
Rachel Maclean
Spite Your Face

What is happening to me — I can't take my eyes off the screen! I want to lap up all the gorgeous colours and shapes, the crazy costumes and cute facial expressions. But, try as I might, and no matter how many times the story goes round, some of the delicious on-screen world always melts away, out of my reach like ice cream at the bottom of the carton. Still, I am completely enchanted by the poor sweet young thing and his incredible journey from rags to riches. Or, almost completely. There is something strange and unsettling about all this. Something about him tells me I'm wrong to find him cute. But his name is Pic and he is like a doll: small and cartoonish with enormous wet eyes, and his adorable outfits have oversized buttons like Mickey Mouse's! And the way he talks, with that barely perceptible lisp marring his snotty-nosed diction: it's so endearing. Even the sores on his face and the old frayed clothing he wears when he is in the world below are kind of cute, I guess. But, judging by the reactions of the other characters, little derelict Pic did seem to smell pretty bad. Oh well, luckily the kind fairy at the temple of OtherWorld Offerings granted his wish to be a rich man and enter the world above, and gave him a bottle of Truth to sort all that out.

As I step out of the screening room, the OtherWorld magic disappears and I'm back in our real world, with its rough edges and distressing news cycle. But beyond appearances, how different are these two worlds? Rachel Maclean's video 'Spite Your Face' (2017) may have a very different aesthetic to the world around us, but Pic's story is really about our own world and the conditions under which we live and work. As a cautionary tale, it warns us of the false promises of advertising and politics. As a sharp satire on our current era, it dramatises the power dynamics at play in events such as the EU Referendum in the UK, the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, and the rise of populist politics across the globe. The world in 'Spite Your Face' may look a little different, but it operates as a mirror for our own society.

Pic's name can be read as an abbreviation of the term 'picaresque', which refers to a type of narrative dealing with the adventures of a rough and dishonest but appealing hero. His journey takes him to a town square whose architecture resembles Renaissance Venice, a pinnacle of human culture. There, a soapbox populist who resembles the grown-up version of Pic has become the face of the perfume 'UnTruth' and decries the 'scum' threatening to take over society, warning that "the wind is changing and it's blowing their stench our way, but the facts aren't known because the media won't report them, and the politicians won't talk about them and the 'special interests' spend a lot of money making sure you don't know any better". While it may be true that "the facts aren't known", the speaker does not make them any clearer for us. His comments perform the kind of anti-immigrant, anti-establishment rhetoric that has become familiar from recent political campaigns. This language is transparent enough in terms of what it opposes, but nebulous when it comes to outlining an alternative. Pic has come a long way on his journey from innocent street urchin to sophisticated hate-monger.

In 'Spite Your Face' Maclean provides us with several instances of the inconsistency between how something looks and what it does. She does this on the level of the plot, with the transformation of an innocent young Pic into a cynical and abusive adolescent, and through the device of the UnTruth perfume, an elixir that causes its users to feel as though all their ills have been remedied and they have risen to a superior level of class. And, across her oeuvre, she exposes similar contradictions through her distinctive aesthetic, which has evolved over the past decade. All this time, Maclean has played every part in the story, using makeup, prosthetics, costumes and special effects to transform her appearance across ages, genders and even species. Her aesthetic is characterised by an abundance of sensory stimulation, including bright colours, music and movement, rapid cuts and layered storylines, cultural tropes of cuteness and kookiness, as well as scripts that make use of edited sound clips and cut-ups of neologisms, catch phrases and buzz words. But that's not all: Maclean's aesthetic gains additional power from the mixed feelings it brings about in us when we see it. It is seductive and thrilling, but at the same time it can also prove to be overwhelming, capturing our attention so fully that it leaves us exhausted and disoriented.

As the study of the way we perceive things through our senses – how they look, sound, smell, taste or feel – aesthetics potentially encompass everything about how we take in the world. It's not just about art. To consider the way it operates in Maclean's videos and images can help us better understand the workings of society, politics and power, and equip us to make more informed choices: in other words, to challenge Pic's pronouncement and ensure that the facts are known.

The young Pic's cute appearance is the latest example of an aesthetics of cuteness that Maclean has developed over the past decade, in videos such as 'Lolcats' (2012) and 'Feed Me!' (2015), which feature internet memes and slogans, emojis and cuddly toys, as well as portraits of a motley crew of characters. These are rendered in a polished style that performs tropes of cuteness, such as enlarged facial features, bright or saturated colour schemes, and smooth surfaces. What is behind this proliferation of cuteness? For cultural theorist Sianne Ngai, cuteness is one of the new aesthetic categories that dominate contemporary culture – others are 'zany' and 'interesting'. According to Ngai, 'cute' is the dominant aesthetic of late capitalism, evident in consumer goods across markets and platforms. Think of the way emojis have taken over communication, even between adults; how Bratz dolls have challenged Barbie's crown as the most popular toy for girls; notice the popularity of baby animal videos. When we encounter something cute, we might joke that we want to hug it until it pops, or to 'gobble it up'. We express a desire to annihilate it. According to Ngai, to feel that something is cute is to experience ambivalent feelings that leave us somewhat confused as to that thing's true nature: is it adorable or disturbing; fun or frightful; entertaining or a sign of something darker? These ambivalent feelings, caused by minor aesthetic types, are in contrast to the clear and powerful responses produced by traditional categories such as the sublime and the beautiful. As Ngai explains, "these aesthetic experiences are profoundly equivocal; indeed, they almost seem to call attention to their relative lack of aesthetic impact or power, to their own aesthetic ineffectuality." In other words, not only does cuteness leave us unsure about what it is that we are experiencing, but that feeling of ambiguity may be the actual point of cuteness. The feeling of cuteness is a response that combines affection and sadism, two of the dominant affects of Pic's character, which we find out about as we see him evolve from a young innocent into a sexually aggressive young man who violently rapes his guardian angel.

In Ngai's analysis, the destructive impulse that accompanies a feeling of cuteness is one of the reasons consumer goods are so often cute: it doesn't matter that we destroy the thing we desire, because consumer capital guarantees us a limitless supply of these commodities, which we are invited to use up. In 'Spite Your Face', the limitless supply of UnTruth perfume means it doesn't matter if Pic – or anyone else – squanders it, more will always be available from the consumer machine. Unfortunately, excessive consumption of UnTruth does nothing to change the harsh realities of life, it merely masks them for a short while. And only UnTruth can be sold: the precious bottle of Truth that heals Pic's wounds and restores his happiness is bestowed on Pic by the good fairy for free.

Another striking aspect of Maclean's work is what I'd like to refer to as a kind of smoothness, and it is present in both the form and the content of her videos and images. Maclean achieves this smoothness through her use of various processes, including digital technologies and consistent colour schemes. In a narrative sense, this smoothness it is evident in the recurrence of the body that incarnates each and every character in the story – Maclean's own body. It is also present on the level of culture, through her use of archetypal forms of storytelling, from morality and fairy tales to the rituals of politics and the rhetoric of sales and advertising. Finally, smooth personalities are also at play in the video. As Pic transitions from poverty to wealth, he begins to inhabit a suave branded persona associated with the UnTruth scent. He becomes so smooth that he paraphrases the great couturière Coco Chanel, coyly confessing to the camera that he wears nothing to bed but a drop of alluring UnTruth.

In 'Spite Your Face', smoothness reflects the light in the flawless gold skin of the characters in the OverWorld, in Pic's moist eyes, and in the opulent sheen of clothing and furnishings. Maclean's digitally created environments are composed on the computer as collages that begin with the images of existing buildings. The UnderWorld is a photorealist version of ancient temples and streets, while the OverWorld is a hyperreal computer-generated rendering. Just as cuteness masks something more complex and disturbing, the smoothness of 'Spite Your Face' hints that all is not well with the world, that things are not actually running smoothly in this world of conflict and strife. Smoothness is often a consequence of processing, and just as the smooth processed meat in a sausage retains the truth of its passage from living creature to protein paste, so Maclean's video is conscious of the dishonesty, exploitation and abuse at work in the world it so skilfully caricatures. When the credit card Pic uses to pay for his new outfit slips across his forearm and slices through his skin, the harmful edge of all this smoothness becomes clear.

While the appearance of 'Spite Your Face' may be highly controlled, its plot periodically reaches paroxysms of activity and its tone nears hysteria in scenes such as the hard sell of Pic's new wardrobe, the rape of Pic's guardian angel and his fatal confession. During the final banquet in which Pic's lies are exposed, the world turns on its side and dumps him back into the UnderWorld. The speed and theatricality of these scenes recall the slapstick performances of the commedia dell'arte, an early form of theatre that originated in Italy in the 16th century and was popular throughout Europe until the 18th century. The commedia influenced playwrights including Shakespeare and Molière, with stock characters such

as Pulcinella, who morphed into Punch (of Punch and Judy), and Arlecchino and Pierrot, who were direct influences on Charlie Chaplin. The character type of the 'zanni', or eccentric servant, gives its name to the modern adjective 'zany', an aesthetic category that Ngai writes about, as an "[i]ntensely affective and highly physical… aesthetic of nonstop action". But while zaniness may entertain us with its constant stream of activity, Ngai warns that "…this ludic aesthetic has a noticeably unfun or stressed-out layer to it." She sees a parallel between zaniness and contemporary working conditions. Indeed, our current system of late Capitalism demands that workers should be seen to be active all the time. This is apparent in the pressure to constantly post pictures of work and fun on Instagram, an untenable demand that leads to exhaustion and an eventual loss of control. This spirit of Capitalism, which the sociologists Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello describe in their 2006 book 'The New Spirit of Capitalism', as 'Networked' Capitalism is the latest in a series of successive 'waves' of Capitalism. This is a system that has grown and changed since its first spirit in the 19th century, which was personified by the bourgeois entrepreneur, and its second wave, which emerged in the first half of the 20th century, exemplified by bureaucratic corporations. Each wave of capitalism picks up the shattered weapons used against it and reincorporates them into a new, more powerful version of itself. The student-led protests of May 1968 attacked the authoritarianism of corporate bureaucracy, with wide-ranging consequences for the status quo. However, the protester's arguments were internalised by the mechanisms of Capitalism itself, and processed into our current system, which promotes a new 'networked' spirit of 'liberated enterprise', but it still rife with problems.

In a bid to be more efficient and to build a personal brand, 'networked' individuals flit between hot desks, work across time zones and fulfil zero-hour contracts that demand endless supplies of energy in exchange for scant security – and what else? These established ways of working are celebrated as being free and creative: precisely those things desired by the protesters of the late 1960s. Yet in truth, they have brought with them unforeseen problems of social exclusion, decline in trade unions, casual labour, disinvestment in public services and a general decline in solidarity. The late capitalist atomisation of society has generated insecurities, fear and resentment that have paved the way for authoritarian political regimes to sell us untruths about who to blame for our ills.

In the ongoing video loop of 'Spite Your Face', Pic endlessly rises off the ground and barters his way into the heavens of commercial success, only to be sacrificed each time his secret is exposed. He never learns the lesson of his demise, and time after time falls for the renewed promises of wealth. The cautionary message put forth by the narrative of 'Spite Your Face' is reinforced by the way the work looks. A deeper exploration into the feelings triggered by Maclean's aesthetic helps us understand the disturbing network of power relations and practices of deception and exploitation that govern our lives. Now it's up to us to pick ourselves off the ground and tread a new path.

Ellen Mara De Wachter

Footnotes and further reading

Ngai, Sianne. Our Aesthetic Categories. Zany, Cute, Interesting. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012

Adam Jasper and Sianne Ngai. 'Our Aesthetic Categories: An Interview with Sianne Ngai'. Cabinet, Issue 43 Forensics, Fall 2011

Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello. The New Spirit of Capitalism. London and New York: Verso, 2007

'Spite Your Face' (2017) was commissioned and curated for Scotland + Venice by Alchemy Film and Arts, in partnership with Talbot Rice Gallery and the University of Edinburgh. Additional support provided by Edinburgh College of Art, Outset and the Saltire Society of Scotland. The exhibition at Chapter is made possible with support from the Art Fund and the Hope Scott Trust.