

## Thinking about Natacha Diels' *Words to Sleep By*

In Sianne Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories*, the zany, the cute, and the interesting are contended to be the foremost aesthetic categories of the postmodern era. Cuteness, Ngai argues, is a product of a culture that prioritizes, perhaps above all else, material consumption. The need to consume those soft, little, helpless objects reflects our need for *power* in a time where we feel powerless within the octopus of capitalism. As applied to an artwork (like that of Takashi Murakami, Natacha Diels, and many others), cuteness may function as a means to not only mimic (dare I say represent?) the state of modern capitalism, but also to castigate it.

How are we to read the unusual readiness with which true reverses into its opposite? Is it a sign of the aesthetic's internal instability, or how the experience of cuteness often seems to lead immediately to feelings of manipulation and betrayal? And how are we to read the *vehemence* of the reversal? Does it say something more about our own phantasmatic investment in the narrative of a cute object's "revenge"?<sup>1</sup>

*Words To Sleep By* by Natacha Diels revels in its own cuteness with its plethora of cute butterflies, adorable hot pink wigs, softly sung "ahs," sparkly objects, and rainbows. Pretty things inundate our senses, making us feel weak and googly-eyed as an aesthetic experience, which we seem to consent to and even enjoy. And yet aren't those objects supposed to be the obsequious and vulnerable ones? The aesthetization and objectification of what is deemed cute is twofold: we are both cuteness' assailant and victim. In grasping the dual nature of cuteness, Diels allows us to at once feel powerful, powerless, comfortable, and uncomfortable.

But *Words To Sleep By* does not *only* present adorable objects to us; we also experience an alarming artificiality in its contrast<sup>2</sup>. While the entire first section (until 3:16, roughly ¼ of the piece) has pleasantly sung "ahs" presented within an equally pleasant tonal framework, dissonant electronic-y gongs interrupt/disrupt (and accelerate as the section progresses) our sense of placid security. At the end of the section, the sung pitches are artificially raised, an ominous warning of the eerily dystopian sci-fi world that is to come.

It is here that we start to recognize some notion of dreams. Words, images, political, and cultural tropes coalesce into a collage while the music analogously vacillates between electronic-y gongs, instrumental sounds, and electronically distorted spoken/sung text. [Trump's "OK" sign](#) (or the idea of fabricated confidence) could easily be interpreted as a symbol of overt capitalistic manipulation—not very cute.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: First Harvard University Press, 2015), i don't rememberrrrr.

<sup>2</sup> Though perhaps cute *is* in its very nature artificial.

Capitalism's specious promise of comfort, security, and safety is a fabricated confidence. The visual and musical technological distortion, full of unnaturally bright colors, altered pitches of the voice (redolent of bad pop music), and animated lips contribute to this *simulcra and simulation*<sup>3</sup>, perhaps as a vague nod to fake news. In any case, artificiality in terms of capitalism's comfort and the modern world's technology taint our cute and dreamy landscape.

As the (distressingly) cute dream-world becomes an established artistic *reality*, Diels uses the electronic-y gongs (which were previously implemented as a symbol) as part of the main *musical* material in tandem with the instruments. The spoken and sung text replace the gong in its symbolic and interruptive function. Soon after (6:00), however, the sung text also joins in the musical fun while the instrumentals play in their highest registers. This rhythmically rich high pitched section fits nicely into our aesthetization of the cute with its adorable and piercing quality. From there we enter into even more scenes that remind us of a bad children's surrealist television show. And finally we end with flying pink wigs singing "ahs" akin to the beginning, though this time fluttering within a black background of nothingness, without a clearly defined tonality, making for an unstable ending—an uncomfortable way to wake from a dream (or perhaps by now it has become a reality), no doubt.

"Art has the capacity not only to reflect and mystify power but also to reflect on and make use of powerlessness."<sup>4</sup> Are we, then, to feel this musical/visual dreamworld is a way for us to collectively process the nightmarish artificiality of our modern world? Do we feel more aware of the ways in which we are mollified and manipulated from having experienced this artwork? Is, then, the act of *liking* something (in the way we like cute objects, or Diels' sparkly video) inherently different from *appreciating* something (in the way we value thoughtfulness and generosity)? By liking something, are we unconsciously acquiescing to systems of oppression/capitalism? *Words To Sleep By* should have taught us by now not to trust the things we like.

---

<sup>3</sup> If you haven't already:

[https://epk.home.xs4all.nl/theory/Simulation/Baudrillard\\_Simulacra%20and%20Simulations.pdf](https://epk.home.xs4all.nl/theory/Simulation/Baudrillard_Simulacra%20and%20Simulations.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> IBID pg. 109