

# “Oh, Stuff and Fluff!”:

## Amplifying the Cute Aesthetic of Winnie the Pooh

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In many ways, Disney's<sup>1</sup> 1977 film *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* remains true to author A. A. Milne's source texts.<sup>2</sup> Both feature hypodiegetic narratives that celebrate the power of imagination; both present quaint art evocative of a simpler time; and both arguably leave audiences feeling warm and fuzzy inside. Where the two media largely diverge, though, is in their cast of characters with Disney amplifying the characteristics of Milne's core cast. As such, Tigger becomes more raucous; Piglet becomes more timid; and Rabbit becomes more bossy. Less notably but no less interestingly, Winnie the Pooh becomes...cuter. This is achieved as *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* amplifies Pooh's soft, malleable, and subsequently cute body, as well as his vulnerability by exaggerating the precarious situations he finds himself in. To what end this amplification takes place is debatable, but may lie in Disney's consumerist culture.

Before one can fully address how Disney facilitates this amplification, it's important to first consider what the cute aesthetic is and how it manifests in Milne's text. Focusing on the physical attributes of the cute, aesthetics scholar Sianne Ngai defines a cute object as small, compact, soft, and malleable.<sup>3</sup> In her text *Our Aesthetic Categories*, Ngai explains,

Cuteness is a response to the 'unformed' look of infants, to

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1 The Disney corporation is referenced throughout this paper as “Disney.” These references do not refer to the actual person Walt Disney, although he was involved in the production of *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*.

2 Disney's *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* is based on two of Milne's texts (*Winnie-the-Pooh* and *The House at Pooh Corner*), but this paper will not discuss the latter.

3 Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (New York: Harvard University Press, 2015), 64.

the amorphous and bloblike as opposed to the articulated or well-defined. Indeed, the more malleable or easily deformable the cute object appears, the cuter it will seem.<sup>4</sup>

An example Ngai supplies of the cute is a frog-shaped bath sponge marketed for babies that not only possesses a simple design but is also physically malleable—one can squeeze the sponge and witness the object's reaction to that force. The fact that this sponge is designed for babies—Ngai notes how the purpose of the sponge is “to be pressed against a baby's body”—also reveals the connection between the cute and commodities designed for children after World War I.<sup>5</sup> Tracing the history of toys and their respective physical forms, Ngai notes how the “exemplary cute object, the stuffed animal or manufactured plush toy” evolved as a reaction to twentieth-century psychology and the recognition of children's aggressiveness.<sup>6</sup> In other words, as people began to recognize just how aggressive children can be, they began crafting softer, more malleable products that could withstand force like the bath sponge previously described. The result is that children's toys began to exemplify the physical form of the cute aesthetic.

With this connection between the cute and children's toys in mind, it becomes easier to comprehend how Winnie the Pooh embodies the physical form of the cute aesthetic. Instead of being an actual bear that lives in the forest, Winnie the Pooh is the teddy bear of Christopher Robin, Milne's son, who is also a key character in the *Winnie the Pooh* series. As a teddy bear, he is rendered soft, cuddly, and malleable. Readers are indirectly informed of Pooh's status as a stuffed animal in the first chapter of *Winnie the Pooh* as Milne writes, “Here is Edward Bear,” Pooh's original name, “coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head,” accompanied by E. H. Shepard's illustration of Christopher Robin dragging Pooh headfirst down a set of stairs.<sup>7</sup> The fact that Christopher Robin is able to handle Pooh in such a manner, with Pooh withstanding the force of the stairs just like the bath sponge, prompts readers to deduce that Pooh isn't a real bear but instead a stuffed animal. This notion is supported by Shepard's various illustrations which depict Pooh not as a realistic-looking bear that predominantly stands on four legs, but as a teddy bear that constantly stands upright. Additionally, by employing sketch-like lines, Shepard's illustrations imitate a certain sense of downiness to Pooh's character evocative of the cute's connection to softness.

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4 Ibid., 30.

5 Ibid., 64, 76–7.

6 Ibid., 75.

7 A. A. Milne, “Winnie-the-Pooh,” in *The Complete Tales of Winnie the Pooh* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2015), 1.

In Disney's *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*, Pooh's cute physicality is amplified in a number of ways, including through the use of song and Disney's revamped character design. Consider, for instance, the film's theme song, which serves as an introduction to the characters featured throughout the movie. Penned by veteran Disney songwriters Richard M. Sherman and Robert B. Sherman, the song emphasizes Pooh's soft body describing him as a "tubby, little cubby all stuffed with fluff."<sup>8</sup> From this song, viewers not only learn that Pooh is a stuffed animal but also to associate Pooh with fluff and, by extension, softness. These lessons are reiterated in Pooh's exercise song, "Up, Down, Touch the Ground," also by the Sherman brothers, as Pooh bends over to touch his toes causing one of his seams to pop.<sup>9</sup> His response? "Oh, stuff and fluff."<sup>10</sup> Here, Pooh's status as a stuffed animal is communicated by the visual of his burst seam, while his association with fluff is made apparent by his language. Both of these creative decisions contribute to Pooh's cute characterization.

In addition to highlighting Pooh's connection to softness, these songs also serve to exaggerate Pooh's rotund, and therefore more bloblike, figure—a key facet of the cute's physical form.<sup>11</sup> Described in the theme song as "tubby," and in Pooh's exercise song as "stout, round...short, fat," Pooh is clearly identifiable by his round figure. This is supported by the animators' character design of Pooh as they give him a larger belly and cheeks than Shepard does, thusly exaggerating his curves. Furthermore, the animator's decision to clothe Pooh in an undersized red shirt makes him appear even fatter than in Shepard's illustrations<sup>12</sup> by bisecting, and therein calling attention to, his stomach. Coupled with the Sherman brothers' songs, it becomes clear that Disney amplifies Pooh's cute physicality by emphasizing his soft as well as round body.

Another facet of the cute aesthetic that Winnie the Pooh exemplifies and Disney exaggerates is the cute object's vulnerability. In discussion of this quality, aesthetics scholar Daniel Harris explains how "the process of conveying cuteness to the viewer disempowers its objects, forcing them into ridiculous situations and making them appear more ignorant and vulnerable than they really are."<sup>13</sup> The result is that objects are rendered

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8 Richard M. Sherman and Robert B. Sherman, "Winnie the Pooh," *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*, directed by John Lounsbery and Wolfgang Reitherman (1977; Burbank: Walt Disney Productions, 2007), DVD.

9 Richard M. Sherman and Robert B. Sherman, "Up, Down, Touch the Ground," *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*, directed by John Lounsbery and Wolfgang Reitherman (1977; Burbank: Walt Disney Productions, 2007), DVD.

10 *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*, directed by John Lounsbery and Wolfgang Reitherman (1977; Burbank: Walt Disney Productions, 2007), DVD.

11 Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 30.

12 Pooh only wears clothes in Shepard's illustrations when it is cold outside.

13 Daniel Harris, quoted in Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 65.

cutest when they are “in the middle of a pratfall or a blunder,” or rather any situation that manipulates them into a physically and/or mentally vulnerable position. Examples Harris provides of the cute “in distress” include a teddy bear fitted with an orthopedic boot, as well as the Care Bear, Love-a-Lot Bear, with a paint can upturned upon its head. However, the most relevant example Harris provides to this analysis is Winnie the Pooh himself, “with his snout stuck in the hive.”<sup>14</sup> It should be noted, though, that in Milne’s text Pooh only gets his head stuck in a honey jar—not a beehive as Harris describes—and therefore is only placed in a vulnerable situation by Milne rather than a dangerous situation.

In addition to the instance Harris cites, there are a number of other scenes in Milne’s text that feature Pooh in a vulnerable situation. For instance, he falls down from a honey tree; he falls from a balloon trying to scale that honey tree; he gets his arms stuck above his head from holding onto the balloon to scale that honey tree—all in a single sequence. As these events reveal, Pooh’s vulnerable characterization often evolves as one mishap gives way to another mishap, which gives way to another mishap. That being said, not all mishaps are equal in threat; they vary from being a minor inconvenience like the “funny feeling” of hunger on a warm day, to being stuck in someone’s front door for an entire week.<sup>15</sup> What they all have in common, though, is that they consistently undermine Pooh’s intellect (demonstrated by his creative plans, song lyrics, and poetry) just as the process of communicating cuteness makes cute entities seem more vulnerable than they truly are.<sup>16</sup>

As previously discussed, the fact that Pooh is first introduced to readers with his head hitting every step of the staircase Christopher Robin descends speaks volumes about his characterization as a disempowered entity that is put into precarious situations. What’s interesting is that in each of these situations Pooh is ultimately protected and/or rescued by the character of Christopher Robin featured within Milne’s hypodiegetic narrative, while the “real life” Christopher Robin, featured in the outer layer of Milne’s narrative, causes him harm (albeit inadvertently). This contrast between hurting and protecting the cute can be related to another of Harris’ observations. As he writes, “the cute object’s exaggerated passivity seems likely to excite the consumer’s sadism or desire for mastery as much as her desire to protect and cuddle.”<sup>17</sup> As such, Christopher Robin’s desires and actions that at one moment cause Pooh harm, and in another moment, rescue him from harm, can be understood as a consumer’s diverging reactions to the cute aesthetic.

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14 Ibid., 65–6.

15 Milne, “Winnie-the-Pooh,” 77.

16 Harris, quoted in Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 65.

17 Ibid., 65.

In Disney's film adaptation of Milne's text, this relationship between Christopher Robin and Winnie the Pooh is rendered far less complex, with Christopher Robin consistently serving as the protector and guide of Pooh and his friends. This is a comforting development given the film's amplification of Pooh's vulnerability by exaggerating the distressing situations he often finds himself in. A prime example of such exaggeration takes shape as Pooh tries to steal honey from a swarm of bees protecting their hive by holding onto a balloon and pretending to be a rain cloud. While in Milne's text the bees never directly threaten Pooh—one briefly lands on Pooh's nose but doesn't try to sting him—Disney turns the scene into an aerial battle.<sup>18</sup> The bees malevolently laugh at Pooh, frantically chase him, and even cause the balloon he's holding onto to deflate.<sup>19</sup> The result is that instead of gently floating down from the sky as he does in Milne's text, Pooh suddenly plummets to the ground and into Christopher Robin's arms.<sup>20</sup> As such, Disney exaggerates the vulnerable situation Pooh finds himself in.

In fact, the scene becomes so overwhelming that some might even argue that it incorporates the zany—an aesthetic category that features an entity overwhelmed by frantic activity often associated with manual labor.<sup>21</sup> However, because viewers remain emotionally connected with Pooh and share Christopher Robin's desire to save him (the zany aesthetic promotes emotional distance between spectator and audience), the scene favors the cute aesthetic.<sup>22</sup> Analysis of this scene, therefore, demonstrates how Disney amplifies Pooh's vulnerability by exaggerating the precarious situations he's placed in.

Having analyzed two ways Disney amplifies the cute aesthetic of Milne's Winnie the Pooh, one can't help but wonder to what end such amplification takes place. What purpose does making Pooh, a character that already exemplifies the cute aesthetic, even cuter serve? Given the cute aesthetic's deep-seated relationship with commercial culture, the answer may lie in the fact that the cuter a product is the more likely it is to sell.<sup>23</sup> Disney's exaggeratedly cute Winnie the Pooh is soft and cuddly and because he consistently ends up in precarious situations, he is also in need of a protector. As Ngai explains, "cuteness solicits a regard of the commodity as an anthropomorphic being less powerful than the aesthetic subject, appealing specifically to us for protection and care."<sup>24</sup> In other

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18 Milne, "Winnie-the-Pooh," 16.

19 *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*, 1977.

20 Milne, "Winnie-the-Pooh," 17; *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*, 1977.

21 Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 7.

22 *Ibid.*, 8.

23 *Ibid.*, 59.

24 *Ibid.*, 60.

words, cute objects make consumers feel like the cute object not only wants them but needs them.<sup>25</sup> The result is that commodities, like Disney merchandise, that are divorced from consumers (they're made by strangers often halfway around the world and sold by an impersonal corporation) become personal. Whether or not it's fair to accuse the Disney corporation of allowing consumerist culture to dictate their art, though, is questionable. Nonetheless, as Disney continues to dominate the media industry and the line between art and commodity is increasingly blurred, it remains an important topic to address.

By analyzing how Disney amplifies the cute aesthetic of Winnie the Pooh, one gains a better understanding of not only what the cute aesthetic is, but how corporations such as Disney manipulate it. Whether or not Disney's changes to Milne's source texts are for better or worse is debatable as Milne's texts and Disney's now series of *Winnie the Pooh* films fail to exist in vacuums separate from one another. The two respective series inform one another with readers and viewers often coming to each source with preconceived notions of who Winnie the Pooh is and what each story is about. That said, it seems fairer not to pass judgement about which series is better, but rather to amicably recognize their own strengths and differences.

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25 Ibid., 64.