

'Just a Dumb Bunny'

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'Just a Dumb Bunny': The Conventions and Rebellions of the Cutified Feminised Animal

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ABSTRACT

Cuteness is primarily associated with a trivial superficiality, so it is perhaps no surprise to find it a relatively ignored aesthetic within environmental thought, which tends to favour seriousness and complexity. The emerging field of cute studies has, however, begun to trouble such associations. This article offers an environmental lens on cute studies by taking, as its case study, the cutified, feminised animal and developing Sianne Ngai's discourse on the power dynamics inherent to cuteness. Examining vivid examples from Hello Kitty to D. H. Lawrence's poems, I argue that cuteness objectifies and 'others' female and animal identities, often to violent effect. Given the cutified, feminised animal's supposed passivity, what resistance can be expected? Analysing Aase Berg's blood-thirsty guinea-pig poems, I argue that horror tropes undertaken in a camp, comedic style serve to expose the violence within cuteness, generating an important opportunity for an environmental reframing of the cute.

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First produced in 1974 by Japanese company Sanrio, Hello Kitty has a white, cat-like face and a bow in her hair. Beyond her cute, disembodied head, she is often shown in a bipedal posture, dressed in child-like, feminine clothes. Emerging from the Japanese culture of cuteness known as *kawaii*, Hello Kitty has reached worldwide popularity. Studying the rise in international distribution of Japanese goods, Christine Yano (2013) describes the anthropomorphic icon as the epitome of pink globalisation. And yet, accepted as she is, several questions remain, most significantly: why does Hello Kitty lack a mouth? In her study on cuteness, Sianne Ngai (2012) suggests that cute subjects – from cartoons to cuddly toys – are defined by their lack of definition; their facial features reduced to mere dots, and, in the case of Hello Kitty's mouth, not even that. If the cute subject was endowed with a practical mouth, then 'it would symbolically render that object our equal, erasing the power differential on which the aesthetic depends' (Ngai 2012, 91). In a manner that supports Ngai's reading, the current designer of Hello Kitty explains that her lack of mouth is 'so that people who look at her can project their own feelings onto her face' (Yamaguchi 2008). Although this may appear a recognisable criterion for many

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cute subjects, it is surely meaningful that the cute subject we are discussing here is not only part animal, but also part female – subjects that, to repurpose Ngai's words, have not been seen as 'equal' within patriarchal cultures: figures that have been objectified and spoken for, consequently denied voice and agency.

Aware that cuteness is overlooked in the environmental humanities, this article explores the emerging field of cute studies and conceptualises the 'cutified, feminised animal' – a pretty, submissive and sometimes vulnerable being of which Hello Kitty is often interpreted as one example.¹ Different and often opposing behaviours transpire in the presence of this figure – including those of consuming, playing, mastering and mothering. In this article, I explore how cuteness can objectify and 'other' female and animal identities to violent effect that is worthy of ecofeminist attention. I examine what rebellion might look like for the cute, feminised animal, questioning the legitimacy of certain strategies that suggest, but do not necessarily deliver, empowerment. This leads me, in the final section, to consider approaches including the grotesque and horror. Drawing on Nicole Seymour (2018) as an ally in my argument, I argue that far from finding grotesque and horror antithetical to cuteness, these representational modes queer the triad of cuteness, femininity and animality, playfully revealing and critiquing its violence.

In what comes, I survey the reasons why no environmental perspective on cute studies has yet been instigated, noting parallels and distinctions with animal studies and ecofeminist discourse. As a starting point on taking cuteness seriously, my analysis is necessarily selective. It is not my intention to provide a genealogy or taxonomy of the cutified, feminised animal, but to draw a variety of vivid examples into conversation to uncover an overlooked grammar of cuteness. As such, I choose to move between the poetry of British modernist D. H. Lawrence and the contemporary 'Gurlesque' poetics of Swedish poet Aase Berg, as well as pop culture; Hello Kitty and Disney's *Zootopia*. My aim here is certainly not to suggest that cuteness is a stable aesthetic across time, space or culture – a reality I will address at points throughout the article. Instead, the juxtapositions I make between diverse material seek to amuse, disturb, provoke and play: my approach embodies something of the cute rebellions it seeks to discuss in this article's second half. In keeping with its challenge to problematic dualisms, my analysis of examples from pop culture alongside those from literature serves to unsettle the division between high and low culture. This goes some way in demonstrating the pervasiveness of cuteness' seemingly light-hearted aesthetic. More importantly, my references to pop culture serve as a reminder of cuteness as a commodity aesthetic, which unsettles the subject/object status of the female animal identity in question.

The emergence of cuteness as an aesthetic originates in the 'Victorian sentimentalisation of childhood' (Merish 1996, 187) – an argument Gary Cross pursues by exploring the cute transition of 'the romantic's pure child' and its commercialisation from the mid to late nineteenth century (Cross 2004, 15). Implicit here is Konrad Lorenz's [1950]1971) definition of cuteness through 'baby schema': a set of infantile, chiefly European features including big eyes, chubby cheeks and stubby limbs. Once combined, these characteristics represent an infantile vulnerability that triggers a care-giving response in the observer. However, this appeal to care-giving is more complicated than it first appears. Lori Merish (1996) draws connections between cute sentimentality and maternal feeling, arguing that the latter became entangled with consumer desire in the proliferation of cute commodities. Pursuing this nexus of ideas, Daniel Harris (2000) addresses how

cuteness aestheticises, even fetishises, helplessness. His argument on cutification as ‘an act of sadism’ (2000, 5) is extended and refined by Ngai’s writing on cuteness’s care/violence dialectic (2012). While I will go on to explain further developments made in cute studies, the arguments summarised here anticipate at least one reason why the environmental humanities have overlooked cuteness. Expanding his argument on sadism, Harris believes a cute worldview ‘annihilates “otherness” through constant anthropomorphism (Harris 2000, 12). If cuteness is an extreme domestication of nature, is it really nature at all? To be seen pursuing the cuddly not only poses the issue of anthropocentrism, it also risks positing value in superficiality and sentimentality when grave questions are raised by the ecological crisis.

In his prominent work that aims to reveal the problematic ideologies associated with nature, Timothy Morton makes a defence of cuteness, albeit cursory: ‘we shouldn’t exchange it for the “into the wild” meme ... I vote not to throw out the cute with the “Natural” bathwater ... soft toys induce love. The subtitle of *Wall-E* could be “cuteness saves the planet”’ Morton (2010, 86). Focused on Beatrix Potter, Erica Kanesaka Kalnay (2019) makes a not dissimilar argument, asserting that her illustrations – including her mycological studies and animal characters – return us to childhood and to an ethics of care across scale and otherness, creating wider affinity with the natural world.² However, given her work on *kawaii*, Kalnay’s avoidance of terms such as ‘cute’ is notable. Her ecocritical reevaluation of Potter finds safer ground in applying new materialist theory to the illustrations, resulting in an expansive identification of Potter’s anthropomorphism as conveying a childlike, animistic view of the world (ibid, 161).

To some degree, these concessions to cuteness align with cute studies scholarship that has identified how the figure of the cute child recuperated the wonder that was lost with increasing dominance and control of the natural world (Cross 2004, 26). As an affect, cuteness often involves child-like regression in the observer whose adult speech diminishes to squeals, murmurs and coos (Ngai 2012, 87). The argument that cuteness returns us to a child-like perspective filled with love for the world parallels recent arguments that, in contrast to Lorenzian ideas on cuteness and caregiving, claim that cuteness increases pro-social behaviour (Dale 2017, 45–7).³ To be involved with cuteness is to be rendered warm and fuzzy oneself. Or is it? Recalling Harris’s argument on sadism, Ngai describes how the blob-like form of a frog bath-sponge invites squishing and other aggressive forms of touch (Ngai 2012, 64–65). Consequently, the observer of cuteness embodies a paradoxical position – one of powerlessness (enacted by child-like regression) and one of power (being entertained by the subject’s powerlessness). With this in mind, we might look again at Kalnay’s perspective on Potter. Do these anthropomorphic creatures retrieve in us a friendlier view of our nonhuman cohabitants? Germaine Greer remarks that ‘the taming of women to fulfil their domestic role is in its way as odd and awkward as the clapping of a hedgehog into a mobcap and apron’ (Greer 2005). We might defend Potter’s illustrations of Mrs Tiggy-Winkle as representative of their time, but, as this article aims to show, the cutified, feminised animal is ubiquitous in contemporary culture, often depicted rebelling against her cuteness, and thus warrants greater examination.

Recent work in cute studies has moved away from the relationship between cuteness and violence. Claiming that Ngai’s analysis neglects difference between cute entities, Joshua Paul Dale proposes that cute subjects might ‘comprise a form of agency: namely, an appeal aimed at disarming aggression and promoting sociality’ (Dale 2017, 37). Going

further, Simon May (2019) is less interested in how power features in cuteness than how cuteness conjures a playful, carefree indeterminacy that thwarts dichotomies of ‘adult/child, knowing/naïve, feminine/masculine’ (May 2019, 40). There is no doubt that cuteness can serve as a potentially radical counter-normative force. Japan’s Lolita fashions provide an interesting case in point in which a visual femininity is pushed to such an extreme as to become a controversial subculture (Jones and Lancaster 2021).⁴ This article, however, explores a cuteness that, instead of being exercised purposefully, implicitly adheres to female animal bodies and, in so doing, serves as a reminder that these bodies are frequently subjected to controlling forces. In this context, I draw attention to a ‘grammar’ of cuteness that comprises (frequently anthropomorphic) qualities of innocence, whole-hearted enthusiasm and openness to interpretation. The latter is an essential criterion in Joel Gn’s (2018) *technè* of the cute ‘lovable’ body. However, where Gn’s argument follows the logic of my previous reference to Hello Kitty as ‘a medium of self-expression’ (15) in an affirmative tone, I draw out the problematic consequences of anthropomorphic interpretability, revealing how it is receptive to projections concerning the ‘other’.

Ecofeminism

The objectification and exploitation of women and nature has been a central principle of ecofeminism since its beginnings in the 1970s. Ecofeminists have identified the dualisms in Western, post-Enlightenment thinking that have historically enacted hierarchical division and resulted in the domination of the bodies belonging to both women and animals. Important here is Val Plumwood’s well-known list of ‘interrelated and mutually reinforcing dualisms’, including ‘human/nature’, ‘male/female’, ‘master/slave’, ‘rationality/animality’ (Plumwood 1993, 42–3). As she notes, ‘the other’ that is generated by dualist thought, ‘is to be treated as not merely different but inferior’ (ibid., 49). In this section, I will show how cuteness is involved in these hierarchical structures. Writing on the otherness associated with the Victorian spectacle of ‘little people’, Tom Thumb and Lavinia Warren, Merish argues ‘cuteness engenders an affectional dynamic through which the Other is domesticated and (re)contextualised within the human “family” ... cuteness aestheticizes the most primary social distinctions, regulating the (shifting) boundaries between Selves and Others, cultural “insiders” and cultural “outsiders”, “humans” and “freaks”’ (Merish 1996, 188). The main emphasis here is on cuteness’s repression of otherness (as we’ve seen, Harris takes this further by describing it as an ‘annihilation’). But cuteness, as I argue in this article, also works to *re-inscribe* otherness. The teddy bear may be made less ‘wild’ and more familiar through cutification, but the derogative term of ‘dumb bunny’, applied to Judy Hopps in Disney’s *Zootopia* (Lehtomaki 2016), reinforces distinction rather than circumventing it.

Animal studies provides another way of looking at this. Its theorisations concerning the ‘pet’ speak to the position of cuteness in relation to nature, domesticity and dependency. In *Looking at Animals*, John Berger ([1980] 2009) argues that the cultural marginalisation of the animal incurred by rampant industrialisation means the ‘animal’ has largely been lost as a category. The human family becomes, once again, a site of re-contextualisation: there, animals are ‘coopted’; becoming ‘pets’ or ‘human puppets’ (25). ‘The books and drawings of Beatrix Potter are an early example’, Berger explains, ‘all the animal

productions of the Disney industry are a more recent and extreme one' (ibid.). However, the use of 'family' across the arguments made by Merish and Berger connotes a homogenising inclusivity that obfuscates the fact that families contain shifting hierarchies themselves. Yi-Fu Tuan (1984) clarifies such by exploring the distribution of power between parents and children. Indeed, Tuan strikingly conceives of the pet as an inclusive term for animals, plants, children and other humans including women, all of whom are subject to control. While these 'pets' are generally understood to be objects of affection, Tuan contends, 'affection is not the opposite of dominance; rather it is dominance's anodyne – it is dominance with a human face' Tuan (1984, 1). Given how cuteness frequently leads to affection, my study's focus on its aesthetic and affect articulates a common thread in the manifestation and distribution of such power.

In many ways, the cutification I explore operates similarly to the sexualisation of female and animal identities. Carol J. Adams' landmark text, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990), proposes that the violent objectification involved in turning animals into meat in Western cultures is paralleled in contemporary misogynistic objectifications of women. The sexualised, feminised animal is, like the cutified version, prevalent and widely commodified. Advertisements encouraging the consumption of chicken that joke 'are you a leg or breast man?' exist alongside pork luncheon meats processed and dyed to resemble a teddy bear or clown face. Cuteness makes a brief appearance in Adams' work and it does so in line with the redemptive views of cuteness presented by Morton and Kalnay. After identifying farm animals (especially lambs) as cute, people are, according to Adams, less likely to eat meat (Adams 1990, 183). While People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) regularly share cute videos of farm animals to campaign for veganism, similar material also influences advertising rhetoric belonging to animal product brands such as The Happy Egg Co and The Laughing Cow.⁵ Is cuteness an antidote to violence or an enabler? In its child-like innocence, the cutified subject would seem to possess comparable potential for vulnerability and exploitation as Adams' sexualised subject.

Given that cuteness is frequently coded as female and expressed via anthropomorphism, it is striking that ecofeminism has not seriously engaged with it. The controversy surrounding ecofeminism is important here. Critiques of ecofeminism's essentialism (a few of which targeted Adams' Eurocentric focus and strong equation between ecofeminism and vegetarianism) grew over the same decade (the 1990s) in which cute studies made its first strides. This charge began to target ecofeminism as a whole, leading to a severe decline in ecofeminist publications and extensive suspicion of ecofeminism as a field (Gaard 2011). It is worth repeating the risks that cuteness poses to the respected, environmentally-minded scholar and how these might be magnified with respect to the ecofeminist. What misunderstandings might arise if the ecofeminist chases after cuteness, with all its associations of 'girly' sentimentality, while her peers concern themselves with 'deep' versus 'shallow' ecology, and, in the case of Adams, the connection between sexual assault and meat-eating? Nicole Seymour's (2018) recent challenge to the sensibilities typically associated with environmentalism including didacticism and reverence suggests a way forward. Like the environmentalist, the ecofeminist is likely to follow a behavioural code in which irreverence and frivolity have no place. However, aiming to restore aspects of queer theory to queer ecology, Seymour argues that these qualities can accurately reflect our often ambiguous and contradictory relationships with environments.

Moreover, as I will explore more fully in this article's final section, irreverence, camp and frivolity are clearly cute-adjacent.

Hello Kitty is situated within the Japanese post-war aesthetic of *kawaii*, which habitually translated as 'cute', originally meant 'pitiful' or 'pathetic', increasing its associations with vulnerability (Yano 2013, 56). While Victorian middle-class conceptions of the cute were often undistinguished by gender, *kawaii* evolved from Japan's attention to the 'shōjo' – a young, unmarried female – and her 'girl culture'. Distinct as it might seem, Kalnay, by way of a larger argument on imperialism, clarifies how *kawaii* 'borrowed liberally from the Victorian imagination' (Kalnay 2020, 567). According to Sanrio, Hello Kitty (otherwise known as Kitty White) was born in London to a mother who enjoys her domestic chores and a bespectacled father who smokes a pipe. In her history of *kawaii*, Sharon Kinsella (1995) notes its dependence on an idolisation of childlikeness in a neo-romantic tradition, raising issues of innocence and purity. Such qualities, as I will show, raise the stakes in Lawrence's depiction of a cute dog, which, far from being genderless, is feminised by Lawrence – and to worrying effect. As a British modernist writer, Lawrence decries Victorian ideals concerning domesticity and sexuality across his works. Frequently, these challenges intersect with those arising from modernism's complex relationship to the animal, specifically in relation to post-Darwinian anxieties concerning boundaries between humans and animals. Lawrence's representation of and reaction to the cute – both of which emerge through anthropomorphic interpretation – are indebted to these tensions.

Cuteness and otherness

'Fish are beyond me', announces Lawrence in his poem 'Fish', collected in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (Lawrence 1923, line 122). With 'their pre-world loneliness/and more-than-lovelessness', Lawrence's fish are 'other' (ibid, lines 153–4). Greg Garrard explains that any anthropomorphic gesture Lawrence makes is immediately withdrawn, creating "'allo-morphism" ("allo" meaning "other") ... [that serves as an] avowal of the wondrous strangeness of animals' (Garrard 2004, 167). Garrard is not alone in this interpretation. Terry Gifford describes 'Snake' a '*critique* of alienated otherness' that suggests otherness deserves respect (Gifford 1996, 9). While my use of the term 'otherness' has so far connoted hierarchical division that might be associated with ecofeminist study, in these studies Lawrentian 'otherness' is an opportunity for awe, perhaps even admiration. What, then, of Lawrence's writing on a species that is domesticated and more familiar?⁶ Crispian Neill writes 'the domestication of the dog, and the animal's accompanying abnegation of wild instincts and loss of autonomy, resonates with Lawrence's broader questioning of civilisation' (Neill 2015, 98). Responding to Lawrence's short story, 'Rex', and poem, 'Bibbles' – both semi-autobiographical – Neill argues that canine defaecation and copulation prompt disgust in Lawrence by exposing the species' uncomfortably dichotomous position between the domestic and the wild. I contend that a far more nuanced reading is necessary. As the titles of these texts already indicate, the relationship between cuteness, animal and gender is crucial to recognising Lawrence as 'aww-struck' rather than awe-struck by 'man's best friend'.

'Rex' (Lawrence 1921) is the story of a fox terrier and his first years in the Lawrence household. Received as a puppy, the pet has cute potential. Unbeknownst to the children,

his name is given ironically and, later, made endearing by its diminutive, 'Rexie'. The dog's cuteness, however, cannot last. The docking of his tail (described in peculiarly masculine terms as having 'made a man of him') means 'his true nature came out' (174). Soon, Rex begins to exhibit 'the native impulse to hunt and kill' (174–5). He becomes 'a beast . . . with fangs and glaring eyes' (174). 'Bibbles', on the other hand, presents an altogether different relationship to a dog: 'Oh Bibbles, oh Pips, oh Pipsey/You little black love-bird!' (Lawrence 1923, lines 17–18). Littered with sentimental names for the French bulldog, including 'Bubsey' and 'Miss Superb', Lawrence's poem may first appear an ode to the dog's lovable character, but a far more complex and concerning situation is afoot (lines 7; 79; 80). Remembering when Bibbles approached a stranger on the street enthusiastically, Lawrence writes:

Don't you just love *everybody*!
 Just everybody.
 You love 'em all.
 Believe in the One Identity, don't you,
 You little Walt-Whitmanesque bitch . . .
 You pranced and bounced with love of her, you indiscriminating animal . . .
 And your black little body bouncing and wriggling
 With indiscriminate love, Bibbles;
 I had a moment's pure detestation of you
 (lines 19–23; 29; 31–3)

There is much to examine here. Is 'animal' used as a slur against Bibbles? Likewise, is 'bitch'? Is the dog's blackness racially inflected? Why should this dog's dog-like behaviour provoke such strong feeling?

The cuteness of Bibbles can be understood through her innocence and boundless enthusiasm, as well as the visual cues of bouncing and wriggling. None of these qualities, however, can be studied in isolation: each is inextricably tied to Lawrence's interpretation of her, which, in turn, provides an opportunity to consider this grammar of cuteness in greater depth. Research has shown that certain animals have evolved physical features and behaviours that appeal to humans in what we may call the 'survival of the cutest'.⁷ Nevertheless, Bibbles' cuteness counts against her. Emotional availability, like interpretability, often marks the cute subject. However, by making herself accessible to everyone and dispensing her favours equally, Bibbles appears disloyal to her owner who consequently despises her. A further dynamic here exacerbates the speaker's feeling of contempt. Returning us to cuteness's strange amalgam of power and powerlessness noted previously, the cute subject 'seems to insist on *getting something* from us (care, affection, intimacy) that we may in turn feel compelled to give . . . [and this] produces the feeling of being strong-armed or manipulated by cuteness' (Ngai 2012, 98). We see this power

dynamic enacted by Lawrence as he writes 'it's you who appropriated me, not I you', and uses the half-endearing, half-intimidating address, 'You omnipip' (lines 11; 41).⁸ The long, run-on lines, coupled with the repetitive, often rant-like voice that fills eight pages, attests to the overwhelming effect of the cute. These feelings lead to 'a moment's pure detestation' of Bibbles, which expands to 'moments of hatred of you since' (lines 33; 36). W. H. Auden called 'Bibbles' 'the best poem about a dog poem ever written, but it makes it clear that Lawrence was no person to be entrusted with the care of a dog' (Lawrence 1923, 289–90). Testament to Lawrence's abuse of Bibbles is 'a kick or two ... a juniper switch', which reasserts control over the dog, bringing the poem to an end (lines 149–51).

Cuteness often aestheticises innocence and purity because of its association with children. Lawrence finds such qualities polluted. His feminisation of her makes her 'indiscriminate love' hover uneasily between the expression of an enthusiastic dog and the behaviour of an adulterous woman. As such, Bibbles resonates with Marc Shell's (1986) conceptualisation of the pet, which, becoming family, not only obscures the position of human and animal, but also prompts confused sexual relations between them. In his biography, Knud Merild, a painter and friend of Lawrence, writes that Bibbles came into heat one day and disappeared with a local dog. These actions provoked violence in Lawrence: [he] 'hurled her with all his might as far as he could through the air, shouting: "I will teach you"' (Merild 1938, 162). Reading Merild's account, Neill accepts that Bibbles may have signified for Lawrence 'the inadmissibility of unregenerate female sexuality' and cites David Holbrook's claim that Lawrence's abuse of Bibbles reveals his propensity for domestic violence (Neill 2015, 1923 102).⁹ All the more surprising then that Neill goes on to repeat that the aggression directed at Bibbles is because she is a dog and therefore presents an uneasy set of cultural relations to humans. 'It would be difficult ... to imagine the same depth of reaction if Lawrence had assaulted a chicken or a pig', urges Neill (102–3). Surely it is crucial to add that the treatment of Bibbles would be similarly difficult to imagine if she were a Great Dane weighing sixty kilos, an aggressive Fox Terrier (see 'Rex') or, indeed, if she was a he? Seen by Lawrence as a 'self-conscious little bitch,/aiming again at being loved', the diminution of Bibbles and the violence acted upon her transpires because she is a cute, female dog (lines 90–1). As this cuteness lends itself to anthropomorphic interpretability, or, more specifically, adult feminisation, it becomes all the more detestable to Lawrence. 'Dirty bitch', he pronounces. Whether the cry is plaintive or ironic in its exaggerated exclamation, Lawrence calls for 'Fidelity! Loyalty! Attachment!' (122–3).

The racialisation of Bibbles reveals another dimension to Lawrence's violent othering. 'Black' appears eighteen times, culminating in one last address to the dog that underscores its racial and racist perspective: 'you look up at me ... fear in the smoky whites of your eyes, you nigger' (lines 152–4). Lawrence, like many of his modernist peers influenced by an imperialist imagination, 'displac[ed] animality onto marginalised groups [including] blacks, women', writes Carrie Rohman (2009, 29). Only here we see its inversion; it only takes another brief scan of Plumwood's dualisms to realise that Lawrence has taken every opportunity to observe otherness in Bibbles.¹⁰ Yet Bibbles' otherness remains distinct from that in Lawrence's 'Snake' or 'Fish'. Anthropomorphism, especially of the cute kind, is generally expected to make a subject more familiar or acceptable by making it more human. This is the argument Kalnay makes in relation to Beatrix Potter; it also underwrites Garrard's decision to pit 'allomorphism' against anthropomorphism.

However, Lawrence's anthropomorphic interpretation of Bibbles, conducted through his feminising of her cuteness and racialising of her blackness, does something different. Compared to the 'sheer unknowable otherness of the non-human life' that scholars note in Lawrence and which Garrard associates with wonder, the anthropomorphism in Bibbles draws on the otherness associated with human identities (Sagar 1966, 121). Rather than unknowable and thus romantic, Bibbles presents an oxymoronic *knowable* otherness, which is, in contrast, repugnant.

Auden joked that if Bibbles could respond to Lawrence, she might justifiably proclaim 'O for Chris-sake, mister, go get yourself an Alsatian and leave me alone' (Auden 1962, 290). What defiance, what mutiny can we expect with regard to the cute subject, recognised by its passivity and vulnerability? Having identified and examined structures of power relating to specific constructions of otherness in the cutified, feminised animal, we might now ask whether these power dynamics can be disrupted and dismantled – and if so, how?

Self-questioning cuteness

No discussion of female animal cuteness would be complete without mentioning The Walt Disney Company, founded in the same decade as 'Bibbles' was published. The animated, 'bouncing' body of Bibbles – or Miss Superb – seems to lend itself to this tradition, anticipating characters such as Lady, from *Lady in the Tramp*, whose grammar of cuteness similarly prioritises qualities of innocence and enthusiasm. Over time, Disney has become the pinnacle of anthropomorphic cuteness, as evidenced by Sanrio's original intention for Hello Kitty to rival Mickey Mouse for cute global appeal (Yano 2013, 16). Consequently, Disney today is not only synonymous with 'wondrous innocence', recalling Victorian sentimentalism (Cross 2004, 111), but also 'disnification' – a neologism coined to define trivial cutification of nonhumans, even those not under the auspices of Disney itself (Baker 1993, 174–8). As if acknowledging this particular critique, a certain degree of self-reflexivity has accompanied the cutified, feminised animal in recent years – Disney's *Zootopia* (Howard and Moore dir, 2016) being one example.¹¹ I turn now to this animated film, analysing how it draws on certain conventions of cuteness to plot potential rebellion.

Zootopia is an allegory in which relations between prey and predator animals speak to problematic modern-day stereotypes concerning gender and race. The film's protagonist, Judy Hopps, is a rabbit determined to become the first 'bunny cop' despite her small and fluffy status. In like manner, Nick, her eventual sidekick, struggles to be seen as a sincere and trustworthy companion because he is a fox. Naively optimistic, Hopps relocates from the country to the city to join the police, only to find her new workplace hyper-masculine, led by Chief Bogo, a buffalo, and staffed by similarly aggressive megafauna. Even before such characters dismiss Hopps as 'just a dumb bunny', it becomes clear that her status as a rabbit who struggles to be heard among the grunting chorus of her colleagues is an analogy for her status as a female in the workplace. Among its complex and often competing storylines of oppression, *Zootopia* finds femaleness associated with cute prey that is subordinate to masculinity (which is in turn identified with the decisively *uncute* predator who not only possesses authority, but is also feared to be predisposed to violence). The film makes overt criticisms of this gendered prejudice, perhaps clearest when Hopps' colleague, realising that he's caused offence, apologises to her for calling

her 'cute'. Elsewhere, Hopps curtly tells Nick 'Don't call me cute', once again suggesting the word is a slur. As the storyline progresses, Hopps the innocently enthusiastic rabbit becomes Hopps the professionally-competent and committed rabbit. Consequently, *Zootopia* presents itself as breaking away from the leash of traditional anthropomorphic associations concerning cuteness, gender and animal.

I have argued that Lawrence indulges in a cutified feminisation of his French bulldog and, via this process of othering, becomes violent towards her. The character of Hopps provides a different, but complementary angle on the connection between cuteness and otherness. Appreciating how her cute feminisation places her differently to her male counterparts, she strives, to some degree, against its marginalising force. Whereas Bibbles is a cute subject to be mastered, Hopps is presented as the master of her own destiny. As such, she also differs from Hello Kitty in that her interpretability is narrowed. Presented as fiercely independent and ambitious, Hopps is not so much shaped and modelled by the audience, as she is a role model for one. 'She's a tough bunny', explains Kira Lehtomäki, animation supervisor for *Zootopia*, 'but she's still feminine. She's sweet, but she's not weak' (Lehtomäki 2016). However, parsing cuteness in those latter qualifiers, we might ask how effective Hopps' disruption can be. Anthropomorphism blurs the boundaries between human and animal to such an extent that a feminist moral is far more readily interpretable than one which suggests animal liberation from problematic stereotypes. And even then, should the 'feminist' label that is frequently applied to *Zootopia* read more accurately as 'post-feminist'? Prevalent in advertising campaigns featuring 'Girl Boss' motifs, postfeminism selectively co-opts feminism so as to be corporate and commodity friendly and ultimately disempowering (Gill 2016). Hopps' individual entrepreneurialism, and the fact that her success depends on her male co-star Nick, indicates the latter (Seybold 2021).

Are there other strategies to which we can turn in order to rebel against the normative confines of cuteness in this context? Suggesting that promise may lie outside of 'mainstream' culture, I turn to the Gurlisque: an avant-garde poetry movement that 'perform[s] femininity ... in a campy or overtly mocking manner, risking the grotesque to shake the foundations of acceptable female behaviour' (Glenum and Greenberg 2010, cover copy). Influenced by the 1990s Riot Grrrl movement, the term's etymology references burlesque and grotesque aesthetics. I choose to bring the Gurlisque into my discussion as it presents a transgressive alternative to forms of feminised cuteness discussed so far. Associated with third-wave feminism, the Gurlisque also provides an opportunity to consider the possibility of a queer ecofeminist mode, particularly through Aase Berg's poems, inhabited as they are by monstrous guinea pigs. To say that these poems disturb conventional understandings of acceptable 'cute' female and animal behaviour is an understatement. 'I'm very interested in ... the opposite of Disney', explains Berg (2017). The grammar of cuteness I have pursued so far is deliberately confused if not broken here. Violence and moral dissociation supplant endearing innocence. In places, the sincere enthusiasm of the cute is swapped for disturbing inaction, while elsewhere it finds itself renewed through gory spectacle. Rather than inviting us to interpret or project onto it, Berg's rendering of cuteness is more likely to obscure and repel. Like the fine line between cuteness and revulsion depicted in Lawrence's 'Bibbles', in this final section I examine the proximity between cuteness and horror.

Cuteness and horror

‘There lay the guinea pigs. There lay the guinea pigs and they waited with blood around their mouths like my sister’, begins Aase Berg’s prose poem ‘In the Guinea Pig Cave’ Berg (1997, 17). Although the syntax conveys the passivity we might expect from the cute subject, the content of these lines does anything but. By turns disconcerting and comic, Berg introduces us to a scenario in which the speaker and sister have seemingly killed and eaten a large quantity of guinea pigs in the curious form of ‘loaves’ (17). Are these reminiscent of cute ‘cat loaf’? Such a question pales in significance as the horror deepens: many of the guinea pigs are still alive, ‘blue under their eyes as from months of debauchery’, not only aching as the sister aches, but also waiting ‘to take revenge’ as the speaker later states (17). The scene appears devoid of cutified or feminised elements. Yet, Berg’s use of the cave, already coded female as an oft-used symbol for the womb, is ‘warm as teats’ (17). The guinea pigs are ‘made of dough’, generating an atmosphere of maternal nurturing and feminine domesticity (17). And then there are the guinea pigs. Like Hopps the bunny, the guinea pigs are considered prey. Docile, they make good pets and a reliable source of food; domesticated for this reason as early as 5000 BCE. The creature’s legacy as a laboratory animal underlines its submissive nature. And yet, just as the cave’s domestic quality may be upturned by its connection to the wild animality of cavemen, bears and wolves, Berg’s guinea pigs, that wait with ‘blood around their mouths like my sister’, do not match certain cultural expectations of the creature – nor those of women.

In keeping with Riot Grrrl’s ironic uptake of Hello Kitty (Yano 2013, 202–3), the Gurlesque seeks to unsettle cuteness. The mash-up of Berg’s style brings to mind Japan’s guro-kawaii (‘grotesque-cute’) style, which arose in the 1990s as an ‘antagonistic’ development from kawaii’s Lolita fashion (Dale 2017, 39). To be guro-kawaii is to combine pink lace and ribbons with sharp implements, bandages and fake blood. This has curious resonances with the context of Berg’s writing and her position as founding member of the 1986 Stockholm Surrealist Group. As Marty Cain explains, Berg’s writing can be seen to subvert the Swedish government’s policies across health and design that aimed to ‘codify a Swedish identity through neo-Romantic ideologies of purity, elegance, and a “natural” body’ (Cain 2021, 146). Such properties resonate with cute feminisation, and Berg clearly subverts them to galvanise her feminist project. For Carol J. Adams, the violent objectification involved in turning animals into meat is paralleled in the misogynistic objectification of women. If ‘eating animals acts as mirror and representation of patriarchal values’, then Berg’s speaker and her sister are destabilising key assumptions about gender (Adams 1990, 187). Of course, by drawing on male-coded, predatory behaviours such as meat-eating and violence to replace female-coded behaviours that are domestic and motherly, Berg appears guilty of the ‘feminism of uncritical reversal’ (Plumwood 1993, 31). We can say the same thing of the guinea pigs: their horrific makeover does not equate to nonhuman liberation. This interpretation, however, fails to take account of the tongue-in-cheek quality of Berg’s horror show, which ends with the speaker’s assertion: ‘I knew that they [the guinea pigs] would take revenge on me’ (Berg 1997, 17).

‘In the Heart of the Guinea Pig Darkness’ (Berg 1997) pursues this irony. Here, the speaker and her male lover attempt to flee a gorge ‘swarming with guinea pigs ... they hatch, out of caves and holes’ (21). Science fiction tropes rely on insects because of their seemingly alien anatomies that defy anthropomorphism. What happens, then, when

guinea pigs are substituted for insects in this style? Guinea pigs are said to gather around 'the gigantic guinea-pig queen's sensitive, swollen egg-white body', while, in the previous poem, their legs are 'stuck straight up like beetles' (21;17). By muddling the science fiction trope, Berg's writing attends to its process of othering with a certain humour. The same can be said with tropes concerning animal horror and Barbara Creed's 'monstrous-feminine' (Creed 1993). Later in the poem, the speaker cries 'Here they come and get us! Now they're opening us up, now they're swallowing us with their pink flesh organs' (21). Berg's imagery contradicts the cute subject as small and powerless. Indeed, the guinea pigs' 'pink flesh organs', appearing like devouring vaginas, strike a parallel with Lawrence's feminisation of Bibbles that finds her 'indiscriminate love' abhorrent. By the end of Berg's poem, the male lover has been captured by the guinea pigs, his 'skin grow[ing] into the stinking cell plasma of the guinea pig wall', illustrating the 'castrating' principle of the monstrous-feminine (21). That guinea pigs with all their associations concerning domesticity and submission play out this trope makes an absurdity of it. This is underlined by Berg's descriptive style, deliberately overstated and marked by repetition: 'rotting acids and guinea pig lymph are streaming, yes, streaming down the walls' (21). It is difficult not to read this, and the guinea-pig victim's exclamation, 'Here they come and get us!', as anything other than a camp, pleasure-taking parody of horror (21).

As Berg plays with cuteness, gender and animality, her work strikes a chord with queer ecology's challenge to heteronormative notions of environment. As hinted above, the delivery of this subversion is as important as its content, generating an important link with Seymour's perspective. Considering important works by Greta Gaard and Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, Seymour explains, while queer ecology takes from queer theory its interest in minoritarian sexual practices and what counts as "natural", what it has left behind are queer theory's trademark sensibilities: its playfulness, its irreverence, its interest in perversity, and its delight in irony (2018, 23). She goes on to frame these sensibilities as self-reflexive critiques of reverent and didactic modes in environmentalism that often turn people off, rather than on, to its causes. Consequently, 'frivolous' modes of interacting with environments and environmental issues suggest new ways of 'doing' environmentalism.

Seymour's interest in the camp is defined by exaggeration, artifice and failed seriousness, and Berg's writing resonates with such qualities as she crafts a campy violence that queers the cutified, feminised animal – and to important effect. Throughout this article, I have argued that cuteness has the potential to 'other' female animal identities. Berg's writing makes this explicit by using horror's outspoken process of othering to comment on the softly-spoken othering inherent to cuteness. Like a knowing wink, deliberate exaggeration self-consciously weds cuteness and horror. Not only does this 'just playing' attitude subtly accentuate cuteness' innocence even as it delivers the most horrifying of images, by doing so it also removes the possibility of seeing horror as a straightforward antidote to the cute.¹² To return to Plumwood's list of dualisms pertinent to ecofeminist concerns in the context of these poems is to find these dualisms chaotically – or, more accurately, riotously – jumbled. After all, there is a certain delight in the unruly, camp nature of this work that is founded on an indulgence in gratuitousness, burlesque humour and perversity. Following the logic of Seymour's argument on 'bad environmentalism'

with these sensibilities in mind, we might say that Berg practices a ‘bad *ecofeminism*’ through her version of the cutified, feminised animal.

Before rolling out ‘your guinea pig body on the baking sheet’, the speaker in Berg’s poem states ‘now I love you and now I fear you’ (Berg 1997, 21). At this article’s conclusion, we may experience similarly mixed feelings about cuteness. The aesthetic is simple, charming and playful. Studies have indicated that images and videos of cute animals increase carefulness in viewers (Sherman, Haidt, and Coan 2009) and decrease blood pressure (University of Leeds et al 2020). Seemingly aware of this potential, hospital director Tsai Tsung-chi, with the agreement of Sanrio, opened the first Hello Kitty maternity hospital in Taiwan in 2008. Echoing the popularity of cartoon mascots in neighbouring Japan, the anthropomorphic icon decorates curtains, bedspreads, wall-paper and nurses’ uniforms with the aim of reducing the stress and pain of childbirth. However, as my argument has illustrated, cuteness can also be a source of repulsion, marginalisation and, in the case of Lawrence’s relationship with Bibbles, abuse. Berg’s poems expose the violence embodied by and subjected to the cutified, feminised animal. Consequently, rather than interpret her depiction of a revolting reproductive guinea pig body as worlds away from the cutely themed maternity hospital, we might ask whether the former is the dark, campy underbelly of the latter. My argument on the power dynamics involved in the conventions and rebellions of the cutified, feminised animal has challenged dismissals of cuteness as irrelevant if not irreverent in the context of environmental thought. Hoping to encourage further discussion in this direction, this revaluation of cuteness shows it to be a significant aesthetic with far-reaching consequences for our relationships to the domestic and the wild.

Notes

1. The intentions associated with forms of cuteness and their global reception are often irreconcilable. Examples of kawaii culture such as Hello Kitty begin as positive iterations of vulnerability, loveability and playfulness. This study, however, involves itself with widespread anxieties emerging from Hello Kitty’s reception outside of Japan, which, as Christine Yano makes clear, is often heavily gendered and, indeed, racially-charged with regard to Asian-American women.
2. See also Lorraine Kerslake’s (2010) suggestion that by balancing sentimentality with scientific accuracy, Potter prompts children into empathetic relation with animals.
3. Joshua Paul Dale’s ‘social engagement hypothesis’ draws on G. Sherman and J. Haidt’s 2011 study ‘Cuteness and Disgust: The Humanizing and Dehumanizing Effects of Emotion’. *Emotion Review* 3 (3): 245–51.
4. See also Rose, M. C., H. Kurebayashi and R. Saionji. 2022. ‘Cute New Materialism in Decora Fashion, Harajuku’. *M/C Journal* 25 (4). <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2926>. Accessed 14 December 2022.
5. See, for example, ‘Five Short Videos of Pigs Being Adorable That Will Make You Smile’, PETA, www.peta.org/living/animal-companions/perfect-vidoes-cute-pigs/Accessed 14 April 2021.
6. Steve Baker (2000) suggests that Deleuze and Guattari’s interpretation concerning animals ‘wild’ and ‘tame’ has led to a postmodern rhetoric of ‘the admirable wolf and the contemptible dog’ (169). While his argument concerns postmodern artists, we might also ask whether this ‘fear of the familiar’ is present in environmental humanities scholarship given its neglect of the cute.
7. See Lee Alan Dugatkin’s 2018 account of ‘The Silver Fox Domestication Experiment’. *Evolution* 11 (16). doi.org/10.1186/s12052-018-0090-x Accessed 14 June 2020. Fictional animals

including Mickey Mouse and the teddy bear have also been examined, see Gould, S. 2008. 'A Biological Homage to Mickey Mouse'. *Ecotone* 4 (1): 333–340; Jeffries, M. 2016. 'Out of the Wild and Into Our Beds'. *Changing Perceptions of Nature*, edited by P. Davis and I. Convery, 289–98. Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer.

8. Additionally, Lawrence did not 'appropriate' Bibles by buying her or choosing her. According to Andrew Harrison (2016), on one of his visits to New Mexico, Lawrence was given the dog as a gift by his host Mabel Dodge Sterne.
9. Neill cites Holbrook, D. 1992. *Where D. H. Lawrence Was Wrong About Woman*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 31. Many scholars have criticised Lawrence for his misogynistic portrayals of women, including Kate Millet ([1970] 2000).
10. See also Joshua Bennett's argument on African-American experience being positioned 'in fraught proximity to animal life' in his 2020 work *Being Property Once Myself*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 5.
11. Other examples include *Aggretsuko*, a mascot produced by Sanrio in 2015 and protagonist of the popular ongoing Netflix anime series whose cute image as a red panda is subverted through her screaming death metal in karaoke bars. See also Pixar's *Turning Red* (2022) in terms of relationships between femininity, cuteness and monstrosity.
12. Daniel Harris references horror films that star demonic children as 'the new iconography of the anti-cute' (17).

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