Volume 7, Number 1 (January, 2010)

Baudrillard and Cuteness

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I. Cuteness, ‘Girliness’, and Female Empowerment

At the turn of the millennium international youth culture is deeply influenced by the Japanese aesthetics of kawaii or cute which is distributed internationally by Japan’s powerful anime and manga industry. The popular aesthetics of kawaii developed during the 1980s and by late 1990s had evolved into an explicit culture (Augier, 2006) of which Pokemon™ animals seem to be the most original symbols. Kawaii culture arose in the realm of manga through the typical image of the shûjo (young girl), which immediately sparked the production of a large range of cute paraphernalia meant for female consumption. Though most analysts would put forward the intrinsically positive and charming aspect of kawaii, there exists also a dark and decadent side of kawaii, which reaches from anomie and hypocrisy to the grotesque, erotic, and violent. One of the most interesting features of kawaii is that it is able to unite contradicting tendencies and values in one single concept.

Kawaii emerges as a peculiar notion that has no equivalent in Western culture except perhaps that of cool; but its equivalent is definitely not “cute”. Gary Cross has shown, in his comparative study of cool and cute in American culture, that a clear concept of cuteness emerged around 1900 when it had become possible to see the “bubbling enthusiasm of the child” as charming and even desirable. Here the cute entirely lost its connotations of ‘shrewd’ and became “the look of wondrous innocence” (Cross, 2004:43). Kawaii, on the other hand, is not cute but must be understood as a female empowerment similar to that provided by fashion, eroticism or, more recently, tattoos. In other words, kawaii is not merely a method of escaping reality but rather a means of establishing a new kind of reality. Kawaii does not simply elude the work ethics of its society but girls “can make themselves ‘cute’ by working hard at it” (Shiokawa, 1999:107).

Kawaii as a liberation project is supposed to have an effect on the real world, which means that it has real value connotations. “Cute is a virtue and, in an oddly paradoxical way, [it is] strength” (Shiokawa, 1999:107). Kawaii is by definition a contradiction in terms because it reunites within one frozen, imperturbable state antagonist qualities like submission and subversion, participation and non-participation. These patterns of a new type of feminine empowerment become also more and more common in Western culture, challenging the traditional ideology of femininity, which includes neatness, diligence, appliance, and passivity, and replaces it with a slightly more sexual ideology. Worldwide, the self-sacrificing female has ceased to be a role model in pop culture and has been replaced by the “strong woman” whose sources of power are no longer classical femme fatale strategies, but rather an exaggerated type of cute or “girlish” femininity. At the moment, popular psychology and alternative cultures preach self-growth, freedom, independence, and empowerment as the supreme values that any individual can attain, cute styles are likely to arise in many places.

Susan Hopkins describes, in her book on “Girl Power”, how a post-punk and post-feminist environment has produced the cute but powerful girl-woman, that is, the heroic female overachiever (Hopkins, 2002:1) who knows how to make things happen, is not afraid of what men think, but still insists on a “girlish” aspect that helps her to gain even more personal power. Hopkins introduces the Spice Girls, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, the animated characters of Powerpuff Girls, Princess Fiona from Shrek, and many others as examples of postmodern “power girls.” The
Spice Girls especially “combine feminine sexuality with cartoon-like innocence” (Ibid.:20), a mixture that comes closest to Japanese kawaii aesthetics. Hopkins shows that girl power can go very far. The postmodern powerful woman is able to embrace her own exploitation in a “cool” and controlled fashion in order to obtain immense financial profits. A campy form of irony that old school feminists find irritating enables these women to ‘eat your cake and have it.’ Fashion models are prime examples of this kind of girlieness because they are “objectified but their objectification is typically read as empowering” (Ibid.:104).

Hopkins defines girlieness as a mixture of femininity and the desire for power and finds many simultaneously cool and cute female action heroes in Western popular culture – many of whom are even equipped with supernatural powers. The playful postmodern girl pretends to be “vulnerable or passive” though, at the same time, constantly conveying the image of an iron perfection, of being “cool, detached and seriously ambitious” (Ibid.:103).

II. Baudrillard’s Dolls and Kawaii Shūjos

Baudrillard’s ([1976] 1993) elaborations on the fetishistic aspect of sexuality and the transformation of women into objects (dolls) touch upon the theme of cuteness. At times it can seem that the cute shūjo, as a self-sufficient, non-productive being who has nothing but itself as an end and who engages in an endless inflation of signs, has sprung right from Baudrillard’s theories.

Analyzing the aesthetics of striptease, for example, Baudrillard emphasizes those aspects of eroticism that concur with women as untouchable goddesses (Ibid.:107) and his insistence on the “woman’s autoerotic celebration of her own body” (Ibid.:108) as a necessary condition for female eroticism. This evokes aspects of the ambiguous eroticism of the shūjo as a being originally and firmly embedded in a purely feminine world. Baudrillard supports the existence of erotic and passive creatures with the help of a quote from Freud who held that a woman’s need does not “lie in the direction of loving, but of being loved; and the man who fulfills this condition is the one who finds favor with them” (Ibid.:111).

At first sight it appears that if we follow Baudrillard’s prescriptions, we will designate kawaii eroticism as it appears in shūjo manga as the most genuine form of all female eroticisms. The erotic, for Baudrillard, is the “transubstantiation of profane (realist, naturalist) nudity into sacred nudity,” always maintaining a “sensual distance” created through an autoerotic aspect that allows erotic scenes to appear “like in a dream” (Ibid.:108). In erotic events like the striptease, for example, the woman adopts “the neutralized gaze of auto-erotic fascination of the woman-object gazing at herself with her eyes wide open, then closing her eyes on herself” (Ibid.:109). At the very end, this process of transubstantiation turns the body into a smooth doll, compared, in the most Freudian fashion, with the phallus because the body emerges “more and more as a phallic effigy to the rhythm of the strip” (Ibid.).

The description of the phallus as a smooth and closed object overlaps with Morreall’s classical definition of the cute object (large head in relation to the body, rounded body shape, soft body surfaces, etc. (Morreall, 1991:40); or it overlaps with kawaii as an object without bodily orifices (Kageyama, 2006). For Baudrillard, “it is necessary and sufficient that [the woman-fetish or doll] be as closed as possible, faultless, without orifice and ‘lacking’ nothing” (Baudrillard ([1976] 1993:104).

Once the main objective of eroticism has become the creation of a fetish, everything else will merely be a matter of body discipline with the phallus as the ultimate model. Then the erotic woman emerges as a smooth phallus-doll not because she has submitted to some “male spell” but because women “perform this labor of continual fetishization on themselves” (Ibid.:110). It is even their feminine privilege to do this because only women can adopt those smooth doll-like features while the male body “can never really become a smooth, closed and perfect object since it is stamped with the ‘true’ mark...” (Ibid.:104).

The question is whether Baudrillard’s doll overlaps with the kawaii shūjo. Yes, if we look only at the self-fetishizing processes that lead to the production of both the doll and the shūjo. No, if we look at the results of both processes. Taken to an extreme, Baudrillard’s erotic cuteness, which is entirely based on closure and the denigration of ambivalent extremes (Ibid.:105), is far too abstract and comes much closer to the cold vitrification of the eroticism presented in the advertisements of a fashion brand such as Diesel. Here women are erotic though at the same time expressionless and
empty as they adopt frozen postures; their eyes staring into nothing and their faces as if made up with wax. The uncanny brand of narcissism attached to these women via the Diesel texts supports Baudrillard’s thesis of disciplined self-referentiality leading to a smooth and cute erotic body because the entire publicity campaign is—ironically—called “how to stay young forever.” In other words, Baudrillard’s idea of cuteness includes the component of self-referentiality and narcissism but excludes the possibility of female empowerment.

Baudrillard’s cute is cold, but fails to integrate the coolness that is part of the contemporary girlish type of cuteness. The reason is that his conception of the cute remains linked to the Western conventional understanding of cuteness and ignores the most original qualities of *kawaii*. Baudrillard does not perceive the links between cool and cute as humanist expressions. If bodies are only smooth and self-enclosed, any human aspect intrinsic to *kawaii* disappears. It is surprising that this thinker who has recognized cool as a pure play of values, will turn the erotic into a cute but cold fetish instead of entirely leaving it within the domain of playful interaction.

When it comes to the definition of the erotic gaze of the self-fetishized woman, however, Baudrillard fares much better because his explanations concur with his general system of erotic reality as an empty exchange of signs and of a commutability in which everything remains indecisive. Here empowerment is possible. “Dreamily, proceeding anagrammatically, that is to say, [the gaze] does not advance from one term to another, from one organ, juxtaposed and connected to another like words by the thread of a functional syntax” (*Ibid.*:120). Baudrillard explains that this is not the “willed cool” (of models), but the cool which abandons itself becoming a “specific quality” transcending all distinctions between hot and cold. This is in keeping with Baudrillard’s descriptions of an essential indifference or neutrality towards the meaning of codes in modern society, enabling the commutation of signs into a variety of significations. Baudrillard believes that “this process … has for a long time been at work in culture, art, politics, and even in sexuality” (*Ibid.*:9). *Kawaii* culture, as well as the Girl Power phenomenon described by Hopkins, act within this paradoxical vacuum in which assertive power most effectively speaks through an elusive web of meanings. Also Hopkins’s empowered women are “both radical and conservative, real and unreal, feminist and feminine” (Hopkins, 2002:6). Cuteness must be defined along these lines. Strangely enough, Baudrillard’s vitrified dolls do not offer this multi-dimensional aspect. To probe deeper into why this is the case it might be a good idea for research to pursue these questions with his important understanding of seduction in mind.

References


