

**We all love big eyes.**

Student name: Amelie Warner

Student number: 2203477

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Tutors: Alex Duncan/ Paul Duerinckx

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In this essay I will be researching cuteness and how we as humans are psychologically attracted to the quality of cuteness. I will also be researching how this relates to art, I will be looking at art in and out of galleries. I chose this topic to research as my own artwork is regularly called cute. I wanted to make my proposal for my dissertation to be an insight into the great spectrum of cuteness that is embed in our lives, as well as our galleries. I am going to be researching cuteness in relation to three topics commercialisation, the uncanny valley and the beginning of cuteness within Japanese culture, along with artists that connect to these topics. I chose these three as they are a good beginning point to research and discuss the influence of this quality that we may not question. Cuteness may seem like a trivial matter to some, but as its disregarded, cuteness is a hidden monument.

Before we look at art works, I want to first discuss the psychology of how cuteness affects us through human attachment theories. Human ethology is based within biological studies and looks at humans innate workings (behaviours you are born with). Saul Mcleod, PhD, wrote an article on psychologist John Bowlby's theory of attachment, in which he stated that Bowlby believed babies had these innate behaviours called 'social releasers' like crawling, smiling, cooing which caused the caregiver to respond and attend to the baby. The response from the caregiver is to keep the baby alive via feeding them, keeping them warm and protecting them. We can understand that these releasers are part of a babies innate survival instinct. Bowlby's work was inspired by another psychologist Konrad Lorenz who described babies as having a baby scheme 'Kindchenschema' which was a set of physical features of a baby – the big eyes, chubby cheeks, small nose and plump bodies that are seen as cute or cuddly elicit caretaking behaviour (Glocker et al., 2009). These

two theories show precedent and suggest, cuteness may have attachment properties.

Both psychologists suggest, qualities that we categorize as cute controls our behaviours. If we see an artwork as cute this may create an automatic innate connection to the piece, possibly because we want to protect it in certain respects or because it creates a positive response in our body. Neuroscientist and oxford professor Morten L. Kringelbach explained “When we encounter something cute, it ignites fast brain activity in regions such as the orbitofrontal cortex” (Kringelbach, 2016).

I attended an exhibition called ‘Cute’ taking place in Somerset house, London (2024). In this exhibition was British photographer Harry Pointers work called ‘*The Brighton Cats*’ (1870-1880). Pointer’s images were a series of photographs that consisted of him photographing his pet cats imitating seemingly human activities or positions. As an example, *The Photographer* (figure 1), where the cat is positioned holding onto the end of a camera.



*Figure 1*

Writing about Pointers work in the Cute exhibition described this series as being so popular that it overshadowed his other works. This is a good representation of how the theories of attachment can be linked to art. The collection was around 200 images which were made into novelty greetings cards.

Cats and dogs do have a resemblance to human babies, for example their big eyes and plump bodies, so as humans we usually have the same innate caring instincts for them. As a viewer to Pointer's work, we may feel some type of connection to the photographs as we create an attachment to the subject of the cat and the cuteness the cat represents. The catalogue for the cute exhibition states that cuteness encourages a sense of belonging and community (Paul Dale. J et al, 2024), the

photographs in an exhibition create a space for the collective viewer to enjoy. We may find that these types of art draw us in as an escape or a safe space because we know cuteness creates a positive emotion.

Pointer's photos became commercial, as happy birthday and happy new year's cards. Commercialisation suggests a demand for something, so this recognises there is a demand for cute imagery i.e., pointers photos. This is only one example of cuteness in art being popular, we can see this same pattern in modern day merchandise, like Hello Kitty (made by designer Yuko Shimizu), Mickey Mouse (designed and animated by Ub Iwerks), Barbie (invented by Ruth Handler) and so on.

Big corporations utilise cuteness to sell their merchandise as they know consumers will be interested. However, we must consider the appeal of cartoons and barbies may be due to its fun qualities such as being toys and television characters, despite the element of cuteness. So, to really support the theory we should look at company's who may be selling mundane items who have also utilised cuteness to expand their sales. For example, the company Andrex which sells toilet paper, has used a Labrador puppy (figure 2) as its main symbol on products since 1972 (52 years).



*Figure 2*

It began with an advert of a puppy running around with toilet paper in its mouth which was a big success in the market as marketing manager at Andrex Raymond Dinkin proved when stating, “When we started the campaign, Andrex had a 23% share of the toilet tissue market. By the end of the 1970s, it had risen to 30%.” (Dinkin, 2019).

Toilet paper itself is not a too exciting as a topic, but when we look at the different packages, we may feel more trusting of the one with puppy on it compared to the rest. In our minds puppies represent positivity and softness so we can be faithful in this product. If we consider the puppy symbol on the toilet paper and replace it with an adult man, the urge to purchase the item will decrease based on the lack of cuteness, which had caused the success of the company previously.

Another line of research about cuteness has led me to the Sianne Ngai's writing about Masahiro Mori's theory the Uncanny Valley in our aesthetic categories book.

Uncanny valley is where:

"...robots (that) begin to look and behave more like actual humans, our affection toward them also grows up to a certain point, after which the resemblance produces feeling of aversion." (Ngai, 2015, page 91)

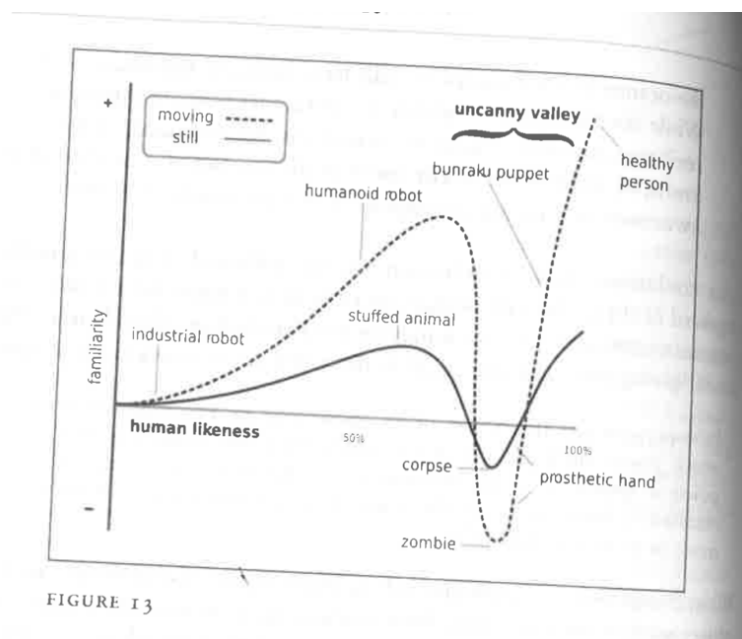


Figure 3

If we look at the graph on figure 3 from Sianne Ngai's book, we can see that something that looks the like a real human but is not, are classed as the most disliked and uncanny. When you go up the scale of familiarity you see that things like a stuffed animal, often perceived as cute, are preferred over things that look more human then are not. The graph shows humanoid to be favoured and with decreased resemblance to humas, however, this isn't accurate to our time now.

Humanoid robots have become more realistic (figure 4) meaning humanoids of modern day actually represent an uncanny look then what they may of used to.

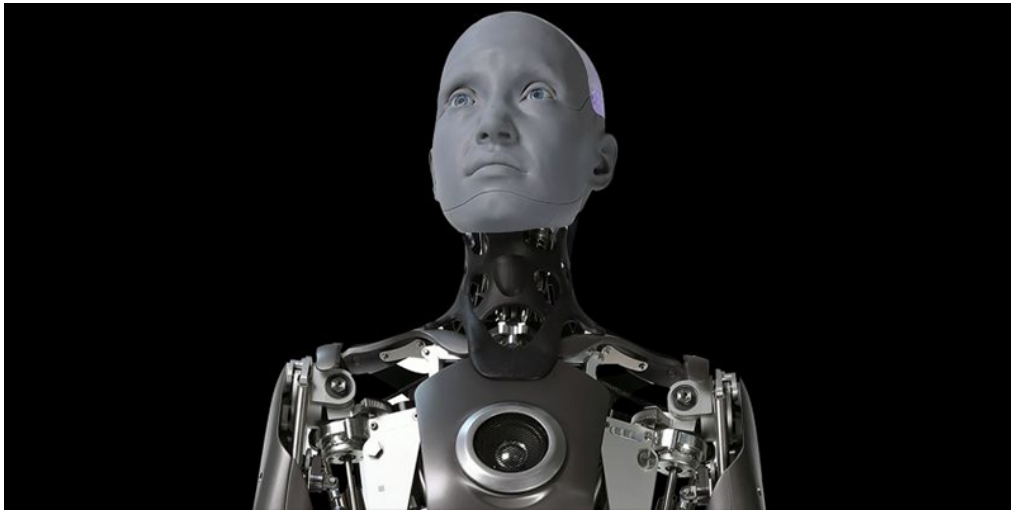


*Figure 4*

Taking Masahiro Mori's theory, I want to apply it to Harry Pointers work, where we are shown cats being placed in human-esc positions which we know have made them more desirable. However, if we were to add human-like features to the cats in turn making them resemble humans more, it would become the opposite - uncomfortable. To support this, we can look at movies like the Wizard of Oz (1939) where the cowardly lion is a human with prosthetic feline features (figure 5) or the film Cats where the actors have been animated covered in cat fur and specific cat features -like ears and a tail but their faces and bodies are human (figure 6). Seeing this film, I am not filled with a positive response as how I would seeing a normal cat, the imagery presents an unease like the humanoid robots.



*Figure 5*



*Figure 6*

Simran Hans review in 2019 of the Cats film for The Guardian states that “The film is rated U, but many of its uncanny images are sure to haunt viewers for generations”.

Knowing something that is supposed to look like one thing is in fact another is where we find the unease of the uncanny. Support for this is in Jennifer Rhee’s essay on Mori’s uncanny valley theory explains by shaking the hand of someone we

are subconsciously expecting a certain feel and temperature, but if we come into contact with a prosthetic hand, we would find it unnerving.

An artist in relation to this uncanny/ cuteness discussion is Margaret Keane. Keane was known for her paintings of subjects with big eyes. The eyes are often quite dark and in most of her paintings the eyes are staring out at you, as though you are being sucked in. As an example of this, one of her paintings called *All dressed up* portrays a white dog with a coat on, on a black background staring straight out of the painting (figure 7). There is some unease about this image as the dog looks almost afraid or pleading, but this is not cute. We are not used to seeing a dog with these eyes, though we know it is a representation of a dog we also know there is something not quite right about it, which is where the uncanny quality comes in. As was discussed with the Andrex puppy, we are trusting of the image of a dog it is something universally found cute, but with Keane's the subject of a dog has now tipped over from cute to uncanny.



Figure 7



Figure 8

We can also see the same affect with her images of babies and children as in figure 8 *Frustrated*. Not all of Keane's works can be subject to the uncanny label, some of the pieces she makes are considered cute, her work shows an interesting border between cute and uncanny.

Another factor that adds to the uncanny aspect of her work is knowing the story of Margaret Keane which I discovered. Margaret married a man named Walter Keane and through the course of their relationship Walter began to pass off Margaret's work as his own. When she found out he persuaded her to keep going with this system. However, Walter was very emotionally abusive to Margaret so despite her works being very popular in the markets. she was in a state of "increasing misery" (Biography, 2022). Eventually Margaret took back her life and exposed her husband revealing who she truly was to the public. In the end her story is of triumph, but it does not come without struggle.

My practice evolves around creating small worlds. I find the reaction of it being cute stems from its miniature scale. We have always played with small worlds since birth. From Barbie or Sylvanian Family to model train sets and Lego. Seeing something miniature could evoke a childhood memory or nostalgia of playing with these small toys. Small objects are generally regarded as cute. Research I found supporting this idea from centuries ago comes from Sei Shonagon's pillow book. Shonagon served the empress Teishi who was the empress to the capital of Japan (Heian) of the time, Shonagon served there from 993 to 1000. She wrote in her pillow book – which was essentially a diary that she kept under her pillow- a list of *Adorable Things* (figure 9).

155. Adorable Things

*A child's face drawn on a melon.*

*A baby sparrow that comes hopping over when we imitate a squeaking mouse. It is also a pretty sight when the parent bird comes to feed the chick an insect after we have tied a string to its leg.*

*When a child of two is crawling briskly along, it is adorable to see it alertly spot a tiny curl of dust, pick it up with its dainty fingers, and show it to an adult.*

*A child's shoulder-length hair gets in her eyes, but she merely tilts her head to look at things instead of brushing the hair back. This is adorable—as is the fresh whiteness of the skirt cord tied above the waist to hold back her sleeves.*

*The tiny pages at the Courtiers' Hall are adorable as they walk about in their splendid costumes.*

*A sweet child falls asleep, clinging to someone who has picked him up to pet him for a moment. This is also a pretty sight.*

*Doll things. A very small lotus leaf plucked from a pond. A small heartvine leaf. Anything small is adorable.*

*Figure 9*

On the list she states, “Anything small is adorable.”. If we consider how long ago this statement was made, we can see that an item being small has always been considered cute or in this case adorable for a very long time. Adorable and cute hold very similar meanings, one can be substituted in for the other in the English language, but through looking at the dictionary definitions adorable may hold a deeper emotional meaning.

The cute catalogue also recognises Sei Shonagons statement as important to cute art and states “...*The pillow book*, has influenced artistic production in Japan to the present day”. Japanese culture and especially art has deep links to cuteness as already shown in Shonagon’s words. In Japan *Kawaii* (which basically translates to cute) is in the majority aspects of their culture including commercialisation, media (including anime), politics, industrial design, advertising, fashion, food and more.

A Japanese artist big on the cute art scene was Yoshitomo Nara, Nara is mentioned constantly throughout my research on cute art. Nara's work is multidisciplinary, he is influenced by popular music, memories of childhood and current events. his depiction of children with expressions emanating resistance rebellion contemplative, calmness (Pace gallery, 2024). Using children as a link to cuteness also relates to the cuteness we find in the miniature, as children and babies are simply miniature adults. In his work depicting children he often creates there features to be big eyed and plump faced- qualities that Lornez and Bowlby collate to being cute. An example of his work is *Harmelss Kitty, 2021 (figure 10)* which shows a child or baby in a kitten costume sitting on a toy duck.



*Figure 10*

The babies face could be interpreted as rebellious. I think there is humour to it being called harmless kitty as the image represents things that we see as harmless such as a baby, a cat and a duck toy, but the character shows us a stern facial expression in juxtaposition with the rest of the piece.

Kawaii appeared in Japan after World War two and became a flourishing staple quality of Japan. Japanese art critic Noi Sawaragi, who researched kawaii, discussed the fact that although we may see cute objects in other cultures no other country is using it to the same extent as Japan. Simon May, 2019, tells us that in 2009 the Japanese government appointed three cute ambassadors (kawaii taishi) who were three young women. (figure 11).



*Figure 11*

These ambassadors would travel around the globe and attend events to engage the world with the Japanese culture. Kawaii was then linked with political powers. This may seem like a weak move from the government as we may not see cute as a powerful asset, but it could be viewed as a rebuild of Japan after the war. This new cultural aesthetic of cute was now be linked to Japan globally and as cuteness is a universally understood quality Japan could utilise this to grow the economy and their popularity standing.

Examining my research throughout these three topics of commercialisation, uncanny and Japanese art I discovered a myriad of paths to follow. There is still so much to discuss in relation to the Japanese culture and cuteness, especially returning to commercialisation. Not only does Japanese culture have connections to cute art but there is also a history within the western world starting from the use of cupids. Cuteness is not subject to babies and small animals/ objects it also is used

to term things we find attractive- i.e., clothes, friends, partners. My proposal is just a brief understanding of cute. The most prominent question I considered for my dissertation is, **how do different cultures arts show their understanding of cuteness?**

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