



Cute Surveillance: Embodiment, Subjectivity, and Intimacy in Samanta Schweblin's *Little Eyes*

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In recent years, a range of commercial home surveillance products have emerged that foreground 'cuteness' as a selling point. From small cat-shaped cameras with detachable ears to 'pocket robots' equipped with speech recognition, movable feet, and interactive LED eyes, these devices imbue digital surveillance with social categories designed to appeal to consumers' affective desires and vulnerabilities. In this article, I read cultural criticism alongside literary fiction to theorize 'cute surveillance' as an emergent form of commercially marketed voyeurism. The article takes up Sianne Ngai's concept of cute as a 'soft' aesthetic category alongside the anthropomorphising of domestic surveillance in Samanta Schweblin's novel *Little Eyes* (2020). Reading Ngai and Schweblin together, I argue that cuteness is an unstable yet lucrative social construct that is increasingly exploited by the capitalist logics of present-day multi-platform surveillance products. Focusing on *Little Eyes*, I show how the personal and societal implications of cute surveillance are imagined and represented in contemporary speculative fiction, which stages intersubjective relations between characters who watch each other remotely via 'smart home' devices. Across the three interrelated dynamics of embodiment, subjectivity, and intimacy, I offer a theoretical framework for articulating the problems that arise when surveillance becomes interpellated—and insidiously disguised—through visual aesthetics.



‘Nothing uncute makes it out in the near future, and the cute will very soon no longer be even remotely human.’¹

In February 2024, approximately thirteen thousand users of Wyze security cameras received footage of someone else’s home due to a malfunction in their device’s camera feed.² Wyze’s second data breach in less than six months, the incident followed a glitch in September the previous year in response to which several consumers voiced their concern on the social news website Reddit. One person alarmingly wrote ‘I don’t know why, but I can see someone else’s camera,’ while another posted, ‘Apologies if this is your house.’³ Wyze Labs, Inc. attributed the issue to a ‘third-party caching client library,’ which ‘mixed up device ID and user ID mapping and connected some data to incorrect accounts.’⁴ However, for the customers who saw an unexpected glimpse of a stranger’s home, and by extension suspected that their own private life may have been exposed, the company’s explanation did little to alleviate the feeling of violation.

While the Wyze fiasco reflects a more widespread issue of data security among global corporations, it also exposes a relatively underexamined problem with the extent to which many people consider smart home devices to be fundamentally benign. Because they have been voluntarily configured *inside* the domestic setting, these devices are often dangerously assumed to be less prone to malfunction, infiltration, or the corruption of personal data by the third-party companies that manufacture them. As such, this kind of surveillant technology, ‘changes and is changed through its installation in the domestic setting’ (Rapoport 2012: 321). As Michele Rapport points out, ‘while domestic surveillance systems may be tailored in scale but remain technologically similar to their public counterpart, they are actors in a different kind of spatial experience once they monitor the home’ (321). Operating in apparent harmony with their setting, such devices become less visible by virtue of their connection to the intimate, familiar setting of the home; an ironic function in which proximity conceals the potential for deception. Moreover, consumer perceptions of smart home cameras are largely attributable to the products’ often nonthreatening-looking exteriors. Many smart cameras, for instance, are anthropomorphised via human or animal features, reconfiguring surveillance into an aesthetically appealing personal belonging, not

¹ Ireland and Kronic, *Cute Accelerationism* (2024), back cover.

² According to *The New York Times*, Wyze informed customers that although approximately 13,000 people incorrectly received thumbnail images from other people’s cameras, ‘1,504 of them actually viewed those images and—in some cases—were able to view video as well.’ See Cericola and Chase 2024.

³ See Peters 2023.

⁴ See Andrew J. Hawkins 2024.

unlike the ornaments, trinkets, or even pets found in the average home.⁵ In this article, I take up a sub-category of smart home surveillance devices in the form of *cute surveillance*: a contemporary phenomenon in which the panoptic logic of unidirectional observation becomes a form of participatory entertainment, exhibitionism, and play. To develop a theory of cute surveillance, I examine two texts that engage closely with the aesthetic, social, cultural, and technological configurations of this specific form of scrutiny: Sianne Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2015) and Samanta Schweblin's speculative fiction novel *Little Eyes* (2020).

Ngai theorises 'cuteness' as a 'soft' aesthetic category 'emerging from the sphere of mass culture as opposed to high art,' making it a concept that is therefore more 'rooted in material commercial culture than in the language arts' (2018: 58; 59). More significantly for the present discussion, cuteness for Ngai is 'explicitly about the appeal of powerlessness as opposed to power' (2018: 58). In this formulation, the cuteness of a thing is indexical to its appearance, which is tied to a set of formal properties such as 'smallness, compactness, softness, simplicity, and pliancy' that 'call forth specific affects: helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency' (2005: 816). Applied to surveillance, these characteristics are instantly and unequivocally recognisable in proliferating smart home devices that are designed and marketed to look, as it were, *cute*. These commodities, I argue, appeal to the affective logics that Ngai outlines, especially in ways that underscore 'the centrality of anthropomorphism to cuteness' (205: 815). It is precisely in this mode that surveillance becomes, paradoxically, invisible because of its own hypervisibility in the form of a cute and lovable object capable of exploiting a human subject's feelings towards it. In other words, by masquerading in plain sight as something other than a camera, cute surveillance devices are a physical instantiation of insidious forms of opaque dataveillance that permeate present-day life in everything from social media to live facial recognition in public spaces. The consequences of this intimate manifestation of surveillance extend well beyond the domestic sphere, becoming fully entangled with the extractive infrastructures of platform capitalism. As seemingly innocuous, even endearing, devices collect and transmit data from within the home, they feed vast commercial ecosystems premised on behavioural profiling, predictive analytics, and the monetization of attention. Surveillance thus becomes ambient—affectively concealed by design choices that capitalise on cuteness in myriad visual and affective forms.

The central theme of Schweblin's novel is home surveillance that begins as participatory entertainment before turning unexpectedly and unnervingly dystopian. Published in Spanish in 2018 as *Kentukis* and translated into English as *Little Eyes* by

⁵ For more on cuteness and contemporary consumer products see: Tait 2019; Yano 2013; and Marcus 2002. For the effects of cute products on 'indulgent consumption,' see Nenkov and Scott 2014.

Megan McDowell in 2020, the novel traces characters from different locations around the world, each of whom purchase a popular new device called a kentuki—a wireless-enabled camera and speaker concealed inside the deceptively nonthreatening felt exterior of a toy animal. ‘There were moles, rabbits, crows, pandas, dragons, and owls,’ one character recounts, and yet ‘no two were the same, their colours and textures varied, and some of them wore costumes’ (2020: 17). Described by another character as ‘nothing more than a cross between a mobile stuffed animal and a cell phone,’ a kentuki wirelessly connects to a network that facilitates a random connection with another user, anywhere in the world, who has purchased a code and can use their personal smart device to remotely navigate the object around a stranger’s home. (2020: 21). Shifting between locations ranging from Lima and Antigua to Barcelona and Erfurt, the novel dramatizes the mostly domestic comings and goings of a culturally diverse group of people, from a young boy mourning his recently deceased mother, to a Croatian couple operating dozens of kentukis on the black-market by selling preset codes to anonymous buyers.

Through this speculative milieu of intimate, multidirectional voyeurism, *Little Eyes* probes the relations between those who purchase a physical kentuki in order to be observed (keepers) and those who purchase a code to become an observer (dwellers). Complicating the straightforward binary between watched and watcher, the physical appearance of the kentukis affords the interactions an unnervingly intersubjective dimension. As different characters become emotionally attached to their roaming devices, the desire to more intimately relate to the object’s internal human dweller thwarts the intended anonymity of the surveillant paradigm. Affectively driven by cuteness, the characters inevitably desire to know—and be known to—other human subjects. In other words, cuteness becomes ‘an appeal to others: an invitation to sociality that we respond to as if it were an act of agency’ (Dale 52). Moreover, as the narrative switches between different locations and the perspectives of dwellers and keepers, the boundaries between human experience and cyberspace become frighteningly blurred. The result is that the kentuki network, although embodied in and ostensibly constrained to the physical hardware of the toys themselves, begins to take up real-world scenarios with disturbing personal and emotional consequences—the visual and auditory paradigm through which domestic surveillance usually operates becomes participatory, affective, and less empirically traceable. Schweblin’s novel thus stages digital media as an evolving architecture of surveillance; one that extends beyond traditional institutional apparatuses such as the CCTV camera or workplace monitoring into the intimate spaces of everyday life. To that end, the novel shows how technology no longer simply records or monitors but actively reshapes human behaviour and subjectivity through emotionally embedded forms of watching.

Reading Ngai and Schweblin together, I theorise cute surveillance across three interrelated registers: the embodied, the intersubjective, and the intimate. These three factors not only illuminate the cultural and social underpinnings of cuteness as an aesthetic category but they also, I argue, go some way towards explaining what happens when multiple data sources and infrastructures combine to produce entirely new kinds of surveillance. My argument builds on recent work in surveillance studies that has also responded to a dramatic rise in interconnected smart home surveillance. Garfield Benjamin, for instance, examines Amazon's Ring camera devices to theorize what he calls 'squeeveillance': 'the performative act of squeeing as acceptance of surveillance systems, constituting legitimacy for devices and the systems in which they are embedded by connecting them with the expected affective response' (2024: 350–351). I share Benjamin's theory that cute surveillance positions the viewer to bear witness to cuteness in ways that enforce complicity in surveillance logics. However, by examining the theatricalization of cute smart devices in the contemporary novel, I extend this theorization beyond the commodity products themselves to examine how they influence and shape intersubjectivity in human agents. In the literary text, the effects of cute surveillance become heightened and stylized, serving to represent its most extreme logical outcomes via the fictional imaginary.

Schweblin's novel reveals the ways in which cute surveillance is at once a performative act but can also be spontaneous, deceptively cumulative, and insidious. The influence of the cute object creeps up on the consumer, who eventually becomes dependent upon the unspoken surveillant agreement. Echoing this logic, Amy Ireland and Maya B. Kronic write in *Cute Accelerationism*:

'Cute' shifts along with the cultural phenomena it tags, snowballing the process and facilitating access as it tentatively hollows out a passage for the Thing that is pressing, finding points of ingress, soft-soaping its way in under cover of whatever feels good at the time, extruding itself into the socius ... It has been arriving for centuries, and now it comes into its own, accelerated by a predominantly vision-configured global networked electronic culture. (10–11)

Tracing the etymology of 'cute' from its Latin origin as *acus* ('pin' or 'needle') through the Middle English 'acute' (physical malaise or sharpness) and into the eighteenth to early twentieth century meaning of smart, shrewd, or sassy, Ireland and Kronic draw attention to the word's more recent correlation to visual appearance. In the post-war years, they argue, cute 'ceases to be merely a descriptor and becomes a factor of production in an expanding realm of synthetic objects, companions, and characters

that artificially educe an indecent *excess* of just-right-feeling' (11).⁶ By collapsing the inescapably seductive pull of cuteness into the smart home object, *Little Eyes* lands precisely on the commercial dynamics of this contemporary phenomenon. As one of the novel's characters ruminates, for example, upon purchasing a kentuki: 'They cost \$279—a lot of money. They weren't pretty, but even so there was something sophisticated about them that she still couldn't put her finger on. What were they, exactly?' (Schweblin 2020: 17). Here, a range of physical, digital, and aesthetic factors converge to create the sense that a novel form of surveillance is taking place in the otherwise quotidian space of the home ('What were they, exactly?'). As the narrative progresses, the ontology of cute surveillance comes to depend not so much on the question of what a kentuki is, but on the question of whom dwells inside—an inexorable demand induced by the cute object's manipulation of affective vulnerabilities.

This kind of unanticipated attachment is identifiable in the commercial imperatives and cute design that informs new surveillance consumer products, such as those sold by Wyze, Lovot, Kuri Robots, and similar companies. Here, cute surveillance devices are marketed to strategically implant various forms of watching, eavesdropping, and other forms of data capture directly in the purview of the surveilled subject. Subsequently, 'indulging in and communicating through cuteness' becomes a corrective for 'subjects caught up in the precariousness inherent to neoliberal capitalism' (Dale et al. 2016: 1). To this end, big data in the form of cuteness 'succeeds in extending the scope of surveillance by co-opting individuals into de facto surveillance of their own private lives, offering a challenge to contemporary understandings of the surveilled subject' (Ball et al. 2016: 64). This savvy tactic, it bears noting, is markedly different to other types of subverted surveillance such as *sousveillance*, which involves the 'procedures of using technology to monitor and confront bureaucratic organizations' or countersurveillance, which usually involves measures undertaken by citizens to prevent surveillance from occurring (Mann et al. 2003: 331; Walsh 2019). In the case of cute surveillance, there is no ostensible attempt to obstruct the means of observation, nor is the proximity between subjects, data flows and infrastructure disrupted. Instead, through the emotionally seductive appeal of cuteness, surveillance becomes an affective and embodied sensibility where the camera—and by extension the Foucauldian panoptic framework—recedes from the equation entirely.

⁶ In his examination of 'cute studies' as a new academic field, Joshua Paul Dale explains how the 'aesthetic' of cuteness first emerged in 'European and North American popular culture in the nineteenth-century, but had an earlier expression in Edo-era Japan (1603–1869), when *kawaii* images often appeared in paintings and prints.' See Dale, 'Cute studies: An emerging field,' 5. In his examination of the term '*kawaii*,' Hiroshi Nittono explains that in Japanese culture the word means 'cute, lovely, pretty, adorable' and 'is used in many daily situations to express the speaker's favourable evaluation towards an object or a person.' See Nittono 2016, 80.

'I'm a dragon!': Embodiment and Play

The sophistication of many home surveillance cameras currently available on the commercial market was perhaps unimaginable to the inventors of the first ever webcam, installed in 1991 as the 'Trojan Room coffee pot.' Delivering grainy live footage from a Cambridge University laboratory, the webcam consisted of a unidirectional feed in which watchers were able to examine a fixed image from a distance in order to monitor the quantity of coffee remaining in a communal carafe.⁷ However, as Hille Koskela writes of the style that many webcams have begun to take in the contemporary era, objects 'which we are used to calling surveillance cameras are at present times not only watching from above but can be hidden, miniaturised, crawling or flying' (2004: 199). Bearing the hallmarks of clever marketing and futuristic design, home surveillance devices now range in shape and style from small cat-like objects with remote notification functionality to 'pocket robots' equipped with speech recognition, movable feet, and interactive LED eyes. In these objects, visual markers of cuteness are deliberately merged with the device's practical surveillance function, creating a product in which 'cuteness is inextricable from modern capitalism and consumer culture'—a 'commodity par excellence, with its promise of eternal sameness of the pleasure of consumption' (Kao and Boyle 2017: 15).

The Aqara Camera Hub G3 device, for instance, is designed to look like a friendly white kitten, featuring small erect ears and a wide, welcoming face with bowed, droopy eyes. The product's marketing rhetoric openly invokes cuteness to appeal to a consumer's assumed preferred aesthetic, stating: 'The cute head cover is detachable and added as an accessory for free.'⁸ Common to all the anthropomorphised devices on the market are accentuated facial features, frequently organised around large, interactive eyes, the absence of a mouth, and small animalistic ears. Another device, developed by the designer Vivien Muller and released for a short period following a Kickstarter campaign in 2015, applies a similar visual aesthetic in the form of an owl. Given the name Ulo, the animated surveillance camera is designed to sit atop a table or be attached to the wall in the style of a decorative ornament. Like the cat-shaped Aqara Camera, Ulo's selling-point is a cute-looking face, marked by 'random animations' that the product's

⁷ Created by Quentin Stafford-Frazer and Paul Jardetzky, the Trojan Room coffee pot was set up in the University of Cambridge's Computer Laboratory to monitor the quantity of coffee remaining in the communal coffee machine to save researchers the disappointment of arriving to find the coffee carafe empty. In 1998, when web browsers gained the ability to display grayscale images, the camera feed was migrated to the Internet, effectively becoming the world's first webcam. See Campanella 2004: 58.

⁸ A recent *Wired* magazine article on 'The Best Indoor Security Cameras' accentuated this design point, stating of the Aqara Camera: 'Cute ears are amazingly effective at adding personality to a device.' See Hill and Giordano 2024.

website suggests ‘add that extra spark of life which makes Ulo unique.’⁹ Users can also customise the device’s eye colour, shape and size to ‘match’ their home interior and personal decorative preferences.

In these products and their attendant marketing rhetoric, cuteness is envisaged as indexical to preference and personalisation, as if somehow the object itself has a stake in appealing to consumer’s emotional needs. Not unlike a pet, who follows its owner around the house, the anthropomorphised smart camera is promoted as an object that is not only cute to look at but is also motivated to appease its owner’s practical domestic requirements. As Joel Gn observes of the intricacies of machine cuteness, ‘the efficacy of cute design’ works to organize ‘perception within a nuanced social space’ (2016: 175). In this dynamic, ‘experiencing the cuteness of the social robot’ positions users to respond as if it ‘were a friend who understands their feelings and shares their interests’ (Gn 2016: 175). Situated in the quotidian household setting, on a kitchen bench or, in the case of Ulo affixed to the wall like a painting, the product’s visual presentation is thus insidiously abstracted from the data stream the smart device is ultimately designed to generate, store, analyse, and in many instances, sell on to third-party actors. Yet the aesthetic judgments at work in creating this abstraction are more complex than simply the fact that a surveillance camera has been made to *look like* an owl or resemble a small fluffy animal. Rather, cute surveillance turns not just on the exaggerated appearance of certain features (large eyes and diminutive ears), but also on subtle forms of bodily negation. Invoking the example of a ‘frog shaped bath sponge,’ in which visual aesthetic ‘depends on a softness that invites physical touching,’ Ngai explains the ironic reasoning behind styles of facial amplification that strive for cuteness:

Yet while the object has been given a face and exaggerated gaze, what is striking is how stylistically simplified and even unformed its face is, as if cuteness were a sort of primitivism in its own right ... Realist verisimilitude and precision are excluded in the making of cute objects, which have simple contours and little or no ornamentation or detail. (2005: 815)

Applied to the cute-looking smart camera, Ngai’s theory explains at least in part the hazardous tendency to mistake facial simplicity for incorruptibility; a slippage created by the absence of realistic facial features, rather than the obvious presence of them. Here, the facial minimalism of cuteness extends to, or comes to stand in for the object, regardless of its intended utility beyond visual impression. Of this affective mapping and its relation to post-war consumer culture, Ngai posits how cuteness ‘speaks to

⁹ See Hohenadel 2015.

our desire for a simpler relation to commodities' (2010: 952). With simplicity and 'babyfacedness' comes not just comfort but also trust and other forms of 'social approval' (Jia, Park and Pol 2015: 171). Applied to home surveillance devices, this principle functions to obscure the possibility that voyeurism could be malicious insofar as the surveilling object's cuteness provides a cover for the database that drives the device in the first place. The power relation evoked by the cute object is thus deceptively simple and benign, producing a feedback loop in which dataveillance can be enacted more freely because it is hiding in plain sight.

In *Little Eyes*, as the domestic contexts and idiosyncrasies of keepers and dwellers are established, we encounter numerous examples of unsettling, embodied cuteness where different characters begin to interact with the smart home devices they have purchased. When a lonely middle-aged woman named Emilia opts to purchase a kentuki code and become a dweller, she discovers that her keeper is a young Spanish-speaking girl named Eva. In a provocative moment of show-and-tell upon establishing their wireless connection, the girl asks Emilia to close her eyes before presenting the box in which the kentuki that Emilia dwells inside of was packaged: 'She was holding a box at the level of the camera, a few centimetres away. The lid was open and the label on the box said kentuki' (2020: 14). Tunnelling into the perspective of Emilia as she observes the kentuki's box on her own screen, the narration then moves to a literary blazon, in which the speaking subject comes to understand the physical manifestation that her voyeurism has taken inside the girl's home:

A pink-and-white rabbit that looked more like a watermelon than a rabbit. It had bulging eyes and two long ears attached to the top. A clip shaped like a bone held them together, keeping them upright for a few centimetres, after which they fell languidly to either side. "You're a cute little bunny," said the girl. "Do you like bunnies?" (2020: 14)

In scenes like the above, which invoke both dark comedy and the kinds of sci-fi dystopia popularised by the television show *Black Mirror*, human subjects become disturbingly implicated in the façade of cuteness instantiated by the surveillance device. However, what makes the scene so unnerving is not so much the fact that the surveillance camera is embodied inside a pink and white rabbit, but more the indeterminacy of whom the girl's rhetorical questions are directed at—the anonymous human voyeur dwelling 'inside' the device or the cute, anthropomorphised object? As Alexandra Brown rightly points out in her examination of what she calls Schweblin's 'cyberpunk avatars,' in addition to the 'visual and auditory limitations that prevent dwellers and keepers

from communicating freely, social relations between the two are further limited in the sense that neither keeper nor dweller appears to the other as human' (2023: 267). Each human participating in the surveillance regime, therefore, 'quite literally encounters the other as a thing' in that the dweller embodied inside the kentuki device appears to the keeper as a cute toy rather than a person' (Brown 2023: 267). In some scenarios, the dweller's embodiment inside a toy renders them helpless and humiliated, rather than empowered. The anonymity and uselessness of their gaze thus leads to a paradoxically disempowering manifestation of cuteness.

In *Cute, Quaint, Hungry, and Romantic*, Daniel Harris (2001) articulates the mode of powerlessness that cute objects engender and which the character of Emilia subjectively encounters in Schweblin's novel. For Harris, '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' (5–6). In other words, even though Emilia has chosen to be a dweller, with a panoptic gaze at her disposal, the novel's inversion of that gaze via the embodiment of surveillance as cute renders her uncomfortable and somewhat embarrassed, even though she cannot be seen or apprehended. What makes the scene unnerving, however, is not Emilia's powerlessness as she peers out from the wireless screen of the kentuki, rather it is the somewhat menacing tone of the girl directing the camera. Asking her kentuki if she *likes* cute bunnies, Eva anthropomorphises the device (and by extension, Emilia), reflecting the ways in which 'cute affect is triggered by' a 'desire to approach and engage with a cute object' (Dale 'Cute Studies' 2016: 6). Unable to respond to the girl's question as herself, Emilia is forced to play a paradoxically infantilising role as an all-seeing yet ultimately powerless cute object.

Little Eyes also takes embodied forms of surveillance to their most logical extreme in imagining a not-too-distant future where the digitally mediated relationships of watcher and watched transgress into the real world of bedrooms, backyards, and living rooms. Drawing attention to the inherently clumsy and vulnerable physical form of the kentuki, several scenes involve the devices falling, breaking, tipping over or getting unexpectedly stuck in places around their keeper's households. This narrative strategy, which verges on comedic, reveals how surveillance technologies are not always at their most intrusive when they are invisible. Instead, as Wellendorf et al. (2022) write in their examination of people's difficulty in noticing more insidious forms of domestic surveillance, 'their noisiness, blatant clumsiness, and the fact that we need to move obstacles for them may cause us to see them as benign when perhaps we should not' (45). In the novel's opening scene, for instance, three young girls provocatively taunt the dweller inside a kentuki that we are told 'looked like a simple and artless plush panda bear, though really it was more similar to a football with one end sliced off so that

it stands upright' (Schweblin 2020: 1). After taking turns removing items of clothing in front of the kentuki's camera, one of the girls tires of the game. Placing the animal back on the floor, she 'picked up the bucket she'd brought from the kitchen, and placed it upside down over the panda. The bucket moved nervously, blindly, around the room. It collided with notebooks, shoes, and clothing strewn on the floor, which seemed to make it grow more desperate' (2020: 1). In a style evocative of slapstick, the dweller becomes not only helpless but overtly victimised as the kentuki is both digitally and physically cut off from interaction. Here, the same qualities that activate a subject's feelings of fondness towards the cute object simultaneously predispose that object to exploitation. Or, to borrow again from Ngai: 'For in its exaggerated passivity and vulnerability, the cute object is as often intended to excite a consumer's sadistic desires for mastery and control as much as his or her desire to cuddle' (2005: 816). As the scene unfolds, a series of disturbing interactions lead to a total breakdown of the rapport between the kentuki and the girls, before one of them restrains it completely:

She picked up the big wooden trunk where she stored her notes and textbooks and put it on top of the bucket, fully immobilizing it ... Trapped under the bucket, the bear went on squealing for hours, banging against the plastic like an overgrown hornet, until, near dawn, the room was left in complete silence. (2020: 8)

At the scene's end, the surveillant paradigm comes full circle. What began as an interaction characterised by entertainment and play unexpectedly turns into a perverted instance of bodily entrapment and domination. The cute surveillance camera, while initially an object that embodies the pleasures of consumption, inevitably becomes a site of perversion, reflecting the 'critical and complex ways that surveillance and pleasure may entangle along surveillance's continuum of care and control' (Chan and McKnight 2024: 1). Extrapolating Schweblin's speculative scenarios back out into the neoliberal marketplace in which cute surveillance cameras are currently sold, we can see how the aesthetics of cuteness are implicated not only in appealing to the affective registers triggered by regimes of the visual but also in the more insidious consequences that networked digital surveillance has on the body of the consumer, directly or indirectly and with or without their knowledge.

'Who are you?': Intersubjective Virtuality

Insofar as *Little Eyes* presents a speculative world where embodied cuteness intersects with intensifying forms of digital networked surveillance, it also provides an imaginative space through which the limits of surveillant subjectivity is tested out in different geographical and technological contexts. As Alexandra Brown observes,

the novel 'examines the extent to which cybernetworks can function as pay-to-play utopias wherein users purchase freedom from limitations associated with the physical body' (2023: 262). Put another way, Schwebelin presents fictional scenarios in which the voyeuristic subject's embodied practices, although abstracted from their real-world settings, allow that individual to experience the world in another 'local sense' (Ball et al. 2016: 58). Moving between different cultural and social environments and their associated narrative perspectives, the novel thus accounts for the multitude of ways in which surveillance is experienced at the level of individual subjects and in the private relations between two or more individuals, each of which might be considered a form of 'social surveillance' or 'interpersonal surveillance' (Marwick 2012; Trottier 2012).

This paradigm is cleverly dramatized, however, in the novel's depiction of surveillance as a cluster of behaviours and affects that are surprisingly different to that which readers might expect to encounter in relation to the standard smart home device or camera. By splitting surveillant subjectivity across kentuki and dweller, subject and object, Schwebelin deliberately confuses the normative power dynamics through which modes of watching tend to operate. Like the robot vacuum cleaner or smart home voice assistant, the kentuki is neither device nor fully human—'part-benign pet whose sensory capabilities are regarded as inferior in comparison with that of its owner, part surveillant intruder that sees more than its keeper' (Wellendorf et al. 2022: 43). Intensifying this already fraught dual perspective, the affective pull of cuteness in both the physical and mental states of keepers and dwellers further complicates the co-constitution of digital surveillance in the novel's human subjects.

As different characters either purchase their own kentuki or opt to become a dweller, we encounter a series of consumerist logics that cleverly double as a critique of the surveillance subjectivity matrix: who watches, how they watch, and why they do it. Or, to borrow Albrechtslund's terms, the novel's varying subjective insights into the motivations different characters have for engaging with a kentuki offer an 'idea of participatory surveillance with regards to user empowerment, subjectivity building and information sharing' (2008: 5). These insights are especially incisive when we encounter a character based in Zagreb named Grigor, who has set up a home laboratory out of which he administers dozens of 'pre-established kentuki connections' to prospective dwellers who want to guarantee a voyeuristic experience in a specific location. Putting himself in the position of the customers to whom he sells kentuki codes out of his black-market home business, Grigor contemplates the mindset of both watcher and watched:

Weighing the pros and cons of being a keeper or a dweller never left either side a clear winner. On one hand, few people were willing to expose their private lives to a stranger, and everyone loves to watch, to be a voyeur into someone else's life. But

then, buying a device meant obtaining something tangible that occupied a real place in the house; a kentuki was the closest thing on the market to having a household robot (2020: 100).

Here, Schweblin paints a deceptively simple paradigm of consumer decision making in Grigor's equivalence of a kentuki with the kinds of household robots now available on the commercial market. Yet this moment of introspection also belies the somewhat graver reality of what it means to *want* to be watched in one's private sphere. As Koskela writes of the concept of 'empowered exhibitionism,' a mode that aptly applies to Schweblin's novel: 'While ... in the televisualisation of human lives individuals increasingly disappear, the home webcam can be interpreted as a form of bringing back the subject' (2004: 206). In this participatory regime, Koskela goes on to argue, unlike 'being targets of the ever-increasing surveillance, people seek to play an active role in the endless production of visual representations' (2004: 206). *Little Eyes* narrates the intersubjective relations between surveillant subjects in large part through the private deliberations of respective keepers who, despite willingly entering into a contract of unidirectional surveillance, nevertheless begin to become interested in the life of the person who dwells inside their device.

In one of these moments of introspection a young woman named Alina buys a crow kentuki in downtown Oaxaca, Mexico and brings it back to her small apartment. After excitedly unboxing the toy and reading the manual, she becomes intensely invested in the personal details of the person dwelling inside: 'She needed to know if the person was a man or a woman, how old they were, where they lived, what they did for a living, what they liked to do for fun. She needed to judge, urgently needed to decide for herself what kind of dweller she'd gotten' (2020: 22–23). While this response could be attributable to the 'subjective feelings called up by' cute objects, as Ngai puts it, there is another dimension to the intersubjective influence of the device that Alina finds herself suddenly alone with (2010: 952). Without the cues of traditional panoptic surveillance in view (a CCTV camera lens or security guard watching from above), the unknowability of the watcher concealed inside the kentuki comes to preoccupy the internal thoughts of the keeper, creating a different kind of proximity between the surveilled subject, the surveillance technology being used, and the data that connects the two. Such a matrix has more in common, it would seem, with the forms of participatory surveillance that characterise social media interaction, in which subjects voluntarily disclose private information to a usually known—though increasingly unknown—and unquantifiable public 'other.' In other words, to use the terms that Ball et al. apply to the abstracted and scaled dataveillance in which the contemporary body-subject now participates, Schweblin's novel works to reveal the 'implications of big data practices for theories

about the surveilled subject who, analysed from afar, is still gazed upon, although not directly watched as with previous surveillance systems' (2016: 58). Thus, in the literary representation of the kentuki as a digital surveillance device, the novel folds together surveillant subjectivity and cute-looking technology—neither fully human nor wholly mechanical.

As the scene comes to an end, Alina becomes increasingly paranoid about the extent of the kentuki's observational capacities, realising that it 'would see her whole body, get to know the tone of her voice, her clothes, her schedules' (2020: 24). To reconcile her decision to be watched with her growing feeling of intrusion, she resolves to constrain the intersubjective relations by (re)reducing the kentuki to nothing more than a cute object: 'She understood now: it was a trap. Connecting with that other user, finding out who this other person was, also meant saying a lot about oneself. In the long run, the kentuki would always end up knowing more about her than she knew about it, that was true; but she was its *keeper*, and she wouldn't allow the crow to be anything more than a pet' (2020: 35). This internal tension, with its emphasis on the owner-owned relationship between keeper and dweller, hinges once again on the maternal feelings evoked by cute device. However, in her vacillations between casting the kentuki as first, a complex human subject whom she wants to understand, before reducing it to a pet to whom she will not disclose anything nonessential, Alina exemplifies the human subject's desire for complete affective and aesthetic control over objects perceived as cute. In such a formulation, Ngai writes, the cute object is 'not only formed but all too easily *de*-formed under the pressure of the subject's feeling or attitude towards it' (2005: 816). To that end, speculative fiction functions to envision the myriad subjective responses to the duplicity of cute surveillance in registering characters' personal hesitations, vacillations, and the rationalities of their decision-making processes when it comes to how they choose to relate to kentuki-like devices. The contemporary novel thus becomes a layered and reflexive medium through which the ambiguities of contemporary digital media—its affective interfaces, opaque networked agency, and entanglement with intimate life—are narratively staged and critically examined.

Intimacy, Cuteness and Desire

When the concept of intimacy is invoked in relation to surveillance, it is often with reference to intrusive and underhand forms of spying in personal relationships. In the practice of 'spousebusting,' for example, surveillance is used to provide the 'means for "making sure"' a suspicion of some kind is either justified or undeserved (Gregg 2013: 301). As Adam Philips observes, this kind of surveillant intimacy is merely a continuation of the investigative work inaugurated by the normative 'love plot' where 'lovers are like detectives: they are trying to find something out that will make all

the difference' (1994: 40). Other theorizations of intimacy surveillance increasingly refer to the closeness and emotional connection implicit in algorithmic advertising, social media, and other forms of datafied corporate information gathering. Minna Ruckenstein and Julia Granroth, for instance, use 'intimacy of surveillance' to describe 'a characteristic of contemporary corporate marketing and dataveillance fuelled by the accumulation of consumers' economically valuable digital traces' (2020: 12). In this system, intimacy arises out of the ways in which algorithms are becoming increasingly adept at anticipating people's desires, plans and daily habits. The manufacturing of intimate-seeming personalisation at scale—as ironic as it is manipulative—is thus now the intended business objective of countless data gathering corporations.

In *Little Eyes*, intimacy takes on a somewhat different register insofar as the boundaries between subject and object, human and kentuki, cyberspace and body, begin to trouble the sense of intimacy felt by different characters. The effect of this tension, to borrow from Brown, is 'a network that appears extremely social even as it takes on an *appearance* of a relation between things: a stuffed animal and a video game meeting each other in a sort of market' (2023: 267). Adding to this already confused relation is the extent to which the cute object (dweller) seems to compel an innate intimacy in the human subject (keeper) even though many of the normative requirements for intimacy (communication, understanding, mutual self-disclosure, trust etc.) are lacking. Moreover, the novel's dual-perspective structure, in which the subjective experiences of both keepers and dwellers are alternately narrated in third-person omniscient, further complicates the dynamics of surveillant intimacy by showing how those in the position of ostensible panoptic power can sometimes be more emotionally vulnerable than the subject under inspection. Reflecting this, as Gavin Smith points out of the strategies and tactics between watchers and watched in 'control(led)' surveillance systems, 'CCTV monitoring is not all about control and domination. Due to the *virtual intimacy* operators experience with the action and people observed, some develop an almost extended obligation of care for those watched' (2007: 301). And yet the concept of care, as it manifests in Schweblin's novel, comes to have troubling and indeterminate consequences. While many of the kentuki keepers begin their engagement with the device in a caring and even affectionate mode, the cute object's innate vulnerability and dependence upon its owner inevitably becomes a burden, leading to abandonment and, in several cases, acts of violence.

For a recently divorced father named Enzo, cute surveillance becomes so integrated into everyday life that it begins to dominate the conditions of his relationship with his ex-wife and son, Luca. We learn that the kentuki in his home, in the variety of a mole, was initially imposed upon Enzo by his son's psychologist as 'an intervention' designed to assist in the development of the boy's social skills and capacity for responsibility

and care. When Luca comes to despise the kentuki, the dweller develops an attachment to Enzo, who feels obligated to care for the kentuki despite his total disinterest in the regime of participatory surveillance: 'The mole always found a way to get his attention. And Enzo (if he didn't want another intervention) had to keep it alive. Because although they shared custody of Luca, his ex-wife had won all the psychologist's sympathy, so it was best that nothing bad happen to the damned kentuki' (2020: 39). Despite his frustration with the situation in which he finds himself, Enzo gradually develops feelings of intimacy and affection towards the object as he attempts, and continually fails, to establish an emotional connection with the dweller. In a moment of contemplation, he imagines his interactions with the dweller from their perspective: 'How could he be so annoyed at a simple attempt to converse as equals? Would he really rather crawl around the house as a mole than strike up some kind of friendship with Enzo?' (2020: 130)

In his attempt to understand his private feelings about the kentuki, Enzo's characterising of the device moves fluidly between human and non-human, from gadget to 'guy.' Clearly conflicted about how he positions himself in relation to the object, he nevertheless seeks a form of intersubjective engagement that can only be described as that of human friendship ('sharing a few beers'). Yet the governing condition upon which the smart device/human friendship depends is still somehow indexical to the object's cute appearance and diminutive size, even though the affinity described is fundamentally to do with personal character. This subject relation, in which Enzo comes to desire closeness to the kentuki, reflects the findings of several scholars who have articulated the link between cuteness, size, and feelings of vulnerability. In this formulation, 'infantile features elicit nurturing responses in adults,' via a response that is 'an evolutionary adaptation to secure the survival of the species' (Li and Eastman 2023: 1308; Lorenz 1970). Put another way, 'vulnerability is an antecedent of cuteness perception' (Li and Eastman 2023: 1308). Enzo's self-reflective bewilderment at his affective attachment, in which he is simultaneously repelled by the kentuki but also wants to care for it, invokes a longstanding connection between cuteness and the problematics of childhood. In other words, as Kao and Boyle argue:

Faced with the cute object, the subject makes a simultaneous move: the subject regresses to the time-space of childhood and projects the child into the future. The cute is always already the child, the childlike, and the childish across species and animacy lines. (2017: 13)

This tension is also reflected by Ngai's more general claims about the complexity of aesthetic categories when she writes that as 'sites where ways of speaking or aspects of human intersubjectivity routinely intersect with qualities or aspects of the thing

world, aesthetic categories are thus challengingly double-sided in more ways than one: objective and subjective, descriptive and evaluative, conceptual and sensuous' (2010: 952). These tensions seem to both prevent a normative relationship between Enzo and the kentuki while at the same time contribute to his growing obsession with winning the object's affections.

However, when the intimacy of Enzo's relationship with the mole begins to constitute its total personification, the machinations of traditional surveillance begin to disappear entirely. While at first uncomfortable with the fact that the kentuki can observe the intimate details of his everyday domestic life, Enzo gradually comes to enjoy the practice of self-disclosure, so much so that he starts to treat the device as if it were his own son, even ascribing it the name 'Mister.' Taking the mole on his daily errands around Umbertide, he enthusiastically ensures that the dweller inside can observe as much of his personal life as possible. Showing off the historical downtown where he lives, Enzo sets the kentuki on the 'passenger seat on a stack of cushions' instead 'of putting him in the back window ledge of the car' (2020: 90). Caring for the kentuki as if the physical object were a living thing, he 'buckled the seat belt and cleaned the mole's eyes with the cloth he used for the windshield, to be sure Mister's sight was perfectly clear. As they drove, he pointed out the Torre della Rocca and the Collegiata di Santa Maria della Reggia' (2020: 90).

Crucially, however, the personifying impulse never comes to complete realization in Enzo's relation to the kentuki. Stopping by the local pharmacy to say hello to a friend, he carries the mole 'under his left arm, against his chest, the way he sometimes carried his groceries' (2020: 90). Two months later, by which point 'Mister had perfectly assimilated into his role as co-parent,' Enzo remains caught in an affective relation to the kentuki that is a 'mixture of pity and gratitude' (2020: 93, 94). As the intimacy of the relationship between the two intensifies, Enzo's frustration with the hybridity of the device (both human and toy, both active but distant) becomes uncontrollable and he begins to imagine ways to restore the hierarchal power dynamic between keeper and dweller: 'He felt an urge to kick the mole, lock it in a closet, hide its charger the way his son kept doing. Then Mister would have no one to wake in the middle of the night, no one who would search for the charger and save him' (2020: 162). The relation encountered here, between a frustrated subject and the harmless cute object, borders on what some scholars have called 'cute aggression'—the paradoxical 'urge some people get to squeeze, crush, or bite cute things, albeit without any desire to cause harm' to them (Stavropoulos and Alba 2018: 2). Discussed as an example, of 'dimorphous expression of emotions,' cute aggression also encompasses the phenomenon of experiencing one kind of strong emotion (e.g. happy, sad, or angry) but expressing an opposite emotion (Stavropoulos and Alba 2018: 2; Aragòn et al. 2015). Caught between feelings of intimacy,

attachment, and aggression, Enzo's relation to the kentuki nevertheless represents a more immediate correlation to human-to-human affiliation.

As the complexity of Enzo's feelings take centre stage, the surveillant dynamic is far less apparent. Narrative tension, in other words, focalises around Enzo's tumultuous relationship with the mole itself, rendering the camera technology at the centre of their connection secondary to the affective relation the cute object engenders in the human subject. What this uncomfortable though perhaps not surprising dynamic ultimately reveals is the extent to which cuteness generates an irresolvable rift in human subjectivity; one that stimulates feelings of intimacy yet denies equal humanly identification. Here, the 'striking incompleteness of the cute visage implies that while the object must be given just *enough* face to enable it to return our gaze, a fuller personification becomes impossible because it would symbolically render that object our equal, erasing the power differential on which the aesthetic depends' (Ngai 2005: 833). While Enzo seeks to personify the kentuki as his equal and intimate 'other,' the relationship can only ever exist as a rhetorical form of closeness, one which affords cute surveillance enough submission into the domestic realm so as to fly under the radar of critique and accountability, but not enough to appreciate the voyeur on the other side of the camera as fully human. In staging this asymmetrical dynamic, the contemporary novel functions as a crucial site for negotiating such rhetorical intimacies, exposing how narrative itself can simulate emotional reciprocity while structurally preserving the hierarchies and affective asymmetries embedded in technologically mediated encounters.

Enzo's troubled and eventually tragic relationship with the kentuki is just one of several interactions in the novel in which cute surveillance begins as an intimate dynamic between watched and watcher before turning unexpectedly dystopian. As a networked narrative that moves across a disparate set of temporal and spatial locations and individual character perspectives, *Little Eyes* offers up a space in which the outcomes of invasive, participatory surveillance can be imagined in discrete social, economic, and domestic contexts. While the overall experiences of keepers and dwellers are thematically interconnected, the novel ultimately reveals how surveillance is felt and understood differently, according to a range of bodily, subjective and cultural factors. The literary text, then, functions to challenge a tendency within studies of surveillance which treats various forms of observation as a singular gaze defined by discipline and control. Instead, the relationships that Schweblin develops between watched and watcher present an alternative range of experiences of surveillance that are neither wholly utopian nor dystopian but rather influenced by a complex set of situational factors not ordinarily taken up in studies of the technological gaze—inflected and reconfigured as they are, by the affective power and persuasion of cuteness.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests

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