore, a male type of kawaii exists. The male cute is not an exclusively Japanese phenomenon but sporadically surfaces in western youth culture as well. Nerdish 'Bronys', male fans of the animated television series *My Little Pony* are one example.⁴ However, in Japan this development is more systematic. Treat noted in the early 1990s that the boyfriends of *shōjo* in manga seemed to have become kawaii themselves: 'Young male characters to whom the *shōjo* are attracted, are very *shōjo*-like themselves: prone to tears and attuned emotionally to their *shōjo* friends, they "do not seem to have much vitality" and distinguish themselves by their "pale complexion and sensitive features"' (1996: 293–94). Even more explicit examples of male kawaii are found in the gender-role transcending, androgynous *bishōnen* (effeminate, beautiful young man) and in the costumes of Visual Kei musicians, whose looks come very close to that of women.

This phenomenon, which can so easily appear as a feminization of the masculine, is not new. For decades it has been observed that 'not just women, but men, too, engage in cosmetic beautification. Men patronize male beauty salons and follow such formerly female trends as keeping the body hairless' (Lebra 2004: xii). The feminization of young men has also been described in harsh and purely negative terms, for example by Osamu Nakano who finds that today 'the feminine principle dominates the family. Proof is seen in young peoples' diluted sense of identity, the spinelessness of boys and vigour of girls, and the unisex fusion of male and female culture' (1988: 13). Nakano criticizes the fact that nuclear families have 'no paterfamilias, no particular authority figure. The father is absent both functionally and as an authority figure' (1988: 13). In this situation, young people are more inclined than ever

to 'repudiate the maturity demanded by the norms of adult society and prefer to remain "kids"' (1988: 14). Critique of male kawaii comes not only from conservative observers but also from creators who actively participate in the production of kawaii. Artist Takeshi Murakami talks about 'Japan's infantilized, emasculated (even "castrated"), post-war condition' (Yano 2013: 6), to which he attributes the formation of Japan's kawaii culture.⁵

5. There is no space here to approach the phenomenon of transgender culture.

It is true that kawaii (just like cool) often appears as a symptom of anomie, confusion, anxiety, self-gratification and escapism. Kawaii rarely finds mainstream social approval as the display of 'healthy' aspects of femininity or masculinity. In spite of this, the application of kawaii should not be understood as a mere feminization of the male, but rather as a complex *twisting* (Verwindung) of male structures. Though it is true that some women's groups like the 'Lady's', 'Bad Girls' or 'Crazy Riders' in Shinjuku in the 1990s tended to prefer slightly feminine, weaker men, and cute boys (cf. Macias and Evers 2005: 36), the weakening of gender identities does not function as a mere 'overturning' but as a Verwindung of gender roles.

Given that the concept of kawaii is not an intrinsically feminine phenomenon, we must acknowledge that this weakening of the male does not simply apply the norms of the feminine to the masculine. Rather it creates, through a playful act, its own rules and its own game of aesthetic presentation. In other words, the masculine idealization of kawaii is not a female fixation adopted by men. To prove the case: the bishōnen has a slightly gloomy look that is normally incompatible with the ideal feminine. In addition, the aestheticism of male kawaii remains based on the principle of seduction, more precisely on seduction through transgression. James Welker writes that the bishōnen 'is visually and psychically neither male nor female [...] he lives and loves outside the heteropatriarchal world' (2006: 842). The male kawaii does not seduce through mere femininity. This is why the bishōnen appears as enigmatic, imponderable and often quasi-unheimlich.

The fact that these cross-gender tendencies do not lead to the dissolution of gender identities is due to the simple reason that weakening should not be equated with liquefaction. Liquefaction happens when the 'solid' part of a cultural item (or of a gender identity) has been 'dissolved' and when, within the signifying process, the signifier has become completely detached from the signified. For Zygmunt Bauman 'modernity [has been] a process of liquefaction from the start' (2000: 2). Bauman describes liquefaction as a state in which social relationships 'are unlikely to be given enough time to solidify, and cannot serve as frames of reference for human actions' (2007: 1) because 'society is increasingly viewed and treated as a "network" rather than as a "structure" (let alone a solid "totality")' (2007: 3). Liquefaction is a typical feature of alternative cultures and youth cultures, which disrupts 'the orderly sequence which leads from signifier to signified' (Hebdige 1979: 52) by alienating traditional signs and by using them for other purposes. Or, in Baudrillard's words, when the disruption is total, when the exchange of signifiers happens without concern for referentiality, then reality has indeed been lost and 'signs are exchanged against each other rather than against the real' (1993: 7). In Japan this autonomous use of signs is relatively current: Japanese 'skater fashions' or 'punk fashions' are often a matter of mere aestheticism; those styles do not refer to a 'real' culture but remain purely a 'formalist' and self-sufficient arrangements of signs.

Why do youth cultures, particularly in Japan, engage in such liquefactions? The 'cool factor' is certainly a major reason. The play with the values of

discourse (signs) that are detached from meaning and reality gives the feeling of lightness that is normally only proper to play (as opposed to the real) and therefore 'cool'. The problem is that whenever the weakening process of deconstruction goes extremely far and the link between signifier and signified becomes very loose, we are facing the danger of relativism. Then everything is possible and nothing is decidable. At this point youth culture becomes the 'celebration of vapidness' (Treat 1996: 283) that many observers find so typical of popular culture in Japan.

In general, postmodern society tends to push us towards such a wilful indifference towards the meaning of codes, thus enabling the commutation of signs into a variety of significations. Then we observe the commutation of 'the beautiful and the ugly in fashion, of the left and the right in politics, of the true and the false in every media message' (Baudrillard 1993: 9). Kawaii culture takes place within such a postmodern context. The liquefaction factor is very high, which accounts for the versatility and flexibility of Japanese youth culture in terms of distribution and adaptation. This is not only true for Japan. To some extent, it concerns also international movements like, for example, Third Generation feminism or Girl Power movements, where, in the words of Susan Hopkins, empowered women are 'both radical and conservative, real and unreal, feminist and feminine' (2002: 6). However, one has to keep in mind that kawaii as *Verwindung* does not include such a nihilist programme but is simply in search of new styles and new expressions.

CONCLUSION

The above reflections on weak thought have shown that it is more appropriate to interpret the main tendencies of kawaii in the sense of a *Verwindung* and as the weakening of strong structures, and not in the sense of a relativistic liquefaction. If it were otherwise, kawaii could not represent strength. It would be simply an absurd behaviour without any meaning. It is thus correct to conclude that kawaii strips both femininities and masculinities of their metaphysical features. In the world of kawaii, to be feminine or masculine does not represent a metaphysically founded value in the form of a rationalized, calculated sense of being, but is merely cultural and therefore playful. In other words, kawaii is femininity and masculinity without meta-narratives, that is, without the transcendent meta-basis with which femininity and masculinity are normally justified ('women have to be like this', 'feminist women should not act like this', etc.). This does not mean that kawaii (or also cool) will necessarily end up as merely relativist statements. On the contrary, relativism is precisely the product of metaphysical pluralism, which still recognizes a central, Cartesian point of reference and derives plurality from this transcendental point. Kawaii on the other hand, functions in the realm of the metaphorical and the deconstructive, which is why it represents a true alternate power that does not simply *overturn* existing structures but twists and distorts them. This does not mean that it aims for the liquidly relativistic (which is the binarily opposed end of metaphysically established authenticity). Philosophers of weak thought try to achieve the authentic as a playful action flowing out of the game of social interaction. In this sense, kawaii is not more or less authentic in terms of 'the feminine' or 'the masculine'; rather it is authentic on its own terms.

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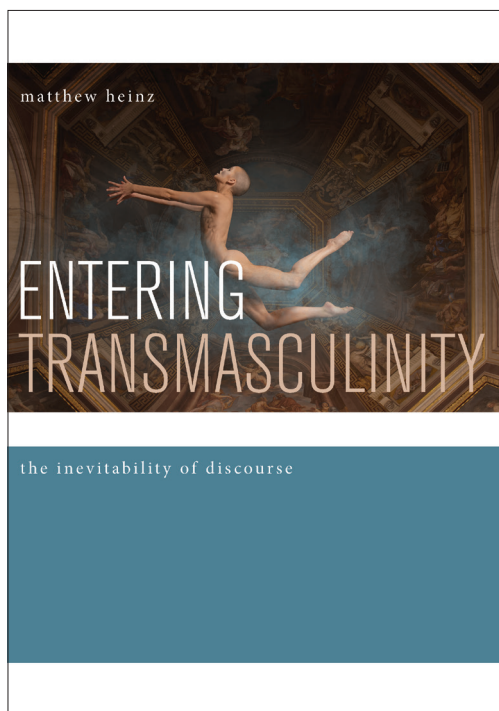
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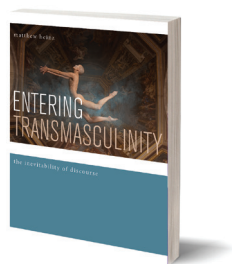
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Entering Transmasculinity

The Inevitability of Discourse

matthew heinz



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Entering Transmasculinity is a holistic study of the intersecting and overlapping discourses that shape transgender identities. In the book, matthew heinz offers an examination of mediated and experienced transmasculine subjectivities and aims to capture the apparent contradictions that structure transmasculine experience, perception, and identification. From the relationship between transmasculinity's emancipatory potential and its simultaneously homogenizing implications, to issues of gender-queerness, sexual minorities, normativity, and fatherhood, *Entering Transmasculinity* is the first book to synthesize the disparate areas of academic study into a theory of the transmasculine self and its formation.

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‘But I am a kid’: Optimizing adolescence in Oshii Mamoru’s *The Sky Crawlers*

ABSTRACT

Oshii Mamoru’s 2008 film The Sky Crawlers imagines a world in which cloned adolescents (Kildren) are made to fight staged aerial battles for the entertainment of the TV-viewing public. This article uses the narrative and visual aesthetic of The Sky Crawlers to examine what it means to be an adolescent, a killer, and a human being in a world where reality and spectacle have become indistinguishable, and where both the bodies of young people and the very idea of adolescence (as a liminal state defined by a lack of experience in and wisdom about the world) have been commodified by corporations. The existence of the Kildren and the world they live in is made all the more vivid through the visual framework of anime, which has a long history of using contrasting drawing styles (hyper-real for machines, hand-drawn for humans). This framework allows The Sky Crawlers to re-imagine the idea of ‘deathlessness’ in anime and manga, with the hand-drawn bodies of Kildren characters emphasizing the impermanent, recyclable nature of their existence. The film points to a world in which spectacle reigns supreme, and everything – bodies, emotions, the very concept of adolescence – has the potential to be optimized to enhance that spectacle.

KEYWORDS

anime
adolescence
The Sky Crawlers
simulacra
affect
spectacle

In ‘Simulacra and science fiction’, one of two essays published in 1991, Jean Baudrillard expands on ‘The precession of simulacra’ (1981) to examine various types of simulacra and their role in science fiction. Where science

fiction once constituted a realm of invented futures and impossible-seeming advances in science, Baudrillard argues that the division between reality and invention has been obliterated:

There is no real and no imaginary except at a certain distance [...] Currently, from one order of simulacra to the next, we are witnessing the reduction and absorption of this distance, of this separation which permits a space for ideal or critical projection... Models no longer constitute an imaginary domain with reference to the real; they are, themselves, an apprehension of the real, and thus leave no room for any fictional extrapolation [...] now nothing distinguishes this management-manipulation from the real itself: there is no more fiction. (1991)

As an example of science fiction worlds that have become reality, Baudrillard describes certain

East German simulacra-factories, factories which rehire unemployed people in all the roles and all the positions of the traditional manufacturing process, but who produce *nothing*, whose only activity involves chain-of-command games, competition, memos, account sheets, etc., all within a huge network.

(1991, original emphasis)

Such factories, Baudrillard argues, are not fake – they are hyperreal, and their hyperreal status ‘(sends) all “real” production, that of “serious” factories, into the same hyperreality’ (1991). Where once copies had a referent in reality, simulacra point to an absence of reality, a ‘generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal’ (Baudrillard 1981: 1732). Another example is Disneyland, which sets itself up as a copy of the United States but actually ‘(conceals) the fact that the real is no longer real’ (Baudrillard 1981: 1741). The most compelling aspect of these situations is not the contrast between real/fake places, but the lack of distinction between them. Beyond copies of the real, we are now faced with copies that have no referent in the real world.

In Oshii Mamoru’s 2008 film *The Sky Crawlers*, two companies compete, sometimes to the point of death, but do not actually produce anything, or generate anything resembling a profit. These are ‘contractor warfare companies’, corporations that wage war between each other via aerial battles. Spectators and participants are aware that these wars are simulations, but they nonetheless react to and engage with them as if they are real – weeping over the deaths of fighter pilots, worriedly watching news of the battles on television, and discussing battle strategies that can give one company an advantage. The main participants in these ‘wars’ are also a kind of simulation. They are Kildren, genetically engineered pilots who look like (and usually have the emotional maturity of) adolescents. In a simulated war that still provides a sense of meaning and urgency in the lives of those who watch it, the Kildren are a valuable commodity. Their bodies and their abilities are easily recycled – when one is shot down, his or her abilities are downloaded into another Kildren body. The new pilot has a new name and a hazy set of memories, but is essentially a clone of its predecessor. In a simulated war where nothing is actually being produced – except the simulated spectacle that has become more ‘real’ to the spectators than an actual war – the Kildren and the concept of adolescence itself are potent weapons.

In this article I will use the narrative and visual aesthetic of *The Sky Crawlers* to examine what it means to be an adolescent, a killer and a human being in a world where reality and spectacle have become indistinguishable, and where both the bodies of teenagers and the very idea of adolescence have been commodified by corporations as a means to enhance this shō to shite no sensō (war-as-show). I will also examine the idea of 'deathlessness' in anime and manga, showing the ways in which it has been re-imagined in Oshii's film to convey a sense of being trapped in a perpetual, game-like cycle of death and rebirth. The Kildren are born of a desire to optimize everything, including the very idea of youth. And the anime medium, with its history of drawing gender-, race- and age-ambiguous characters, and depicting a sharp contrast between human and mecha against a backdrop of wartime propaganda, allows the film to more vividly illustrate the often ambiguous relationships between human/machine, adolescent/adult and real/unreal. The world of *The Sky Crawlers* points to the realization of a Baudrillardian existence where simulacra and simulation are the ideal tools of hegemony, because all meaning and value has been replaced by a parade of images masquerading as meaning. In this world, everything becomes a spectacle, and everything – machines, affect, the adolescent body – has the potential to be optimized for the purpose of enhancing that spectacle.

READING ANIME

In the second decade of the twenty-first century anime and manga remain a multi-billion dollar industry for Japan. Popular films, TV series and comic books have long since moved beyond the realm of small groups and specialist conventions and into the mainstream marketplace, where they are consumed by eager fans all over the world. The Anime Expo, an annual event held in California, has grown from a gathering of less than 2000 people and a handful of guests in 1992 to attracting 90,000 people and A-list publishers and performers in 2014 (Hemmann 2015). Tokyo's Akihabara district, once primarily a centre of electronics, has been reborn as an anime and manga Mecca, with tourists flocking to shops that sell anime and manga-related videos, comics, costumes and action figures. Anime and manga also find themselves at a creative and legal crossroads, with an ongoing debate between the Japanese government, manga publishers and fans over questions of child pornography and whether manga images can be subject to the same forms of regulation as photographs.¹ Though the various forms of legislation that have been proposed, rejected, and enacted since 2010 do not seem to have had a dramatic effect on manga and anime content, the debate concerning exactly how to regulate anime and manga, as well as what kinds of media should be considered 'harmful' for children, remains active, as does the question of: how to define a minor / child in the world of anime and manga; and how 'real' anime and manga are compared to, for example, photographs and live-action films, and how that reality exerts an influence on the public. If anything, the legislation and the debates surrounding anime and manga indicate the overall power and influence of the manga and anime medium, which show no signs of diminishing worldwide.

The last ten years have also seen a flourishing of academic interest in anime and manga. Susan Napier's groundbreaking *Anime: From Akira to Howl's Moving Castle* (2001) was arguably the first collection of essays to combine analysis of anime with psychoanalytic and post-structural theory. Much early work on anime analysed it in the same manner that one would

1. In 2010, manga publishers threatened to boycott the 2011 Tokyo International Anime Fair over the so-called 'non-existent youth' (hijitsuzai seishōnen) bill, which aimed to ban the depiction of sexually explicit acts between characters who appeared to be under the age of 18. The bill was defeated in committee, but a revised version (Bill 156), which removed the 'non-existent youth' clause, was later passed and went into effect in July 2011. As of September 2015, however, the number of manga that have actually been censored under the new law appears to be very small (see McLelland 2011).

2. Brian Ruh points out that, in preparation for *Ghost in the Shell*, photographer Ogura Hiromasa took a series of photos in Hong Kong that were blurred because of the humidity, and it was this visual aesthetic that Oshii drew from (2014: 226).

analyse a live-action film or a book. Though Thomas Lamarre has argued that many studies of anime, while well-researched, tend too often towards the plot summary/movie review format and 'see anime as a direct reflection or representation of the social problems of, say, postmodern Japan' (2009: xxxi), in the past five years the study of anime and manga has moved beyond studies of plot and character into analysis that examines the medium as a product of postmodernity, invoking Heidegger, Foucault, Freud, and theories of visual culture. Lamarre's work, as well as the work of Christopher Bolton and essays by Ōtsuka Eiji, Waiyee Loh, and others posits anime as an ideal medium for discussions of technology, globalization and capitalism (see, e.g., Bolton 2007; Orbaugh 2008; Lamarre 2008, 2009; Ōtsuka 2010; Brown 2010; Loh 2012). Several scholars have focused on Oshii Mamoru's films and *The Sky Crawlers* specifically, with a particular focus on the film's treatment of adolescence, the question of whether the Kildren are human, and the game-like, repetitive nature of their existence (see, in particular, Ruh 2014, 2011; Horbinski 2011; Gan 2011; Katsuhiko 2011; Takahashi 2008).

Susan Napier has described anime as an anti-mimetic, non-referential medium, or at least as a medium unconcerned with the representation of reality (2005: xii). Given that anime and the animation medium in general present images derived from drawings, whether computer-generated or hand-drawn, it is not so farfetched to argue that the people and places presented in anime do not approximate, or make any effort to approximate, 'real' spaces. But I would argue that much of anime is, in fact, deeply concerned with accurately representing real spaces. Miyazaki Hayao's *Mimi wo sumaseba/Whisper of the Heart* (1995), for example, pays meticulous attention to detail in its depiction of a Tokyo suburb, from the layouts and door designs of cramped apartment buildings to the colours of street signs. The famous opening shot of Ōtomo Katsuhiro's *Akira* (1988) pans over an incredibly detailed rendering of Tokyo, showing a jumble of boxy buildings flanking a long expanse of highway that seems to stretch all the way to the horizon. This detailed vision of a very real place is set up in contrast to the rest of the film, which depicts a post-apocalyptic Tokyo where impossibly tall skyscrapers gleam over a landscape of decay.

Oshii Mamoru's films take place in a variety of alternate universes, but the references to real places and things are never far away. Two of his most famous films, *Kōkaku kidōtai/Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and *Innoscenza/Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (2004), take place in the fictional megacity of Newport City, which resembles Hong Kong,² while *Avalon* (2001), a story of an addictive virtual reality war game, combines live-action footage of Poland with CG images of the online game that clearly models its tanks and landscapes on the real. In the case of *The Sky Crawlers*, there is a dramatic contrast between the depiction of machines and landscapes, which at times seem indistinguishable from live-action imagery, and the very hand-drawn look of the characters. As I will discuss in more detail later, the anime medium, with its mix of hyper-real and hand-drawn imagery, allows Oshii to add resonance to a story in which things that look and feel concrete may not be, and in which human bodies exist in a kind of immortal limbo.

KIDS, KODOMO, ADOLESCENCE: A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

In this article, I use the terms *adolescent*, *youth* and *teenager* to refer to characters and concepts as they exist in film, though those characters and concepts

are of course informed by real-world conceptions of youth and adolescence. In addition to designating an age (roughly 13–18, or post-pubescent/pre-adult), the words generally refer to those who are not emotionally mature, who remain (to varying degrees) dependent on others, who are imbued with a kind of innocence that comes from lack of knowledge and experience, and whose lack of experience and knowledge of the world makes their transgressions more forgivable than those of adults.

In *The Sky Crawlers*, we learn that the Kildren do not have the same life cycle as normal humans (they are never 'born' and do not pass through stages like infancy and toddlerhood). Judging by the way the characters are drawn (with smooth faces and small bodies, in contrast to adult characters, who are drawn with larger bodies and lined faces, and occasionally facial hair), as well as their language, their mannerisms, and the way they relate to each other and to adult characters, the Kildren appear to be in their late teens.³ Explanatory notes on the official film website say that they 'appear to be sixteen to seventeen years old' (*The Sky Crawlers* official website 2008). At the same time, as I hope to illustrate, the film itself is purposefully vague in revealing the Kildren's exact ages, if they can even be said to have exact ages. They frequently refer to themselves as *kodomo* (kids), often ironically, and other characters also call them *kodomo* and comment on their 'immaturity' or weep at the loss of a 'poor boy' when they die. While their ages are uncertain, it is obvious that the characters exist in a liminal state not unlike that of adolescence, and many of their character traits – recklessness, an inability to think outside of the present, and an inability to fully understand the consequences of their actions – are attributed to that state. The film clearly wants us to see them as entities separate from the world of adults. Thus I use the words *adolescent*, *teenager* and *youth* to describe both the (approximate) age of the Kildren⁴ characters and to describe the liminal state of being that they exist in (albeit through artificial means).

THE SKY CRAWLERS: RECEPTION AND THEMES

Though his career spans decades and his films include a wide range of themes, Oshii Mamoru is perhaps best known outside Japan for breathing new life into the cyberpunk genre with the *Patlabor* films (especially *Patlabor 2* [1993], *Ghost in the Shell* [1995], *Avalon* [2001] and *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* [2004]). Along with Miyazaki Hayao (*Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* / *Spirited Away* [2001], *Tonari no Totoro* / *My Neighbor Totoro* [1988]) and Ōtomo Katsuhiro (*Akira* [1988], *Steamboy* [2004]), Oshii is an internationally celebrated figure whose work has helped turn anime into a global phenomenon. Over the past twenty years his films have focused primarily on the question of what it means to be human in a world where human/machine and real/virtual are becoming harder and harder to distinguish. Within Oshii's landscapes of dystopian cities, cyborg assassins, and virtual war games that can cause real death, however, questions about the nature of youth, innocence and childhood often linger. *Ghost in the Shell*, the story of a female cyborg trying to solve a mystery involving a virtual serial killer, ends with its heroine's consciousness transported into the body of a pre-pubescent girl. *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* depicts something akin to child sex trafficking, in which young girls are kidnapped so that their 'ghosts' can be downloaded into robotic sex dolls. *Avalon* deals with disillusioned young people who have never known 'real' war finding refuge in an online war game. And in *The Sky Crawlers*, Oshii

3. At the same time, it is important to note that adult characters in anime and manga are often drawn in a style that, to readers unfamiliar with the medium, makes them look like children, with large eyes, small faces, and 'cute' expressions. This has proven controversial outside Japan, where certain manga and anime featuring adult characters have been labelled child pornography. As Patrick Galbraith and others have documented, the question of what constitutes an adult and a child in the world of manga and anime is becoming an important legal issue both at home (where manga censorship laws are attempting to target images featuring sex between minors) and abroad (where misunderstandings about manga drawing styles often lead authorities to assume that characters depicted in sexual situations are children) (see Galbraith 2014).

4. Interestingly, while the original novels, the film and Japanese-language media all use the term *kirudore* to refer to the characters, English-language media and the film's English-language subtitles refer to them as Kildren. My thanks to a peer reviewer who noted that *kirudore* could be a play on 'kill' and 'dorei' (slave, thus 'slave killers'), a sentiment echoed in a discussion thread on Ghibli Tavern. Online commentary seems to agree that the English word Kildren is a combination of 'kill' and 'children' (the change might have been an attempt to make the word sound closer to 'children'). One commenter proposes that the Japanese

kirudore could also be a combination of 'kill' and 'dread' (see Mixi Community 2005–2010; Ghibli Tavern 2008; Yahoo! Japan Chiebukuro 2009).

5. Tracking the relationships between anime films, TV shows, novels, manga and even action figures can be maddening. Sometimes a film is based on a manga series, which then becomes a TV show and/or video game. Sometimes the film comes first, and sometimes the action figure. There may be dramatic differences between film/TV and manga or none at all. *Sky Crawlers*, like many big-budget anime films, is part of a franchise that includes five novels (these came first, beginning in 2001), a film (August 2008), a video game (October 2008) and a manga series based on the game (November 2008). In this article I will be focusing my analysis on the film.
6. Ruh also describes Oshii as 'remarkably contrarian, eschewing the limelight in favor of his own personal cinematic vision' (2014: 2), though the same could be said of Miyazaki Hayao, who has never shied away from making controversial statements to the media or being generally irascible.

depicts a race of beings who exist in a state of perpetual adolescence and are used by corporations to stage elaborate aerial battles.

Released in 2008, *The Sky Crawlers* is based on Mori Hiroshi's novel of the same name (actually one of a series of five novels about the same characters).⁵ It takes place in an alternate world where war has been completely eradicated. Fearing that the significance of this peace will be lost if human beings are not regularly exposed to images of violent conflict, a bizarre solution has been enacted: two 'contractor warfare companies' will stage elaborate aerial battles that result in real casualties. Their soldiers are Kildren, children who have been genetically modified to remain in a state of perpetual adolescence. The reasoning (though the film's logic is full of paradoxes and contradictions, arguably on purpose) seems to be that as adolescents the Kildren live eternally in the present and are not emotionally mature enough to comprehend the consequences of their actions. They are thus less conflicted about what they do and are more willing to follow orders, absurd as the orders may seem. The film follows several of the Kildren as they go about their daily lives: Kusanagi, who has mysteriously lived longer than all of the other pilots; Kannami, a recent 'replacement' who has questions but gets very few answers; Tokino, a playboy who's fatalistic about everything; and the various spectators, prostitutes, and adults who are part of the Kildren's world. All of the characters treat the 'war' as if it's real, even though the winning and losing seem rigged – when one corporation becomes too successful the other corporation suddenly manages a surprise attack, and a mysterious ace pilot called the 'teacher' shoots down Kildren pilots at random (or in some cases when they become too self-aware). By the end of the film it is essentially revealed that all the Kildren are recycled versions of former pilots, given new names and slightly hazy memories but maintaining the same valuable piloting skills as their predecessors. As Brian Ruh points out, many of Oshii's films feature characters trapped in a 'cyclical or illusory world' that they eventually escape from (Ruh 2011: 307). *The Sky Crawlers*, however, is more fatalistic. Though there is a hint of hope at the end of the film, for the most part the characters are resigned to their fates. Unlike in many dystopian novels and films, the crux of the story is not realization and resistance, but realization and resignation.

Though Oshii has a sizable Japanese fan base, his films have never achieved the same level of domestic popularity as Miyazaki Hayao's, likely because of their distinct lack of *kawaii* / cute characters and the fact that their story lines are aimed more firmly at adults.⁶ *The Sky Crawlers* is no exception. Though released in 213 theatres domestically in 2008, the film was 78th in terms of overall domestic box office revenue, bringing in less than 700 million yen. It was dwarfed by two other domestic animated features released in the same year, Miyazaki's *Gake no ue no Ponyo* / *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* (2008) and *Doraemon: Nobita to Midori no kyojinden* / *Doraemon: Nobita and the Legend of the Green Giant* (2008), which made fifteen and three billion yen, respectively (Box Office Mojo 2015a). None of Oshii's films have ever made the annual Kinema Junpo 'best-ten' list, while almost all Studio Ghibli releases of the last 30 years have made the top ten (and have consistently outperformed Oshii's films domestically) (Kinema junpō-sha 2012; Box Office Mojo 2015b). Internationally, though, Oshii's films are regular entries at major film festivals – *Innocence* was nominated for the Palme d'Or at Canne in 2004, *The Sky Crawlers* for the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 2008 (Festival de Cannes 2015; imdb.com 2015), and his foreign fan base includes the Wachowski siblings, who cite *Ghost in the Shell* as a major influence on

The Matrix (1999), and James Cameron, who called *Avalon* 'the most artistic, beautiful and stylish [film] in science fiction history' (Rose 2009; Knowles 2001). A DreamWorks remake of *Ghost in the Shell* starring Scarlett Johansson is slated for release in 2017 (Siegel 2015).

The Sky Crawlers touches on many of Oshii's favourite themes: the notion of what it means to be human when so many aspects of humanity are easily replicated, the relationship between reality and simulation, and the question of how memory and affect shape who we are. At the same time, the film is something of a departure from Oshii's usual territory. There are no cyborgs, no robots, no gritty urban landscapes. Where the *Patlabor* films, *Ghost in the Shell*, *Avalon* and *Innocence* centred around action sequence and narrative tension, *The Sky Crawlers* seems to exist in a quieter, more resigned world, one where the characters are vaguely aware that they are pawns in a game but have no power (or real desire) to fight their fates. Sheou Hui Gan cited this as the main reason that some viewers didn't care for it:

The slow pace... coupled with an anticlimactic narrative that stresses the tedium of everyday life has confused or disappointed those viewers who may have hoped for the well paced action sequences of *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) or the visual extravagance of *Innocence* (2004). (2011)

Indeed, a common complaint about the film on the Japanese film site eiga.com is that it was 'confusing' or not 'entertaining' in the manner of Oshii's other films (eiga.com 2008–2015). Still, it holds a 3.53 rating (out of five) on Yahoo! Japan Movies, only slightly lower than the scores for *Ghost in the Shell* (3.87) and *Innocence* (3.71) (Yahoo! Japan Eiga 2008–2015, 2006–2015, 2005–2015).

AFFECT, MEMORY AND MANUFACTURED CHILDHOODS

As in Oshii's other films, the idea of memory, its relationship to what makes us human, and the concept of manufactured memory/affect are key concepts in *The Sky Crawlers*' narrative. Like the replicants of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), the film's Kildren characters seem to have no real memories of their own – only downloaded remnants of their former selves and fragmentary images of a childhood that may never have happened at all. At one point pilot Kannami says 'I've been flying Mark B's since I was born', leading the audience to wonder if he knows that he was never 'born' in the traditional sense – that he has, actually, been flying planes since the first version of his Kildren-self was created by the contractor warfare company that owns him. In that sense, he *has* been flying planes since he was 'born'. In Oshii's films, memories are clearly not a solid indicator of a character's humanity (when contrasted with robots or cyborgs, for example), simply because they are easy to manipulate or fabricate. For Oshii, though, there is one factor that still separates human from machine:

To the unidentified interviewer's question 'If humans have no memory and no body, in what sense are they still human?' Oshii responds with one word: *omoi*, which can be translated equally plausibly as 'thought' or 'feeling/emotion' [29–30]. (I often translate it here as 'affect,' which connotes both.) 'Even if we are already resigned to the loss of [the body

and memory], I believe that *affect remains* (*omoi ga nokoru*). It may be some kind of feeling toward a particular woman, or toward the dog who lives with you, or toward the body you have lost' [35]. The affect that a person leaves behind is the evidence that they have lived.

(Orbaugh 2008: 36, original emphasis)

Sylvan Tomkins defines *affect* as a group of biological responses to emotions which produce certain biological patterns – joy produces smiling, while shame produces blushing and lowered eyes (1963). For Oshii, it seems, these biological processes are the only element that provides 'evidence' that someone is alive. The body and the memories may be machine-generated, but affect is a reliable trace. For many of Oshii's characters, that affect, faint or corrupted as it may be, is all that divides human and machine. *Ghost in the Shell* features a character with a cyborg body who wonders if her 'ghost' – her human soul and memory – is in fact real or a fabrication of the company that made her body. In the second *Ghost in the Shell* film we are introduced to the idea of 'ghost-dubbing', in which the souls and memories of children are stolen and implanted into the bodies of sex doll cyborgs to make them more human. These characters' memories may have been implanted, swapped or erased, but a touch of genuine *omoi/affect* keeps them connected to humanity.

The Kildren possess another kind of affect that makes them ideal for their task: the ability to stir human emotion through the deaths of people who look and act like adolescents. In her examination of Japanese *kawaii*/cute culture of the 1980s, Sharon Kinsella links cuteness to weakness and vulnerability, arguing that *kawaii*/cute images, accessories, writing styles and ways of behaving were beloved because they trigger protectiveness. In this world, 'cute and pitiful were often the same thing' (Kinsella 1995: 236). Cuteness and vulnerability were naturally linked to childhood, and 'playing cute' involved, among other things, 'denying the existence of the wealth of insights, feelings, and humor that maturity brings with it' (Kinsella 1995: 237). This quality of youthful inexperience and lack of insight has been harnessed by *The Sky Crawlers'* contractor warfare companies and is as valuable as the Kildren's piloting abilities. Invoking Heidegger's conception of technology, Thomas Lamarre writes that in the modern age, 'everything – nonhuman and human – is seen in terms of how its usefulness might be technologically optimized. Such is the modern technological condition: an understanding of existence in terms of optimization' (2009: 52). The Kildren are the epitome of this kind of optimization. They have been bred (created? developed? cloned?) specifically to fight aerial battles, and they have been endowed not only with a set of transferable skills but with the emotional and physical trappings of adolescence. They are optimized both for battle and for their role as poignant figures who can never truly comprehend the nature and consequences of what they do. They have, for the most part, accepted their roles, but some characters find small ways to rebel. In a scene in a bowling alley, Tokino and Kannami both bowl perfect strikes repeatedly, but their victories feel half-hearted – they know they've been manufactured to do everything perfectly and that their accomplishments aren't 'real'. Kusanagi purposefully bowls badly. Her only rebellion against the technological optimization of her body and mind, it seems, is to fail on purpose.

In *The Sky Crawlers*, it is not only the bodies and memories of the Kildren themselves that are being recycled, but the very idea of adolescence, which exists as an eternal prison for the Kildren (for the duration of their short lives, at least), and as a kind of brand for the corporations that own them.

Even though the wars they engage in are meant to provide the public with an emotional and spiritual outlet by virtue of their being 'real', the Kildren have no real sense of an individual past or childhood. Takahashi argues that the narration in Mori Hiroshi's novel frequently uses the word *boku* ('I') but does not always make it clear who is narrating, making the line between the Kildren's individual identities and their existence in a 'continuum' (*renzo-kutai*) fuzzy (2008: 145–46). Asami points to the repetitive existence of the Kildren (fighting the same battles, dying in the same way, being reborn to do it all again) as well as their inability to think outside of the present as another marker of adolescence (2011: 91). In the film as well, the Kildren have similarly hazy memories and a shared sense of uncertainty about their existence as individuals. They were not born, and they do not age. Whether they die is a more complicated question. To the public, they do, and thus the staged war's goal of giving people a necessary dose of real deaths broadcast on TV is achieved. But in reality their memories are simply downloaded into new bodies again and again. Ironically, the most important claim of this corporate-sponsored warfare – that it's *REAL*, and that it ensures people will not forget the significance of peace – is essentially meaningless with the knowledge that the Kildren were never really born and never really die.

As imagined by Oshii, adolescence in *The Sky Crawlers* is a state of perpetual limbo, a temporal no-man's land where a lack of connection between past, present, and future means a complete lack of accountability for or emotional connection to death and destruction. For the Kildren, adolescence means never growing up but also being forced to kill and be killed, it means being shut off from wisdom and knowledge but being used as a commodity by those with wisdom and knowledge. Combined with their lack of real memories, the Kildren's prison of eternal youth makes them the perfect weapons: unconcerned with past or future because they have no real childhood memories to cling to and no future to look towards. Their limbo-like state is further illustrated by the way in which they are drawn – with smooth, androgynous, ageless faces that appear simple and hand-drawn in contrast to the hyper-real objects and scenery around them. As I will discuss in the next section, this mixing of hand-drawn and hyper-real – a feature of the anime and manga medium since its origins – helps to drive home the idea of 'deathless' adolescence and humanity that is so central to *The Sky Crawlers*. It also calls into question the idea of simulation and authenticity, ultimately revealing that distinctions between the two are becoming more and more difficult to make.

THE DEATHLESS BODY RE-IMAGINED

Anime and manga have a long history of separating their mecha (mechanical or machine) components through dramatic differences in drawing style.⁷ Oshii Mamoru took this a step further with his 2001 film *Avalon*, a film that juxtaposed human actors and live-action location shooting with computer-generated depictions of an online game. The *Patlabor* films featured the common anime / manga trope of humans operating giant 'mobile suits' from the inside, while both *Ghost in the Shell* films depicted more traditional cyborgs (humans enhanced by technology). Though the Kildren are not, technically speaking, human-machine hybrids, Takahashi makes the interesting argument that the characters in the novels are products of biotechnology (they're the result of genetic experiments and attempts to develop a life-prolonging drug) (2008: 140). Additionally, Takahashi argues that the Kildren are so deeply connected

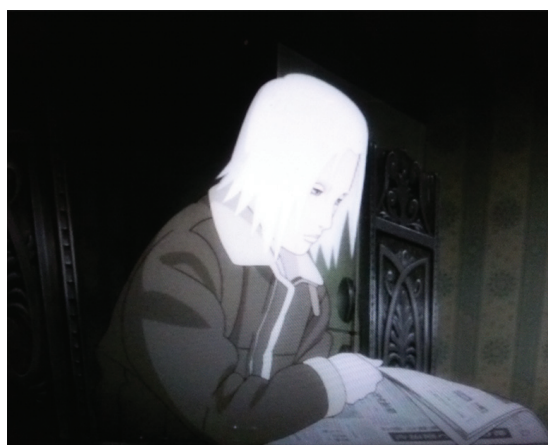
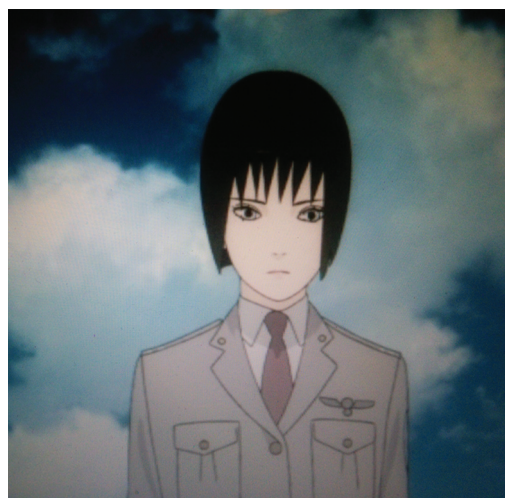
7. For a detailed account of the varied human / mecha drawing styles in manga see Thomas Lamarre (2010) and Ōtsuka Eiji (2008).

to their airplanes that Kildren+plane equals a cyborg-like single unit (2008: 140). Horbinski notes that flight in the film is a

separate, inimical sphere: when airborne the pilots speak English, while on the ground they speak Japanese almost exclusively. Precisely because of this alienating difference, it is debatable whether flight grants the Kildren a temporary escape from or a temporary union with their selves. (2011: 304)

The deep connection that the Kildren feel with flight and with their planes is complicated by the very dramatic contrast between line-drawn humans and three-dimensional mecha, providing a constant visual reminder of the human-machine question. The Kildren are drawn in a style typical of anime: slightly androgynous, with smooth faces that make them appear young but not overtly childlike – an actual child character who appears in the film is set up as more blatantly ‘childlike’, with a more youthful-looking face, smaller body and high-pitched voice. The Kildren and those around them frequently state or refer to the fact that they are ‘kids’ (kodomo) but the images on the screen contradict them. At one point Kannami is in bed smoking a cigarette, having just had sex with a prostitute who appears slightly older, with a larger body, a lower-pitched voice and more defined facial features. When she teasingly tells him that he ‘sounds like a kid’, he replies, quite seriously, ‘But I am a kid’. The look shared between the two of them, and the focus on Kannami’s youthful-but-not-childlike body, shows that they are both aware of the ambiguity of the situation. The Kildren are presented to the war-as-spectacle-consuming public as adolescents, and they lack the emotional maturity of adults, but in the way that they are drawn, we can see that the situation is more complicated.

In contrast to the very hand-drawn look of the Kildren and other human characters (and the basset hound that appears in so many of Oshii’s films), the fighter planes in *The Sky Crawlers* are drawn with amazing attention to



Figures 1 and 2: Kildren drawn with smooth, gender-ambiguous faces

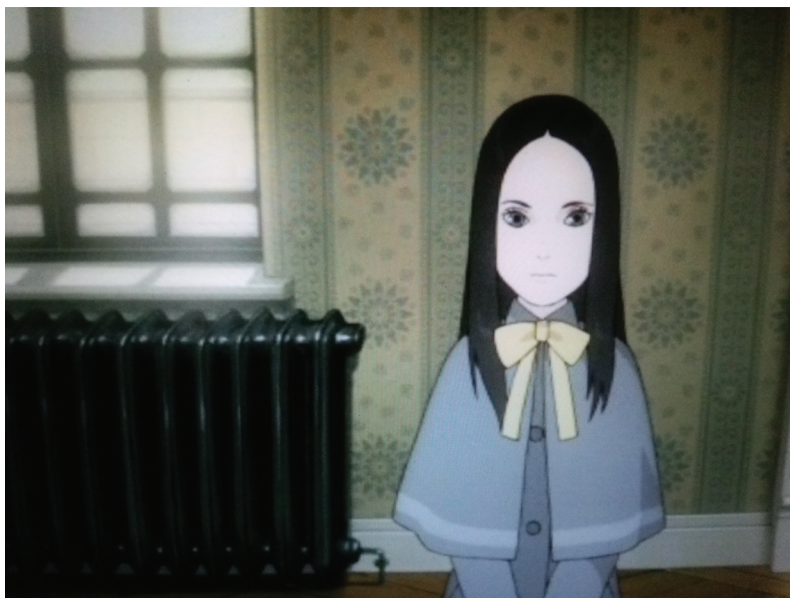


Figure 3: Actual pre-pubescent child character with smaller body and more youthful clothing.

8. Ruh writes that the reasons for this contrast may be practical:

... there are increasingly fewer and fewer animators who are skilled enough to draw moving vehicles by hand. Therefore, a film like *The Sky Crawlers* has to rely on computer-generated images for the sake of cost and expediency [...] Regardless of such a practical reason for such differences, though, the disjuncture between the flying scenes and the scenes with the characters emphasizes the differences between the two worlds – the exhilaration of flight and the mundanity of daily life. (2014: 224)



Figure 4: Kannami in bed at the brothel.

detail. The juxtaposition of hand-drawn characters like Kannami and Tokino with the harsh angles and shiny metal surfaces of their fighter planes at times makes it seem as if two separate films have been layered on top of one another.⁸ Indeed, the film opens with an aerial battle that looks realistic enough to be live-action, and when we eventually cut away to the line-drawn



Figure 5: Hyper-realistic battle scenes



Figure 6: Line-drawn Kildren juxtaposed with realistic-looking plane.

basset hound and human characters, the effect is jarring. One group of images seems real and the other seems drawn and impermanent, but authenticity, simulation, and referent are slippery categories in the film, and the narrative moves between them as seamlessly as it flashes between hyper-real machines and hand-drawn humans.

Ōtsuka (2008) has written of the ways that anime and manga differentiate between human and mecha, a practice that Ōtsuka connects to the wartime ideology of the 1930s and 1940s that was represented in children's comics. Realism, particularly realistic depictions of 'scientific' objects like tanks, weapons, fighter planes and factories, was the style of manga promoted by the government. Extremely realistic drawings of mechanical objects were juxtaposed with Disney-esque, anti-realistic line drawings of human characters. Additionally, the human characters, like their Disney counterparts who fell from great heights with a splat only to reappear unharmed in the next panel, displayed an 'undying' physicality, their line-drawn forms always bouncing back to life. Ōtsuka writes:

A contradiction arises between the realistic depiction of industrial machinery, trains, and weaponry, and the world of 'undying' Mickey-style characters, characters without physical substance. Tezuka betrays a certain anxiety about this contradiction, presenting an apparently deathless young man who receives a direct hit from the machine-gun bullets fired by Mickey's realistically rendered fighter plane. The techniques of representation are such that the actual body of the youth, head slumped and gushing blood, remains anime-like. In this system of representation, I detect a symbolic turning point in the history of manga in terms of how it will depict 'life' and 'death' and 'sex' – the inevitable mortality of the living body appears fundamentally at odds with Disney-esque antirealism. This is how postwar manga could, on the one hand, internalize the topics of life and death in a 'literary' manner and, on the other hand, move in the direction of pornography associated with the *moe* style of anime drawing.

(2008: 121–22)

According to Ōtsuka, the work of Tezuka Osamu managed to combine the anti-realist styles of Disney and the hyper-real style demanded by the Japanese government, but the combination was not without tension. Though characters were drawn in a style similar to Disney's 'deathless' heroes, they did not always survive the fall from the cliff or the shots from the gun. In an analysis of the manga *Barefoot Gen/Hadashi no Gen* (Nakazawa Keiji, 1973–1987) that contrasts the 'plastic line' character drawings with more realistic depictions of mecha, Thomas Lamarre writes:

In Tezuka's manga, a question thus arises: what happens when deadly weapons turn against the cartoon hero? *Can a cartoon hero really die, and what kind of death is it?* In other words, within war manga itself, questions emerge precisely because of the basic contrast between drawing styles...

(2010: 296, emphasis added)

The hyper-realistic drawing style used to depict tanks and weaponry, coupled with a much less realistic, 'plastic' drawing style for human characters, was much more than an aesthetic choice. The effect produced was subversive – manga that adhered to rules set by a nationalist government but that nonetheless allowed seemingly deathless heroes to suffer and die.

Similar contrasts between mecha and human drawing styles in *The Sky Crawlers* point not only to the ambiguity surrounding the characters' human-

ity and ages, but also force us to re-imagine the idea of the ‘deathless’ body. In wartime manga, anime-style bodies were mutilated but retained a ‘plastic line’ style typical of characters who were killed but appeared unharmed in the next frame. In *The Sky Crawlers*, the hand-drawn, somewhat age-ambiguous drawing style of the Kildren drives home the fact that they are recyclable goods – they have no specific age or individual identity, only a set of easily transferable memories and abilities that move from one smooth, ambiguously drawn body to another. Their lives are hazy and impermanent, just as they are drawn in a style that feels vague and uncertain when juxtaposed with the sharp-angled, hyper-real images of the planes they fly. It is telling that we never see the bodily deaths of the characters – their planes are shot down, and we hear the story of how one former Kildren (Kannami’s predecessor) was actually shot, but we never see blood or corpses. After one plane crash a pilot’s body is carried off, but it is completely covered with a blanket. In another scene, a new pilot shows up who looks exactly like his recently deceased predecessor, but with a new name. The ‘deathless’ body is distant from the physicality of death, as well as being eternally recyclable.

The Kildren live within an endless loop of death and rebirth, what Sheou Hui Gan calls a ‘game-like existence’ of ‘renewable youth’ (2011). Because of this constant ‘push-pull between survival and death, killing and being reborn’, Takahashi argues, they are ‘ideally suited to the realm of war’ (2008: 148). Because the war is a spectacle that can never have a clear winner or loser, that must continue indefinitely as the Kildren continue to kill, die, and be reborn, the Kildren are perfectly optimized: they provide spectators with the sense of reality, urgency, and pathos that they need, all the more potently because everything about them has been designed to enhance the spectacle. Their looping, game-like world is not ‘real’ – it’s more than that.

PLAYING AT CHILDHOOD

When contrasted with the hyper-real images of fighter planes, the insubstantial, androgynous, age-ambiguous look of the Kildren characters in *The Sky Crawlers* would seem to point to one group being ‘real’ and one group being ‘fake’, or at least simulated. But the distinction between authenticity and simulation remains uncertain in many of Oshii’s films. *Urusei Yatsura 2: Beautiful Dreamer* (1984) is all about characters being trapped in another character’s dream, always uncertain of whether they’re awake or dreaming. *Avalon* imagines a virtual game where the final level is essentially the real world – or is it still the game, made to vividly resemble the real world? *Ghost in the Shell* opens with a man realizing he’s been ‘ghost-hacked’, all of his memories (and thus, we infer, his whole identity) being permanently erased and replaced with new ones that seem just as real as the old. In *The Sky Crawlers*, the planes may be real, but the war is not, even if it is surrounded by the emotional and physical trappings of a real war. The Kildren are presented as actual children dying actual deaths, but in fact they are something akin to clones, never having experienced a bodily ‘birth’ and never maturing beyond adolescence.

Oshii admits that he is primarily interested in these ‘borderline spaces’ and the characters who inhabit them: ‘My motivation as a director is rooted in these imaginary space-time continuums – somewhere that is not here, sometime that is not now [koko ja nai dokoka, ima de nai itsuka]’ (Brown 2010: 20). Oshii often speaks in contradictions in interviews about the film-making process for *The Sky Crawlers*: he tells the sound designers that the sound of

the planes should be realistic, but they're fictional planes, so don't use a real plane sound; he describes the setting of the film as an 'imaginary Europe', but stresses the importance of taking his animators location scouting because he wants them to draw 'based on experience, not pictures' (Oshii 2009). At the same time, though the location photographs and the images created for the film are not exact copies, it's clear from the drawings and notes for the film that the location shooting was more than just an inspiration – the details of the drawing borrow heavily from details captured in the photographs (radiators, windows, the layout of bunk beds and desks in a dormitory) (Oshii 2008). Ruh argues that Oshii's 'answers to direct queries about the meanings of his films invariably generate more questions than they resolve' (Ruh 2014: x), and questions about the role of 'reality' in his films are no exception. In a discussion between Oshii and Okabe about how reality informs the cinematic image of war (and vice versa), Okabe argues that DARPA is 'imitating anime' in its development of unmanned ground vehicles. Oshii comments that during research for *Patlabor 2*, he had wanted to make the air defence command centre as realistic as possible,

but of course I wasn't allowed to see the real thing. Since I had no choice, I created everything from my imagination... But then I spoke with an ASDF public relations representative, a former pilot, and he said 'Actually, the design of our command center was based primarily on movies.' And it's true. From *Dr. Strangelove* to James Bond's headquarters, our image of a massive command center is a product of illusions created by movies.

(Oshii and Okabe 2011: 309)

Even in the creation phase, the question of real/copy informs the process of making the film. Oshii's own creative process exists in a kind of referent-copy loop similar to the narrative of *The Sky Crawlers*, where the division between 'real' and copy is not always clear. Oshii makes films inspired by reality, but he acknowledges that reality as we know it today – real military command centres and military vehicles, for example – often takes its inspiration from fictional images and worlds.

In *The Sky Crawlers*, one of the more fascinating examinations of the real/copy question takes place in a scene in the middle of the film. Kildren room-mates Kannami and Tokino have temporarily relocated to another base in preparation for a large-scale aerial attack. After being welcomed to the base with a sign drawn in childish crayon scrawl and given popcorn and sweets, they wander outside to a pair of metal toy planes. Tokino bounces idly on a plane that is clearly too small for him. The two friends talk, and then there is a close-up on the two of them as they both bounce determinedly on the planes, their faces expressionless. A female Kildren, Mitsuya, arrives and tells them that the planes are 'for the kids' (*kodomo ga norumon*), to which Tokino replies, 'Well, I happen to be a kid' (*itchō ore mo kodomo da kedo*), an echo of Kannami's 'But I am a kid', spoken to the prostitute he'd just had sex with. Mitsuya stares at both of them, and again, there's the sense that they all know how ridiculous it is to call themselves 'kids', even though that's the way they are presented to the public.

What takes place in this scene is essentially quasi-children playing at being real children. The simulacra are imitating their own referent in a world where the referent, and the distinction between real and simulated, no longer



Figure 7: Tokino and Kannami bouncing on toy planes.

has any meaning. As Kannami and Tokino bounce on the planes, which make squeaky metal sounds reminiscent of the weapons they fire from their real planes, they are also imitating their everyday lives, which consist of flying real planes and shooting down living enemies (though they are only ‘enemies’ because corporations designate them as such). At the same time, they are doing this on toys that are designed for actual children, who would ride the planes in an innocent imitation of the Kildren, who they likely see as larger-than-life superheroes. In Tokino and Kannami’s case, they are not innocent of the realities of what it means to fly real planes as Kildren, and so Tokino’s response of ‘Well, I happen to be a kid’ has an edge to it. They’re not kids – they’ve seen and done too much, and they’ll never have the same kind of innocence that the kids the toys were designed for have. But for the intents and purposes of the companies that own them, they are adolescents, with their bodies and the very idea of adolescence being used as a corporate commodity. Bouncing on the planes, they are part of an endless circle of simulation and referent: Kildren imitating ‘kids’, play-fighters imitating real fighters, quasi-children poking harsh fun at their own image. The whole system ‘becomes weightless, it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum – not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference’ (Baudrillard 1981: 1736).

CONCLUSION

The world of anime sits in its own borderline space: a frequently anti-mimetic medium with limitless possibilities for the types of beings and environments it can depict, but one that also takes its cues from the real world. But in a time when simulacrum and referent are becoming indistinguishable, exactly what kind of reality are anime films drawing upon to created their fictional

universes? As Oshii has pointed out, the 'reality' that cinema borrows from is itself heavily influenced by cinematic creations, meaning that designers who seek authenticity in their settings and costumes are looking to a referent that is infused with fiction. Anime is also being produced in a world where the copy has become indistinguishable from the original. In addition to Baudrillard's example of East German factories surrounded by all the trappings of production that produce nothing, there also exist fictional cities and theme park versions of real places: Disney's World Showcase, China's Window on the World, Japan's recreated Netherlands, Huis Ten Bosch, and North Korea's 'Peace Village', an elaborate fiction that is described by the North Korean government as a fully functioning farming community with accompanying infrastructure (schools, a hospital), but which is in fact an empty shell with no residents.⁹ The science fiction world of seamless simulation, of the fake imitating the real to the point where the copy is all and the referent no longer exists, is no longer a fiction.

9. For more details on 'Peace Village' see Bonnett (2014).

Just before his death in 2007, a series of Baudrillard's previously unpublished essays and interviews were released as *The Agony of Power* (2005), which sees the author returning to notions of simulacra and simulation as ideal tools for hegemony. Simulacra and simulation, Baudrillard argues, are what distinguish hegemony from

pure and simple domination [...] Power is only the parody of the signs of power – just as war is only the parody of signs of war, including technology. Masquerade of war, masquerade of power [...] All meaning is abolished in its own sign and the profusion of signs parodies a now undiscoverable reality.

(2005: 35)

This abolition of meaning, this 'profusion of signs', has created a society of 'unlimited progress and growth' where 'human beings have become the weak link in technological processes [...] The only choice left is between disappearing or being "humanengineerized"' (Baudrillard 2005: 82–83). There can be no victory in a war against an enemy that has usurped and reshaped our very concept of 'meaning' and 'reality', that forces humans to compete with technology (a competition they will always lose) for fear of being left behind in the race for total optimization.

The fictional world of *The Sky Crawlers* points us towards this Baudrillardian reality. The existence of the Kildren is predicated on a series of violent and monstrous fictions: the use of adolescence (and its accompanying emotional immaturity) as a tool of violence, the commodification of adolescence as a tool in a worldwide manipulation of human emotion and empathy, and the twisting of adolescence from a transitional, innocent state into a perpetual hell of repetition. The Kildren exist in a science fiction universe, but their world, one in which anyone and anything can be optimized in the name of corporate victory, is closer to reality than invention. It is a world in which simulated war is used to give people a 'sense of reality', but a sense of reality that has its referent in spectacle and fiction, not 'real' war. The 'war-as-show' that the Kildren enact is presented via a carefully constructed media narrative not unlike the media narratives that surround our own real-world armed conflicts, where a parade of images present a cinema-inspired story that has little relation to what is actually happening on the ground. Further, the creators of *The Sky Crawlers*' 'war-as-show' know that everything within their spectacle

must be optimized, and that 'real' humans are a weak link in a technological chain – thus they use specially engineered clones of adolescents to complete the endless simulacra-loop. Bodies, the concept of adolescence, the images of aerial battles, the sense of 'reality' that the war supposedly provides – everything is optimized, and everything is spectacle. 'Reality' is a distant memory and an unnecessary artefact in a world where the simulacra reveals only an absence. The spectacle-war, like the lives of the Kildren themselves, continues in an endless cycle.

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Some Wear Leather, Some Wear Lace

A Worldwide Compendium of Postpunk and Goth in the 1980s

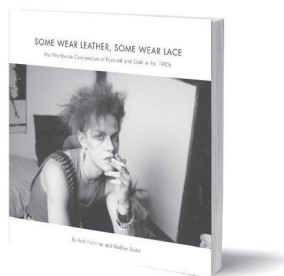
Andi Harriman and Marloes Bontje

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Some Wear Leather, Some Wear Lace is a visual and oral history of the first decade of the scene known variously as punks, new romantics, new wavers, the bats, or the morbids. Featuring interviews with both the performers and the audience to capture the community on and off stage, the book places personal snapshots alongside professional photography to reveal a unique range of fashions, bands, and scenes.

A book about the music, the individual, and the creativity of a worldwide community rather than theoretical definitions of a subculture, *Some Wear Leather, Some Wear Lace* considers a subject not often covered by academic books. Whether you were part of the scene or are just fascinated by different modes of expression, this book will transport you to another time and place.

Andi Harriman is a fashion theorist and goth enthusiast. Marloes Bontje is a student of language, culture studies, and history.



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REVIEWS

Making sense of Chinese TV's past, present and future

TELEVISION AND THE MODERNIZATION IDEAL IN 1980S CHINA:

DAZZLING THE EYES, HUIKE WEN (2014)

Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 155 pp.,

ISBN: 9780739178867, h/bk, \$75.00

FAMILY REVOLUTION: MARITAL STRIFE IN CONTEMPORARY

CHINESE LITERATURE AND VISUAL CULTURE, HUI FAYE XIAO (2014)

Seattle, WA: The University of Washington Press, 247 pp.,

ISBN: 9780295993492, h/bk, \$75.00

STAGING CORRUPTION: CHINESE TELEVISION AND POLITICS,

RUOYUN BAI (2015)

Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 276 pp.,

ISBN: 9789622091832, h/bk, \$99.00

CHINESE TELEVISION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY:

***ENTERTAINING THE NATION, RUOYUN BAI AND GENG
SONG (EDS) (2015),***

New York: Routledge, 200 pp.,

ISBN: 9780415745123, h/bk, \$145.00

Reviewed by Jing Jamie Zhao, Gender (and Cultural) Studies Programme, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Although the earliest form of Chinese television broadcaster, Beijing Television, was launched in 1958, the constant restructuring and turbulence of Chinese political, ideological and economic systems in the two decades that followed largely held back and disturbed the development of broadcasting in the country. The riveting history of national-scaled Chinese television and 'the decentralization of China's television structure' did not begin until 1978, when Beijing Television was transformed into China Central Television (CCTV) (Sun and Gorfinkel 2015: 24–25). Reconfigured from a propagandistic tool to a commercialized cultural form enabled by post-socialist China's modernization and marketization policies, TV has arguably been the dominant force in the Chinese-speaking media environment since the 1990s (Zhu and Berry 2009: 73).

James Lull's (1991) seminal work demystified Chinese TV as a polysemic site of public memories, historical traumas, contemporary realities, and sociopolitical currents and imaginaries. As the benchmark in Chinese TV studies, this pioneering work also called for further critical studies, specifically committed to the complicated relationships between televisual broadcasting and the audience's unpredictable, sometimes dissident, interpretations in the Chinese context (Lull 1991: 34). Nevertheless, even in the contemporary anglophone academy, compared with the growing body of scholarly literature on Chinese cinema studies, Chinese TV scholarship, especially concerning diverse TV audience groups' critical responses, remains sporadic. Current English-language treatment on Chinese TV mostly speaks to its distinctive institutional (political-economic), social, and cultural implications and dilemmas in an increasingly internationalized eco-cultural system (e.g., Chinoy 1999; Curtin 2007; French and Richards 2000; Hong 1998; Keane 2015; Zhong 2010; Zhu 2008; Zhu et al. 2008).

Against this backdrop, this article offers reviews of four recently published, academic books that fill gaps in Chinese TV studies in varied theoretical, methodological and empirical ways. These books scrutinize the unique characteristics of Chinese TV culture that have been perpetuated and inflected by sociocultural inequalities and hierarchies deeply rooted in China's traditions, modern history and contemporary society. Thus, the scholarship under discussion effectively serves as a much-needed contribution to understanding the contextual specificities and shifting, interlocking discourses in Chinese TV production and consumption.

Huiké Wen's monograph, *Television and the Modernization Ideal in 1980s China*, offers a rare account of 'the images of and on TV' in 1980s China (2). Her study employs a combined methodology of archival research, discourse analysis, visual cultural studies and ethnographic research (oral interviews). Focusing her analysis on 'the representation of intellectual reception of TV in 1980s Chinese media' (2), Wen probes how the entangled political, ideological and technological powers played out in the uses of TV as 'a 'tongue' of the government... [and] a fantasy of an exotic culture or a modernized future for Chinese audiences' (18–19).

Chapters 1 and 2 consider advertisements' framing and promoting of TV technology as 'a symbol of modern life' in 1980s China (17). Wen convincingly reveals how the diverse social statuses and meanings symbolized by the TV set were influenced by media representations of TV. As she contends,

these representations in turn implicate the clash of Chinese traditional morals, social realities and westernized modernization imaginaries in the context of the 1980s' economic reforms. Chapter 3 shifts its focus to delimiting how TV functioned as an effective means to promulgate the nationalist ideology that the 1980s' Chinese modernization was a challenging but ultimately benign process 'made possible by nature' (75). Wen does so by unpacking the ways 'an idealized harmony between the gains and the pains of modernity' (82) was portrayed in the TV documentary *Talking about the Changjiang River* (1983). In Chapter 4, Wen expands her discussion to explain how other types of modern media, such as film and print media, helped reframe TV as a technology of modern life. Chapter 5 switches back to a feminist discussion on gendered images and narratives in both domestic and imported TV dramas of the 1980s. The short epilogue concludes with an overview of the potentials of investigating TV broadcasting technologies and content productions and distributions in early 1990s' Chinese modernization and globalization discourses.

Generally, Wen's work offers an innovative view of the sociocultural status and symbolic meanings of TV in 1980s' Chinese society. Her conceptualization of other media forms' symbiotic relationships with TV on a specific historical stage is particularly astute. However, this book would benefit from a more sophisticated understanding of the convergences and struggles between local Chinese circumstances and western technological and information flows. Some epistemological dichotomies persistent in the author's theorization of TV culture, such as art/technology and Chinese tradition/western modernity, to some extent weaken her arguments. In addition, Wen's discussion of televisual representations of male masculinity and female femininity in Chapter 5, overlooks non-heteronormative and anti-heterosexist connotations in certain media narratives. She simply refers to the gendered TV representations that were adapted from some classical Chinese novels, such as *Dream of the Red Chamber* (Cao Xueqin, 1868) and *Journey to the West* (Wu Cheng'en, 1592), as emblematic of 'traditional views on masculinity and femininity in the traditional stories' (103). Yet, the rich homoerotic (Hinsch 1992: 147) and 'gyno-centric' (Zhu 2015) descriptions in these two classical stories, respectively, go unheeded in her analysis.

Hui Faye Xiao's *Family Revolution: Marital Strife in Contemporary Chinese Literature and Visual Culture* is the only book reviewed in this article not entirely devoted to Chinese TV. It instead offers a detailed scrutiny of literary, televisual and cinematic representations of familial-marital struggles, and more precisely narratives and images of divorce in post-revolutionary China. In so doing, Xiao unpacks how these media texts function as contested spaces for 'the operation of official ideologies, judicial practices, and intellectual discourse in regulating the reconfiguration of family ethics, gender/class difference, and subject positions' (5). The first three chapters focus on literature, while the following two chapters tap into wider visual cultures. Only one chapter of this book (Chapter 4) is focused specifically on TV portrayals of marital strife. Nevertheless, Xiao's scrupulous and thought-provoking assessment of the refashioning of hetero-patriarchal ideals and heterosexist gender norms prevailing on the post-socialist TV screen, combined with the useful list of Chinese TV dramas with divorce plotlines from 1990 to 2010 in the appendix of this well-written monograph (185–88), makes this a valuable and informative contribution to Chinese TV studies.

In Chapter 1, Xiao interrogates the 'new thematic pattern of "science plus love"' in the stories of 1980s' male writers associating romance with 'scientific

modernity and metropolitan splendor' (50–51). She shows that this hetero-sexist textual manoeuvre doubly disempowers and marginalizes women in rural areas, and was remodelled and encouraged by the radical ideological shift from Mao's revolutionary socialism to the post-Mao reforms and developmentalism. In Chapter 2, she goes on to reveal the continuity of 'a misogynistic rhetoric in (post-revolutionary male writers') narratives of the male intellectual's midlife crises' (55) before and after the 1989 historical trauma. As she adroitly illustrates, after the Tiananmen Square Massacre, this rhetoric mediating 'the global currency of romantic love and domestic sentimentality' (83) not only depicted middle-aged male intellectuals as excluded from the processes of marketization and modernization but also continued to portray women as gendered and sexualized threats that hinder the spiritual progress of the male subject. Chapter 3 turns to look at representative stories produced by female writers in the 1980s and 1990s. As Xiao expounds, although these works unsettled mainstream Chinese gender ideals and marital morals, they were still influenced heavily by, and, in continual dialogue with 'well-established gender norms and the cultural imagination of the proper domestic scenario' (115). Chapter 4 presents a sensitive reflection on the divorce plots in TV dramas produced within a neo-liberal, consumerist context. The last major chapter questions the cosmopolitan utopia and female subjectivity of divorced women featured in twenty-first century's Chinese cinema of divorce.

Xiao's wide knowledge of both Chinese and western feminist theories and media cultures allows her to steadily build her analysis in a transnational, theoretically cogent and information-rich frame. In the same way as Wen argues that it is impossible to understand TV fully without considering 'its connections with other media' (85), Xiao's book echoes as similar position demonstrating how divorce TV dramas are culturally and historically situated in, yet also deviating from, the gendered discourses in literature and cinema discussed in other chapters (133). Shifting from her treatment of high-art cultural forms, popular media and cultures, such as soap operas and TV viewers' online discussions, are also briefly discussed in her detailed analysis of the divorce TV drama *Chinese-Style Divorce* (2004) (121, 126). In so doing, Xiao discloses the hypocritical post-feminism embodied in the 'neo-liberal validation of individual freedom and self-reliance' of the divorce TV narratives that came into being in the 1990s (138). As she notes in the introduction, post-revolutionary China's marketization of individualism, the globalization of capitalist consumerism, and privatization of house ownership have worked together to accelerate a radical break from China's previous 'socialism and revolutionary collectivism' whilst rationalizing 'the global market economy and... neo-liberal (self-)governance' of the current government (16–21). This is in line with the idea that contemporary Chinese TV often serves to promote this 'neo-liberalism with "Chinese characteristics"' (Harvey 2005: 120–51; Sun and Gorfinkel 2015: 20). Xiao further understands this Chinese-specific neo-liberalism as 'a subjectivizing project' (203). In this vein, she powerfully demonstrates that the Chinese TV representation of divorce, consonant with the unique neo-liberal governmentality, creates an 'imaginary harmonious middle-class interiority' that emphasizes women's 'corporeal and emotional consum(er)ability' (137). It ultimately underpins 'a formula that combines transnational middle-class culture and traditional family ethics with "Chinese characteristics"' (138).

Xiao offers some groundbreaking feminist readings of Chinese media culture. Yet, her feminist investigation concerns mostly literary and visual

materials produced by media intellectuals. Little is said about how her feminist views can further be applied to newly emerged cyber cultures and the grass-roots public's reactions to these popular cultural products. Although she touches on online TV audiences' comments on the divorce TV drama, she does so hastily. Further consideration of topics, such as Internet feminist literature and netizens' (feminist, post-feminist or queer) rereading and rewriting of media representations of marriage, family, kinship and divorce, would be reassuring.

Media communication scholar Ruoyun Bai's monograph, *Staging Corruption: Chinese Television and Politics*, provides a solid and illuminating understanding of corruption TV drama as 'a production of the concrete historical conditions of the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century' (5). Reverberating with Xiao's discussions on divorce TV narratives in the Chinese neo-liberalist context, Bai reveals how corruption dramas are also inseparable with 'the depoliticizing agenda of neo-liberalism, which idolizes the private self' (7). In the introductory chapter, Bai eloquently argues that media censorship in post-socialist China, 'although repressive, must be seen as a dynamic process shaped by multiple forces and conflicting agendas rather than as something monolithic and unchanging' (12). This clear account of the Chinese media censorship system significantly sharpens Bai's later illustration of the Chinese corruption TV drama as a productive site of political, ideological, and economic contestations and contradictions. Furthermore, the introduction conceptualizes a disjunctive media order in contemporary China that has been made prominent by 'the coexistence and interpenetration of two equally powerful forces, either of which dominates or collapses into the other: the political and the economic' (13). This concept, substantiated in her illustration of Chinese media landscape specificities, bolsters Bai's arguments in six major chapters.

In Chapter 1, Bai traces the shifting positions and structures of media-related political and economic institutions that have been modifying the role of commercial TV in post-socialist China. From blended 'political-economic and anthropological' (24) perspectives, Chapter 2 interprets the introduction of corruption plotlines to the 1990s' prime time TV as negotiations between political-economic factors and reforms, social and ideological tensions, and media intellectuals' subjective mediations. Chapters 3 and 4 are used to explain the changing ways in which corruption has been melodramatically imagined, intellectually appropriated and politically managed under the context of the disjunctive media order. Categorizing 'the anti-corruption melodrama as the official mode' of framing corruption as a moral problem (157), Bai illustrates how and why this kind of corruption narrative was supported by political elites yet left media intellectuals and audiences dissatisfied because of its dull replication of official moral code. As she further explains, the gradually blurred boundary between the oppositional categories of the 'good' and 'corrupt' officials in this genre facilitated an increasing dissonance among the commercial, political (including censors and propaganda officials) and media intellectual sectors (119). Therefore, the production and broadcast of prime time anti-corruption dramas after 2004 have been modified, more strictly regulated, and sometimes even banned (115–17). While representations and discussions regarding corruption have subsequently manifested in diverse drama genres and online public spaces; the conduct of corruption has also been paradoxically legitimized in the anti-corruption genre through being narrated as 'a necessity' in the state's glocal-

izing neo-liberal processes (117–18, 157–58). These contextual and textual specificities eventually led to a cynical turn in the production of the corruption TV drama. Chapter 5 elucidates how this cynical turn, which endorses sympathy for corrupt officials in ‘the realm of officialdom’ (guanchang, 159) rather than unequivocally critiquing corruption, functions as a cultural manifestation and normalization of the bureaucratic heritage and manipulation rooted in Confucian ideology. In Chapter 6, Bai further critiques the cynicism exemplified in the corruption genre as politically impotent through an enquiry into both the production and consumption of cynical corruption as perpetuated by Chinese neo-liberal desires and anxieties.

Bai’s rigorous research adds deep insights into ongoing scholarly dialogues about particular TV narrative themes and their relationships with Chinese ideological, sociocultural, and economic forces and transformations. The monograph should also be applauded for its thoughtful use of surveys of the production, distribution and online critical interpretation of corruption TV dramas. In distinction from the previous two books, Bai’s work pays far more attention to TV audiences’ responses to gender and sexual relationships in corruption dramas. Nevertheless, readers may still want to see a more detailed and complete examination of these issues. Bai occasionally implies that extra-marital sexual relationships function as an almost indispensable element in both real-world corruption practices and televisual corruption narratives in China (196–97, 202) and that traditional sexual morality might embolden an anti-corruption, yet misogynistic, attitude among some audiences (196–97). Still, the question of how audiences of diverse gender identities, sexual orientations, and social statuses understand and complicate the gendered and sexualized discourses surrounding corruption in both media and the real world is germane to her research but left unanswered. An explicitly systematic account of this query would be especially desirable in Chapter 6, where Bai’s analysis centres mainly on how online audiences read male characters and their romantic, sexual and marital relationships in corruption dramas.

I have left the review of *Chinese Television in the Twenty-First Century: Entertaining the Nation* until last, as it is the only anthology included in this review, as well as the only book dealing solely with twenty-first century’s Chinese TV. Capturing the implications of time and space represented on and surrounding contemporary entertainment TV (6), this book serves as an extremely valuable text for future studies on nascent aspects and directions of Chinese TV culture in ‘the context of globalization, commercialization, and digital technologies’ (7).

This edited collection is structured in three parts. In Part 1, Entertainment TV – A New Territory of Significance, three chapters are presented to map out how class and post-socialist ideologies are expressed through reality TV and mobile TV. Wanning Sun’s research examines health-themed lifestyle TV as ‘an essential part of the neo-liberal technique of governing, which stresses the centrality of the individual as a self-enterprising, self-governing subject’ (29). It teaches ‘a way of life under an authoritarian rule’ (19, original emphasis) that aims to transform the audience into ‘the neo-liberal subject’ (19). Shuyu Kong and Colin S. Hawes’s exploration of mediation TV programmes delineates the ways in which the legal and moral dimensions of this reality TV format are negotiated and inflected by both the commercial interests of the TV industry and the government’s economic, cultural and political ideals of social harmony. Chapter 3, by Joshua Neves, diverges from the previous two chapters’ focus on contemporary TV ‘tethered to... attentive home viewing and...

linking the living room to the nation' (51). It instead offers a cutting-edge examination of entertainment TV on public transportation. Neves argues that mobile forms of televisual information, particularly its 'seamless' flows, are a critical response to China's urbanization and its related sociocultural living conditions (64).

Although focused on a relatively 'traditional' debate, that of censorship in Chinese TV studies, Part 2, *Curbing Entertainment*, consists of two instructive chapters by Ruoyun Bai and How Wee Ng, respectively. As Bai's sophisticated interpretation of the 'Clean up the Screen' campaign reveals, while current Chinese media regulations 'have been marked by a search for stability in the political, moral, and cultural orders' (84), both entertainment TV content and censorship are 'symptomatic of, and internal to, China's disjunctive media order' (70). Using the popular TV drama *Snail House* (2009) as a case study, Ng shows the 'productive' and 'generative' potentials of censorship in Chinese TV content production, distribution and regulation as well as public debates and controversies (100). He unveils how the intertwined power struggles between competing forces, such as Chinese state institutions, media intellectuals, entrepreneurs, and online and offline publics, confound the censorial practices and discourses. I also find Bai's and Ng's insightful views of the Chinese TV censorship system extremely helpful for re-evaluations of the government's regulations of other forms of media and public cultures in general.

The final section, *Commercial Television and the Reconfiguration of History, Memory, and Nationalism*, is the most vigorous and expansive section in this book. It features five chapters that tease out the contextual and textual levels of TV entertainment in terms of historical, national and transcultural imaginaries of China. All five chapters strive to reveal, and thus dismantle, the Self/Other dichotomy epitomized in contemporary Chinese entertainment TV images. Geng Song's research on the representations of foreign 'others' in recent TV dramas and Lauren Gorfinkel and Andrew Chubbs's understanding of televised Chinese language and culture contests unveil how Chinese political ideologies are represented to both domestic and international audiences through self-Orientalist, Occidentalism and cosmopolitan discourses. Rong Cai's and Qian Gong's chapters explicate how certain dominant ideological and political-economic reforms guide and complicate the TV adaptations of Red Classics. These two chapters demonstrate how the adaptations' ambivalent representations of economic difficulties and class struggles in Communist China subtly justify both Communist and post-socialist China's political and economic policies. The final chapter by Kun Qian uncovers how the Emperor TV drama, through its imaginary and symbolic reconfigurations of China as a great empire within a historical context, discursively vindicates contemporary imperialist thinking, reformist politics and political ideologies of building a harmonious and powerful nation with 'Chinese characteristics' in a global context (188).

I might risk aiming too broadly in attempting to find some general criticisms of the impressive writings in this volume. Yet, one possible weakness lies in its failure to fully acknowledge the ethnic and linguistic complexities within Mainland China. Of course, some chapters have already unmasked the disturbing equation of the cultural construct of 'Chineseness' with a single ethnic or linguistic community in the binarist televisual representations of the Mandarin-dominated, Mainland-based Chinese self and the foreign other. In particular, Song's perspicacious analysis showcases how Chinese nationalism

can be incorporated into the gendered TV representations of transnational marriage. Meanwhile, Gorfinkel and Chubbs's chapter also reveals how the televisual framing of foreigners who can perform an essentialized Chinese identity perpetuates 'the image of a powerful, modern, and unified Chinese nation, firmly at the centre of world civilization' (121). Indeed, gendered, sexualized, or even queered popular imaginaries of non-Chinese foreigners, especially white western people, on Chinese TV have been proliferating and of great importance. Nonetheless, none of the contributors further problematizes the ways the symbolic 'China' is represented in the televisual imaginaries of diverse non-Mandarin-speaking and/or ethnically non-Han Chinese communities in Mainland China. For instance, in the last chapter of this anthology, Qian briefly notes that, as portrayed in the TV series of *Great Emperor Wu of Han* (2004), the Chinese race's inclusion of a minority tribe, the Xiongnu Hun, in the Han Dynasty is 'symbolic of the all-encompassing, assimilative, and centripetal power of China, signif[ying] the great harmony of the Chinese empire' (183). Yet, this televisual rationalization of the national solidarity of a mainland-centred empire through eroticization, exoticization, deracialization, and/or erasure of China's minority ethnic groups, languages and cultures can be seen in a great many historical dramas, variety shows and TV documentaries, which deserves further thought.

To reverse this centralization and simplification of Mainland Chinese cultures and languages, a Sinophone studies approach could be helpful to understand these intricate discourses surrounding media representations of Chinese race, ethnicity, nation and citizenship (Chiang 2014; Shih 2007). As Howard Chiang elaborates, 'a non-hegemonic subversive definition of "Chineseness"' can be accomplished through

pa[ying] closer attention to the cultural differences between Sinitic-language communities on the margins of China (Taiwan, Hong Kong, etc.) and those within the People's Republic of China (PRC), rather than flattening out these unique cultural identifications with the bias of China-centrism.

(2014: 31)

In this fashion, the temporal and spatial heteroglossia of Chinese TV cultures underlined in this set of essays could also be better exposed in additional studies on trans-regional and transnational TV adaptations and interpretations in the Chinese-speaking world, the racial and geo-cultural characteristics of provincial TV products and appeals, and the cultural-linguistic variations and similarities between diverse non-Mandarin-speaking Chinese TV cultures.

As is to be expected, given the relatively limited scope, breadth and depth of these four books, some exciting areas relevant to Chinese TV remain unexplored or understudied. 'Elite' TV genres (Zhu 2008: 141), such as TV drama, are still treated as the most vital concerns in this scholarship. Online TV forms and grass-roots participatory cultures, often enmeshed with flourishing non-mainstream discourses on gendered and sexualized identities, spaces and subjectivities in contemporary China, receive limited attention in the writings reviewed here. However, this is perhaps a criticism that could be levelled at much of the other existing scholarship on Chinese media. As Michael Keane notes, Chinese TV 'audiences are increasingly dispersed, many are online and many are overseas' (2015: 165) and '[t]here are many Chinese characteristics, many regions, many audiences, many voices, and many platforms'

(2015: 172). Especially in the past decade, the explosion of 'non-mainstream' phenomena in Chinese media and popular cultural milieus, which has resulted from the wide penetration of TV technology into working and private spaces, the prominent developments and uses of digital and social media, and the mobility of human and informational resources on a global scale, makes this research direction imperative. Although briefly discussed in these four books and other existing research (e.g., Lu 2002; Shih 1999; Sun 2002; Yang 1997; Yang 2014; Zhang and Zhang 2015; Zhu 2008), topics, such as pornographic and other 'perverted' uses of TV, online LGBTQ TV, transnational TV cultures and fandoms, and the broadcasting and consumption of Chinese-speaking TV in the non-Chinese context, are certainly worth more serious consideration.

In summary, further research on Chinese-speaking, border- and/or culture-crossing TV and audience communities that explores the fecund intersection of Sinophone studies, grass-roots participatory cultures, and global media theory would keep Chinese TV scholarship enlightened and updated. Of course, these quibbles and sometimes unavoidable omissions do not prevent these four complementary books from presenting valuable critical engagements with different aspects of the Chinese TV landscape. Published at a crucial moment, when the production and consumption of Chinese TV is prominently shaping and being shaped by the prevalence of digital technology and global information flows, this new scholarship undoubtedly offers compelling material that highlights the significance of Chinese TV studies. At the same time, this scholarship is indicative of a promising and burgeoning research environment in TV studies that welcomes intersectional, interdisciplinary, multi-methodological approaches that highlight 'how race, class, gender, and sexuality need to be analyzed in relationship to one another... in an increasingly diverse, global, and digitally networked world' (Carter et al. 2013: 6). Undoubtedly, in this sense, these four books would be of enormous value to both academic and general readers who are interested in learning more about Chinese TV's past, present and future.

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NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS 2016

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