

THE REVENGE OF THE CUTE: HUMAN DOLLS AND THE MORTIFICATION OF THE FEMALE BODY

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Abstract: One of the central motifs in the aesthetics of cuteness that dominates the most widely disseminated strains in East Asian pop culture - especially the aegyo aesthetic in Korea - is the mortification of the female body: specifically, tropes in which the female body is treated as if it were corpse-like in the sense of being uncomprehending and passive. However, while such tropes can obviously contribute to bigoted conceptions of femininity, I argue that aegyo's radical intensification of those qualities that endow a female body with cuteness opens up the possibility of undermining misogynistic masculine desire in a distinctive way.¹

I. Mortification and Femininity

There is a desire that mortifies its object: it looks upon a living thing, and seeks to transform it into or treat it as a pure and uncomprehending passivity. In this way, it strives for its object to approach the condition of a corpse. Namely, it strives to deprive that object, in reality or appearance, of the sentience and agency in which its life partly consists. And this is because in essence it's a necrophilic desire: one aroused by something whose life has been obscured or suppressed; and conversely, made impotent by a life on full display. As a result, those things it transforms end up, at the extreme, in an uncanny state – as inverted versions of the undead: not dead things that have taken on the character of something alive, but living things that have taken on the character of something dead.

To see what kind of desire it is that mortifies its object in this sense, we can first note that the paradigm example of a mortified object is the female body; and, that such mortification is one of the paradigm images of femininity. A body is

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¹I would like to give special thanks to Joseph Almog and Aljoša Pužar for comments on early versions of some of the arguments in this paper; as well as to Sunny Cabrera for conversations on this essay's themes and help with a range of Korean language issues.

counted as feminine whose sinuousness invites a hungry look; whose softness promises to yield to the invasive touch in which that hunger is expressed; and whose insensibility leaves the person whose body it is unable to resist this yielding. As a result, it might occur to us to say that the desire that mortifies is a masculine one. Consider the opposition between the masculine and the feminine as it's often been conceived. Where the feminine is what invites, the masculine is what hungers. Where the feminine is what yields, the masculine is what invades. And where the feminine is what demurs from experience and understanding, the masculine is what craves them. In each of these oppositions, the masculine is what masters and the feminine is what is mastered. And insofar as the primary objects of masculine conquest are women themselves, the first task of this desire will be to make them fit objects of conquest – to mortify and thus feminize them.

The mortifying power of masculine desire over the female body is, of course, a well-worn theme. For example, we find a classic exploration of it in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. In his famous description, it's a story of necrophilia.² The protagonist Scottie becomes obsessed with Madeline, the woman he was hired by her husband Gavin Elster to protect; the woman with whom he then fell in love, but whose suicide he was helpless to prevent. His obsession, for a time, remains directionless. He circulates endlessly among the places where he'd observed Madeline, desperately grasping at phantoms of her image in every woman he sees. But then, he finds Judy, whose resemblance to Madeline is so striking that it gives a focus to his fixation. To satisfy his necrophilic desire, he treats Judy as a woman who's dead in order to treat her as a woman who's dead; or in other words, he mortifies her in order to mortify her.

That is, he attempts to shape Judy into a perfect simulacrum of his dead love. Even as she shows signs of falling in love with him, he makes her dress in the outfits that Madeline wore; has her nails, hair, and makeup done up in just the way Madeline had them. Thus, he mortifies her in the sense that he attempts to fashion her into this particular dead woman. However, the means by which he achieves this is by mortifying her in a distinct sense – viz, the one described above. He treats Judy's body as if it were lifeless meat to be shaped unbeknownst to her into Madeline's image. And this, in fact, is the more profound form of mortification to which he subjects her. Indeed, it could even be said that the narrative function of Judy's transformation into the dead Madeline is to make

²Truffaut and Scott 1985, 244.

clear the mortifying nature of the actions through which Scottie accomplishes it. And in the end, this nature becomes clear, even to him. He discovers that Judy was the Madeline he knew all along, transformed by Gavin Elster into the image of the real Madeline as part of an extravagant plot to murder his wife and make Scottie testify to it as a suicide. Thus, Scottie's transformation of Judy has simply been a repetition of Elster's. And in the light of that comparison, Scottie's own disgracefulness becomes clear: like Elster, he's treated Judy's body as an inert plaything. In fact, Scottie's in fact been worse than Elster on this count: he's exploited Judy's love, and it ultimately leads to her literal death at the film's end.

In these respects, *Vertigo* calls our attention to a fundamental dimension of the way that masculine desire often functions. That is, it vividly evokes how such desire often strives for a female body that is corpse-like in being prone and malleable, as well as innocent of the transformations foisted upon it. However, things are not quite as simple as this. We can turn to another exemplary filmic treatment of mortification to call into question the notion that a mortifying desire is essentially a masculine one: Pedro Almodóvar's *Talk to Her*.

Talk to Her focuses largely on the character of Benigno Martín, a hospital nurse who takes care of a comatose woman named Alicia Roncero. She's constantly under his care: he bathes her, cuts her hair, massages her, and cleans her bodily waste. But for him, these aren't merely a nurse's chores. Rather, they constitute a labor of love. And his affection for Alicia is manifest in nothing more clearly than the fact that he continually talks to her. As if engaged in mutual conversation with her, he reports hospital gossip, the trivial events of his life, and the plots of films and performances he watches because they're of the sort she once loved. He even holds up pictures before her closed unconscious eyes and narrates them. Eventually, he befriends Marco Zuluaga, a man who lurks at the hospital after an accident in the ring casts his bullfighter lover Lydia González into a long-term coma. Marco is drawn to Benigno's devotion to Alicia, and his unshakeable commitment to treating Alicia as a full-blooded person rather than an inanimate body – a commitment that feeds Marco's own desperate hope for Lydia's recovery.

Later, though, the film takes a dark turn. It comes to light that Alicia is pregnant. Benigno's love for her has led him to commit the worst kind of violence of which masculine desire is capable: rape. However, what makes the film's portrayal of this act surprising is that Benigno is far from a paragon of masculinity. Quite the contrary: throughout the film, he's feminized. His

stereotypically feminine mannerisms lead many to think he's gay; in fact, this is the only reason Alicia's father permits him to care for her in her vulnerable state. And, his constant doting on Alicia is portrayed as if it were akin to that of a little girl upon a doll. In fact, these qualities are partly what draw Marco to him as to a kindred soul. That is, Marco himself is feminized throughout the film: music and dance make him weep; he behaves as if terrified when seeing a snake; and he falls in love with Lydia, who is ostentatiously masculinized by the camera eye, which dwells on the ritualized masculinity she embodies while bullfighting.

In this way, the film explicitly 'queers' masculine desire by calling our attention to a feminine/feminized element therein. That is, it reveals that the mortifying impulse of masculine desire as exemplified in *Vertigo* coincides, in many of its essentials, with one that's often conceived of as feminine: viz, the impulse to play with a doll. In both, we find an object that must first be treated as lifeless in order that a simulacrum can be imposed upon it. In both, this imposition is accomplished through specific forms of adornment and interpellation by means of which the object is made into a fit object of enjoyment. And Benigno's desire embodies both equally in all these respects: as we might put it, his is both a mortifying and a dollifying desire. In the body of Alicia – living, but in a death-like state – he finds a kind of human doll he can fashion, without meeting any resistance, into an image of feminine perfection he can enjoy and exploit. But in doing so, he himself engages in all manner of behaviors presented as feminine: he grooms and dresses up his 'doll', talks to it as a child does to a Barbie, and so on.

By noticing how Almodóvar's film casts mortifying desire in a new light, we can see what we ought to have noticed all along: that the mortification of the female body is just as central to stereotypical femininity as it is to stereotypical masculinity. And nowhere is this clearer than in the fact that self-mortification is one of the hallmarks of the former. The rituals of adorning and addressing dolls into which a young girl is often initiated can function to simply prepare the way for her eventual relation to her own body – one in which she carefully cultivates in it an image of passive, insensible femininity. The usual interpretation would of course be that in doing so, she's internalized masculine desire in the sense that she's been socialized to fashion herself into a perfect object for its satisfaction. This notion is in fact at work in many treatments of mortification: to use an already mentioned example, in the fact that *Vertigo*'s Judy willingly submits to Scottie's manipulations in order that he might come to love her.

However, such dollifying self-mortification also takes extreme and uncanny and forms that can serve a different function altogether. Below, I'll consider examples that concern recent East Asian pop culture and its influence in the West. Such examples, I'll argue, are ones in which dollifying self-mortification can in fact frustrate masculine desire in a distinctive way; and, this highlights a radical ambiguity in some of the most prominent forms that such desire takes in contemporary culture.

II. The Doll Trope in *Kawaii* and *Aegyo*

The East Asian context is of particular interest here because the figure of the doll has long dominated Western conceptions of East Asian femininity – most conspicuously, in tropes like that of the East Asian woman as ‘China doll’. Such tropes, in which the mortified female body is idealized and eroticized, are scattered throughout Western culture, from high culture artifacts like *Madama Butterfly* on down to the nomenclature and visual language of pornography.³ For example, in older variations on the trope of the China doll woman, her body, with its slow, ritualized movements, approaches the static immobility of a doll. This economy of movement is paired with an economy of expression to constitute a distinctively feminine variation on the trope of the constrained and mysterious East Asian: viz, the East Asian woman as an embodiment of quiet modesty. Yet, the China doll woman also adorns herself extravagantly and colorfully, often to the point where nothing in her outward form remains unembellished with artifice. In this way, she acquires a lifeless, object-like quality. Her modesty is thereby coupled with a manipulability through which it's fetishized as a modesty that's paradoxically also submissive, both sexually and otherwise, and thus ripe for mastery, even violation.

Of course, it might be thought that such tropes belong to a bygone age and no longer dominate the Western imagination. However, in large part through the recent influx of East Asian (especially Japanese and Korean) pop culture into the U.S. and other Western countries, they've begun to morph into forms that

³For a brief survey of such phenomena, especially as they pertain to the figure of the doll in contemporary South Korean culture, cf. Pužar 2011. In the discussion of the doll motif in East Asian culture that follows, I owe a great debt to this paper and to personal conversations with Pužar.

resonate in striking ways with these older ones.⁴ In particular, in recent years, the figure of the doll has become a central element in East Asian pop culture – especially in its aesthetics of cuteness. And, it's precisely these trends that have gained a particularly strong following in the West.

In Japan, the aesthetics of cuteness are designated by the label *kawaii* (かわい). As is true of cuteness more generally, in *kawaii* the central figure is that of the child. Complex iconographies are employed to signify, perform, or evoke performances of qualities like innocence, vulnerability, and lovability in forms explicitly associated with childhood. Such iconographies include childlike modes of behavior – e.g. whining, giggling, and speaking in a high-pitched voice or with the phonetic ticks of toddlers. However, they also drawn upon and are expressed in many types of commodities derived from children's culture, including media such as *anime*, *manga*, and video games; publications like *Giant Robot* and *Gothic & Lolita Bible*; and merchandise from companies like the massive Sanrio (owner of the character Hello Kitty). Through the explosive popularity of these commodities, the aesthetic repertoire of *kawaii* has disseminated to such an extent that it's arguably become the most important element in Western perceptions of Japan's contemporary cultural identity.

In the Korean context (on which I'll focus below), the corresponding label for cuteness is *aegyo* (애교).⁵ *Aegyo* involves a conventionalized vocabulary of femininity in gesture and language through which someone (usually a woman) attempts to perform childlike adorableness.⁶ The principal vehicles of this

⁴Throughout this essay, I will refer to the Republic of Korea simply as Korea; this accords with the common practice in this country, both among Western immigrants and English-speaking Koreans.

⁵Throughout this essay, I employ the Revised Romanization of Korean system for Romanizing Korean terms, since most of the terms I will use are colloquial, and this is the system most commonly employed in Korea. In every case when such a term is introduced, I will also provide the original Hangeul spellings in parentheses or square brackets.

⁶Well-known examples in gesture include making a heart sign with both hands; making a 'V' sign with the fingers around the face; creating a mock dimple by depressing the skin of the cheek with a finger; and the 'Bbuing Bbuing' (뿌잉 뿌잉), in which one pantomimes a small child wiping away her tears with her fists. Common examples in speech include using a high-pitched voice, extending the final vowel of a word, and the addition of 'm' or

conventionalization have been precisely those forms of media in which such performances are most frequently undertaken. These include private forms such as messages, selfies, and videos of oneself posted on social media. However, they also include commercial forms like K-Pop and K-Drama that have been central for *hallyu* (한류): the recent ‘Korean Wave’ of popular cultural exports. Through their global popularity, such mass media have transformed this vocabulary of *aegyo* into a defining aspect of Korea’s ‘brand identity’ in the international marketplace.

However, of equal importance to *aegyo* femininity has been the propagation of precisely defined standards of feminine bodily beauty. For example, in Korea the ideal female face is typically thought to have: a small head; an egg-shaped visage with a ‘V line’ jaw (Koreanized as *beuirain* [브이라인]); large eyes with visible tear ducts, the ‘double eyelids’ that are uncommon in East Asians, and *aegyo sal* (애교 살) – the ‘smiling eyes’ that mimic the tensing up of the under eye muscles when a person smiles; milky-white ‘porcelain skin’ (*dojagi pibu* [도자기 피부]); a thin, pointed nose (the *beoseonko* [버선코], named after traditional pointed socks called *beoseon*); and a mouth with thin lips and a ‘lip tail’ (*ipkkori* [입꼬리]) – i.e. with corners up-turned as if with a permanent smile. This ‘standard model’ face shares many features with the feminine faces of *anime* and *manhwa* (만화, Korean comics), and thus also with the faces of dolls and toy figures that are based on or emulate the look of animated characters.

The standard model face can frequently be achieved, thanks to widely available plastic surgery. Notoriously, Korea can plausibly be called the world capital of plastic surgery. In a highly publicized 2009 report by the market-research firm Trend Monitor, nearly 1 in 5 women in Seoul – Korea’s largest and most fashionable urban center – have had such surgery.⁷ And this has been facilitated by a huge and growing plastic surgery industry. According to recent annual reports from the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, Korea has the highest per capita rate of aesthetic/cosmetic procedures in the world. For example, in 2014 alone 980,313 such procedures were performed there (almost two for every member of the population) –representing a more than 50%

‘ng’ sounds to the ends of verb phrases (which in ordinary Korean grammar always end with a vowel).

⁷First reported in The Economist Online 2015.

increase from 2010.⁸

Such vast numbers are made possible not solely by the domestic market, but by medical tourism from countries like China, the U.S., Russia, and Japan. According to the Korea Health Industry Development Institute, the number of foreign tourists annually seeking cosmetic surgery swelled from 2,851 to 36,224 between 2009 and 2014, most of this increase coming from Chinese customers.⁹ This rapid growth has led to a host of legal and diplomatic problems (in particular, with China), and to a slate of legal reforms proposed in early 2015 by the Ministry of Health and Welfare to curb the rise of predatory medical brokers as well as of 'assembly line' clinics that employ under-qualified surgeons in unsafe facilities.¹⁰

For each element of the standard model face, there's a range of cosmetic procedures, going far beyond the nose jobs and Botox injections well-known in the West. And such procedures are so common that the medical terms for them have largely been replaced by colloquial ones. To enlarge the eyes, there's East Asian Blepharoplasty, known colloquially as *ssangsu* (쌍수), used to achieve double eyelids and vertically larger eyes; as well as epicanthoplasty and lateral canthoplasty (colloquially, *apteuim* [앞트임] and *dwitteuim* [뒗트임], respectively), in which incisions are made into the eyes' corners to lengthen them and reveal the tear ducts. Fat injections under the eyes result in *aegyo sal*, sometimes combined (in the so-called 'smile lipt') with lip surgery to achieve *ipkkori*. Ideal coloring is achieved through skin-lightening and tattooed makeup (*bannyonggu huajang* [반영구 화장]). And most notoriously, there are surgeries (colloquially, *yangang susul* [양악 수술]) in which the jawbone is fractured and re-positioned and/or shaved, which, sometimes together with silicone cheek and forehead implants, help to achieve an ideal *beuirain*.¹¹

Through this plethora of invasive surgeries, supplemented by non-invasive procedures and over-the-counter products, and combined with the gestural and linguistic vocabulary of *aegyo*, the self-mortification of the female body has taken

⁸ISAPS 2015, 3, and ISAPS 2012, 3.

⁹Reported in Korea Bizwire 2015

¹⁰KMoHW 2015

¹¹For the sake of brevity, I have focused on facial procedures. A great deal more could be said about ideal body shapes, together with an equally wide range of invasive procedures used to achieve them.

unusually explicit forms. As with our *Vertigo* example above, it has a dual character. The first mortification consists in a self-transformation that requires treating one's own living body as if it were dead material to be molded irrespective of its own vital existence. And nowhere is this clearer than in one's submission to the skills of the surgeon, under whose knife one's body is reduced to sculptable meat: muscles and ligaments to be severed and removed or re-attached; bones and cartilage to be broken, sliced, and shaved. Further, this self-mortification is undertaken to cultivate in one's own body an image of femininity that's flamboyantly doll-like in its artifice: plasticine, mechanically infantile, possessed of factory-like uniformity, and animated by robotically ritualized movements. In this way, the first mortification is the means to a second: a female body's crafting of itself into what ultimately seems, especially in extreme cases, like a mere simulacrum of human life – a doll, a mannequin, an android.

Now, one might justifiably suspect that this phenomenology of *aegyo* femininity is just the perspective of a biased outsider gawping at what seems strange in an unfamiliar culture. After all, the popularity of *hallyu* cultural products in the West has been driven, not just by admiring enjoyment, but also by patronizing superiority. For every 'koreaboo' (i.e. Western *hallyu* fan), some observer has clucked his tongue – often in the name of progressive values – while reading one of the abundant tabloid articles on Korea's plastic surgery industry, its suicide rate, its workaholism, its 'tiger moms', etc. And in such discourse, we can often detect displaced forms of self-involvement: the West projecting its anxieties about its own vain superficiality, the excesses of neoliberal capitalism, and so on onto Korea.

However, an awareness of the issues I've cited is far from absent in Korea itself. Quite the contrary: the image of the female body as doll is commonly invoked in exactly those cultural domains where *aegyo* femininity has thrived best – for example, in K-Pop. Perhaps the most well-known example of the latter is due to Girls' Generation (*So Nyeo Si Dae* [소녀시대]), one of Korea's most successful girl groups, whose smash hit "Gee" features a music video portraying the group's members as mannequins in a clothing store who wake up at night and sing a love song to the boy who arranged and dressed them. However, many other examples can be found in the songs, music videos, and marketing materials of K-Pop. And while the doll motif has often been used to solicit the audience's enjoyment and identification, it's also come up for criticism.

For example, consider Lee Jeong Hyun's (이정현) 2000 single "Give It To Me" (*Jullae* [줄래]). If we only consider its lyrics, it seems like nothing more than a girl's desperate plea to be accepted back by her possessive ex-boyfriend, whom she loves precisely because of his possessiveness ("You said that if you could, you would make me smaller so that you can put me in your pocket... How can I not love you when you're like that?")¹² However, the accompanying music video is quite ambivalent. The theme of possession is heightened, but in ways that seem to contradict the sentiments expressed in the lyrics. It begins with a teenage boy shoplifting a Barbie-like doll. As he runs home, he drops the key that would allow him to wind it up and thus animate it at will. Disappointed, he hangs it up on a hook and leaves to find the key. While he's gone, though, we see images of the doll animating herself and trashing his room; intercut with footage of the singer dressed up as a sexy doll, but also surrounded by men with plastic doll faces whom she manipulates. And when the boy returns with the key, the doll is nowhere to be found. In these ways, the video inverts the message of the lyrics: the doll can't be encompassed by the boy's desire to possess her; and the roles of doll and doll-owner are partly inverted.

This ambivalence about *aegyo* dollification is perhaps due in part to a familiar phenomenon: the Scylla and Charybdis in which women are degraded both for aspiring to and for rejecting widespread ideals of femininity.¹³ In response to this impossible dilemma, many women have chosen the Scylla of aspiration, for the simple reason that performing *aegyo* femininity is often essential to personal or even professional acceptance. And in light of this, we might look at something like Lee Jeong Hyun's video as a compensatory pittance:

¹²“할수만 있다면 넌 날 작게 만들어서 / 주머니 속에 날 넣고 다니겠다고... 나 어떻게 미워하니?” Quoted from Lee 2000.

¹³Much more could be said on this. To briefly gloss a range of examples of images that shape public discourse: a woman might be called a *choding* (초딩, an elementary school student) for performing *aegyo*. But if she doesn't perform it, she's in danger of being portrayed using the popular figure of the *ajumma* (아줌마) – the middle-aged woman who is everything that's the opposite of *aegyo*: old rather than young; stern-faced rather than cheerful; aggressive rather than solicitous; or poor and unfashionable rather than dressed in the latest designer clothes. If she indulges in too much plastic surgery, she might be mocked as a *seonggoe* (성괴, 'plastic surgery monster'). But if she refuses it altogether, she might be ridiculed just as much for being an *okeunyeo* (오크녀, 'ogre woman').

a merely symbolic rebellion within a regime (that of K-Pop) in which *aegyo*'s reign is supreme and unchallengeable; and in fact, a rebellion that can't even manage to be wholehearted, but only an expression of ambivalence – a faint whisper of the living woman from beneath the plastic veneer to which she will, at the end of the day, always submit.

However, there is, I suggest, another form of symbolic rebellion that consists, not in rejecting self-dollification, but rather in heightening it. To see how this is so, we must first note that self-dollification can, in its extreme forms, veer over into the monstrous. What was sweet and endearing in the cute object can, at the limit, solicit disgust. This possibility has been exploited by a number of artists whose work responds to the culture of cuteness – premier among them Takashi Murakami, whose distinctive aesthetic turns on heightening *kawaii* cuteness to the point at which it becomes repellent.¹⁴ However, in doing so, such artists have merely made explicit what even a casual observer of *kawaii* and *aegyo* phenomena already knows: that in these cultural trends, a focus on what is cute has developed that is so single-minded, so intent on an increasing intensification of cuteness, that in the products and images they produce, cuteness achieves a saturation that makes them unsettling. The Goth Lolita girls made famous by Tokyo's Harajuku neighborhood; the massive multimedia spectacle of K-Pop girl bands in high budget videos or arena shows; or (to take an example that will be familiar to anyone who's walked down the streets of Seoul) the eerily robotic visage of a woman who's invested tens of millions of won on an endless plastic surgeries in the 'beauty belt' of the Gangnam neighborhood of Seoul – these phenomena inspire a sense of shock that isn't merely the shock of pleasure, but also the shock of something unsettling and ghastly. The layers of artifice that encompass and restrain the body are no longer a light, decorative veneer that inspires sentimental pleasure or titillation. Rather, they are heaped on with a kind

¹⁴For a representative collection of Murakami's art curated by the artist himself, cf. Murakami and Gioni 2012. Of course, Murakami isn't alone in trying to merge *kawaii* cuteness with horror. As has been abundantly pointed out, his work overlaps (and is heavily influenced by) the so-called 'lowbrow art' movement of which this particular fusion is a defining element. However, a great deal of lowbrow art errs on the side of domesticating what is horrifying by viewing it through the lens of the iconography of cuteness. Murakami's virtues, in contrast, lie in his ability to make explicit a horror that was always already implicit in the visual language of *kawaii*.

of violence, and we see a woman that seems to be wrapped in plastic so thick and opaque that nothing of the person can be seen but the vague writhing of a body being slowly suffocated. Many Western commentators have responded to this sense of shock with quasi-racist mockery and moralization. In contrast, I would like to articulate something else: the potential for a distinctive kind of symbolic rebellion in which the cute take revenge on those who cutify them.

III. Mortification and the Aesthetics of Cuteness

How can this uncanny, monstrous quality be understood? To develop an answer, I'll consider the aesthetics of cuteness that are so central to *kawaii* and *aegyo* femininity. This might seem odd, since no quality seems as far from the monstrous as the cute. However, upon reflection, we can see that it's precisely through the heightening of those qualities that make a body, a gesture, an utterance, or an adornment cute that it can become horrifying.

Let's begin, then, by asking: exactly what makes something cute? I can think of no better concise formulation than that of Sianne Ngai:

Cuteness is a way of aestheticizing powerlessness. It hinges on a sentimental attitude toward the diminutive and/or weak, which is why cute objects—formally simple or noncomplex, and deeply associated with the infantile, the feminine, and the unthreatening—get even cuter when perceived as injured or disabled. So there's a sadistic side to this tender emotion...¹⁵

In other words, cuteness offers its spectators a way of enjoying the helplessness of a living thing. The cuteness of a doll, for example, functions to signify the helplessness of the character it portrays or of the person (e.g. the child or infantilized woman) with which we associate it. Yet what's special about cuteness is that it allows us to give ourselves permission to enjoy helplessness. We smile and laugh at what's cute. We become benevolently affectionate toward it. It solicits our engagement, including our interpersonal engagement – as for example when a person's cuteness inspires us to seek out their company. In this way, our enjoyment is seemingly emptied of malice or predation. And yet, as we all know, something strangely sinister nevertheless haunts our enjoyment of cuteness. This can be seen in the fact that the desire to enjoy what's cute is often

¹⁵Ngai and Jasper 2011, 45. Cf. also Ngai's fascinating recent work on the aesthetics of cuteness, specifically in Ngai 2012.

expressed as the desire to consume it: for example, when we say that we want to eat the faces of adorable infants. In this way, the enjoyment of cuteness is ambiguous, tinged as it is with both tenderness and violence.

Inherent in the violence of this enjoyment is an impulse to mortify what's enjoyed. Consider the metaphor of consumption. When I eat something, this is a way of incorporating it into myself – specifically, one aimed at satisfying the conditions for my own vital existence (i.e. by nourishing me). As such, in eating, the nature of what I eat is only significant insofar as it's capable of nourishing me because it has that nature. Thus, if what I eat is a living thing, the conditions for its own vital existence are only of indirect importance – i.e., only insofar as it has a composition fit for nourishing me because it has led a life aimed at satisfying those conditions. Otherwise, my consumption of it is indifferent to those conditions. This is why the consumption of a living thing usually entails its destruction.

It's these features that make consumption such an apt metaphor for the enjoyment of cuteness. In this enjoyment, there's a dark possibility that has at times been misrecognized as the nature of aesthetic enjoyment as such. That is, such enjoyment always threatens to treat its object as a mere spectacle – as something that exists solely for our enjoyment. And when it's a living thing that we enjoy in this way, the desire to enjoy becomes a kind of predatory hunger that is indifferent to that thing's vital existence – an existence whose nature involves far more than being a potential object of enjoyment.

On the basis of this alone, we might conclude that if there's something monstrous in the phenomenon of cuteness, it's not the cute object but rather the one who enjoys its cuteness. How, then, does the former itself become monstrous? And in particular, how can the cutified female body exhibit this monstrosity? There are, of course, many ways this can happen.¹⁶ However, I'll focus here on

¹⁶For example, one kind of monstrosity that's very important for understanding contemporary gender dynamics lies in the juxtaposition of feminine cuteness with eroticism: a combination of the childlike and the titillating that, especially when it shows up in widely-disseminated forms, threatens to infect the culture with detestable and yet publically sanctioned forms of pedophilia. And when this juxtaposition has flowed out of East Asia, we can't help but worry that it's fed and been fed by a globalized sex industry in which veritable armies of sex workers in poor East Asian, Southeast Asian, and Pacific Island countries – many of them literal children – service droves of men from Western and

the form described above: the female body whose cuteness is enacted using the aesthetic repertoire of *kawaii* and/or *aegyo*, but to the point of over-saturation, so that it becomes unsettling or even disgusting. In this case, I suggest that what makes such bodies monstrous is that they lack an ambiguity that is central for the functioning of certain masculine desires – ones that are plausibly among the principal engines driving the imperative toward feminine cuteness. To understand the ambiguity I have in mind, I will turn to the example of pornography. Porn is a symbolic form in which the satisfaction of our erotic desires is staged in phantasmatic form with striking vividness. Thus, by considering porn, we can understand what's implicit in such desires – especially those of straight men, since they are porn's leading consumers.

Nancy Bauer has characterized the world of porn aimed at straight men as one that's typically what she calls 'pornutopia' – i.e. a quasi-utopian vision of the world as it would be, were it to be ideal for the sexual gratification of such men.¹⁷ In pornutopia, whenever anyone has any sexual desire in relation to other persons, those other persons instantly desire the same thing: no desire remains unreciprocated, and no desires conflict. Further, ordinary life in pornutopia can always accommodate the instant gratification of these desires without falling apart. This is the source of the oft-mentioned stupidity of pornographic narratives: no matter what we're doing (visiting the doctor, shopping for groceries, riding the bus), in pornutopia we can instantly drop everything and have any kind of sex imaginable, and there are no negative consequences. Everyone is satisfied, and the ordinary world functions smoothly both before and after.

What pornutopia does, then, is to commensurate two impulses that cohabitate in the straight male libido, but that are frequently at odds with one another in the real world. If I'm a man in pornutopia, when I want to do *x* with some women, then, no matter how degrading it is, she voraciously wants it too. In this way, the women of pornutopia can simultaneously be both mortified and free of mortification. That is, men can treat them as dead material to be shaped and manipulated so as to satisfy any craving, to embody any fantasy. However, unlike those of the real world, the women of pornutopia offer no resistance whatsoever – not even the kind of paltry, ambivalent, and merely symbolic resistance we saw

wealthy East Asian countries who can thereby live out their orientalist and/or pedophilic fetishes in relative anonymity.

¹⁷Bauer 2015.

manifested in *Jullae*. Yet, this absence of resistance isn't a mark of what I called the 'first mortification' above. It isn't made possible by a female body rendered insensible and inert, but instead by its polar opposite: viz, one whose vital existence is paradoxically affirmed and enjoyed precisely through becoming mortified.

What can we glean about masculine desire from this peculiar character of pornutopia?¹⁸ What we can recognize here is that pornutopic desire (i.e. the masculine desire being addressed by pornutopia) is far from being swallowed up by the mortifying impulse. First, the desire to mortify the female body, even in men who have it, isn't single-minded; this much is of course obvious. But more importantly, this desire is neither the exclusive key to understanding what they find erotic in stereotypical femininity, nor even to understanding what's ethically and politically troubling about this erotic dimension.

That is, there's a kind of ambiguity in pornutopic desire. It wants, at one and the same time, to mortify the female body and to preserve its vital existence. A completely inert and insensible female body is little more than a corpse, and as such (barring paraphilias that are quite foreign to pornutopia), isn't erotic in the least. Instead, what makes the women of pornutopia arousing is precisely that they occupy a paradoxical middle ground: that they present themselves to pornutopic desire as both alive and dead at once, so to speak.

Further, it would be absurd to claim at this point that this represents a mark in favor of pornutopic desire: i.e. that what's troubling in it is the impulse to mortify; whereas this other dimension – the impulse to engage with a woman who affirms her own vital existence – is in and of itself noble – a redemptive element in what's otherwise a craven form of desire. To think this is to presuppose that the

¹⁸The answer I offer to this question in what follows is quite different from the one Bauer herself offers. Bauer's aim in the early portions of her book (of which "Pornutopia" is the first chapter) is not, as mine will be below, to suggest a criticism of the concept of objectification as it shows up in feminist theorizing, with all of the Kantian presuppositions such theorizing usually carries with it; but rather to argue for a meta-philosophical view: that philosophy isn't always best served by the search for necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of concepts. It's not my concern to oppose this latter view exactly. However, unlike Bauer, the line of thought below is driven by the suspicion that the centrality of the concept of objectification in a great deal of feminist theorizing has blinded it to some of the most disturbing aspects of misogyny.

desire to mortify (or to use the quasi-Kantian term more familiar from feminist theorizing: to objectify) is the sole original sin of misogyny. But this presupposition misses something absolutely crucial: that the misogyny on display in pornutopic desire not only can survive being coupled with the desire to engage with a vital existence that is fully expressed, but requires it. Confronting this fact might very well be unsettling: by now, the notion that objectification is the root cause of misogyny is so ingrained in feminist theorizing that simply to question it can seem like an abdication of any properly feminist stance. But if we really take in what the above observations about pornutopia have to teach us about masculine desire, this confrontation is inevitable: we will be forced to reconsider the real nature of misogyny.

Let us, though, return to the question that motivated the foregoing discussion of pornography in the first place. What makes the heightening of *kawaii* and *aegyo* dollification so uncanny, so unsettling? We must first notice that the ambiguity in pornutopic desire is of exactly the same sort as that found in the desire to enjoy what is cute. Each seeks to mortify its object, while at the same time engaging with it as something that affirms a life that is its own. Because of this, one of the modalities of pornutopic desire is precisely the desire to enjoy the cuteness of the female body. And it's this form of pornutopic desire, I suggest, that is frustrated by extreme dollification, and whose frustration is what makes the latter repellent.

What makes the overcharged cuteness of extreme *kawaii* and *aegyo* femininity disturbing, that is, is that it threatens to expose the ambiguity of those objects that pornutopic desire wishes to find. These disturbing female bodies stray too far in the direction of mortification. To use the terms I've employed above, they become strangely inverted versions of the undead: living bodies that threaten pornutopic desire by becoming nothing more than lifeless objects, mere shells or echoes of living female bodies – automata, dolls, corpses. In doing so, they give way entirely to the impulse to mortify, while at the same time leaving the desire to engage with and be recognized by a vital, living creature utterly unsatiated.

There is, in other words, a kind of symbolic revenge implicit in the dollified female body in its most uncanny forms – one, I suggest, with emancipatory potential. This potential is of the same general sort, in fact, as that articulated by Susan Sontag in her classic work on camp.¹⁹ Just as queer culture has

¹⁹Sontag 1999.

appropriated and intensified just those images of queerness with which queer people have often been oppressed, and then used this intensification to turn the tables and horrify their oppressors; so there is the potential for intensifying the iconography of cutified femininity so as to turn the tables on pornutopic desire. Such desire wants to have its cake and eat it too – to enjoy a living, breathing female body that is at the same time unable to be an active, sentient being unto itself. The uncanny spectacle of the excessively dollified female body thus refuses to concede to pornutopic desire even the illusion that it's anything but a perversely incoherent desire – one destined always to be ravenous and violent exactly because it seeks something that is impossible to have. The potential of this spectacle, perhaps, has yet to be fully exploited. However, the project of doing so can, perhaps ironically, turn to no better source of inspiration than the aesthetics of cuteness to be found in *kawaii* and *aegyo*, which already contain the resources for enacting a cuteness that's too intense for pornutopic desire to bear.

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