

Cute, Quaint,
Hungry and Romantic

THE AESTHETICS
OF CONSUMERISM

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CUTENESS

She stands in maroon bloomers and a pink dress that flares tantalizingly above two acrylic legs that descend, unvaried in diameter, all the way down to her gout-stricken ankles crammed into booties. Her feet, crippled and pigeon-toed, touch at their tips. A sassy tuft of a synthetic top-knot sprays out of a helmet of auburn hair encircled by a polka dot bow that sits atop her head like a windmill, dwarfing the rest of her figure. Her nose is no bigger than a button, and her astonishingly candid eyes are two moist pools framed by eyebrows penciled like quizzical circumflexes on the vast dome of her forehead. Emptied of all internal life, these mesmerizing orbs, composing at least 25 percent of a face as wide as her shoulders, stare out directly at us with a reticence heightened by the hec-

tic flush of her complexion. Her name is "So Shy Sherri," and she is one of toy manufacturer Galoob's nine new "Baby Faces," a set of "super posin'" dolls with names like "So Sweet Sandi," "So Sorry Sarah," and "So Delightful Dee Dee," each with an "adorable" expression and personality of her own.

Everywhere we turn we see cuteness, from cherubic figures batting their peepers on Charmin toilet paper to teddy bears frozen mid-embrace, the stubs of their pawless arms groping for hugs. In the eyes of most people, whose conditioned responses to this most rigid of styles prevent them from recognizing its artificiality, things like calendars with droopy-eyed puppies pleading for attention or greeting cards with kitty cats in raincoats are the very embodiment of innocence and as such represent an absence of the designed and manipulated qualities of what is in fact a heavily mannered aesthetic. For them, the foreshortened limbs and sad, saucer eyes of a doll like So Shy Sherri are part of a unique and readily identifiable iconography whose distortions trigger, with Pavlovian predictability, maternal feelings for a mythical condition of endearing naivete. The chilling paradox of the fetishes over which we croon so irrepressibly is that their cuteness suggests

guilelessness, simplicity, and a refreshing lack of affectation, the very antithesis of what we would expect if we were to judge these toys on the basis of their extreme stylization alone.

Cuteness is not an aesthetic in the ordinary sense of the word and must by no means be mistaken for the physically appealing, the attractive. In fact, it is closely linked to the grotesque, the malformed. So Shy Sherri, for instance, is an anatomical disaster. Her legs are painfully swollen, her fingers useless pink stumps that seem to have been lopped off at the knuckles, and her rosy cheeks so bloated that her face is actually wider than it is long. Medieval or renaissance images of the Christ child, those obese monstrosities whose muscularity always strikes the modern viewer as bafflingly inaccurate, make an interesting comparison. In an era like our own, which prides itself on its ability to achieve effects of uncanny realism, the disfigured putti of the "Baby Face" series of dolls mark a decline rather than an advance in the representation of children, an eerie throwback to the slant-eyed sphinxes in Sieneese icons: alien, carnivorous-looking creatures who are, in many ways, as pictorially inexact as So Shy Sherri.

Far from being an accident of bad craftsmanship, the element of the grotesque in cuteness is perfectly deliberate and must be viewed as the explicit intention of objects that elicit from us the complex emotions we feel when we encounter the fat faces and squat, ruddy bodies of creatures like the Trolls, with their pot bellies, pug noses, and teased-up mops of brightly colored hair. The grotesque is cute because the grotesque is pitiable, and pity is the primary emotion of this seductive and manipulative aesthetic that arouses our sympathies by creating anatomical pariahs, like the Cabbage Patch Dolls or even E.T., whose odd proportions and lack of symmetry diverge wildly from the relative balance and uniformity of ordinary bodies. The aesthetic of cuteness creates a class of outcasts and mutations, a ready-made race of lovable inferiors whom both children and adults collect, patronize, and enslave in the protective concubinage of vast harems of homely dolls and snugglesome misfits. Something becomes cute not necessarily because of a quality it has but because of a quality it lacks, a certain neediness and inability to stand alone, as if it were an indigent starveling, lonely and rejected because of a hideousness we find more touching than unsightly.

The koalas, pandas, and lambs of the stuffed animal series "Lost 'n Founds" directly allude to this state of homeless destitution. With their "adorable 'so-sad' eyes" that shed real tears, these shameless examples of the waif or pauper syndrome seem to be begging to be rescued from their defenseless state, so tellingly emphasized by paws as cumbersome as boxing gloves—absurd appendages that lie uselessly in their laps, totally free of any of the prehensile functions hands usually serve. Because it generates enticing images like these of ugliness and dejection, cuteness has become essential to the marketplace, in that advertisers have learned that consumers will "adopt" products that create, often in their packaging alone, an aura of motherlessness, ostracism, and melancholy, the silent desperation of the lost puppy dog clamoring to be befriended—namely, to be bought.

Cuteness, in short, is not something we find in our children but something we *do* to them. Because it aestheticizes unhappiness, helplessness, and deformity, it almost always involves an act of sadism on the part of its creator, who makes an unconscious attempt to maim, hobble, and embarrass the thing he seeks to idolize, as in the case of "Little Mutt," a teddy bear

with a game leg that a British manufacturer has even fitted with an orthopedic boot. The process of conveying cuteness to the viewer disempowers its objects, forcing them into ridiculous situations and making them appear more ignorant and vulnerable than they really are. Adorable things are often most adorable in the middle of a pratfall or a blunder: Winnie the Pooh, with his snout stuck in the hive; the 101 dalmatians of Disney's classic, collapsing in double splits and sprawling across the ice; Love-a-Lot Bear, in the movie *The Care Bears*, who stares disconsolately out at us with a paint bucket overturned on his head; or, the grimmest example of the cruelty of cuteness, the real fainting goat, which has acquired of late a perverse chic as a pet (bred with myatonia, a genetic heart defect, it coyly folds up and faints every time you scream at it). Although the gaze we turn on the cute thing seems maternal and solicitous, it is in actuality transformative and will stop at nothing to appease its hunger for expressing pity and big-heartedness, even at the cost of mutilating the object of its affections. The French-manufactured "Vet Set" takes the neediness of cuteness to macabre extremes: The kit is equipped with a wounded stuffed puppy whose im-

ploring eyes seem to wince as it patiently awaits the physician, who can alleviate its suffering with a wide array of bandages, tourniquets, syringes, and even a stethoscope to monitor the irregular, fluttering thump of a mechanical heart that actually beats.

If cuteness is the aesthetic of deformity and dejection, it is also the aesthetic of sleep. Although adorable things can be bright eyed and bushy tailed, the pose we find cutest of all is not that of a rambunctious infant screaming at the top of his lungs but that of the docile sleepyhead, his chin nestled drunkenly in the crook of someone's neck, wearing the pjs in the FAO Schwarz catalog that consist of a full-length leopard suit made of spotted fur or a "sweet confection of lace" with fuzzy marabou touches of pristine white down sewn like a tutu around the waist. The world of cute things is transfixed by the spell of the sandman, full of napping lotus eaters whose chief attraction lies in their dormant and languorous postures, their defenseless immobility.

Turning its targets into statues and plush dolls, cuteness is ultimately dehumanizing, paralyzing its victims into comatose or semi-conscious things. In fact, the "thingness" of cute things is fixed firmly in our minds by means of the exaggerated textures and hues so char-

acteristic of stuffed animals, with their shimmering satins and their luscious coats of fur, or dolls with their luxuriant profusion of hair, often of absurd length and body (as with the Cutie Kids of the "Cutie Club" series, a set of dolls whose psychedelic coiffures cascade down their sides in corkscrew curls longer than their own bodies). "Anxiously awaiting power snuggles," FAO Schwarz's huge grizzly bear is a slouching, seemingly invertebrate mammoth rippling with "serious spreads of soft spots" that are "just asking to be hauled and mauled," while their elephant, as large as a St. Bernard, is described as "big, plump, and deliciously soft with soulful brown eyes that encourage big-time hugging and smooching." Vacant and malleable, animals like these inhabit a world of soothing tactile immediacy in which there are no sharp corners or abrasive materials but in which everything has been conveniently soft-sculpturized to yield to our importunate squeezes and hugs. If such soulless insentience is any indication, cuteness is the most scrutable and externalized of aesthetics in that it creates a world of stationary objects and tempting exteriors that deliver themselves up to us, putting themselves at our disposal and allowing themselves to be apprehended entirely through the

senses. In light of the intense physicality of our response to their helpless torpor, our compulsive gropings even constitute something one might call cute sex or, in point of fact, given that one of the partners lies there groggy and catatonic, a kind of necrophilia, a neutered coupling consummated in our smothering embrace of a serenely motionless object incapable of reciprocating. Far from being content with the helplessness of our young as we find them in their natural state, we take all kinds of artificial measures to dramatize this vulnerability even further by defacing them, embarrassing them, devitalizing them, depriving them of their selfhood, and converting them, with the help of all of the visual and sartorial tricks at our disposal, into disempowered objects, furry love balls quivering in soft fabrics as they lapse into withdrawal for their daily fix of TLC.

During the course of the twentieth century, the overwhelming urge to engage in cute sex profoundly affected the appearance of the teddy bear, whom toy manufacturers put on a rich diet, creating an irresistibly moon-faced dough boy whose corpulence invites caressing. The original designs for the teddy bear, produced during the 1880s, were modeled on actual

taxidermic specimens and were relatively naturalistic in appearance, disfigured by scholiastic humps that jutted out of their backs, long, vulpine snouts, and slender, simian arms that hung all the way down to their feet. Over the last few decades, Pooh and Paddington have improved their posture, sprouted fat, dwarfish arms, and, moreover, submitted to a barrage of rhinoplastic amputations that has turned their crunching mandibles into harmless bulges that protrude only slightly from round, unthreatening faces. Casting melting glances from sad button eyes, today's winsome "critters" have also been redesigned as more serviceable cute sex toys, much like the gaping-mouthed dolls available in adult book stores: Their arms are now permanently sewn in an outstretched position, rather than dangling at their sides as they once did, simulating an embrace as lifeless as the latex clasp of our "fantasy playmates."

The strange consequence of the need to increase huggability is that all stuffed animals, from marsupials to pachyderms, are covered in fur, regardless of the fact that the real-life counterparts of Beatrice the Boa and Willy the Walrus have scales that are wet and slimy or hides that are bristly and tough. Behind the pleasure

we take in the bodies of such cartoon heroes as Kermit and Snoopy is the fear of another sort of body altogether, the distasteful subtext of our plush toys: The excreting bodies of real live babies which, far from being clean and dry, are squalling factories of drool and snot. Our unenviable role as the hygienic custodians of children, whose dirty bottoms we must regularly wipe, noses we must blow, and soiled underwear we must launder, has led to a recurrent parental fantasy, that of the diaperless baby, the excretionless teddy bear, a low-maintenance infant whom we can kiss and fondle free of anxiety that it will throw up on our shoulder as we rock it to sleep or pee in our laps as we dandle it on our knees.

Exaggerating the vast discrepancies of power between the sturdy adult and the enfeebled and susceptible child, the narcissism of cuteness is evident in the way that the aesthetic ascribes human attributes to non-human things. Anthropomorphism is to a large extent *the* rhetorical strategy of children's books, which often generate their narratives from a kind of animal transvestism in which dogs, cats, bears, and pigs have the clothing and demeanor of human beings. Calendars, another rich source of cuteness, also employ animal

transvestism as a major theme: mice as prima ballerinas in toe shoes and tutus, dogs in party hats and sunglasses, or swallow-tailed hamsters in tuxes and cummerbunds rearing up on their hind legs to give each other what appears to be an affectionate peck on the cheek. Even an artist as respected as William Wegman subtly refashions, in the appropriative style of post-modernism, the low-brow aesthetic of cuteness by decking out his lugubrious mastiff, an irresistibly funereal pooch cheerlessly resigned to his fate, in everything from Christian Dior to Calvin Klein jeans. Examples like these reveal that the cute worldview is one of massive human chauvinism, which rewrites the universe according to an iconographic agenda dominated by the pathetic fallacy. Multiplying our image a thousand-fold and reverberating like an echo chamber with the familiar sounds of our own voices, the cute vision of the natural world is a world without nature, one that annihilates "otherness," ruthlessly suppresses the non-human, and allows nothing, including our own children, to be separate and distinct from us.

The imitative nature of cuteness can also be seen in the relation of the aesthetic to precocity. One of the things we find cutest in the behavior of our children is

their persistence in mimicking us, not only in such time-honored traditions as dress-up (the anthropomorphic version of which is played out obsessively in children's literature) but in that most basic form of child's play, mothering, whether it be of a doll or of a family pet. The spectacle of toddlers rocking their babies, changing the diapers of the many incontinent toys on the market, placating anxious dolls, or thrashing disobedient teddy bears elicits some of our most gloating and unrestrained responses to cuteness. Nothing delights us more than the strange sight of a one-year-old in a stroller meeting a barely ambulatory two-year-old, who, rather than seeking to establish spontaneous esprit de corps with his peer, breaks rank and gibbers baby talk at the bewildered object of his curiously perfunctory affections. As co-conspirators in this game of make-believe maturity, we reward children who at once feign helplessness and assume adult authority in mothering others, reinforcing simultaneously both infantilism and precocity. The child is thus taught not only to be cute in himself but to recognize and enjoy cuteness in others, to play the dual roles of actor and audience, cootchy-cooing as much as he is cootchy-cooed. In this way, our culture actively inculcates the aesthetic doc-

trines of cuteness by giving our children what amounts to a thorough education in the subject, involving extensive and rigorous training in role-playing. By encouraging our children to imitate the way we ourselves fawn over their own preciousness, we give them the opportunity to know cuteness from both sides of the equation, not only from the standpoint of the object receiving the attention but from the standpoint of those giving it as well, from their appreciative audience-cum-artistic directors, whom they impersonate for brief and touching intervals in their own highly informative charades of child-rearing. We teach our children the nature and value of cuteness almost from the dawn of consciousness and initiate them into the esoteric rituals of its art, passing on to them the tribal legacy of its iconographic traditions, its strange, self-mutilating ceremonies, as alien in their way, at least to a culture unindoctrinated in cuteness, as the scarification customs of Africa or New Guinea. Because imitation allows children to observe their own behavior with the analytic detachment with which they in turn are observed by their admirers, cuteness is unique among aesthetics because it lays the foundations for its own survival by building into itself a form of proselytizing.

The association of cuteness with a delusional state of artlessness prevents us from realizing that the qualities of primitivism and droll savagery around which we have woven this all-consuming folk religion embody something we would *like* to see in children rather than something we actually do see there. The conventions of cuteness are the residue of unfulfilled wishes that crystallize in the gap between the daily realities of children and our quixotic and unobtainable notions of what they should, ideally, be like. Cuteness is every parent's portable utopia, the rose-colored lenses that color and blur the profound drudgery of child-rearing with soft-focused sentimentality. We use it to allay fears of our failures as parents and to numb us to the irritations of the vigilance we must maintain over creatures who are, despite the anesthetizing ideology of cuteness, often more in control of us than we are of them.

Although it is easy to sympathize with the disquieting frustrations that underlie this aesthetic, cuteness is in fact ultimately more a source of unhappiness than of comfort among parents. To superimpose the vast edifice of fetishized images and intricate rituals onto the shallow foundations of a reality that cannot withstand its weight is to invite disappointment, not only for us

but for our children. Cuteness saturates the visual landscape of consumerism with utopian images that cause feelings of inadequacy among parents, who inevitably measure the rowdy and selfish behavior of their own children by exacting ideals of tractability, cuddliness, and quiescence. Just as the inundation of our culture with the glitzy images of recent video pornography has elevated our aesthetic standards in regard to our partners (and consequently interfered with our sexual enjoyment of ordinary bodies in all of their imperfections), so cuteness elevates our expectations in regard to our children. It prevents us from enjoying them in their natural, unindoctrinated state, oppressed as we are by our apparent failures as caregivers who strive unavailingly to discern in our headstrong offspring the lineaments of the model child.

The result of this psychological malaise is an entirely new aesthetic, an invention of the last few decades: the anti-cute. In an effort to counteract prevailing images of children, a culture like our own naturally produces as an antidote images of the exact opposite of cuteness: the perverse. Our belief that our children are harmless little cherubs who toss wreathes of posies hither and yon collides with their intransigence and generates in

the process so much hostility that we are inclined to view them as corrupt, possessed, even satanic.

Cuteness thus coexists in a dynamic relation with the perverse. The failure of the hyperboles of one aesthetic gives rise to the hyperboles of the other, of the child as the vehicle of diabolical powers from the Great Beyond, which have appropriated the tiny, disobedient bodies of our elfish changelings as instruments for their assaults on the stability of family life. The spate of films about demonic possession shows just how assiduous we have become about building up the new iconography of the anti-cute. Catering to a deep need in the popular imagination, Hollywood has begun to manufacture images that function as outrageous travesties of cuteness, like those found in *Poltergeist*, in which a young girl becomes the conduit of tormented spirits of the damned who emerge from the throbbing blue light of the television set; or in *Child's Play*, in which the spirit of a dead serial killer inhabits the body of a doll named Chuckie, who, stalking down hallways with butcher knives tucked behind its back, murders Aunt Maggie, the baby-sitter, by giving her such a jolt that she staggers backwards out of the kitchen window and plummets ten floors to splatter on the hood of a parked car. Similarly, in David Cronen-

berg's *The Brood*, the protagonist's children, a pack of dwarfish gnomes, gestate in moldy embryonic sacks hanging outside of her belly and then, after birth, begin spontaneously to respond to her volatile moods, ultimately bludgeoning her mother to death with kitchen utensils in a fit of rage.

Although it is still the dominant mode of representing children, cuteness is an aesthetic under siege, the object of contempt, laughter, and skepticism. Its commercialized aura of greeting card naivete makes it so fragile, so vulnerable to ridicule, that it cannot withstand the frank realism with which matters of parenting, divorce, and sexuality are now being addressed by the public at large. In the last few decades, cuteness has been subjected to remorseless satire as we attempt to loosen the grip of its iconography on an imagination hungry for images closer to the harsh realities of the era of the latchkey kid, the two-career family, the single-parent household, the crack baby, and the less-than-innocent, drug-running sixth-grader with a beeper in one pocket and a .44 Magnum automatic pistol in the other. Loud and chaotic, *The Simpsons* is the anti-cute show of the 1990s, the "all-American dysfunctional family," as they have been nicknamed. Their

household constitutes a direct subversion of the insipidity of cuteness, with its cartoon characters' harshly contoured shapes, gaping, lipless mouths, and enormous boiled-egg eyes goggling in such a way as to suggest the mindless somnambulism of compulsive TV viewers. The anti-cute launches a frontal assault on fuzzy-wuzziness with a blitz of images of the child as the petulant and demanding brat who disdains the sacrosanct laws of property ownership, gleefully annihilating cuisinarts and microwaves as he mows a broad swathe of destruction through the household's inner sanctum.

With the rise of the anti-cute, we are witnessing what amounts to civil war in the contemporary aesthetic of the family, a battle in which the image of the child as the unnatural spawn of Satan, an impish spirit of pure malevolent mischievousness, has locked horns with that of the child as the inanimate stuffed animal. Generating their plots by pitting the cute against the anti-cute, Parts 1 and 2 of *Gremlins* provide a kind of allegory of this transformation. In Part 2, the adorable "Gizmo" (an appropriate name for this standard-bearer of cuteness, because it emphasizes the animal's status as an inert object) purrs with a contented coo, its droopy ears and sad eyes inviting the lubricious em-

braces of cute sex. After it is exposed to water, however, it begins to reproduce, laying eggs that enter a larval stage in repulsive cocoons covered by viscous membranes. Whereas Gizmo is soft, dry, and relatively well behaved, the ferocious aliens that quickly hatch from their water-induced hibernation are, as one character calls them, "ugly, slimy, mean-spirited, and gloppy." In them, both the behavior and appearance of cute objects are at once evoked and subverted. Gizmo's strokeable fur is transformed into a wet, scaly integument, while the vacant portholes of its eyes (the most important facial feature of the cute thing, giving us free access to its soul and ensuring its total scrutability, its incapacity to hold back anything) become diabolical slits hiding a lurking intelligence, just as its dainty paws metamorphose into talons and its pretty puckered lips into enormous Cheshire grimaces with full sets of sharp incisors. Whereas cute things have clean, sensuous surfaces that remain intact and unpenetrated (suggesting, in fact, that there is nothing at all inside, that what you see is what you get), the anti-cute Gremlins are constantly being squished and disemboweled, their entrails spilling out into the open, as they explode in microwaves and are run through paper shredders and

blenders. With the help of food and water, they multiply exponentially and begin their devastating campaign—Hollywood's favorite plot device—against property ownership, destroying in Part 1 an entire town and, in Part 2, a skyscraper modeled on the Trump Tower. In this Manichean contrast between the precious Gizmo and its progeny, the hyperactive vandals who incarnate a new but equally stylized representation of youth and innocence, *Gremlins* neatly encapsulates the iconographic challenges to an aesthetic that is gradually relinquishing its hold on the popular imagination as we attempt to purge ourselves of the antiquated religion of infantilism.