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Is Donald Trump Cute?

If you use a post-modern definition, Donald Trump has a "touch of cute."

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These days, cute people, animals, and things are ubiquitous. Think Mickey Mouse, the Pokémon monster, E.T., Cabbage Patch Kids, Panda cubs, Jeff Koons’ Balloon Dog, and emojis.

In The Power of Cute, Simon May, a visiting professor of philosophy at King’s College, London, and the author of Love: A New Understanding of an Ancient Emotion, explains the rise of the phenomenon in the postmodern world and identifies its salient characteristics. Although not entirely persuasive, his analysis, which includes claims about Donald Trump, is ingenious, insightful, and provocative.

Cute objects, May argues, are not simply childlike and childish distractions, sweet sources of safe and reliable sociality and intimacy, or projections of innocence. Tinged by alienation, apprehension, artfulness, and absurdity, knowing and yet unknowing, innocent, cunning, experienced and edgy, they are, instead, "teasing expressions" of the transience, uncertainty, and absence of lasting significance “at the heart of human existence.” And they reflect distrust in sincerity and authenticity; a flaunting of and flirting with vulnerability; liberation from “clear identities” of gender, age, ethnicity, and “the power paradigm.”
May locates cute “in the spirit of our times.” After World War II, he claims, citizens of Western Europe, the United States, and especially of Japan were seized by a desire, born of revulsion against violence and cruelty, for innocence, gentleness, civility and cooperation. The “cult of Cute” expressed this aspiration. May maintains, however, that an acute awareness of the dark side of human behavior produced its “defiant, resilient, and lighthearted” characteristics.

Perhaps. But, in my judgment, except for some intellectuals and artists, the postwar generation did not embrace the indeterminacy of human existence. Moreover, support for the Cold War testifies to the limits of the desire for innocence, civility and cooperation, and an exit from the paradigm of power. May acknowledges that Japan “does Cute,” but Germany “does remorse.” He connects Japan’s “protean culture of Cute” to the long arc of its history. And he notes that “deep intimacy in Japan – whether parental, sibling, romantic, or marital – seems remarkably free of the rituals and symbols of Cute.”

More compelling, it seems to me, is May’s view of Cute “as a celebration of childhood in all its complexity and newfound equality of status with adulthood.” Accompanied by a sense, captured by the metaphor of “original sin” (embedded in films like The Bad Seed), and reinforced by the postmodern postulate that uncertainty and relativism are intrinsic to a universe previous thought law-like, Cute sees childhood as “dark as well as light, ugly as well as beautiful, cruel as well as gentle, deformed as well as pristine.”

May also invites us to play a parlor game. Most of us will agree, he suggests, about which personalities are cute and which aren’t. Cute leaders will not necessarily be innately harmless, innocent, submissive or moral. They may well be, at once, strong and vulnerable; self-conscious and naïve; menacing and gentle; beautiful and gruesome. For May, Lady Gaga is not cute, but Shirley Temple was; Winston Churchill was cute, while Theresa May is not; Hillary Clinton is not cute, but Donald Trump has “a touch” of it.

Americans under Trump’s spell, May writes, neither seek nor need to know whether he believes his truths or his lies. A consummate performance artist, with a distinguished lineage that includes Phineas T. Barnum, Trump embodies an alienated world threatened by meaninglessness and promises relief from it: he “evokes the sinister and the consoling, the malevolent and the benevolent, the destructive and the creative…the promise of chaos and the promise of order; and these ‘inconsistencies’ draw power precisely from not being resolved.” Trump won – and he wins – “by stepping outside the realm of sincerity,” something none of his rivals “could be or dared” to do.

Many Trump supporters, of course, believe in absolute truths: abortion is murder; Islam is evil; immigrants streaming across our southern border constitute an existential threat to the United
States. That said, it seems to me that Simon May has pinpointed key elements of Trump’s formula: evoke the fragmentation of the modern world, allow alienated American voters to experience chaos and the threat it poses from a distance, while promising a new – and old – order that will “make America great again.”

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