Beyond Cute: The Serious Work of Kawaii in Contemporary Japan

From the adorable Kumamon mascot to the hard rock band Baby Metal, the world adores Japan’s unique aesthetic of kawaii (cute). When most people think about kawaii, they imagine the fluffy, frilly, and frivolous. Yet the cute aesthetic has spread beyond expected domains into politics, conduct literature, history textbooks, and elsewhere. Japanese cute can also extend beyond the saccharine, encompassing the weird or disturbing. The kawaii aesthetic serves legitimate and important social and cultural functions. It is a clever way to do the work of informing us, admonishing us, and convincing us. It provides an outlet for creativity and humor. From signs cautioning riders to watch the closing of doors on trains, to posters in medical clinics, cute pleasantly reprimands, warns, and guides. This presentation will take us beyond the expected forms of kawaii to a spectrum of cute and grotesque cute (guro kawaii) found in school textbooks, public service posters, and religious artifacts, emphasizing the critical role of this aesthetic in contemporary society.

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