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Cuteness as Counterculture in Anthropomorphic Japanese Animation

Abstract: Big eyes, flying *tanukis*, talking teddy bears, angry red pandas, and the list carries on. Anthropomorphic characters laugh and cry, search for retribution, fight evil magicians, try to stop experiments, fall in love, or just struggle with work while reenacting our human emotions on the big screen; usually, in the Japanese animation context, in *kawaii* or “cute” form. Although the aesthetics and use of *kawaii* has gained its place in the mainstream consumption of Japanese popular culture as “pure,” “childlike,” or “adorable,” this artistic and narrative device has a long history of both consumption and subversion when exposed as empty, superficial, and flawed. In this paper, I propose critically exploring the “cuteness” or *kawaii* tradition in Japanese animation, as a site of resistance and a form of counterculture. Through a close reading of such animated series as *Aggretsuko* (2018), *BNA: Brand New Animal* (2020) or *Dorohedoro* (2020), I argue that their anthropomorphic characters and disturbing narratives transgress once more into the realm of the opposite. Sharon Kinsella highlights cute style as “anti-social,” and a means to escape real life (1995). I pose the question: can it function as a form of social, ideological and political critique? Scott McCloud’s concept of *iconic abstraction* (1994) becomes then instrumental in analyzing these characters through the effects of the non-human representation in comic books, as a form of drawing attention to the essential “meaning” of that representation. I further argue that the Japanese animations above shed light on the dominant narratives in the public sphere while questioning their legitimacy, thus transforming *kawaii* in a subversive mechanism.

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The current wave of anthropomorphic Japanese animation, with such contenders as *Beastars* (2019), *BNA: Brand New Animal* (2020) or *Aggretsuko* (2018), brings at the forefront the clash between social, moral orders and escapist consumption, a

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clash inherent in the culture of *cuteness* or *kawaii*. Thus, Japanese popular culture becomes, once more, the fertile ground for shedding light on various dominant narratives in the public sphere while questioning their legitimacy.

From its origins as a form of youth culture in the '70s and '80s, through to its current ubiquity in mainstream commercial practices, *kawaii* (or cute), as both aesthetics and representation, has played an important role in driving Japan's "fancy goods industry" (toys, cards and stationery, toiletries, lunch boxes, etc.), while also fueling a powerful counter-discourse. This paper returns to *kawaii*'s cultural origins in order to explore how current Japanese animation discourses and characters can push the meanings of counterculture further, while offering a critical close-up into what the use of anthropomorphic devices can achieve: a subversion of "mainstream" behaviours, social structures or religious symbols.

Between the liminal and the mainstream —a case for counterculture and *kawaii*

The concept of counterculture has been widely debated, as a form of diverging from a parent culture, opposing hegemonic ideologies, practices, beliefs (Hall 1968, Bennet 2012), while sometimes being conflated with the more popular term "subculture" defined by its use of the prefix "sub-" to represent the hierarchical relationship with the wider society or culture (Gelder and Thornton 1997).

Although both concepts have their thoroughly analyzed limits within the global mediascape, and have been generally critiqued for their narrow view pertaining to class structures and their homogenizing tendencies (Gelder and Thornton 1997, Muggleton and Weinzierl 2004), for the scope of this analysis I will use the concept of counterculture as defined by Andy Bennet in his seminal work, "Reappraising « Counterculture »":

The terrain of everyday life in late modernity is such that a variety of different lifestyle sites and strategies emerge and coalesce into collective forms of social life, each embodying specific sets of aesthetic and political sensibilities through which groups and individuals articulate their sense of 'difference' from others who occupy the same urban and regional spaces and places. (19)

In the '60s and '70s, when youth cultures and alternative cultural discourses were gaining terrain even across borders (e.g. hippies, punkers, bikers), sociologists, anthropologists, and the first culturalists made sense of these "Others" as subcultures. In the global, digitalized world of popular culture, Bennet's reappraisal of such behaviours as "lifestyle sites" and "strategies" resolves one important limitation. As he further underlines, it is "a more socially and culturally complex way of positioning lifestyle as a conceptual framework for understanding aspects of opposition and change" (19), thus answering the homogenizing

and even the class structure problems—it is not a question of the working-class youth fighting the adult society, but of youth cultures manifesting differently.

Furthermore, looking at a complementary concept appearing in Paul Willis' analysis of popular culture phenomena and those same youth cultures, this definition of counterculture transforms into a lucrative term to apply in today's critique of "different" cultural consumption. Willis discusses "cultural homologues" as the relationship between the group and the cultural artefact:

The artefact, object or institution in such a relationship must consistently serve the group at a number of levels with meanings, particular attitudes, bearings and certainties. It must help to support, return and substantiate particular kinds of social identity and the practice and application of particular kinds of sensibility—conscious and unconscious, voluntary and automatic. (191)

Thus, the lifestyle and site of cultural consumption established through the counterculture implies a certain symbolic relationship with the object of that consumption, which is different, sometimes opposed, sometimes outside the realm of what is considered mainstream culture. This lifestyle and its artefact enable people to create a particular social identity.

With this lens in place, let's return to the *kawaii* culture and its origins in the '70s as a form of youth culture, and later in the '80s and '90s as a form of consumption. It involved "childlike" appearance, writing, speaking, behaving and more, idealising a "childhood atmosphere" that was never real, and defining a style that is "anti-social" or "pre-social": "Cute style is anti-social; it idolizes the pre-social. By immersion in the pre-social world, otherwise known as childhood, cute fashion blithely ignores or outrightly contradicts values central to the organisation of Japanese society and the maintenance of the work ethic" (Kinsella 251).

The youth culture and consumer goods that Sharon Kinsella's study of "Cuties in Japan" highlights have continued to transform the world of *kawaii*, understood as "innocent," "adorable," "naive," etc., which then exploded with one global figure, Hello Kitty, the cat-like character with a multicultural background. What was once relegated to enclosed sites and "temporary" lifestyles in Japan became commoditised and globalised, from the '90s onwards. It was through Sanrio's character that *kawaii* entered the global commercial space, becoming just another "fancy good" and depleting its countercultural discourse (McVeigh 2000). Or, as Leila Madge puts it, conflating the escapist and nostalgic behaviours with the overall consumption hegemony,

kawaii culture, like other popular aesthetics of postwar Japan, such as nostalgia, science fiction fantasy, and romance, seems to offer escape as the only solution, often through consumption. Also, as the *kawaii* aesthetic interprets the basis of behavior through a logic of emotional attachment—that is "loveability"—rather than power, it cannot really challenge the power structure but, rather, often appears to conform to it. (172)

It is worth mentioning here that *kawaii* culture, which developed as a subversion of the official writing style by teenage girls (Kinsella 1995), was part of the larger *shōjo* culture, with its ambiguous treatment of girlhood, as both critiquing the traditional women roles in society and reinforcing stereotypes through consumption (Teodorescu 2018, 2019). As Kinsella further points out, if the Western youth cultures that were appropriated by Japanese teens were mostly the domain of men, *kawaii* was dominated by girls innovating in terms of fashion, style, music, and so on. Like other youth cultures suffered before, it was rapidly integrated into the commercial landscape by corporations such as Sanrio, the creator of the aforementioned Hello Kitty.

Although part of the mainstream culture now—to a certain extent—the question of cuteness as a site of opposing or changing behaviours remains, even within the ambivalence of consumption, as we will observe when analysing anime anthropomorphic characters that inhabit the *kawaii* design, while managing to behave in ways that negate it. But, before that, there is another cultural form that needs to be taken into account when discussing the intersection of cute and animal in Japan.

The kyara and the iconic abstraction

It is no wonder that the trademark of *kawaii* is a cute, cuddly, non-aggressive look often found in baby animals. It informs the Japanese society's love of zoomorphic characters, generally known as *kyara*, that support consumption ever since the advent of Hello Kitty, and even before that. In today's Japan, these cute anthropomorphic animals advertise everything, educate people in state-funded campaigns, represent touristic places or fashion lines, etc. While finding them non-threatening, humans can integrate what the *kawaii* characters symbolise and their normative role, thus being more open to receiving their message. Possessing these characters is, in a way, a way to conform to that message or role. Deborah Occhi correlates this widespread phenomenon to the long time usage of animal talismans and objects in the Japanese spiritual practices, while focusing her study on these *kyara* that

are not only differentiated by their drawn features, but are usually attributed with brief narratives—origin myths, in most cases—that cement their identity and often explain the logic behind their naming and other features. Though not all are neotenous, or even cute, many *kyara* exploit the original semantics of *kawaii* which joins “cuteness” with the notion expressed in the adjective *kawaiisō* (“pitiable”). (111)

Cementing their lovable identity and narrative with a non-threatening outlook manages to achieve another important function, as Scott McCloud, one of the first comic books

theoreticians, points out with his lucrative concept of *iconic abstraction*: “When we abstract an image through cartooning, we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning’, an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t” (30). So, it is crucial for our anthropomorphic characters to have impact by simplifying specific abilities and signifying personality traits based on the animal they embody or the key message they’re supposed to convey. For instance, Hello Kitty’s creators describe the character as “born in the suburbs of London. She lives with her parents and her twin sister Mimmy, who is her best friend. Her hobbies include baking cookies and making new friends. As she always says, ‘you can never have too many friends!’” (sanrio.com/collections). In contrast, Aggretsuko, also a Sanrio character which we’ll explore in depth, is described as “a single, 25 year-old red panda. Yet, despite her cute appearance, something deep within her is filled with rage,” while being depicted with heavy metal hand gestures and aggressive teeth showing.

These types of iconic abstractions, specific to the comics and manga medium, heavily influenced character design and the *kawaii* aesthetics, managing to separate the *kyara* from the reality they’re being consumed in. As Laura Miller presents in her “Japan’s Zoomorphic Urge,” the separation happens so that escapism can be further fed: “Dislodged from their representation of anything from reality, human-acting animals are freed from the demands of the rational eye. According to Yoshimi Shun’ya, *kawaii* consumption functions as a way to shut out ‘problematic reality from one’s perception’” (70). Miller goes on to investigate the “visual tactility” of such characters as adding to their allure, combining the commercial materiality with the idealized representation they embody. “Zoomorphic characters are frequently made into small figurines or fluffy objects,” she says, as “both forms of tactility, the actual and metaphorical, are one of the more productive avenues into our comprehension of popular culture” (79).

It is that very tactility, physical and metaphorical, that works for the *kawaii kyara* appeal, but that can also be subverted, as manga and anime artists continue to show, not necessarily in the realm of the teenage girl anymore. Plus, the amplification of meaning operates in both ways, supporting consumption or highlighting its “wrongness.”

The following sections focus on three Japanese animation series, mostly aimed at adult audiences, and their set of characters, where the *kawaii* and the *shōjo* collide in new, subversive ways. For this research, by *shōjo* I mean the typified teenage girl character, with her wide-eyed look, sometimes clumsy demeanour, looking for romance, being in a journey of transition from girlhood to womanhood, and surrounded by pastel-coloured clothes, objects, backgrounds, etc.

The corrupted *kawaii* in *BNA*: *Brand New Animal* (2020) and *Dorohedoro* (2020)

Created by Studio Trigger, marketed as an original anime series on Netflix international, and part of their streaming programming, *BNA: Brand New Animal* (dir. You Yoshinari, 2020) is a *seinen* (aimed at an adult male demographic) show with a particular world building. The universe is populated by humans and human-like animals, called beastmen, and the story follows Michiru Kagemori, a human mysteriously turned into an animal, a mythological one at that: a *tanuki*—a raccoon-dog-like creature that has the ability to transform into anything, known as a funny or cruel trickster in Japanese folklore and myths. Michiru seeks refuge in Anima City, the only place where beastmen can live in peace, away from human discrimination.

Although the premise and the narrative setup are promising, the plot falls flat as it all turns out to be one great scientific experiment that caught Michiru in the cross-fire, with another power-hungry beastman posing as human and trying to destroy Anima City. If Michiru Kagemori is portrayed as the typical *shōjo* heroine, fighting for what is right and trying to figure out her new *tanuki-beastman* metamorphosis powers, it is episode 6 and the introduction of Nazuna Hiwatashi that I want to further analyze here.

Nazuna is Michiru's best friend and former classmate, also turned into a beastman, a *kitsune* posing as the legendary Silver Wolf, a religious figure for the beastman, caught between history and myth. As the title of the episode foreshadows ("Fox Waltz"), it is revealed that Nazuna has always dreamed of being an idol and is now using her metamorphic powers—the *kitsune* is a mythical fox with immense powers of transformation, wisdom and cunning—to lead a Silver Wolf cult. Her iconic abstraction as a white fox with pink and purple touches through her hair, ears, and tail, while metaphorically playing on the treacherous fox traits, highlights the fracture: her *kawaii* appearance and idol-like behaviour in public and her stark lack of a moral compass when constantly using Michiru and the cult to get what she wants. When confronted by Michiru as being wrong in deceiving the beastmen with her Silver Wolf embodiment, she replies: "I've finally become a pop idol. Tons of beastmen worship and praise me. That's what a pop idol is." Her *kawaii* aspect and *shōjo*-implied qualities remain just that, a facade, until almost the end of the show, when her cult organizes a concert where she is supposed to reveal she's really a human suffering from the "beastman disease," just like Michiru, thus being able to fully transform into an animal (unlike the "regular" beastmen). This constant questioning of her moral compass and human desires until the very last minute contrasts with what she's supposed to represent, the creators consciously using the *kawaii* device as a deceiving visual trait. The fact that she conflates a religious symbol with her idol aspirations cracks the *kawaii* mirage. It is a false promise for the viewers, shattered right at the end of the episode where she's introduced.

When analyzing cute idols, Kinsella talks about Matsuda Seiko, the most popular female idol in the '80s, a “flat-chested and bow-legged” singer who “wore children’s clothes, took faltering steps and blushed, cried, and giggled for the camera” (235). That’s how we see Nazuna in the final two episodes of the season: an innocent, shy singer, taking the stage one smile at a time, with her voice trembling as she confesses that she has a secret to share. There is even one scene where, before the concert, she shares her schedule with Michiru, revealing the cute writing with hearts and stars neatly drawn on a piece of paper, the point on point representation of *kawaii*, “using extremely stylised, rounded characters with English, *katakana*, and little cartoon pictures such as hearts, stars and faces inserted randomly into the text (...)” (222).

If, for the beastmen crowd and even through her one on one interactions with them, the illusion is real, for the viewer the mirage is further broken. The *kawaii* functions as a form of critique; the cute has been corrupted, highlighting the shallow waters of idol culture and consumption while in the act of consumption. It’s also a way for the creators to use the anthropomorphic fox character to highlight the many shades of grey of human behaviours and choices in life. The fox-liar iconic abstraction is quite simple, but effective in the idol context.

Even if *BNA* as a whole tries to tackle too much at once (discrimination, totalitarianism, class power struggles, etc.) without a well-developed plot, its cast, and especially Nazuna, manage to convey the underlying critique.

“A social imaginary carries within it an image of moral order, which imbues embodied practices and the accompanying cultural forms with meaning and legitimacy” (11), Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar underlines in “Toward New Imaginaries: An Introduction.” The social imaginary created by the Japanese popular culture with its *kyara*, *shōjo* and *kawaii* is depleted of its non-threatening, innocent attributes, denying its legitimacy in *BNA*. The corrupted cute becomes literally just a shell, going even further with the critique into the landscapes of parody, satire, and even nihilism that abound in *Dorobedoro* (dir. Yuichiro Hayashi, 2020).

Anecdotally described by fans as a punk-rock anime, *Dorobedoro* is a Japanese animated series produced by MAPPA and internationally streamed by Netflix, aimed at both *shōnen* and *seinen* demographics. Created by Q Hayashida, an independent manga artist, in the early 2000s, it was serialized initially into the *seinen* magazine *Monthly Ikki*. When the publication ceased, *Hibana* took over for a while as the replacement *seinen* magazine, but it closed after 2 years. Then the manga was transferred to *Monthly Shōnen Sunday* where it also ended.

As with *BNA*, being initially aimed at an adult male demographic, and then at a teenage male demographic (the literal definition for *shōnen*), *Dorobedoro* denies the female character tropes and uses the *shōjo* as comedic relief and parodic intervention instead of the stereotypical “damsel in distress.” Before deep diving into analyzing Ebisu, the mentioned

shōjo character, we need to take a look at the narrative universe that heavily uses various liminal and countercultural aesthetics: it is a dystopian world where humans live in a slum-like city, straightforwardly named *The Hole*, while in another dimension live powerful sorcerers who travel through magical doors in *The Hole*, so as to practice their magic on said humans. The main character, Caiman, is an amnesic human with a lizard head (sorcerers turn humans into animals or part animals) on a quest of finding and killing the magic wielder that did that to him. His sidekick is a warrior-like blond female, dressed in orange worker's overalls, denying any form of hypersexualization, which is another stereotype in such shows. Both sorcerers and Caiman wear masks reminiscent of bondage, goth, and punk aesthetics, while gore, violence, and aggressive consumption abound as the story progresses. The act of consumption, especially eating, gains metaphorical meanings throughout the show, as Caiman literally swallows the heads of magic users (before killing them) to identify his perpetrator. En, the head of a sorcerers' clan transforms anyone into mushrooms when annoyed, while eating only mushroom-based meals, and Nikaido, Caiman's friend, constantly cooks meat-stuffed *gyoza* (Japanese dumplings).

It is in this hybrid context that Ebisu is introduced in episode 2, titled "In The Bag / Eat Quietly During Meals / My Neighbor the Sorcerer": she is a magic user with a skull mask, purple hair, purple eyes, and an innocent-looking face who opens a portal to *The Hole* and jumps straight into Caiman. He manages to swallow her head, but she is pulled by another magic user trying to save her, literally losing her face in the process, a trauma that leaves her with amnesia and a speech impediment. The dark parody hinted in this episode is carried out throughout the show, as Ebisu, now only a pretty face (which gets recreated through magic) is dragged by the others through their fights, while she constantly babbles, randomly laughs or cries, talks to herself while doing chores—basically becoming like a child, not only enacting the *kawaii* visually. In the manga it is revealed that she used to be considered a cute, apathetic child by her parents, and as both the manga and the anime highlight, her personality also takes a turn after the traumatic incident into the hedonic, limitless desire to satisfy her every whim. There is a scene in episode 2 where her magic user companion, Fujita (the one that saved her), needs to dress her up for an upcoming sorcerers' party. It is a fashionable purple dress, made of zipper parts that Fujita doesn't know how to compile, so he leaves one of her breasts out. When another female character sees her, she bemusedly questions if that's the latest fashion fad and she's unaware of it.

Designed as a goth Lolita character, another *shōjo-kawaii* subcategory in Japanese street culture and fashion, Ebisu loses her face and her facade, becoming just a container of mangled visuals. She is physically and metaphorically denied that aesthetic, while being devoid of any sexuality. In another episode, in a similar setting (a sorcerers' ball), she gets fake breasts, tries to dance sensually while constantly exclaiming "sexy dance, sexy dance," but only manages to be part of the backdrop and ignored by everyone.

She has a lot of screen time where, among the violence and serious conflicts around her, she just shops, dresses in lingerie, asks for “dresses, furs and tiaras,” steals cute-looking cakes and pets, makes puppy-like squeals, is attracted by dubious characters with balloons and candy, and so on. She is also portrayed as being reduced to her senses, from eating, to jumping and singing, to puking when she is in distress. All the behaviours of a spoiled, yet helpless child, used as a comedic-ironic leitmotif. The *kawaii* is not only literally ripped off her body, but devoid of any meaning and used as a farce. The moments when she makes sense are scarce and are usually emotional, triggered by helping her friends and short moments of lucidity.

Unlike *BNA*, *Dorobedoro* is a punchy intervention into the nuances of power struggles, imposed hierarchies, hypersexuality, and so forth, while using over the top animation, the visual shock factor, and a post-apocalyptic atmosphere to prove those points. All the characters escape stereotyping and generic tropes, or, as is the case for Ebisu, use those stereotypes and tropes to devoid them of meaning and gather all the critical attention. The *kawaii* is not only corrupted, but rendered useless. It is even more meaningful as a literal and symbolic act, as Ebisu is part of the magical users species, the perpetrator class that considers itself entitled to rule because of their supernatural power. Even more so, she has Reptile Transformation magic and the ability to turn into a giant purple lizard (herself or anyone that gets in contact with her magic), reminiscent of Caiman’s green lizard head, completely erasing the cute, as she violently kills everyone in a fit of rage.

The anthropomorphic aspect in *Dorobedoro* is just a backdrop and an iconic abstraction for power relationships, as humans get turned completely or partially into lizards, bugs, octopuses, etc. Some magic wielders get to transform themselves, as Ebisu does, further continuing the *kyara* counter-discourse: there is nothing non-violent or non-threatening in the sorcerers, their aspect or their behaviour. The masks and costumes are full of spikes, teeth, metal, etc., showcasing the savage, the brutal, the animal. Through instances like these, the *kawaii* subverts its charming, non-threatening meaning, being used as a form of social critique and change.

Kawaii as failed escapism in Aggretsuko

On Sanrio’s Youtube channel, *Hello Kitty and Friends*, there is a short clip titled “Introducing...Aggretsuko” with the following description: “Retsuko is a cute Red Panda, working as an office associate in the accounting department of a highly respected trading company. She works in one of the biggest metropolitan areas of Tokyo,” echoing Sanrio’s website bio for Aggretsuko, mentioned above.

Aggretsuko (dir. Rarecho, 2018) or, as its full Japanese name goes, *Aggressive Retsuko*, is an original animated series created for the eponymous Sanrio character presented in the Hello

Kitty universe, produced by Fanworks studio and internationally streamed, once again, through Netflix. It is Sanrio's way of targeting an adult audience, while reinterpreting *kawaii* and contextualizing it in a contemporary setting, with contemporary problems to address.

Using the *kyara* landscape at its fullest, considering Sanrio is one of the main Japanese players in the mascot market, *Aggretsuko* centers around anthropomorphized office workers in an accounting company, playing on their iconic abstractions as stereotypical. Mr. Ton is the mean, sexist boss, literally embodied as a domestic pig; Ms. Washimi is the secretary of the company's director, while also depicted as the secretary bird; Tsunoda is a co-worker sucking up to Mr. Ton with her doe-eyed face, while embodying a gazelle, and the list goes on and on. But, instead of using the literal connection between the animal traits and the characters, the narrative goes further into problematizing appearances and human nature.

Returning to our main character, Retsuko is a 25 years old red panda lady and junior accountant who's learning to navigate office politics, while being constantly bullied, overworked, and socially wronged one way or another. Her *kawaii* nature and polite behaviour are contrasted with her cathartic habit: going to karaoke and singing death metal, while putting her frustration into lyrics such as "Choke on my rage!" or "Here's my battle cry!". It is both a physical transformation, as her whole face changes to pointy teeth, aggressive eyes, and the symbol for "rage" on her forehead, as well as her behaviour, from her "death voice" screamed into the microphone, to her violent gestures and postures.

Throughout season one, Retsuko is constantly building up tension, especially in her boss-employee relationship, while dreaming unrealistic scenarios of escape: becoming an entrepreneur, marrying and becoming a housewife, or using a harassment complaint to change Mr. Ton. Her "rage mode" inside the karaoke booth becomes the site of resistance, while she is trying to contain her disappointment in office life, and keep up with the Japanese social order. Instead of becoming the poster office lady and the *kawaii* incentive for an ideal woman, Retsuko uses her built-up rage to keep the facade, while the viewer is invited into her intimacy. There are many layers to unpack here, but season one offers two climactic moments that I will focus on, to explore how *kawaii* becomes the diegetic device for failed escapism.

In episode 7, titled "The Duel", Retsuko organizes a drinking party with her co-workers, in an attempt to smooth the relationship with her boss. The whole thing backfires, as he realizes she was the one putting forward a harassment complaint, so his cute fake smiles and hers drop as they battle with music. Mr. Ton's rap is filled with discriminatory remarks and personal attacks to the "short-timer" as he mockingly calls her. Retsuko gives into her rage and, in front of her drunken colleagues, she replies with her "death voice" in kind: "You're a shitty boss! I hate you!". In the end, she realizes she'll have to apologize and that catharsis she was looking for fails to arrive.

The show's creative use of music (sub)cultures at this point manages to highlight another fracture between the perceived self-image and what lies beneath. What starts as a

reconciliatory night ends up as a new failure—it is both Retsuko’s failure to accept reality and the viewer’s failed escapism, as the confrontation lacks any satisfaction.

Then, the epitome of *kawaii* and the *shōjo* imaginary gone wrong spans throughout episodes 8–10: “The Out of Pocket Prince,” “A Rosy World” and “The Dream Ends.” As one can guess from the telling titles, the creators use the *shōjo romance* formulaic tropes to critique Retsuko’s superficial attempt at dating and marriage. After going to a *gokon* (a mixer party) organized by Tsunoda, the sparkly gazelle, Retsuko decides to date Resasuke, another red panda working in the sales department.

Usually, the *shōjo*, defined this time as the anime genre aimed at teenage girls, centers on matters of the heart and finding romance, having specific tropes and leitmotifs such as the amusement park first date, watching fireworks together and the first kiss or confession of true feelings, nursing one another while being ill, etc. *Aggretsuko* takes all these formulaic scenes and completely reverses them, as Retsuko herself insists on that “rosy world,” ignoring the lack of any real emotion on both their parts. While visually exploding in pink nuances, rainbows, sparkles, and even a Disney-like duet between Resasuke, the “Out of Pocket Prince” and her, the “Metal Princess,” the *shōjo-kawaii* aesthetic is contrasted with the harsh reality that Retsuko denies. She gets her amusement park first date, but her feet get blistered, Resasuke doesn’t talk to her or mind her while she’s struggling to walk, the fireworks are an anti-romantic moment, and she insists on seeing him as the shiny, bright prince, while he’s just boring and uninterested. In the end, Retsuko drops the literal pink from her eyes, as she reveals her “death voice” true self at karaoke. Resasuke’s reaction is just as anti-climactic, telling her she’s “really good” and she shouldn’t “mind him, just keep singing.”

The way the escapist romantic fantasy gets constantly denied, while visually representing everything as cute and fluffy, is another critical form of tearing down *kawaii* as superficial consumption. It may seem ironic that the company that fuels the mainstream *kawaii* ventures into this new realm, but in the end it’s just that ambiguity of consumption inherent in the culture’s evolution. *Aggretsuko* functions differently than *BNA* and *Dorobedoro*, in that the narrative uses *kawaii* both as a commercial device and as a countercultural outlook on life, critically underlining the complexities of adulthood that can’t be solved through easy escapism. Depicting Retsuko’s perceived or public persona as *kawaii*—while her true self as metal works for the serious narrative, and the anthropomorphic device—manages to create that dissociation analyzed by Laura Miller: looking at human-like animals opens the space for social and, in *Aggretsuko*’s case, emotional critique. When she accepts her own flaws, she goes one step further into becoming an emotionally mature adult. And here is where, I would say, *Aggretsuko* manages to keep the tension between consumption and counterculture.

“A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status,” Michael Warner highlights in his study on publics and counterpublics. “The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public,

but a dominant one. And the conflict extends not just to ideas or policy questions, but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public, or to the hierarchy among media,” Warner concludes (423–424). Retsuko, the “metal princess” is temporarily the creator of a counterpublic, using her “rage mode” initially as a form of coping with social injustice, and then as a way to acknowledge her own shortcomings—without taking the social commentary away from the viewer. Through watching Retsuko, the audience becomes an accomplice, accepting her rude, violent mode of address and condemning the dominant public embodied by such figures as Mr. Ton or even Resasuke. It is still a failed or fake escape, as life is not fair or just, and the general social order must be restored.

Conclusion

Kawaii had a fast journey from subversive girl culture to commercialised aesthetic, both inside the Japanese market, and the global market. Yet, contemporary manga and anime creators reclaim it as a countercultural artefact, a site of resistance, sometimes temporary, sometimes permanent, and a cultural homology for irony and difference. From the superficial cuteness, the bubbly girls, and 2D feelings that permeate the commoditised Japanese goods, with anime series such as *BNA*, *Dorobedoro*, and *Aggretsuko*, the mirage drops and the backdrop of complex, unjust life springs free. The use of anthropomorphic characters contributes to the abstraction, as animal and human traits mingle to demask the superficiality and the fake. *BNA*'s Nazuna contrasts the *kawaii* idol behaviour and the self-indulgent motivations that fuel her, *Dorobedoro*'s Ebisu acts as a *kawaii* loli girl devoid of meaning, negating all that is supposed to make her cute, while *Aggretsuko*'s Retsuko shatters the escapist illusion, making the public confront its limitations and overall humanity.

In the saturated mediascape of *kawaii* and *kyara*, it is a different part of Japanese popular culture that attempts to create the alternative solution—cuteness completely unraveled as a deceiving device for consumption. The fate of *Aggretsuko* is quite interesting in this selection, as it is created as a new commodity for Sanrio, and the company's webshop is filled with Retsuko figurines and paraphernalia. As the series is still ongoing, there is much left to debate, but I would argue that, probably, in the end, its use of *kawaii* and *kyara* will imbue the “resistant consumer” more than an actual site of resistance. Yet, the narrative so far manages to strip the illusion and the iconic abstraction works even for the audience to realize their stereotyping fails them in a nuanced world.

In the face of the dominant public and discourse, *kawaii* can act as an opposition, not necessarily to deny the dominant, but to question it, and highlight its alternative lifestyles and their ensuing strategies.

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