Unicorns in Contemporary Popular Culture

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I hope nobody will object if I begin with a fairly average anecdote from my English friend Fabio Barry. When I mentioned the topic of my article en passant, over coffee, he told me about an ongoing contest with his former mentor at the University of Cambridge, the architectural historian Peter Carl. The aim of the competition is to see who can find the funniest combination of name and title in a book by a German scholar. The more abstruse and silly the result, the better. With the condescending attitude that the British often display towards German scholarship, Fabio chose a book by Stephan Steingräber, a classical archaeologist who teaches in Rome. The author's name means 'stone digger' or 'stone graves' and the title is *Antike Felsgräber unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der etruskischen Felsgräbernekropole* (cf. Steingräber 2015). In response, his mentor named a study which is important in our context: a book by Jürgen Werinhard Einhorn (whose surname means 'unicorn', cf. Caroutch 1997: 512) entitled *Spiritalis unicornis. Das Einhorn als Bedeutungsträger in Literatur und Kunst des Mittelalters* (Spiritalis unicornis: The unicorn as a bearer of meaning in the literature and art of the Middle Ages, cf. Einhorn 1998). It really would be hard to make this up – and it certainly gave the two British scholars great cause for hilarity.

Spiritalis Unicornis, written by Einhorn, a Franciscan friar and submitted as a doctoral thesis at the University of Kiel in 1970, was published by Fink in 1974 and reissued by the same publisher, with substantial revisions, in 1998. According to Einhorn's own statement, his choice of topic was influenced by »personal inclination«: He had been unable to resist the temptation to let his name point him towards a »related« object of study (ibid.: 13). Einhorn set the year 1530 as the cut-off date for his countless literary and visual examples, justifying this, in the first edition, with the assertion that the unicorn had »lost the abundance of its meanings« in the modern era (ibid.: 16). This view was obviously open to contestation, and in the second edition the author himself struck a less absolute tone. Here he at least hinted at how much the motif had been used in modernity, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – from Rainer Maria Rilke's poems (1906, 1907, 1922) to Peter S. Beagle's novel *The Last Unicorn* (1968), and from Arnold Böcklin's difficult painting, *Schweigen im Walde* (1896) to a work by the artist Rebecca Horn – a 1970 performance entitled

Einhorn.[1] Einhorn argued that these »curiosities« in the literary and artistic response to the unicorn should be recognized as »data for a history of mentalities«, since these many different unicorns might reveal the »fears and longings« of the present day (ibid.: 87).

Of course, this had a long tradition. It was the motif's heterogeneity and adaptability that allowed the Christian Middle Ages to evoke it in a wide range of contexts. The unicorn was always »bound to a semantics of oppositions« (Hörisch 1986: 204). It was notable for its contradictions: this animal from the Orient became »the cult animal of Western Christianity; it symbolized both Christ *and* the Prince of Darkness«; it was »the most chaste animal, despite its obvious fertile/phallic qualities«; it was »as terrible as it was beautiful, and as wild as it was mild; it both threatened and healed; it had a terrifying roar yet loved music«. And of course, there was always one question that remained unanswered: Did the unicorn ever actually exist, or not (ibid.: 205)? We can quote Jochen Hörich's summary: »The medieval unicorn is inconceivable without the paradoxes and puzzles that it presents. The reason why 'early and high Christian culture courted the unicorn so assiduously' was its ability 'to give seemingly innocent expression to experiences of ambivalence« (ibid.).

Fig. 1: Unicorn Frappucino. Starbucks 2017.

The question is whether this ambivalence can still be found in today's popular culture. To answer this, it is worth looking at the 'unicorn fever' that swept over the United States in 2016 and 2017, bringing forth astonishing forms of appropriation. On the entertainment website *Refinery 29*, which seeks to appeal to young women,

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1   Further references in Einhorn 1999: 75–106, here 85.

Arianna Davis put it as follows: » [In 2017] Unicorns morphed from a millennia-long symbol [...] to a full-on cultural phenomenon. « (Davis 2017). The American food industry was particularly active in promoting this trend, having discovered the sales-boosting potential of this mythical beast (Fig. 1).

Starbucks set a creamy milestone with its 'Unicorn Frappuccino', available as a limited edition for one week in April 2017. The firm promised no more and no less than an experience: »Magical flavors start off sweet and fruity transforming to pleasantly sour. Swirl it to reveal a color-changing spectacle of purple and pink. It's finished with whipped cream-sprinkled pink and blue fairy powders.«[2] Even the green straw had magical powers. On the one hand it was meant to match the colour of the Starbucks logo, a two-tailed mermaid (green to reflect the company's origins in the 'Emerald City', Seattle). On the other hand, it was supposed to symbolize the unicorn's horn, through which anyone who had managed to capture a limited-edition Unicorn Frappuccino could now suck out and imbibe the mythical creature's creamy soul.

Fig. 2: Unicorn Froot Loops, 2023

This unicornization of the Frappuccino set a precedent. Unicorns now appear everywhere, particularly in packaging design. Often attributes are added to boost

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2   Author's archive.

the product's narrative and emotional appeal. A striking feature here is the frequent use of the rainbow, now an indispensable addition. But of course, other elements are also deployed: clouds, stars, and occasionally fairytale medieval castles (Fig. 2).

On Kellogg's limited-edition 'Unicorn Froot Loops', the image on the box also shows a rising sun – a reference to the product's function as a breakfast cereal. On the packaging for Kraft's unicorn-themed 'Mac & Cheese', which is marketed as a dinner and illustrated accordingly, the pieces of pasta have been magically transformed into pictures. Children can now eat unicorns, rainbows and stars – and dream sweet dreams.

Fig. 3: Inkee Unicorn. Bath Bomb with surprise, 2022. Craze GmbH, Karlsruhe

Alongside the food industry, which sinks to abject depths in its exploitation of the unicorn theme, the hygiene and cosmetics industry has also made intensive use of this medieval motif – and with good reason. The many unicorn-themed soaps, shower gels, shampoos and bath additives effortlessly reconnect with history, re-activating the ideas of innocence and purity that were associated with this animal, particularly in Mariological contexts. In the words of Arianna Davis, »[...] somehow unicorns evolved from icons of chastity and purity embroidered on 15th century tapestries to the sparkly-eyed, pastel-hued toys that dominated the 'girls' aisle in the 1980s« (ibid.). This is an allusion to the incredibly successful 'My Little Pony' figures,

which were first launched by American toymaker Hasbro in 1982 and continue to be reissued in new versions even today. Their enduring success eventually led to the production of the animated series *My Little Pony – Friendship is Magic*, currently available on Netflix (cf. Hasbro, online). The most recent version of the animated figures, the 'New Generation', seems to be trying to get away from the girly image of the band of ponies so as to address the 'queer' element in child consumers (Fig. 3).

Traces of the unicorn's qualities of »chastity and purity« can be found even in bath bombs – made by a company called Craze GmbH in Karlsruhe. The six collectible plastic figurines embody the core element of the high medieval signum of the unicorn, innocence. As with the ponies, they present an inseparable amalgam of unblemished chastity and 'cuteness' – a quality that has frequently been described and theorized in recent years (cf. Ngai 2005: 811–847).

The reason why the concept of cuteness (defined most notably by the cultural theorist Sianne Ngai) seems so helpful for describing today's popular culture is that – like the unicorn itself – it is characterized by inherent tension. This is partly to do with the fact that the term 'cuteness' has its origins in 'acuteness', which has been ground down into its opposite. In other words, this is the literal blunting of *acutezza*, another relevant concept within the history of ideas. The cutting away of the first syllable (the technical term is apheresis) turns the meaning of the original word on its head. Sharp and pointy contrasts with soft and round; mental acuity with sweetness, sleepiness, and insouciance (Ngai 2022: 110–111). The English word (unlike its German translation, *Niedlichkeit*,) reflects the polarity that is always present in the concept. Historically, the use of 'cute' can be traced back to the 1850s. What is interesting, in this context, is that the term evidently emerged in the domestic sphere of the American middle-class family. From the very beginning, it belonged to the semantic field of women and children and described a »feminine spectacle« which played out mainly in domestic interiors (Dale et al. 2017: 2). Acuteness, with its masculine connotations, reaches out into the world and expends its energy in other arenas – or at least this is the hypothesis of Joshua Dale et al. in the introduction to their 2017 book *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*.

As a side note, a young Sigmund Freud had already noted the universal validity of the mechanism that can be glimpsed in the concept of 'cuteness', that is, the practice of securing happiness within the family. In a 1883 letter to his later wife, Martha Bernays, Freud describes his conception of a shared domestic idyll. As he sees it, their future home has two areas. On the one hand, there are objects and tools that bear witness to 'serious work'; these are part of everyday life and are therefore subject to constant change; they wear out, become old-fashioned or lose their value. On the other hand, there are things that reveal *Kunstsinn* (literally a 'sense of art', variously translated as an artistic sensibility or a feeling for beauty). These objects are removed from the contingent vicissitudes of life and the modern pressure for renewal and can therefore serve to reify what is thought to be permanent. Their func-

tion consists in filling living spaces with emotions, personalizing them, and thus transforming them into »a small world of happiness«, as Freud calls it. The home is populated with »silent friends and proofs of lofty human values«, with mementoes, knick-knacks, souvenirs, in short, with little things that can radiate magic, but are also allowed to be soft and sweet. »Are we to hang our hearts on such little things?«, asks Freud in his letter. The answer is: »Yes, and without hesitation, so long as some event beyond our control does not knock on the silent door« (Freud 1992: 27). It is the *Kunstsinn* described here that decorates the interior with universal gestures to secure happiness, driven by the desire for an existence without threat. Anything that is questionable, anything that is acute must remain outside, leaving the interior enclosed in cute insouciance. In Freud's vision, domestic happiness is already conceived as a reduction in complexity and thus in effort.

In practices for securing happiness, the ephemeral nature of first impressions, for example the transience of previously observed cuteness, invites modification. Cuteness needs to be transformed into something else in order to remain available as a trace of its own historicity for future acts of presentification. Seen in this light, what is commonly defamed as 'kitsch' seems to be the materialization and enactment of a once-observed cuteness. It is not the baby or kitten itself that is kitschy, but the pink-framed picture of the baby or kitten on the wall. Mere cuteness is replaced by preserved emotion, which, as a built-in trigger for storytelling, justifies the objects' existence. This process, this building in of sentiment, gives each object its own specific quality.

Practices of emotional reshaping, which will later be resurrected as nostalgia, also ensure that this mythical beast – previously tamed by the maiden in her *hortus conclusus* – can give fluffy form to innocence and purity even today. The pinnacle of cuteness are undoubtedly the 'Glubschis', soft toys produced by the German company NICI. Anyone contemplating these toys, especially the unicorns, may find themselves concurring with brand strategist Jess Weiner, who applied a history of mentalities approach to the American 'unicorn fever'. She gave her statement a strangely feminist touch:

> Women are in need of fantastical magic in their lives right now, because we're surrounded by culture and politics that are very bleak and dark and oppressive, […]. Unicorns are rare, they're powerful, and they're imaginary, so they're capable of anything. And they do have a certain girly undertone because many of us associate them with our childhood, so they're unapologetically feminine.
> Why *wouldn't* we own something that's just for us and inspires us to believe in our otherworldly capabilities? We're being faced with some dire messaging around

being female. Unicorns are our chance to escape and have some fun. (Weiner, online)[3]

If we take Weiner seriously, the cuteness that may have triggered the purchase of unicorn ponies or NICI products from the Glubschi series does not actually play a crucial role. What is important about the objects is that they make it possible to enter a magical kingdom, far from the multitude of everyday threats, where images of a better past can be kept safe (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4: Glubschi Unicorn Vita-Mi, 2020. Nici GmbH, Altenkunstadt

Sweetness and softness may be the initial incentive to buy, but it is only once the 'Glubschi Ballerina Unicorn Lady Moon' has been absorbed into the secure and reassuring domestic soft toy emporium that she can, in the distant future, remind us of the mystical happiness of childhood that we once experienced.

The unvarying wide-eyed gaze of the unicorn Glubschis promises to offer self-assurance to sensitive souls. It can come as no surprise that taste, in such spheres of authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*), is largely autonomous. The assimilated objects are used in a highly self-willed and self-confident manner to subvert aesthetic orders and norms. Decorative self-reliance and sentimental autism come to the fore. The

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3   See also: (Davis 2017, online).

dominant attitude is a benevolent inclination towards kitschifying permanence, which can confidently mock the rationalist standards of a supposedly objective theory of the aesthetic by looking at the evidence of personal experience. Emotions, condensed into reliquaries and stereotypical narratives, aim at consistency, at the unchangeable, at triggers for storytelling – and they happily tolerate clichés.

Archives of the subjective are forming everywhere, because it is only the image and object worlds of the private sphere that give a home to a historicizing self-narration. One of the dominant forces in these refuges is certified cuteness; it reigns here as the will to represent one's own being and one's own historicity. This reaches its dialectical apex in the fact that the formative character of cultural history weakens to the same extent to which consumptive processes for generating historical meaning are set in motion, and media of self-empowerment and self-archiving, in their affordability, claim to be able to safeguard the personal as a universal. The many unicorns in children's bedrooms today offer to magically secure happiness. The idea is that they will remedy, on a small scale, what cannot be achieved on a large scale, and set in order the aspects of the world and of history that are not understood, be it as figures from a band of pony friends, or in a book of puzzles, a sticker book, or a scratch art album.

As Jürgen Werinhard Einhorn intimated, the examples provide data for a contemporary history of mentalities, since they are subject to ideological and economic modelling. At heart, their objective is insouciance; they market the apparent absence of any threat.

The idiosyncratic nature of the many commodified triggers for remembering becomes precarious, however, at the point where the private archives lose their custodians – and suddenly no one has any idea what to do with all the unicorns. The collections of material feeling and materialized remembering become somewhat tragic when the feelings and (hi)stories preserved with them fall into oblivion, and the artefacts, now with no point of reference, are thrown back upon themselves. Mike Kelley's *Stuffed Toys* owe their unsettling effect to this kind of loss of attention. But precisely because of Evidence of the sentimentalization of personal history can be found everywhere and in every epoch, across genders and independent of class. The filling of the household with *Kunstsinn* solidifies into an emotional frame to give stability and protection to individual lives.

Enveloped in such a mantle of objects, gestures and images, people believe themselves to be immunized against references to the Other and the outside, change and death. Why? Because once we are inside an enclosure full of our own things our uncertainty ceases; because we 'feel' at home there, and because there are stories to tell there. This takes on separatist, exclusive, even militant overtones at the point where home becomes a castle – or a *hortus conclusus*. What might this have to do with 'freedom'? Martin Heidegger attempted to deduce this in his famous lecture 'Bauen, Wohnen, Denken' (Building, dwelling, thinking) in 1951. To answer the initi-

al question, »[...] worin besteht das Wesen des Wohnens?« (translated as »What is it to dwell?«), he resorts to etymology, and reaches back into the unicorn-rich Middle Ages:

> The Old Saxon *wuon*, the Gothic *wunian* like the old world *bauen*, mean to remain, to stay in a place. But the Gothic *wunian* says more distinctly how this remaining is experienced. *Wunian* means: to be at peace, to be brought to peace, to remain in peace. The word for peace, *Friede*, means the free, das *Frye*, and *fry* means: preserved from harm and danger, preserved from something, safeguarded. To free really means to spare. [...] Real sparing is something positive and takes place when we leave something beforehand in its own nature, when we return it specifically to its being, when we 'free' it in the real sense of the word into a preserve of peace. To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature. The fundamental character of dwelling is sparing and preserving (Heidegger 1971: 149).

Undoubtedly, the average sense of self-worth tends to make itself at home – or, philosophically speaking, enclose itself (*sich einfrieden*) – in the banality of its own appropriation of history and explanation of the world. Wherever we go, we meet museum-like formations of the subjective. Because it is only the object and image worlds of the private sphere that seem to constitute what is generally described as a home, and what Heidegger postulates as a 'dwelling with things' – and this includes dwelling with unicorns. We hang our hearts on little things and say yes, without hesitation. Triggers for storytelling are 'recovered' (*zurückgeborgen*) and – on the fridge, on the wall, or on the shelf – attest to mass-produced wellbeing. We thereby enclose and preserve gestures of emotional reassurance, which, in their framing and repeatability, open up residues of the self. The unicorn seems a natural fit for this task.

Sianne Ngai imputes an extreme passivity to the cute object; she sees it as the most thing-like thing among things, the most objectified of all objects, an object par excellence (cf. Ngai 2005: 834). This can only be correct if we disregard the practices of co-opted subjectification which seek to create object-generated obliviousness to the world, cocooned in cosy harmlessness – practices for securing happiness that are as ubiquitous as unicorns in contemporary popular culture. Arguably the most important of these unicorns, incidentally, is one I have not yet mentioned: the mega-successful, ultra-hip 'Neinhorn' (a play on words combining the German words for 'no' and 'unicorn') created by Marc-Uwe Kling and Astrid Henn. This can be dealt with in another essay – or not, as the case may be.

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Illustrations

Fig. 1: ›Starbucks' unicorn drink is pushing adults to the edge of insanity‹, Source: https://nypost.com/2017/04/21/starbucks-unicorn-drink-is-pushing-a dults-to-the-edge-of-insanity/ [accessed: 1 March 2024].

Fig. 2: ›Kellogg's® Unicorn Froot Loops®‹, Source: https://www.kelloggs.com/me/en -kw/products/unicorn-froot-loops/unicorn-froot-loops-cereal.html [accessed: 1 March 2024].

Fig. 3: Author

Fig. 4: ›Die süßeste Invasion kommt von NICI‹, Source: https://www.nici.de/ueber -nici/neuigkeiten-von-nici/die-suesseste-invasion-kommt-von-nici [accessed: 1 March 2024].