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Silent Reading



How-To

To know Larry Johnson's work is to attend to the silence of over-reading. While the name, the work, will go unmentioned until the end, when we hit bottom or crypt, Johnson & Johnson Incorporated, the sit-tight reflections that now follow in the meantime come right out of Johnson's work, out of the "same" ghostly inspiration. Before dropping names, for the time being, it should be noted that Johnson's work today is all alone in its Karl-Krausian, Walter-Benjaminian edginess, hedginess around the live or dead issues that occupy the media ground of our existence.

The Contest, I Mean, Context

The term wasn't big enough for the two of us. But "California" alone was the shoot-out, cut-out target and trophy that got abused, libidinized just for the fun of being "cute."

As a "Californian," "cute" was first raised to some third degree of consciousness in the New York art world. Soon it was compartmentalized in cute genres and given new names with East Coast accents. Peter Schjeldahl, for example, in a review of Allen Ruppersberg's 1992 New York show, expands on cutism, trans-cutism, rancid cutism, cryogenic cutism, classic cutism, and then rests the whole proliferation on a definition of the new phenomenon that recollects the controlling interest inevitably taken by the artist in his own reception (which at least since Goethe has been the better half of making art). "All of it is cutist to the extent that it needs complicit viewers and makes their complicity a work's main pivot of pleasure."

If matters of style tend to get middlebrowbeaten by authors and administrators of well-made grant applications, then it's because the beat they police does count as the one reception still readily available for the works or words addressed to it via the paraphrase-arama of journalism (and modernism). America's reader digestion of "cute" needed the appetizing other and the New York critic to balance the couple act whereby I can have my mass culture and hate it too. It's the standard of exchange between modernism versus postmodernism.

But following its debut as a "Californian" exclusive (deep inside New York's pocket of resistance), cute has spread, at first through Japan, then just going through more and more phases until it covered the whole of multiculturalism. In Japan, the vacancy advertised by

the cute was seen as dangerously proximate to transparent and transcendent notions of emptiness or absence that allowed the commodity to go with all that overflow of cuteness right into advanced stages of commodity forgettogether and consumer projection, I mean, protection. In Germany the language could only render "cute" as "sweet," which, as Freud reminds us in his case study of Wolfman, brings us back down to the cannibalistic stage of development and belongs, therefore, in this context, to the uniquely German idealization or death cult of childhood. But that belongs to what in cute culture passes as "history."

Today cute models or mascots worldwide admit all the races lost or commemorated in one big blend. That following their installation as cute idols, Michael Jackson and O. J. Simpson were also served up, without immunity, with the twist of sacrifice and the libidinal charge of abuse, is another demo of the volatility of cute culture. From the video playback of Rodney King's trauma and the looting during the LA riots to the near-miss convictions of these two blender idols, the violence that does go down in cute culture already doubles and contains itself as violence control.

(The blending of gender gets injection-driven into this melting plot of commodification almost, however, as side effect. Simply put up there, every body onLoad="if (self != top) top.location = self.location;" on display is, in the first place, one mother of a body onLoad="if (self != top) top.location = self.location;". Thus the accessible cuteness of young men in the Klein world after all are maternally curved cure-alls for all our oral needs.)

First stage of multiculturalism was containment: members of politically marginalized groups were admitted to public institutions but only if they talked about, studied, embodied "multiculturalism" (the feedback mechanism was then marketed as concept, topic, another one for "Cultural Studies"). These diversifications proved good opportunism for first generation emigrants from the margin to the center stage and recycling has-beens of identity: just look at the libidinal upsurge that attended the beginnings of "career," I mean, "queer" theory, art, movies as though this were the mourning after the catastrophe of AIDS.

But the second stage, which belonged to the equal rights of passing, saw a spread of the cute that involves a whole oedipedagogy of what we call "species" and which the Germans call "Art." The cute-teen blender mixes one size for all fit to survive as a species of the look.

Theses on Cute

Cute is the adhesive of our mass media cultures of adolescence. It's so basic to the (libidinal) functioning of everyday life in groups and yet, at the same time, it is our most repressed constant point of contact with our others, our selves. Cute is the password (with the adhesive side out) that improves our circulation, that lets us pass as instantly available for easy libidinization, assimilation, replacement.

Cute names the death-driven meta http-equiv="Window-target" content="_top"bolism of our happy mass medium. Whatever needs to be eliminated or (if the object of execution is already going or gone) mourned, must first be suffused with our "capacity for love" (as Freud

once succinctly defined "libido"), and thus made attractive, "cute," for one last libidinal upsurge.

Cute is the adolescent type (you know the type) who makes the in-group of moving targets of mass libidinization but who is thus at the same time typecast as being at everyone's disposal.

A footnote in the mouth of the murderous orality the cute teen attracts has been in our typeface ever since the invention and group formulation of adolescence was given its first twist-off opening. It was Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* that gave owner's manual instructions to the first modern readership of cute consumers who role played and acted out in groups the young hero's different way of suicide.

Cute gives children and teens a kind of tabooizing protection against the abuse that's thus ultimately, eventually, and just as forcefully, invited in, attracted, confirmed.

Cute takes on a surcharge, embodies an access or excess of assimilation that becomes the one who's "similar," image, double, "like." If you're cute, you like to be different -- like everyone you like -- to be like. Our relations with cuteness always pass through this relay and delay of likeability -- all the way to a same difference that's only as close as it is so far away.

The cute are up there with missing persons and all the other unmournable stars of young death.

In Kantian terms: the cute one is free -- to die.

Philosophical positionings can be cute by the giveaway wavelengths they go to in the resistance, the grief they give psychoanalysis. Like Existentialism when it prays to the lip service of the aloneness, the uninvaded personal space, of one's own death. But since the one in question is always the group of one, sometimes a great notion of one's own is readily available for group-wide syndication, as in the case of "my death," which can opt for mass suicide's synchronization of the one with all the other deaths at the same time (every act of suicide is *en masse*).

The cute refusal of the other keeps what's cute always at the adhesive border of identification's half-life (life with other).

The ego (or, same difference, the double) is cute because it wants to live forever right now -- for example by replicating itself for the survival of the species (science-fiction creatures are always real cute). But its superegoic sentencing can't be tuned out: you want to live forever, then be immortal but also suicidal as you forever watch the other (and yourself in the other) die.

The shelter cuteness gives is of passing significance. Even kitsch must pass as cute in order to be considered as camp. Cute is the password of mass-cultural contact, connection, communication. Many of our mascots demonstrate the transformative powers of cuteness by making us like their rat and pig bodies (like, I don't know, you know, like Mickey Mouse and

Babe).

Cute can kill.

Gadgets are always cute. Walter Benjamin sees gadget grow out of any old machine function once it has been updated to come complete with the trigger, the click, or the switch on and off that personalizes it for your own use while removing it from the assembly line of a machinic-industrial complex. It marks the spot of internalization we are in when it comes to technology. Internalization, like identification, always begins with trauma. According to Benjamin, the effects of the gadget, which are always after effects, lie at the same time in the moment of impact, the administration of a "posthumous shock" (630). The resistant charge of boredom, a common one in art journalism (but who would want to get under the skin or boil the blood of some LA Times critic), belongs to the meta `http-equiv="Window-target" content="_top"`bolism of cute. Boredom is what can't be controlled, it's the ready position that's so hard to endure but gives the other the time it takes to happen. But it's also a shocker: like doubting Thomas's boring finger stuck up Christ's wound. When cuteness reaches consciousness it shocks, bores, but also, as it resumes unconscious passage, helps build a defense for the consumer with a charge of boredom.

Babe, I'm bored.

Cuteness belongs to a transference-therapy-proof genre of resistance. It's live, not dead or alive. But if the cute one or the one who saw you as cute appear so hard to mourn, then the association that follows also spills over onto transference prospects for future work: mothers and children are at the front of the line of the unmournable body `onLoad="if (self != top) top.location = self.location;"` count. Before an adult is cute because his look or style has retained the child-like and juvenile features of the libidinal charge of abuse, the child starts out acting cute by adopting adult roles. A mother's narcissism will sponsor this role and the fantasy that goes with it, that of little one already being everything to her and even more than the father can be by the forgettable fact of maturity.

High-Low There!

The boundary blending between the high art world and, at the low end, design, fashion, comics, ready-mades, road kill, you name it, follows the cute object (or, on the same interchange, by a stretch or reversal of criteria marking the elasticity of the concept, the cute abject). Paul Rand (whose surname spells in German "border" or "margin") occupied a high point of modernist designs on the art of everyday life. He believes in all art being -- like Platonism, advertising, or propaganda -- practically all about ideas. But, as the Lyotard argument goes, this highpoint is unthinkable without the postmodern presuppositions that always come before the manifestations or manifestos of modernism. Rand's history lessons try to lessen the margin or frame to get the most out of the headlines of a standard reception:

The great lesson of the cave paintings of Lascaux is that art is an intuitive, autonomous, and timeless activity and works independently of the development of society. ... The premise on

which this book is based draws no distinction between the so-called fine arts and the applied arts or artifacts. ... Like mathematics, the principles of aesthetics involve the abstract formal properties of things and applies to everything -- to apples and to oranges, to ideas and to things -- regardless of one's feelings, opinions, or emotions. (X)

In his essay "On 'the Uncanny'" Freud set aside aesthetics as just another psychology that worked over-time to stay pre-psychoanalytic in its provenance and perpetuation. Post-postmodernism (which works double-time to overcome the modernist legacy based on the original boundary-blending premises of a completely now-ive postmodernism) is all-naturally psychoanalytic and deconstructive in the distribution of its interests, in the spanning and standing up of its elements to a longer term of attention. What goes without comment is the margin, where the art of the cute, of the subject of technology, begins. Rand, born in 1914, awards primal scene status to the 1940 discovery of the cave of Lascaux by four boys cruising through the woods. The dates Rand keeps with both world wars and the opening and shutting of the story of four boys in search of a hiding place for their circle or chain deliver some of the coordinates of the story that slides between the lines of Rand's eternal phrases or logos. Another date on the modernist timeline: Rand designed his first Direction cover in 1938 to throw a high beam on the news of Czechoslovakia's Nazi invasion. In 1996 he describes that effort with an enthusiastic sweep of recognition which can take in the process or history internal to the art work and, at the same time, with polymorphous neutrality, all the contexts that can fit the design:

It was a time of turmoil not only on the world order but also in the world of art, with modernism on the upswing. The designs reflect the influence of the isms, and they are also concurrent visualizations of war, upheaval, and ultimate victory. (54)

The main "ism" to open wide for this design's mobilization of red and black shapes down an axis of piercing movement is the Nazi one that scored the immediate victory in 1938. But Rand might even admit this one without taking time out for responsibility (which indeed is not, at least in Kantian terms, very interesting) nor for the more important consideration of the inoculative implications and exclusions that make his design so right on the money, the Mark, as effective propaganda. In Rand's sovereign opinion: design, art, the whole continuum of the cute (which opens in childhood when we first undergo "initiation into art" through our toys [6]) must always aspire to being state of the art but only on behalf of a state politics for this art only. Rand therefore sets up as cautionary example of the deluded valuation of art's influence or responsibility the story of Jan Tschichold, who, taken aback by what he took to be Nazi application of the principles he set forth in his 1928 *The New Typography*, started over from scratch, recanted, created instead a new look that only made the retrograde (159).

The value freedom of Rand's aesthetically correct choosing is part of the show of cute resistance. Modernism has all along been digging the felt absence of a rapport with adolescence. The result, always gorgeous, is at the same time fueled by a fundamental misreading of the Teen Age. Everyone misses adolescence, already in the opening gap that

the new overload of insight creates together with the complete incommensurability of the new inside view with the work or time that the teen can fall back on to formulate or keep up with these interiority flashes. What fetishists of a full adolescence always exclude symptomatically is the linguistic force of adolescence or cuteness. Cute adolescence is never so much the phase or phrase everyone tries to get over rather than stuck on; it is in the first place a level of intervention and reception that is always there, for example whenever we're in groups.

Larry Johnson's Madonna piece of prophecy or projection is scrawled across the "Pop cycle" that continues to complete itself in his work. When Warhol opts for the machine's existence or Johnson embraces the likeability axis of mutual internalization and technologization, the point is not to double the isolationism that the more therapeutic brands of analytic theory promote through all-out interventionism. But just like a master discourse, one moreover with two not entirely compatible objectives, to treat and to understand the margin where reality begins, psychoanalysis plays good breast, bad breast (or good cop, bad cop). There's more to psychoanalysis than gets addressed or reversed in the alternatives proposed by the Deleuzers.

Larry Johnson's work keeps the crypt and the viewing, the burial in progress, in one place. Taking it all in -- in stereo -- is this kind of work's only and own reward system. It is to this extent that its textuality is "safe:" both the safe deposit of what's been simulated in such cute or late arrivals of the same as Madonna or Bambi and the kind of safety net which, according to Heidegger's tally of technology's prophecy and profit, drops out right where the danger keeps on growing. There is a crypt of doubled and "incorporated" loss in Johnson's work, a remote-controlling crypt deep down in the cell-structure or black box of our ongoing techno relations.

Warhol wanted to be a machine, and I believe him. But he was raised by his mother as Gadget to replace the loss of her daughter, a replacement that extends the work of mourning (or unmourning) through the son.

Completely technologized work isn't haunted. But in work like Johnson's there's an allegorical tension between the low tech and the high tech that demarcates the damned spot we're in and that won't come out with melancholia. The relentless and makeshift application of the hands-on labors that once went into film titles and cels, and which double thus as replay of the concise history of their progressive innovations, always lead up then to that exquisite endpoint of developments, where the photogenetic transparency slams shut, with a certain cute perfection, right over the work, now contained, after the fact, a fact of life, like Snow White in her coffin.

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