

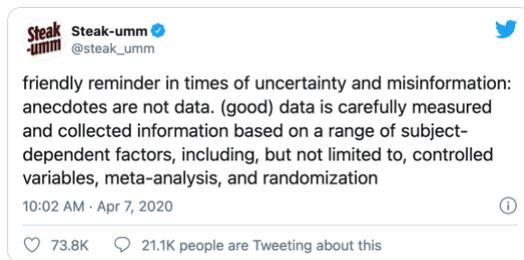
Plush Assemblage
Francis Russell

In order to grasp the atmosphere of today's failing liberal democracies, one must contend with an ambivalent relationship between feelings of banality and intensity. Numerous texts and events speak to this ambivalence: the election of "normcore plutocrats"¹ the world over; the storming of Capital Hill by a QAnon inspired regional bourgeoisie (and largely for the purpose of live-streaming, taking selfies, and "owning the libs"); the ever-looming threat of yet another COVID-19 lockdown. All such events could be taken as examples of what Mark Fisher referred to as "boring dystopia". Indeed, the phrase "boring dystopia," like "capitalist realism," presents the banality/intensity dyad—the intensity of accumulation, crisis, and acceleration, on the one hand, and the ever-extending sense of boredom, stagnation, and lowered expectations, on the other hand. Perhaps the closest one can get to a contemporary moment of attunement (*Stimmung*) is to let oneself appreciate these two extremes. Life today is banal, in that everything is merely a repetition of something already experienced: the long 1990s will continue in perpetuity, and the cultural fracking of twentieth century popular culture will continue, ever-increasing the risks of poisoning the cultural groundwater.² But life today is also intense, since the repetition of events becomes unbearable and overwhelming, like folded steel; ever stronger through its self-layering. To quote, albeit in a different context, former president Donald Trump—another powerful embodiment of this ambivalence— today's capitalism is "boring but very nasty".³

At the level of discourse, this ambivalence often expresses itself through moments of what Robert Pfaller calls "interpassivity"—i.e., the delegation of one's enjoyment to another person or thing.⁴ Take, for instance, the popularity of the sardonic cartoon cat Garfield. According to his creator Jim Davis, central to *Garfield's* mass appeal is the acerbic honesty of the titular character. As Davis puts it, "the very first products done had lines like I Hate Mondays, I'd Like Monday Better If It Started Later, and things people did not want to say themselves but they would let Garfield say it for them. It is the attitude that people gravitate to because he is such a great escape for that."⁵ The process Davis unwittingly describes, the use of a banal and diminutive aestheticized form to articulate a position or opinion, appears to be an increasingly common communicative act. Such acts are perhaps appealing, insofar as the presentation of a position in a diminutive and cutesy form provides one with the luxury of expressing a proposition without the burden of being held responsible for it. The poster, or coffee cup, or desktop background, or meme that displays Garfield's characteristic scowl, adorned with the phrase "I hate Mondays" or "Yup, it's a Monday", or "Give me the coffee and no one gets hurt!", simultaneously states and undermines its message. In this way, we could read the circulation of anti-work sentiments through figures like Garfield as a kind of interpassive political act. Indeed, no boss or manager or conservative co-worker could reasonably object to such expressions of dissatisfaction—since, one would only need to point to the self-evident impotence of the aesthetic form in question: "if I really hated my job, would I express the sentiment in such a glib and powerless way?"

It's important to note, however, that it would be pointless to treat such a reading of Garfield's popularity as in any way exposing a disavowed passivity on the part of the office worker. To do so would be to ignore the very point expressed—that passivity or resignation is not the hidden meaning of a seemingly overt political act, but that an expression of passivity is inextricable from the act, insofar as it allows for protest without the likelihood of retaliation or

the burden of assuming responsibility. In this sense, the communicative act embodied by Garfield appears long ago to have escaped the realm of office culture kitsch, and has expanded into a general phenomenon. Take the example of Steak-umm’s April 7th 2020 viral Twitter thread responding to conspiracy theory and misinformation in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic:



As *Newsweek* clarifies, “Steak-umms are beef trimmings left over after a cow is slaughtered, which are chopped, emulsified, formed into a loaf, sliced, frozen and packaged for use in homemade Philly cheesesteaks and other steak sandwiches.”⁶ From the cutesy epenthetic quality of the name “Steak-umm”—signalling the term for endearment, “snookums” and the implied exclamation “Steak, yum!”—to the folksy tone of the first tweet—“friendly reminder”—we can see here a mode of communication that is comparable to Garfield’s own banal and adorable presentation of fact. While many Twitter users scoffed at the calculating cynicism of the tweets, others embraced the thread as an important reminder of Enlightenment values and the durability of the scientific method. Indeed, Steak-umms’s own capacity to acknowledge the cynical reading of their unofficial PSA led some to be only more endeared and supportive of their actions:



I use the word “endeared” because it seems implausible that any significant number of people acquired new information or became motivated to act as a result of encountering Steak-umms defence of Baconian reason. Rather than making what we could call a cognitive judgement, or rather than entering into praxis, those affirming the tweets seemed to make an aesthetic judgement—they found the defence of scientific rationality endearing; it made them smile and warmed their hearts, and made the ever-encroaching collapse of liberal democracy feel that bit less immanent.

The notion that the marketing team that runs the social media account of a “chopped, emulsified, formed” beef product can defend scientific reason, or that a pudgy cartoon cat can successfully embody mass dissatisfaction with, if not hatred of, work might strike some as

evidence of the inverse—i.e., that scientific reason is simply no match for the commodity form, and that a real critique of work is almost entirely prohibited in the liberal-democratic west. Through such an inversion, we can again detect this ambivalent relationship between banality and intensity. With both Garfield and Steak-umms, we can find the intensity of the cute—the small but powerful affective charge of the adorable—matched with the mundanity and dryness of fact: “I hate Mondays” or “don’t let anecdote dictate your worldview”. Drawing on Sianne Ngai’s work on cuteness as an aesthetic category, we can better appreciate this inversion, since, the transformation of something pointed and sharp into something soft and powerless, appears to be inseparable from cuteness as an aesthetic category. As she indicates,

since “cute” derives from the older “acute” in a process linguists call aphaeresis (the process by which words lose initial unstressed syllables to generate shorter and “cuter” versions of themselves; “alone” becomes “lone,” “until” becomes “til”), its etymology strikingly replicates the logic of the aesthetic it has come to name. But there is a key difference between “cute” and these other examples. While cuteness is an aesthetic of the soft or amorphous that therefore becomes heightened when objects are depicted as sleepy, “acute” means “coming to a sharp edge or point” and suggests mental alertness, keenness, and quickness. Cute thus exemplifies a situation in which making a word smaller—or, if you like, cuter—results in an uncanny reversal, changing its meaning into its exact opposite.⁷

Emojis, minion memes, Garfield, cutesy tweet-PSAs, all such phenomena exhibit this tension between the cute and the acute, between the banal and the intense, between the pointed and diffused. Furthermore, I would argue that this tension is central to the assemblages in *The Last Bastion of Laziness*. In these works, we find this tension in the basic material components of the work: Garfield plush toys, children’s Nike trainers, cat trees. As has been discussed, Garfield embodies a general loathing of work that can only be expressed in an undermined form. Moreover, the charm of such an aesthetic protest is arguably to be located in its very undermined and passive status—it is cute insofar as it is a form of protest devoid of edge or pointedness. It is worth noting, as Ngai does, that the plush toy was itself an invention in response to the recognition of childhood aggression. As she puts it,

it was only once children were no longer imagined as miniature adults, as they were in the eighteenth century, or as naturally moral or virtuous creatures, as they were for a good part of the nineteenth century, that manufacturers found the impetus to produce indestructible toys that could survive the violence with which children were increasingly associated.⁸

We find in the *Garfield* plush toy a materiality that can absorb pointless and powerless rage in a dual sense. Firstly, insofar as the plush toy is designed to survive being thrown, bitten, stretched, and squeezed. Secondly, in the sense that it projects an acerbic loathing of work and vitality in a cute and cuddly form. For children, the plush toy is an object that allows for a safe exploration of negative feelings, whereas for adults, the plush toy often functions as an interpassive embodiment of dissatisfaction and anger. Similarly, children’s trainers gain their cuteness from the pretence of athleticism and dedication, qualities children generally lack. The charm of such shoes is to be found precisely in the tension between the diminutive clumsy movements of the wearer and the power and mastery associated with the brand. Lastly, the cat tree also embodies

this tension, insofar as it presents athleticism, adventure, and the outdoors, in a form that is diminutive and contrived. Although on a certain level we know that it is absurd, it is nonetheless a charming thought to maintain that a cat views scaling a cat tree as being akin to exploring nature in search of shelter or prey. Signified by all of these materials, is something acute—irreverence, athleticism, mobility—and something cute—softness, sleepiness, diminutiveness. In similar but not synonymous terms, we can see these works as presenting an ambivalent relation between the intensity of endless work, interminable competition, and general alienation, and the banality of their surrounding discursive expression, “I hate Mondays” or “JUST DO IT”.

Arguably, this ambivalence has been a consistent thematic of Attwood’s work over the last decade. At the level of materiality—shit, Garfield, Nike trainers, Officeworks, TV Week, emojis, home appliances, iPhones—Attwood’s work locates sites where this ambivalence can oscillate productively. While it might be easy to accept that Attwood’s work engages with the banal—insofar as his materials are typically humdrum, bric-à-brac, detritus—in what sense is it intense? Isn’t the readymade or assemblage one of the least intense artforms in the sphere of contemporary art? Especially when contrasted against the intensity of the spectacular or confessional modes of contemporary practice. Despite this, Attwood’s work is intensive insofar as it concentrates on emblematic phenomena that can help us to interrogate the abstract and systemic, but also in that his work displays intensiveness often associated with repetition and reproduction. Reproduction—in the sense of copying, resituating, and reconstituting—is perhaps Attwood’s main thematic, one that he has followed by reproducing a range of artefacts related to reproduction, especially those that revolve around work and domesticity.

As with many of Attwood’s previous works, *The Last Bastion of Laziness* joins together seemingly unrelated artefacts from our present consumer-competitor society in order to reveal their mutual strangeness. Once combined, these seemingly inconsequential commodities function like a puzzle or rebus, and in obscuring the meaning of the commodities presented our ideological attachments to them can be unpacked. Put differently, the sheer ubiquity of banal invocations of intensity—the eye rolling dullness of injunctions to be yourself, self-actualise, be a boss, rise and grind, etc.—can often obscure their social function. Once recombined, the bizarreness of a *Garfield* anti-work mascot or an infant’s endurance trainer has the potential to reveal itself in a manner that gesture to a greater social fantasy—one of individual autonomy and self-optimisation if not self-perfection. Arguably, the strangeness of Attwood’s ready-mades is to be found, not in the quirks of an individual artist, nor in a general creativity that flows through the art-world as such, but instead in the very fractured and alienated society that surrounds both.

¹ For the social theorist and sociologist Jo Littler, normcore plutocrat “is a term I developed to describe how sections of the ultra-wealthy attempt to maintain and increase their power and wealth by performing ordinariness”. See: Jo Littler. 2019. “Normcore Plutocrats in Gold Elevators: Reading the Trump Tower Photographs” *Cultural Politics*, Volume 15, Issue 1 pp. 15-28.

² Just as fracking conventionally involves the use of high-pressure water to release gas trapped within bedrock, today’s culture industry channels components of the creative class into the bedrock of past cultural texts in the hope of producing lucrative reboots and sequels. While such a technique allows the last vestiges of profit to be squeezed out of such texts, there is always a risk that the surrounding cultural “eco-system” will be destroyed in the process. For more on the term, see: <https://www.thejaymo.net/2020/04/10/136-craving-canon/>

³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/boring-very-nasty/612181/>

⁴ Robert Pfaller. 2014. *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions Without Owners*. Trans. Lisa Rosenblatt. London: Verso, 15. Pfaller explicitly refers to the expansion of descriptive and supportive texts in art exhibitions as another example of interpassivity (ibid, 20). This of course raises the question as to whether your engagement with this text

counts as an act of interpassivity, insofar as your reading of this text could be interpreted as delegating your engagement with the artworks exhibited to a pre-existing textual discussion. This is an unavoidable problem for anyone attempting to engage in art criticism or “arts writing” today, and a detailed response to such a problem cannot be meaningfully provided here. Nevertheless, I will minimally respond to this issue by reaffirming the importance of art’s social, or collective, dimension. Opposed to the interpassive engagement with a piece of art criticism, would be the attempt to engage others in dialogue and debate, and to situate the meaning of the artwork as between others, and between others and the work, such that delegation is substituted for collaboration.

⁵ “Jim Davis Explains Why Garfield Loves Lasagne and Hates Mondays and Why People Love Garfield”. *Huffington Post* 11/03/2014. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/jim-davis-explains-why-ga_b_6094892

⁶ <https://www.newsweek.com/steak-umm-twitter-thread-sliced-steaks-trending-data-1496595>

⁷ Sianne Ngai. 2015. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 87.

⁸ Sianne Ngai. 2015. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 75-76.