

# **IN THE FACE OF CHAOS, THERE ARE ONLY QT PIE'S**

## **or People Wuv Cute Stuff When Times 'R Tuff n' Wut Do'z Implications Mean For Our 4ever-Struggle Era**

By Molly JF Caldwell

The West's techno-orientalist visions of the future often evoke dystopian landscapes reminiscent of *Blade Runner*, where sprawling, hyper-digital metropolises bathe in a perpetual neon glow. In these imagined worlds, Western protagonists, typically white, navigate environments alongside Eastern cyborgs, while the sterile, metallic sheen of the landscape underscores a chilling, impersonal atmosphere. These depictions, however, reflect an increasingly obsolete dream. While we once projected a chrome-finished society onto the future, the reality we inhabit is far different. Instead of the gray, industrial gloom envisioned in these narratives, we find a world where the pervasive presence of hopelessness is softened by the embrace of cuteness. This aesthetic is not merely a trivial indulgence though, as it fulfils a variety of purposes beyond visual pleasure. From coping strategy to biological endurance, the adorable has evolved beyond the aesthete.

Writer Sianne Ngai created the classification of cuteness within aesthetics. Her interpretation of modern sensibilities in her seminal book, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, is how I will be using cuteness throughout this essay. Ngai identifies cuteness as a visual category that reveals underlying power dynamics, often masking fragility, dependency, and even manipulation beneath its surface appeal. By framing cuteness as not merely an innocent or superficial quality but as a reflection of cultural, social, and political ideologies, Ngai declares how cuteness is an undeniably tethered quality to contemporary society. I am to present cuteness through the multi faceted prism it occupies, how it is not only a product of overlapping social, cultural, and political influences but also a predominant contributor to such forces.

### **°°¤¤,¬¬¤¤°°°°¤¤, MILLeNNiALs & CuTeNeSS °°¤¤,¬¬¤¤°°°°¤¤,¬**

Millennials are emblematic to, and entirely mocked for, our proximity to cuteness. If you search #Millennialcore on TikTok, you'll be confronted with an unrelenting doom-scroll taunting Millennials for how we speak, dress, and act. With social media and the concept of public identities having been forged during most Millennials' formative years, there is a regrettably overwhelming amount of evidence lending itself to the argument that Millennials value curation that soften our realities. From diminishing language ("henlo" "doggo" "heckin") to infantilizing our media consumption (Cal-Arts style cartoons, adult colouring books), Millennials are an entire generation suffering with "I'm baby" syndrome. A staunch rejection of growing up, and the shift from "adult" as a noun to "adulthood" as a verb, has defined the stunted Millennial experience that sees maturity as performance. However, this reluctance to embrace adulthood is not merely a generational affectation but a reaction to the systemic failures that have defined the Millennial experience. Markers of adulthood that Millennials were fed during childhood, such as a stable

career, buying a home, and having children, are almost entirely unattainable in contemporary times due to the many failings of capitalism. For many Millennials, the inability to attain these markers is coupled with a sense of betrayal, as the promises of a prosperous future that were once guaranteed seem to have evaporated. This sense of disillusionment has catalyzed a collective refusal to adhere to outdated notions of adulthood.

Millennials may also be entirely responsible for initiating infantile regression as a coping mechanism so normalized in our current reality. Digital technology's hyper-acceleration in the last thirty years has allowed the succeeding generation(s) to become fluent in modalities that are entirely alien to elders, setting the framework for personal devices to become essentially "no-parent zones." During the expansion of the internet, Millennials found themselves exploring digital spaces where childish behaviour was not only allowed but encouraged as an outlet for the rising frustrations from unattainable expectations our parents swore they would guide us towards and yet simultaneously destroyed. There was an agreed-upon consensus from older generations that it was the endless participation trophies and coddling that were to blame for our innate failure to accept growing up and maturing. We responded with a juvenile rolling of our eyes alongside the sardonic statement "okay Boomer."

The term "reparenting" has become pervasive in contemporary discourse, alongside the general popularization of therapy-speak. An obvious dig at our parent's failure to change patterns of familial mistreatment, it is also a recognition of the Millennial ideology that maturity and wisdom are gained through self-reflection and the "unlearning" of idealized professional careers and nuclear families. With the inability to evolve through traditional external factors, Millennials instead have had to turn inwards to find the wisdom necessary for personal evolution. By "doing the work" and "healing" we experience the advancements in ourselves that reflect the growth we associate with getting older. This transformation displays the stark renunciation of the original "adulthood" as a stable descriptor that defined itself through financial achievements, to Millennial "adulthood", a reluctant performance heeding mundane tasks such as paying bills, doing laundry, and especially going to therapy.

Alongside the slew of unrealized potential and broken promises made, Millennials also were (and continue to be) bombarded with an unending amount of catastrophes. With the development of the 24 hour news cycle during the 1990s, endless visuals of violence and chaos became the white noise of Millennial childhood. Cuteness being an instinctual trauma response to chaos explains the urge to hyper-aestheticize the world around us. Two global events have occurred during Millennial lifetimes that changed the fabric of the status-quo, erasing a previous reality and rewriting a "new normal" overtop: 9/11, happening during most Millennials childhood, and the recent COVID-19 pandemic, experienced when most Millennials were entering their post-20s. Both events threw the world into fearful chaos, forcing society to accept that the world they once knew and future they had anticipated now ceased to exist entirely. Ngai's notion of cuteness depicts a structure that resists resolution, leaving the viewer suspended in a state of ambiguity. If cuteness is indeed defined by an aestheticization of powerlessness, the desperate Millennial reach towards the adorable becomes clear.

From the years 1990-1992, a massive boom of Millennial babies were born. This cohort, referred to as Peak Millennials, are the largest sect within the already massive Millennial

population. This giant group has pushed and stretched the limits of economic availability since coming-of-age, and currently experience huge competition (mainly within each other) when vying for already sparse resources, such as jobs and housing; Peak Millennials flood a hyper-saturated market. Kindchenschema, or baby schema, was defined by ethologist Konrad Lorenz in 1943 to describe the inherent cute qualities that evoke a caregiving response out of humans: Large eyes, round cheeks, fluffy coats, tiny bodies, etc. This nurturing holds an evolutionary purpose by protecting the most vulnerable within the group; cuteness allows for the small and weak to thrive. With Peak Millennials struggling to persevere with endless competitors, could it be assumed that the Millennial draw towards cuteness could also have evolved beyond mere coping strategy and now fulfills an evolutionary and biological purpose? When Millennials claim they are incapable of “adulthood” or need “reparenting,” they are stating their inability to persist on their own. Those who appear the least likely to withstand the harsh realities of current society provoke sympathy from stronger forces, and receive the necessary protection. Maybe cuteness has developed further than an aesthetic reverence or fantastical escapism and now exists in the realm of individual survival.

### **9/11 wuz t0tes @d0rbz BuT C0v1D-19 wuz 3V3N KeWtEr!!!! :3 XD**

Every Boomer remembers the moment they heard about US president John F. Kennedy being shot. If asked, often a story follows that illustrates the exact moment with austere honesty, describing not only how they heard but where they were, what else was happening, and who was with them. It was an event that shifted the fabric of society so intensely that a “before” and “after” was established, and although many experienced this event during their childhood, recollections depict the abrupt end to a vague innocence that never was to be reclaimed. On September 11 2001, two airplanes were hijacked by terrorists and flown into World Trade Center Towers 1 and 2. Now that enough time has elapsed where adults who were not alive during the event exist, it can now be retold through the foggy lens of memory. As with JFK’s shooting, 9/11 presented a deep rupture in societal rules and expectations that were so disparate, a “before” and “after” again conceptualized in the public awareness. It seems unbelievable now, but there was a time where loved ones could walk up to an airplane gate to say goodbye to travellers, a “no-fly” list did not exist, and pervasive, state-sponsored islamophobia was not (as) rampant. Once the dust had (literally) settled, it became clear how much society was desperately reaching toward cuteness to mediate the fear and anxiety collectively being experienced. There were direct references to the event that morphed into adorable sentiments, such as the idolization of the first-responders through endless cries of “Never Forget”, as well as seemingly more abstract interpretations, from the creation and rise of gender reveal parties to the use of phone-camera filters as a way to soften the harsh ridges of reality. The “manic-pixie-dream-girl” came into existence, entire businesses based on colourful desserts such as cupcakes and macarons began to occupy every street, and a fourth wave girl-bossing “fun-feminism” began to take hold of society’s politics. The 90’s were defined by an apathetic ennui that came crashing down with World Trade Centre towers 1 and 2, and society built a soft, saccharine replacement overtop of the ashes.

The COVID-19 pandemic also disturbed the status quo so greatly that the previously existing world halted and a “new-normal” came into existence. As with 9/11, it is hard to imagine a reality where meetings were held in-person, sickness couldn’t persuade workers to stay home, and a culture war did not meddle itself into every conflict. Instead of “Never Forget,” the world chose their frothy hero worship by standing on their balconies and clapping for the nurses and doctors who were drafted into fighting the virus. Sentiments of “I’m baby” and “uWu” proliferated our collective lexicon, and pop culture began its exploitation of childhood nostalgia with remakes and reboots. The world painted themselves Millennial Pink, an inoffensive, placid colour, and began asking “does this bring joy?” when making decisions. Emojis have developed such symbology that it is now possible to have entire conversations without words and it is universally understood what is being said. Life has become noticeably tinier in recent years as well, with temporary locations such as “prefabricated micro-homes” and “pop-up shops” becoming more and more available. Rooftop beekeeping, community gardens, and urban foraging have also become inescapable due to capitalistic greed shrinking the available spaces, leaving us to try and make the best of what we have, if we even have it. As previously argued, if cuteness has evolved into a survival strategy, it could further be reasoned that those who have experienced these traumatic events with high death tolls would cling to any tactic that promises them longevity. I mean, who could possibly harm or hurt that which is “just baby?”



What does all of this mean for the future, and post-Millennial generations? Now that Millennials have left the trendsetting demographic that rules over consumption, Gen-Z (or colloquially, Zoomers) have now become the generation to which all marketing and media is positioned towards. Zoomers have been quick and ruthless in their rejection of Millennial aesthetics, especially when concerning cuteness. In the same way we pushed up against the cold and serious tones of our Boomer parents, Zoomers follow the same pattern with the Millennial adults in their lives. Again, there is a never ending amount of memes making fun of how Millennials speak and act, but these memes act more so as dismissal of the perfectly curated aestheticization at the core of Millennial performance. Obvious depictions of this abandonment include:

- The progression of meme formats, from Impact fonts overtop of repetitive colourful icons, to Arial (often the default font in most programs) above badly cropped blurry media
- Carousel posts showing an array of images with no narrative, including random screenshots to candid selfies (popularly referred to as “photo dumps”)
- Fashion reverting back to 90s thrifted simplicity, lacking the branded logo boasting of the 2000s
- Tik Tok aesthetics such as “clean girl” or “vanilla girl” that reflect minimal makeup and a heavy dedication to skin care (i.e. removing the focus on surface decoration and instead emphasizing the canvas underneath)

Zoomers, born between the years 1997-2012, were born into a chaotic reality with little to no reference of a life without this constant noise. Many do not remember 9/11, and the 2020 pandemic was just further anarchy in an already frenzied environment where Donald Trump had been elected president and the economy had never been good. Instead of needing to manufacture coping mechanisms as Millennials did, Generation-Z carved their identity into the world as-is. It would be inaccurate to call it acceptance of the currently fractured society, as it is all they have ever known.

As survival grows increasingly detached from the norm and society descends further into the dystopian realities of the present, I wonder if the need for cuteness as an adaptive strategy is destined for obsolescence in future generations. Once a radical disruption, cuteness now feels like just another peculiar experience absorbed into the sponge of our normalized absurdities.

### **SO WHAT?**

In conclusion, the persistent connection between Millennials and cuteness, far from being a mere aesthetic preference, is better understood as a deeply embedded everyday reality that arises from the systemic chaos and crises that have marked our modern world. While cuteness is often dismissed as an innocuous indulgence or a whimsical cultural trend, it serves as a multifaceted response to the broader sociopolitical, economic, and psychological conditions that society is faced with endlessly. The Millennial generation have self-realized during an era where promises of prosperity, stability, and upward mobility have mostly collapsed, leaving behind a pervasive sense of insecurity and unknowing. The collapse of traditional markers of adulthood—such as job security, homeownership, and stable family structures—has given rise to a culture of infantilization, where Millennials cling to the comforting, soothing qualities of cuteness as a means of survival.

Through Sianne Ngai's theory of cuteness, we can see how cuteness as aesthetic is not simply about the visual appeal of small, round faces and soft textures, but instead functions as a profound reflection of contemporary societal anxieties. Ngai argues that cuteness, while superficially innocent, often masks deeper power dynamics and societal tensions, and it operates as a cultural force that both reflects and shapes the world in which it exists. Cuteness becomes an aesthetic refuge in the face of overwhelming uncertainty, providing a temporary escape from the harsh realities of economic precarity, political instability, and environmental degradation.

However, this new adorable reality is not without its contradictions. The very act of embracing cuteness, as Ngai suggests, reveals a complex interplay of power, vulnerability, and dependence. Cuteness is not merely an expression of whimsy or nostalgia but a calculated aesthetic that plays on our deepest emotional instincts—instincts that have been shaped by both evolutionary biology and cultural conditioning. As such, cuteness functions as a way of negotiating power dynamics: those who embody cuteness are often perceived as weaker, more vulnerable, and in need of protection. This dynamic is particularly evident within the Peak

Millennial cohort, who, despite their numerical dominance and cultural influence, continue to struggle with a range of existential pressures that are difficult to understand from a perspective less damaged by severe chaotic change. The very act of embracing cuteness allows Millennials to simultaneously acknowledge their vulnerability while demanding care and protection in a world that often offers neither.

Looking ahead, the role of cuteness in our world remains uncertain. With the emergence of Generation Z, who have grown up and only ever known a fractured and chaotic world, it is possible that the aesthetic of cuteness will lose its disruptive potential. Gen-Z has been quick to distance itself from the saccharine, infantilizing trends of Millennial culture, embracing a more raw, unfiltered approach to identity and expression. The proliferation of minimalist aesthetics, anti-consumerist ideologies, and the rejection of tropes so deeply embraced by Millennials suggests that Zoomers may be less inclined to rely on cuteness as a form of emotional regulation. Instead, they may seek alternative modes of coping with societal crisis, possibly embracing more subversive or politically charged forms of expression.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that as long as societal structures remain fractured and uncertainty continues to be a defining characteristic of modern life, the instinct to seek solace through cuteness may persist, even across generations; the innate desire for comfort and security in the face of frenzied disorder is a fundamental human impulse. In a world where survival often feels like a constant struggle, the need to find moments of tenderness and vulnerability remains a crucial and instinctual part of the human experience. In this sense, cuteness becomes more than just a superficial and easily defined aesthetic—it transitions into a mechanism for emotional and psychological survival. In current times of profound distress, humanity's most fundamental desire is not merely to endure, but to find moments of joy, softness, and connection. As the world continues to shift and evolve, it is likely that cuteness will persist as cultural artifact, biological evolution, and coping mechanism. For now though, cuteness continues to serve as a balm for the wounds inflicted by a society in turmoil.

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