Back to Issue 9

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Natures and Cultures of Cuteness

by Gary Genosko

Walt Disney is said to have pinned a note over each of his animators' desks reminding them to "Keep it cute!" This demand for cuteness is not restricted to the cartoon bestiary, despite the remarkable array of cute mice and other rodents found there. Mickey Mouse was not always so cute. As he evolved, he became progressively more juvenile in appearance. 1 The circles that gave form to his body - especially his ears which very early on ceased to be drawn in perspective - were subtlely adjusted to signify that his mean streak and off-color hijinks had been nipped in the bud: no more stripping and spanking frankfurters, hoisting Minnie by the knickers, and playing music on the bodies of animals.

The biologist Stephen Jay Gould has argued that Mickey's progressive juvenilization - what is known as neoteny - moved toward the features of his young nephew Morty. This was accomplished by an increase in eye size, head length and cranial vault size; Mickey's arms and legs and snout were thickened, his legs jointed, and his ears were moved back. This growth

toward childhood, Gould contends, represents the "unconscious discovery" by Disney and his artists of the biological principles outlined by Austrian ethologist Konrad Lorenz. The attributes of cuteness described by Lorenz and other ethologists are the very features of infancy acquired by Mickey. These attributes are said to trigger "innate releasing mechanisms" of caring and the related affective responses of adults to children. A cute Mickey is more affectively involving, and more saleable, than a jealous, wisecracking rodent with a pointy snout. For this reason, Gould thinks, "the magic kingdom trades on a biological illusion - our ability to abstract and our propensity to transfer inappropriately to other animals the fitting response we make to changing form in the growth of our own bodies." 2

The attributes of cuteness are, then, vehicular and transferable from human to non-human creatures and hybrid forms. It is precisely this so-called illusion that unites biological with commercial and emotional concerns. And it this transferability which can reduce an adult to a gooing and gawing, baby-talking ball of mush at the sight of a kitten, a panda bear, or even an inanimate cuddle toy. From the uniformed school girls of the Japanese cartoon series *Sailor Moon* to the tiny, sparkle-dusted ‘pixies’ of women’s elite gymnastics, cuteness is an ideal body type, a truly Olympian affair put into place by coaches, judges, sponsors, and spectators alike.

These introductory considerations suggest that the study of cuteness must be an interdisciplinary affair requiring creative juxtapositions of knowledge drawn from diverse quarters. Ultimately, I want to

consider the representations of animals used by *National Geographic Magazine* [henceforth *NGM*] to elicit reader involvement in the National Geographic Society's [henceforth *NGS*] work. I am arguing that popular participatory science of the kind found in *NGM* cultivates cuteness in order to encourage specific kinds of involvement with the animals reproduced in its pages.

Donna Haraway is undoubtedly correct in pointing out that the *NGS* has produced “a particular reader self-image and a style of sponsoring and reporting scientific research.” 3 The *NGM*’s lush photography fulfills the reader's desire for pleasure and facilitates a kind of imaginary participation in the adventures of geography. The study of cuteness provides insight into one aspect of the mixed modes of involvement in doing science the *National Geographic* way. Responses to cute animal life may be euphoric, caring and intrusive, maternal and overbearing. The need for contact with animals in the form of petting, patting or collecting, works itself out in a kindly aggressivity, a giddy proprietary right to possess, nurture, and display the pedomorphic treasures of one’s personal menagerie. The collection and display of yards of *NGM*s, a recreation room diorama consisting of rows of yellow spines on bookshelves, may in itself signify the extent of one’s participation in nature and commitment to certain principles of preservation. In short, cuteness sells – by subscription, or in serial installments.

To be blunt: I am suspicious about cuteness, about its ordinariness. It is a vehicular term that drags along with it clusters of similar adjectives, generating an

emotionally resonant but impenetrable fog. Neotenization is a regime of cuteness, a means by which maturation is stalled or suspended. It is not, as one says colloquially, a Mickey Mouse affair. The prolongation of immaturity and the exaggeration of certain attributes, by cosmetic or other means, is not a matter confined solely to the cartoon bestiary. As I mentioned earlier, the bodies of elite women gymnasts are submitted to a regime of cuteness in which the passage from girlhood to adolescence is suspended by hyper-training and drugs. Cuteness cultivates submissiveness, and it relieves one of the responsibility of understanding its physical and psychological consequences. It is easy to get lost in the fog of harmlessness and delight, in the Disneyland of cuteness if you will.

I

'Cute' signifies beings or objects whose attributes elicit affective responses. Cuteness produces a feeling of warmth and closeness accompanied by behavior patterns of caring associated with brood-tending about beings or objects aroused by their specific infantile attributes. What are these attributes? In the early 1940s Konrad Lorenz developed his *Kindchenschema*, the infant schema for the aesthetic proportions of the heads of human and non-human animals considered to be cute [Fig. 1].

The proportions of the heads on the left side of the Figure activate the caring response in adults while those on the right side do not. Widely discussed in the ethological and popular literatures, and repeatedly returned to by Lorenz in light of new experimental data refining the schema, this research

provides a list of the physical (as well as one behavioral) attributes constituting an ethological definition of cuteness:

1. Head large and thick in proportion to the body;

2. Protruding forehead large in proportion to the size of the rest of the face;

3. Large eyes below the middle line of the total head;

4. Short, stubby limbs with pudgy feet and hands;

5. Rounded, fat body shape;

6. Soft, elastic body surfaces;

7. Round, chubby cheeks;

8. Clumsiness [4]

Lorenz describes an innate releasing mechanism (IRM) in human adults that is triggered by configurations of key attributes, in this case those of cute infants, eliciting affective patterns of behavior such as the desire to cuddle, pat, use pet names in a high-pitched voice, generally care for, perhaps nurse, bend down one's head

towards, etc. The attributes characterizing cute infants are “naturally” IRM-effective in the absence of a gestalt or absolute complex of attributes. 5 That is, IRMs react positively to the sum of heterogeneous attributes, defined not in terms of absolute values but, rather, by the perception of intervals and relations between attributes. 6 Lest one assume that the IRM is thoroughly innate or a drive, Lorenz defines it as a function that may be made more selective by learning, meaning that IRM-effectiveness is heavily mediated by cultural codes.

Importantly, the IRM may be activated more effectively by models or dummies than by natural beings. As Lorenz remarks, it reacts remarkably unreflectively to supernormal objects that consist of qualitatively and quantitatively modified attributes, and to adults as long as they possess some of the aforementioned characteristics. Simulated cute bodies with certain exaggerations/ diminutions are sometimes more IRM-effective than natural bodies; that is, someone will simply gush over them. It needs to be added that the social display of gushing over someone/thing and related forms of emotional extravagance is a way to signal that one is really involved in a certain activity.

Lorenz's experimental rule of thumb is that "an IRM can be assumed to be at work whenever an organism is 'taken in' by a very simple dummy model." 7 Conversely, in the event that the attempt to elicit a certain response fails, it is not assumed that an IRM is not involved. Instead, it may be that an inhibition relating to a specific configuration of attributes has been learned, or the tested subject was not ready to respond, or the experimental protocols were

poorly defined (i.e., the results of one experiment to which Lorenz refers were considered contradictory because the instruction given was to choose the most baby-like model, a question more affectively ambiguous than being asked to choose the model one would like most to cuddle).

Lorenz believed that the Kewpie doll represented "the maximum possible exaggeration of the proportions between cranium and face which our perception can tolerate without switching our response from the sweet baby to that elicited by the eerie monster." 8 Many filmic creatures occupy a threshold between cute and eerie, however, calling forth varying responses from different groups (children and women as opposed to men). As one may recall in the case of E.T., some of the creature's attributes (protruding forehead, head size, and large eyes) were cute while many others were not (gangly limbs, long fingers). E.T.'s wrinkled skin was more difficult to pin down since it was simultaneously that of a newborn and an elderly person. E.T. was at once infantile and aged, cute and eerie, child-like and wise; cute attributes are combined with those signifying bodily deterioration and aging to form a powerful configuration of releasers. Positive responses to the former may also recognize and respect the latter, by paying attention to the signs of experience and wisdom.

In an amusing anecdote, Lorenz recalls the remark of an American journalist at an ethology conference who said, after having seen a film of an Oyster Catcher attempting to sit on an oversized and brightly painted egg: "Why, that's the covergirl!" For Lorenz this remark "showed [a] complete understanding of the phenomenon. Most

measures taken by fashion to enhance female - and male - beauty function on the principle of exaggerating key stimuli." 9 Anyone familiar with the combination of make-up and photographic editing at the heart of fashion magazines will appreciate Lorenz's point, although swings in fashion dictate a shift in the attributes (in various combinations constituting a look) focused upon in a given season or campaign. In addition, ethologists often borrow examples from the doll and fashion industries to refine and extend their findings. 10 Examples of Disney cartoon animals and kitsch art abound to illustrate the overemphasis of baby characteristics in cute representations, to which it may be added that certain breeds of dogs such as the Pekinese have been bred to be perfect substitutes for the unfulfilled desire of mothering in older adults. This was the breed of dog given to Sigmund Freud upon his arrival in London late in his life as a substitute for his chow that was held in quarantine. Ethological criteria have been used to explain the anthropomorphic appreciation of Panda bears and the connection between neoteny and the exhibition value of certain species of animals, as well as the success of particular dolls and fantasy animals. 11 In Mullan and Marvin's research on popular attractions at zoos, they consider that the ability of an infant animal to maintain a vertical posture enhances its cuteness by making it more easily subject to anthropomorphism. Mullan and Marvin also maintain that when animals mature the interest shown in them diminishes, as was the case for a popular polar bear born in captivity at the London Zoo in the early 1950s. 12

II

In the 1950s and 1960s, *NGM* often carried stories about animals; most issues, in fact, had at least one such item. Animals also appeared regularly in the exotic and domestic cultural geographies that were the staples of the magazine, even if they were only decorative. Animals were collectible or already collected. Of the latter, reports on zoos abound in which children are either brought to the animals or the animals are brought to the children. The transition from collectible to collection provided the premise for a series of adventure stories of animals in transit; a platypus is brought from Brisbane to the Bronx Zoo; Bimbo the gibbon, supposedly left behind by friendly fieldworkers in Thailand, is rediscovered in the Washington Zoo - a family reunion ensued.Many of the animal stories are, in fact, human-interest stories, for the sake of the oft-expressed sentiment that "animals are humans too!" Interest and involvement in the lives of animals as far they intersect with human lives is often intensified by the use of photographs of kittens and kids (goats), seal pups, and a lost beaver kit being bottle-fed by a friendly warden. Photographs of 'baby' animals are liberally peppered throughout the articles.

It is not enough, however, that *NGM* foregrounds the lives of captive animals (since they make easier photographic targets), but the magazine itself also serves as background, as in an image of Waxbills, Cordon Bleu and Whydas perched on the spine of a *NGM* in a report on a distribution center for exotic birds in Manhattan's Bowery. 13 The author of this article, Paul Zahl, had already used this self-referential motif in his study "Back-yard Monsters in

Color," in which the magazine served as a mounting board for the display of insect specimens (especially moths). 14 It should be noted that color images did not appear on the cover of *NGM* until the second half of 1959, only two years into Melville Bell Grosvenor's tenure as editor (Coca-Cola advertised on the back cover for most the decade). But photographic images in Kodachrome of animals literally on the spine and cover of the magazine were already in evidence in the early 1950s in these examples. Before 1959, the white background over which the title and table of contents were laid in black ink, the whole of which was framed by a yellow border, served as a kind of standard instrument in its own right. At once a device for sizing and measuring, and a mounting board, the magazine itself was a tool for doing science in the laboratory of the everyday. These images also provided evidence of the proximity of animal life to the magazine, shrinking the mediations of editorial policies, political and pedagogical visions, and the vicissitudes of fieldwork so that any implied distortion or distance would be erased.

By referring to itself, *NGM* demonstrated its self-awareness and self-control and proved that it was its own measure - that is, it was its own yardstick - of excellence in nature reporting. This self-knowledge and assuredness set the stage for the more ambitious use of itself as a mirror of third world peoples, as Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins explored at length in their book *Reading National Geographic* (1993). What is extraordinary about their book is that there are no animals in it. But this very absence is instructive since it occurred during a marked shift that began to emerge in the 1960s away from animals and onto

non-Western peoples and places. As the *NGS* expanded into television in the 1960s, the yellow frame of the magazine stood in the foreground against the background of the television screen in advertisements in the *NGM* .

Descriptions of animals and animal-human relations in military terms were commonplace. Zahl used the motif of the beach landing in his article "Man-of-War Fleet Attacks Bimini" (1952); elsewhere, turtles are called "nature's tanks" and "nice people," too, over which one must take care not to drive while on the highway; American operations of the period in the Iraqi desert are recorded in "Report from the Locust Wars" (1953). 15 The mixed representational conventions of the *NGM* enabled military motifs to sit comfortably alongside tender evocations of baby animals. For every military animal there was a king penguin wearing a "frowzy Teddy-bear costume," 16 a "cuddly Slow Loris," 17 and brilliantly colored North American silk moths, mounted in an unnatural display of their wingspans, as flat as cardboard, on a begonia plant, framing the face of a child [Fig. 2] 18

In "Strange Babies of the Sea" (1952), the authors employ key attributes of cuteness in images and reinforce them in the text to create supernormal forms and cute identities for plankton. 19 Cuteness helps to solve the problem of how to report on tiny and even microscopic forms of life and assist readers having feelings (aesthetic and perhaps moral) for unlikely candidates like plankton. The paintings of squids, octopuses, barnacles, sea urchins, etc., executed by Craig Philips have no scale

[Fig. 3]. This allows for exaggerations in the visual material which complement the textual overemphasis on baby characteristics and the repetition of the adjective 'baby' throughout the article (i.e., "jewel-like baby barnacles"); visually, large eyes and large, delicate, round bodies are highlighted (some plankton even have short, stubby tentacles, and one seems to have a bulging forehead). In one instance, the large eyes of a Spiny lobsterling seem to "swim by themselves." The suffix ‘-ling’ has diminutive force, denoting a young and small creature. Lorenz and Gould have both pointed out that in German the names of animals which possess the attributes of cuteness found in humans often end in the diminutive suffix *-chen*, even if they are larger than related species without such features. 20 Although lobsters are not normally thought to possess the attributes of cuteness, except when they sing and dance and speak with foreign accents, in this instance its eyes are enough to make it so; in case one misses the meaning of ‘-ling’, the authors add that the image is of a "baby lobster."

Philips's painting of the "little acorns," as the caption writer puts it, reinforces the overall impression that plankton is a world of "fantastic youngsters" and baby animals, even though plankton obviously consists of much plant life. It is not until the end of the article that we read the disclaimer: "Of course, it must be borne in mind that the plankton is not composed solely of babies or even of animal life." Still, this representation of plankton can elicit feelings of sweetness much more effectively than Jacques-Yves Cousteau's suggestion that plankton-filled water is a living "purée of tiny organisms;" 21 on the matter of culinary

representations, *NGM* contributing editor Paul Zahl was more low-brow, preferring "planktonburger" instead. 22 Zahl continued his interest in forms of plankton into the late 1950s in a 1958 article on "Hatchetfish, Torchbearers of the Deep," in which crustaceans are described, for example, as "sad-faced." A year later, Zahl was busy again, this time working on the "Little Horses of the Sea," an article focusing on baby sea horses illustrated with posed Kodachrome images of women with slightly cocked heads looking with interest and amazement upon these so-called babies.23

The Harvard educated biologist Zahn was a master of cuteness, matching Walt Disney in expertise. His articles appeared regularly in the magazine throughout the 1950s and 1960s. His writing is key to understanding the participatory nature of science practiced by the *NGS* and the warm invitation issued by cuteness to bring the whole family into the scene of natural science. One of the trademark aspects of Zahl's articles was his use of the adjective 'baby' for just about any tiny or micro-organism, regardless of its developmental stage (i.e., 'Blue-eyed baby crabs' and 'inch-long baby flying fish).24 And his own 'babies', that is, his son and daughter (Paul and Eda Kristin), grew up in the pages of *NGM*. They were constant features of his family-oriented brand of nature reporting.25 Indeed, photographs of his wife, brother, and nephews often appeared as well.26 The Zahl family staged the family romance of doing science the *National Geographic* way; it was standard procedure for male photographers and authors to use photographs of their children and wives to present and show interest in natural objects from fungi to bivalves. The

most remarkable aspect of Zahl's writing was that his descriptions of, for example, bivalves could be applied equally well to his children at the seaside, for they, too, are cute, "foot loose and fancy-free" [and] "during their childhood ... the tiny creatures propel themselves about the watery neighborhood…."27

III

The relationship between Disney and *NGM*, cemented by the bond of cuteness, was cultivated by the magazine and Walt Disney himself in the 1960s. In 1963, Melville Bell Grosvenor published an editorial "Genius of Laughter and Learning" in which he praised Walt as a "superb teacher of natural history, geography and history." This editorial introduced a lengthy article by Robert De Roos on "The Magic Worlds of Walt Disney." 28 In this appreciation of the Disney empire's efforts to really represent nature by means of animation on film and television and in print, not to mention by mechanical simulacra in reconstituted environments, the two institutions mutually shared the theme of family participation in the entertaining vocation of science. While Mickey Mouse explained the principles of animation to Mr. G. O. Graphic, Walt Disney testified that *NGM* was "a truly invaluable research tool" and "we use it all the time." Surrounded by shelves of the copyrighted spines of the *NGM*, Walt Disney lent his support to the pursuit of animals through cuteness. In other words, NGM stood behind Disney's zoological vision. As De Roos elaborates, *Bambi* told a "fictionalized story of a deer" whose animal studies "made it the forerunner of one of Disney's most important contributions: the True-Life Adventure Films, about live animals in

nature." 29 Disney himself continues: "In *Snow White*, we had cute little animals, more on the fantasy side. In *Bambi* we had to get closer to nature. So we had to train our artists in animal locomotion and anatomy." It would be a mistake, however, to think that cuteness was transcended on the way to true-life adventure films of animals in nature. The techniques used in the making of cartoons were also used in the true-life series, just as true-life studies helped to make Bambi physiologically and behaviorally convincing to children. Despite these claims, Bambi's head was classically cute: a massive protruding forehead with large eyes surrounded by tan coloring that made them appear three-times their size.

All Disney animals need a personality and a style and these are the paramount concerns of its artists and writers. The so-called "real scene" of animal personality is reducible to particular behaviors or attributes which, once isolated and exaggerated, come to define it, regardless of the realm of fantasy or true-life from which it was borrowed or into which it is transported. The attributes of cuteness bridge the realms of fantasy and true-life since responses to them are remarkably unreflective, but may be used reflectively in the commercial domain. The idea of getting closer to nature in a film like *Bambi*, as opposed to *Snow White*, suggests a refinement and selective exploitation of cute attributes to build personality and style rather than the abandonment of so-called cute fantasy animals. In the Disney universe there is no need to abandon anything. The combination and hierarachy of attributes need merely to be (re)adjusted as nature is drawn into the sights of the Disney artist and *NGS* photographer and author.

IV

In conclusion, the cute body is educated to suit the demands of the marketplace and to elicit participation through consumption. Commercial concerns always threaten to remake the cute body, to make it communicate and circulate more intensely through the transfer, extension, and diminishment of particular attributes, giving everyone a chance to be a kind of nurturer through consumption. This is particularly evident in the ownership of pets. Certain configurations of cuteness may shape the animal biotext through the genetic manipulation of particular features that leads to pets specially bred for human social arrangements and needs. The cute animal body remains on the drawing board, not only in the studios of Disney and the drafting tables of Hallmark Inc., but in the interventions of breeders and buyers and judges of competitions.

Ultimately, it may be said that what makes cuteness so alarming is that it is so disarming. Cuddly, soft, and charming creatures create delight and emotional warmth, but not understanding and respect. Cuteness dissuades these things for the sake of the control of a lesser being or what is essentially an inanimate creature, a cuddly toy at one's disposal.

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1. See Elizabeth A. Lawrence, "In the Mick of Time: Reflections on Disney's Ageless Mouse," *Journal of Popular Culture* 20, 1986, 65-72.

2. Stephen Jay Gould, "A Biological Homage to Mickey Mouse," in *The Panda's Thumb: More Reflections in Natural History* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1980), 89.

3. Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 157-58.

4. Adapted from Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, *Ethology: The Biology of Behavior* (New York: Holt, Rineholt and Winston, 1970), p. 490 and Konrad Lorenz, *The Foundations of Ethology* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1981), 164.

5. K. Lorenz, P. Leuhausen, *Motivation of Human and Animal Behavior* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1973), 306-7.

6. Lorenz, *The Foundations of Ethology*, 154ff.

7. Lorenz, 171.

8. Lorenz, 164.

9. Lorenz, 164.

10. See Eibl-Eibesfeldt, *Ethology: The Biology of Behavior*, 492.

11. See R. and D. Morris, *The Giant Panda* (London: Macmillan, 1981).

12. See Bob Mullan, and Gary Marvin, *Zoo Culture* (London: Weidenfeld &

Nicolson, 1987).

13. See Paul Zahl, "Exotic Birds in Manhattan's Bowery," *NGM* Vol. CIII, no. 1 (1953): 77-98.

14. See Zahl, "Back-yard Monsters in Color," *NGM* Vol. CII, no. 2 (1952): 235-60.

15. See T. and R. Chapelle, “Report from the Locust Wars," *NGM* Vol. CIII, no. 4 (1953): 545-62.

16. See N. Rankin, "A Naturalist in Penguin Land," *NGM* Vol. CVII, no. 1 (1955): 93-116.

17. See Ernest Walker, "Portraits of my Monkey Friends," *NGM* Vol. CIX, no. 1 (1956): 105-20.

18. See Zahl, "Man-of-War Fleet Attacks Bimini," *NGM* Vol. CI, no. 2 (1952): 185-212.

19. See H. B. Moore, C. Phillips, and J. Hulton, "Strange Babies of the Sea," *NGM* Vol. CII, no. 1 (1952) 41-56.

20. See Lorenz, *The Foundations of Ethology*, p. 164; and Gould, *The Panda's Thumb: More Reflections in Natural History*, p. 87.

21. As quoted in Zahl, "Hatchetfish, Torchbearers of the Deep," *NGM* Vol. CXIII, no. 5 (1958): 712-14.

22. See Zahl, "How the Sun Gives Life to the Sea," *NGM* 119, no. 2 (1961): 194-225.

23. See Zahl, "Little Horses of the Sea," *NGM* Vol. CXV, no. 1 (1959): 130-53.

24. See Zahl, "How the Sun Gives Life to the Sea."

25. See Zahl, "Oregon's Sidewalk on the Sea," *NGM* 120, no. 5 (1961): 208-34.

26. See Zahl, "The Bizarre World of Fungi," *NGM* 128, no. 4 (1965): 502-27.

27. Zahl, "The Magic Lure of Sea Shells," *NGM* 135, no. 3 (1963): 391.

28. See Robert De Roos, "The Magic Worlds of Walt Disney," *NGM* 124, no. 2 (1963): 159-207.

29. De Roos, 178.