Weaponized Cuteness:

MilTok as Operational Aesthetic

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the emergence of what I term a *cutified military aesthetics* – a feminized, cute, and sexually inflected mode of war imagery circulating in platformed media cultures in the 2010s and 2020s. Exemplified by the Israeli "MilTok", this aesthetic departs from earlier regimes of masculinized war spectacle by mobilizing influencer vernacular, exaggerated femininity, and affective intimacy. The article asks how cutified military aesthetics operate in platformed media: what this aesthetic looks like, how it reshapes the perception and feeling of war, and how these dynamics become visible through contemporary art. To investigate this, I analyse the video artwork *MICCHAN* (2024), which appropriates and exaggerates MilTok imagery. Drawing on theories of *war porn* (Baudrillard; Pasquinelli), cute and affect theory (Ngai; Dale et al.; Birlea; Lieber-Milo), *post-feminist masquerade* (McRobbie), and *overidentification* (Kollectiv & Kollectiv), I argue that cuteness functions as an affective strategy that can soften violence and render militarized power emotionally palatable. Finally Jussi Parikka's concept of *operational images* aid the conclusion that cutified military imagery operates not only representationally but performatively: guiding attention, modulating emotion, and mediating everyday encounters with war. By showing how *MICCHAN* mirrors and disrupts this aesthetic logic through mimicry, overidentification, and rupture, the article reframes cuteness as an operational aesthetic within contemporary digital war.

KEY WORDS

MILTOK, OPERATIONAL IMAGES, CUTIFICATION, AESTHETICS, DIGITAL WARFARE

INTRODUCTION: THE FEMINIZATION OF THE SOLDIER

Across the history of visual culture, the soldier has functioned as an emblem of masculinity and national force. The Israeli photographer and visual artist, Adi Nes', staged-photo series *Soldiers* (1994–2000s) provides an illustrative point of departure for this study because it both relies on and unsettles that representational script. Nes stages hyper-masculine tropes like dog tags, boots, taut muscles, only to render them through intimacy, vulnerability, and homoerotic charge (Seymour, 2020). By over-performing masculinity, Nes exposes its constructedness and destabilizes the naturalization of the gender-normative soldier. His work demonstrates how gendered bodies have long been mobilized to perform discursive and affective labour for the nation: to signify strength, legitimacy, and progressivenes even as desire and violence remain entangled in how the nation pictures itself and justifies its power.



Image 1. "Soldiers" by Adi Nes

This article traces a subsequent and notably different reconfiguration of militarized visuality: a turn from hyper-masculine war imagery toward feminized and increasingly cutified military aesthetics emerging in platformed media cultures in the 2010s and 2020s. Rather than queering masculinity like Nes, this visual style mobilizes exaggerated femininity, cuteness, and influencer vernacular to reframe how militarism appears, circulates, and even feels. Israeli social-media figures popularly associated with "MilTok," (an abbreviation of military TikTok) such as Nathalia Fadeev (online as *Gun Waifu*1), exemplify this broader aesthetic register by combining cat-girl cosplay (cat ears on top of military helmets e.g.), *waifu* tropes and *thirst-trap* conventions with visible weaponry. While waifu – slang from the manga and animé fandom universe – describe a visual style defined by idealized, hyperfeminized character embodiment, that emphasizes cuteness, thirst traps are visuals designed to attract sexual attention and provoke desire on social media. In this way MilTok serves as a prominent example of what I term *cutified military aesthetics*: a war aesthetic that distingushes itself by departing from earlier masculinized *war porn* (Baudrillard, 2006; Pasquinelli, 2004) – and not least from circulating war images of atrocity.

This article investigates how such cutified military aesthetics operates within contemporary platform culture: how this feminized, cute mode of militarized imagery is visually constructed and how it (re)organizes the ways in which militarism is perceived, felt, and normalized. It asks what this aesthetic does, what effects it produces, and how these dynamics are made visible through contemporary art. In response, I argue that cuteness's affordances – that is, the capacity to elicit ambivalent feelings of tenderness, domination, and attachment (Ngai, 2015, p. 108) – make it particularly compatible with social platform infrastructures of virality (Sampson et al., 2013) that reward emotional intensity, intimacy, and circulation. From this perspective, I read feminized and cutified militarized imagery as a soft-power aesthetic that reframes military violence as charming and harmless.

Drawing on recent scholarship in cute and affect theory (Birlea, 2023; Dale et al., 2017; Lieber-Milo, 2025; Ngai, 2015), I approach cuteness not as an innocuous or decorative style, but as an affective strategy that can soften, normalize, and render militarized violence emotionally palatable. In this framework,

cutification works by manufacturing attachment – feelings of harmlessness and desire – through visual languages optimized for algorithmic circulation.

To investigate this operational mode of the cute, I conduct a close analysis of *MICCHAN* (2024), a video artwork by Noura Tafeche and Tobia Paolo Bettoni that reflexively engages with cutified military imagery like MilTok. Rather than treating MilTok itself as the primary site of analysis here, I use *MICCHAN* as a methodological lens: the artwork appropriates, exaggerates, and distorts platform-native military aesthetics in order to make their affective and political mechanics visible. Presented as a "dummy Twitch live stream" hosted by a "gijinka-turned-streamer", the video alternates between TikTok dances performed by beaming female soldiers and documentary-like footage from warzones, all framed within a pink, gamified streaming interface.

Ultimately, this article contributes to critical studies of war aesthetics and digital propaganda by reframing feminized cuteness as an operational aesthetic. I propose a way of understanding how a seemingly harmless aesthetic can participate in the normalization of violence, while also highlighting how art can make these affective infrastructures perceptible and open them to reflection and critique.

HISTORICAL ROOTS: FROM WAR PORN TO BIKINI DIPLOMACY

Before diving into analysis of MICCHAN, this section offers some context to the utilization of gender as a war aesthetic. The french sociologist Jean Baudrillard's influential intervention on war and media is anchored in the core claim, that contemporary conflict is experienced as a media event: simply put, the images through which we encounter war do not merely represent battlefield actions but effectively *constitute* what the public understands as war. In his controversal *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1991) essay, Baudrillard does not deny that violence occurred in the 1991 Gulf War; rather, he argues that for most spectators the 'war' was experienced not as an event in the world but as a media-constructed spectacle. Baudrillard argued, that the conflict became a sequence of images designed for global broadcast – satellite feeds, precision-bomb footage, and sanitized news coverage – that displaced the material reality of fighting, casualties, and battlefield presence. In this context, the familiar distinction between representation and reality breaks down: understood by a public that encounters it almost exclusively through screens and mediated formats. The Gulf War, in this sense, was "not really taking place" for most observers because it existed primarily as a system of mediated signs and simulations.

Building on this theoretical foundation, Baudrillard's 2006 essay *War Porn* develops the metaphor of pornography to describe a new logic of obscene exposure in contemporary war imagery. Writing in the wake of the 2003 Iraq invasion, he argues that the proliferation of violent images produces a form of obscenity in which war no longer belongs to the order of representation and instead becomes conceptually pornographic: not in the sense of sexual allure, but as what he terms an "excessiveness of a power designating itself as abject and pornographic" (Baudrillard, 2006, p. 8). For Baudrillard, pornography exemplifies the moment when everything becomes visible, immediate, and consumable. The obscene does not reside in the violence depicted, but in the act of exposure itself: the elimination of distance and mediation transforms war into a hypervisible, spectacular surface, staging violence as a consumable, almost performative, experience. In this shift, images move from representing reality to directly performing and enacting it; the "pornographic" replaces simulation with excessive presence, foregrounding the hypermediated logic of contemporary conflict facilitated by platformed media.

While Baudrillard emphasizes the pornographic logic of war images in terms of excessive exposure, philosopher Matteo Pasquinelli slightly shifts the focus in a critical essay titled *War Porn War Punk* (2004). In here he offers a series of reflections on the visual resemblance between images of contemporary

conflict and pornography, attending to the aesthetic and fetishistic qualities of war imagery. Pasquinelli defines war porn as "the popular tabloids and government talk-shows fascination with super-sized weapons and well-polished uniforms, hi-tech tanks and infrared-controlled bombs, a panoplia of images that some define as the aseptic substitute of pornography proper" (Pasquinelli, 2004). Drawing on examples such as *Time Magazine's* 2003 *Person of the Year*-cover featuring The American Soldier, he shifts the focus to include the libidinal, fetishistic and aesthetic dimensions of war imagery.

In his own words: "[w]atching Abu Ghraib pictures of pornographic tortures does not scandalize us, on the contrary, it rather excites us, in exactly the same way as the obsessive voyeurism that draws us to videos of 9/11 videos" (Pasquinelli, 2004). In this view, contemporary war imagery does more than saturate the visual field; it resembles pornography in the way it structures desire, fetishizing militarized masculinity, polished weapons, and high-tech uniforms. This aesthetic is designed to shape the spectator's desire, producing an eroticized fascination with militarized bodies and artillery. Thus, whereas Baudrillard treats images primarily as an operative part of war's machinery, Pasquinelli emphasizes the image as part of a desire economy: a visual system through which war can be consumed as pornographic spectacle. In this way, Pasquinelli extends Baudrillard's theory, highlighting the aesthetic-affective structure of desire, fetishization, and spectacle that operate through digital and networked media, thereby laying the groundwork for understanding a platformed military aesthetics.

In Pasquinelli's conceptualization, war porn as an aesthetic emerged from "the Iraqi marshes", around the invasion of Iraq, however, as demonstrated in Nes' photographic series, such masculinized military aesthetic has long defined the visual culture of war. Nes's photographs simultaneously account for war as an inherently masculine-coded phenomenon, and restage the IDF soldier as a vulnerable, sensual, and homoerotic figure. The soldiers are portrayed sleeping in close embrace, bathing together, or standing in moments of quiet intimacy. Rather than glorifying the Israeli military mythos, these photos aim to expose its contradictions. By aestheticizing male intimacy and desire within a hypermasculine institution, Nes both reveals and destabilizes the fetishization of the male soldier's body. His photographs can be read as a visual inquiry into what queer theorist Jasbir Puar theorizes as *homonationalism* (Puar, 2007): a strategy in which nation-states incorporate certain queer subjects into their national imaginaries as markers of liberal modernity, while simultaneously producing racialised 'others' as threats. For Puar, homonationalism functions as a form of sexual exceptionalism, what he terms *pinkwashing*, that showcases tolerance and diversity as markers of national progressiveness, even as these ideals are used to justify militarized or imperial actions (Puar, 2007, p. 1). Nes's work, in this light, can be read not simply as opposing militarized masculinity, but as exaggerating and exposing its internal contradictions. And in doing so, revealing how homoeroticism is already embedded in the nationalist imaginary. By over-performing the tenderness and beauty of the soldier's body, Nes makes visible the erotic charge that sustains Israel's militarized masculinity, and the ways in which desire, nationalism, and violence are entangled in its visual culture.

In this way Nes' photographs provide a foundation for the 2000s transformation within the image of militarism: from the hard, violent aesthetic of masculine domination to the soft, seductive imagery of feminized militarism. A semiotic and aesthetic binary between hardened masculine bodies and feminized softness that scholar in cultural studies Klaus Theweleit pays attention to in his book *Male Fantasies* (1987), in which he argues that masculinity is structured around a fantasy of male hardness defined in opposition to the feminine.

The 2007-issue of the American magazine *Maxim,* often referred to as "The Women of the IDF spread" marks a pivotal moment in the shift happening in Israel's visual branding strategy. As media scholar

Omna Berick-Aharony notes, this issue was as part of a public diplomacy campaign to promote a "sexier" image of Israel's Defence Force to American audiences (2013, p. 390). The photographic essay featured former IDF soldiers, whom might be better described as bikini babes posing half-naked on a Tel Aviv beach or on the ledge off a skyscraper. While the magazine images appeared hyper-sexualized, the accompanying texts focused on each model's military accomplishments, like that of Nivit Bash who "loved shooting the M-16, but hadn't had a chance to shoot anything since she left the army" (Berick-Aharony, 2013, p. 398). Here Pasquinelli's focus on the male soldier as the central figure of war porn seems to be replaced by a feminized variation: a new, seductive militarized body, that retains Baudrillard's obscenity and exposure, but recodes it as *feminine*.

As communication scholar Eli Avraham observes, this campaign represented a deliberate move "away from the hard image to the soft image: from soldiers in helmets to female soldiers in bikinis" (Avraham, 2009, p. 208). However, this move from masculine hardness to feminized softness did not signal the end of militarized spectacle; instead, it marked a rebranding. As part of Israel's self-promotion efforts, Berick-Aharony describes this turn as the mobilization of "women's gendered aesthetics to further a national agenda," inaugurating what became known as "bikini diplomacy" or "the sexy offensive" (Berick-Aharony, 2013, p. 397). The goal was to "create a sexier image of Israel," reframing the nation as Western and liberal rather than occupational and militaristic (Avraham, 2009, p. 202). In this context, the pornographic representations of the female IDF soldier signifyed the "liberated Western woman" and functioned as a visual emblem of Western modernity (Berick-Aharony, 2013, p. 391) and a shorthand for democracy, openness, and progress that simultaneously obscured ongoing occupation and militarization in Gaza.

This turn extends earlier patterns of gendered national branding. Just as Puar's term homonationalism shows, while male intimacy can signal liberal modernity, the bikini-clad female soldier enacts the same dynamic along a reversed gendered axis. In both cases, bodies become affective instruments, channeling legitimacy and emotional attachment toward the state – a pattern that cutification later takes up, translating militarized spectacle into playful, emotionally inticing forms.

THE DARK SIDE OF THE CUTE

In continuation of the sketched out geneaology of strategic utilization of engendered branding, this section turns to the affective mechanisms that makes this rebranding emotionally effective in the present-day: cuteness. The MilTok phenomenon can be understood as a continuation of such gendered strategies, but one that unfolds within a distinct platformed media environment and attention economy that thrives on virality. As visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff notes in *To See in the Dark* (2025), contemporary war imagery is no longer primarily distributed through mass media spectacles such as news photography or magazine spreads, but increasingly circulating on social media platforms whose networked infrastructures actively shape visibility, attention, and emotional response. Within this media ecology, earlier pornographic aesthetics of militarized masculinity and the feminized "sexy offensive" converge and seems to mutate within influencer-driven visual regimes of virality.

MilTok influencers – often young female soldiers sharing curated glimpses of everyday military life – extend Israel's tradition of mobilizing gendered aesthetics to mediate war, but do so through a hybrid of sexualization and cuteness. Unlike earlier campaigns such as the *Women of the IDF* spread, which relied primarily on erotic appeal, the MilTok aesthetic blends flirty sex appeal (tight clothes that hightligt a busty cleavage, pouty lips) with the cuteness of cosplay and waifu-inspired tropes: large eyes, cat-ears, playful and infantilizing gestures. Recent scholarship on cuteness (Birlea, 2023; Dale et al., 2017; Lieber-Milo, 2025) agree, that the cute is not merely a neutral style, but a potent affective structure that

shapes emotional response and can attach itself even to threatening or violent objects. As Dale et al. note, cuteness operates by soliciting feeling rather than critical distance, triggering emotional engagement even when applied to objects or situations that might otherwise provoke fear or resistance (2017, p. 4).

As one of today's main theorists of affective cuteness, feminist and culture theorist Sianne Ngai further clarifies this ambivalence. In her theoretization of *the cute* (2015) as an aesthetic category, she situates it precisely at the intersection of tenderness and aggression. For Ngai, cuteness is associated with smallness, vulnerability, and helplessness – qualities that invite care while simultaneously provoking impulses to dominate or possess. Therefore the affective response to cute objects oscillates between gentleness and aggression, "between tenderness and cruelty, passivity and domination" (2015, p. 108). In this sense, the cute is not the opposite of violence but a form through which aggression can be softened, displaced, or rendered emotionally palatable. Deriving from *acute*, connoting sharpness or intensity, the word's semantic history underscores this latent tension, allowing cuteness to operate even within contexts structured by power and domination (Dale et al., 2017, p. 5). This dynamic exemplifies what Dale et al. describe as the "dark side of the cute," in which cuteness does not negate aggression but reframes it, allowing violence to appear playful, approachable, and emotionally disarming.

Read through this lens, MilTok's display of armed, hyper-feminine and cute soldiers may appear playful and empowering while simultaneously normalizing militarized authority. Cultural and feminst scholar Angela McRobbie's account of *post-feminism* helps explain how this dynamic operates structurally: in popular culture femininity has been framed as self-chosen and pleasurable, yet in reality it remains tightly aligned with consumer culture and neoliberal self-branding. She terms this a *post-feminist masquerade*, within which I argue cuteness becomes an especially effective register, one that transforms military power into something charming rather than politically confrontational. Situated within this theoretical framework the following analysis turns to the video work *MICCHAN* (2024). The artwork investigates how militarized femininity and visuality converge within platformed media, staging the aesthetic logic described above in a concentrated and reflexive form. In the work, the militarized body, once coded through masculine domination, is reimagined through the aesthetics of cuteness, seduction, and affective engagement, making militarism appear compelling, even empowering, in everyday life.

The viewer responses proposed in the analysis are not universal or predetermined. As emphasized in Dale's account of cute theory, affective reactions to cute objects are potential, rather than fixed, shaped by cultural position, political awareness, and individual disposition (Dale et al., 2017, p. 35). I do not argue that all MilTok content is propaganda, instead, I seek to point out a broader structural dynamic in platform capitalism; that the platform system itself contributes with conditions where cute militarized imagery can function as soft power. Accordingly the analysis merely proposes an interpretation of how these affective structures are designed to operate and how the artwork intensifies their mechanisms in order to render them perceptible to the viewer.

TACTICS OF CRITIQUE IN MICCHAN

The video work *MICCHAN* explores a newly emerging cutified military aesthetic within Israel's digital propaganda system. As I will show in the following analysis, it does so by 1) making opposites appear similar hereby *hiding* violence behind the cute aesthetics, and 2) making visible the juxtapositions between opposites and hereby *exposing* the contradictions of the cute military aesthetics of contemporary war. Put plainly, the work employs a tactic where cuteness alternates between *hiding* and *exposing*. This strategy brings war and cuteness together in a way that is at once shocking and simultaneously inviting the viewer to consume it. I will dissect this tactic by focusing on three elements of the artwork: the affordances of platform aesthetics, the gender-based

aesthetics and finally the artistic use of tone & narrative – three elements that share tropes, structures and ruptures, that are symptomatic for the online cutified military aesthetics. Through this investigation, it becomes clear that *MICCHAN* utilizes artistic strategies to play on the cute military aesthetic to show how it functions as ideological camouflage in a digital war regime, where war circulates through the affective, algorithmic infrastructures of platform culture as an operative aesthetic designed to go viral. However, by playing with the cute aesthetic, *MICCHAN* goes beyond mirroring these strategies, and instead warps and accelerates them into new forms that critically implicate the viewer.

PLATFORM LOGIC AND GAMIFIED AESTHETICS

The central feature of *MICCHAN* is its at once seamless and clashing juxtaposition of war and cuteness. In this section, I will focus on how this is played out in the artwork, and how it strives to fully immerse the viewer within platform logics and gamified aesthetics.

MICCHAN situates itself within the architecture of gaming and streaming platforms by presenting itself in platform vernacular as a "dummy Twitch live stream by gijinka-turned-streamer *MICCHAN2*". The interface of the *Twitch* – a website developed for livestreaming video games, allowing followers to watch, chat, and interact with the streamer real time – provides the visual grammar, that the artwork mimics: chat sidebar, ever updating follower-comments, streaming overlays, and influencer-style narration. The "gijinka" narrator Micchan, – gijinka being a Japanese word for the anthropomorphizing of non-human entities – hosts a so-called "dummy"; a test version, in which she promotes a new drop of military merchandize. By using esoteric terms and concepts, such as "dummy", "drop", and "gijinka" borrowed directly from gamer and otaku culture, the presentation of *MICCHAN* becomes almost unintelligible for a layperson, which is precisely the point – this is how the work embraces the cute as a viral aesthetic. It is by such mimicing that *MICCHAN* situated itself within the very digital infrastructures



Image 2



Image 3



Image 4

Images 2–4: MICCHAN (2024). Noura Tafeche and Tobia Paolo Bettoni, commissioned by Simiyya

from which MilTok originates and operates and is the very position that makes its embedded critique possible.

The Twitch stream alternates between displaying live-action footage consisting of heavily armed soldiers moving through collapsed buildings, tanks in desert terrain – and then choreographed TikTok dances by Israeli female soldiers – all appropriated from IDF's social media accounts and MilTok influencers like Gun Waifu. This oscillation between two types of gendered war images, 1) the cute militaristic selfies, cat-girl cosplay, TikTok dances and 2) scenes

from real war zones, is a central tactic of the artwork. This fluctuation is consistently framed by the cutified Twitch interface, consisting of a gamer sidebar, decorated by pink hearts and displaying reactions from followers in real-time. At first, such a combination of war and cuteness may land as immoral and inappropriate, but it is precisely through the familiar gamified aesthetic, that *MICCHAN* encourages a suspension of moral evaluation and invites the viewer to consume the stream as entertainment. As Micchan ecstatically reminds us, "the line between warfare and gamification has been redesigned!", meaning: the dropping of bombs attracts viewers as if it were a game show and soldiers are "online celebrities", as she further explains in the video.

Through this clash between the cute and the violent, the work enacts a surreal experience intrinsic to the logic of the social media feed, where horrifying war footage appears side-by-side with cute lifestyle content in an endlessly looping stream. This may register in the viewer as a sense of dissonance, echoing the affective tensions that MilTok's cute aesthetics are designed to generate online. This logic follows what media scholars Tony D. Sampson and Jussi Parikka (2013) describe as virality, in which repetition and social sharing enable militarized aesthetics to spread through the grammar of everyday platforms. In this way, the high-paced montage and abrupt aesthetic shifts transform the video into an allegory of virality itself, revealing how cuteness functions not only as camouflage but as a contagious media form that propagates through affective pleasure rather than explicit persuasion of ideological conviction.

Evoking a platform aesthetic, I suggest, can function in two seemingly contradictory ways: I argue, that *MICCHAN* utilizes the algorithmic structure of social media platforms, designed to maintain attention, in order to hypnotically retain the viewer and dull moral scruples. In this way, the viewer gets mesmerized by the cutified, seductive universe which lulls them into accepting such shameless promotion of something as anti-cute as the destruction of the Palestinian population. Conversely, precisely this over-the-top cutification, especially in contrast with violent imagery gradually prompt critical reflection on the absurdity of digital warfare infrastructures. Because MICCHAN exaggerates how cute content and war already appear side by side online, it invites the viewer behind the scenes of these mechanisms and help understand how this system works. The work unfolds the process of seduction, creating an awareness of the tactical operations behind cutified military aesthetics that functions by pushing the horrifying images streaming out of Gaza into the background.

By first implicating the viewer in the act of overlooking the violence behind a cute aesthetics, *MICCHAN's* artistic strategy warrants a more profound critique, that allows for forgetting and acknowledging distant suffering to exist at the same time. Thus, by turning its own aesthetic into a critical model of digital affect circulation *MICCHAN* does not just represent the problem of cute militarism; it embodies the viral, algorithmic logic that enables it. In this sense, *MICCHAN performs* the feed-logic of digital war itself, showing how such logics can simultaneously distract from and expose militarized ideology.

FEMINIZED CUTENESS

In this section I direct focus towards the way in which *MICCHAN* explores the symbiotic relationship between gender and cutified military aesthetics. The main function of this relationship, as I will show, is creating an affective trap in which cuteness renders violence harmless. The structures of platform aesthetics function by first seducing, then sensitizing the viewer. Such persuasive artistics strategies are heavily reliant, if not defined by, gender. Because, as pointed out earlier, militarity aesthetics has often been characterized by masculine muscle power, whereas new feminized registers have now emerged on social media. So when Micchan remarks: "tank porn you say?" (01:42) in the video, it connotes Pasquinelli's and Baudrillard's theories of masculine war porn – as evident in image 5, the tank being tenderly polished by a male soldier in *MICCHAN*. However, what the

work actually engages with is the excessively feminine military aesthetics. To answer Micchan's own question: "tank porn?" Cute porn, definitely.

MICCHAN plunges the viewer into an ultra-feminized "battle station" streamer universe, immediately establishing an exaggeratedly cute aesthetic. As defined by visual culture scholar Shiri Lieber-Milo (2025) the cute is defined by child-like features (big eyes, small mouths, large head), playfulness, round simplified forms, and small size (2025, p. 1). Besides the battle station's interface – framed by pink text boxes and hearts – Micchan herself incarnate such child-like and round-formed cuteness: initiation the video, the pink-haired, large purple-eyed gijinka-narrator introduces herself as "Sergeant Micchan reporting for duty!" (00:08) with a playful eye wink and peace-sign emblematic of kawaii cuteness. Further, if looking closely, Micchan – at first glance a girl – is in fact, as indicated by the gijinka-predicate, an anthropomorphized cat (see image 2-4). Two small fangs underline how the ears, which initially appear to be cat girl cosplay, are actual animal ears. Not that surprising, as Micchan's primary role is to be cute – and what is more kawaii than a (Hello) kitty? It is precisely this aesthetic expression, that I here describe as cute.

To understand the affective gain of this aesthetic, Sianne Ngai's theoretization on the cute is central. As touched upon, for Ngai, cuteness produces "equivocal feelings" (Ngai, 2015, p. 53). The screenshot in image 6 from the video work can be said to precisely hold tenderness and aggression in an unstable tension: in this frame, Gun Waifu is shot from above, making her "smaller than" (Ngai, 2015, p. 3) the viewer, her lips pouty, Bambi eyes (signalling tenderness), and a gun strapped across her chest (aggression). Despite the visual signifiers of violence, the belittling, cute aesthetic encourages a perception of the figure as non-threatening. In Ngai's terms, Gun Waifu's cuteness can here be said to "evok[e] a tenderness for 'small things', but also [..] a desire to belittle or diminish them further" (Ibid). In other words, here, the cute aesthetic provoke clashing feelings of tenderness and domination.

The ultimate consequence of such cutification is the softening of IDF violence. In my reading of MICCHAN, the cute functions to temper the viewer's perception of harm: through an aesthetic of busty, blue-eyed innocence, MilTok imagery constructs a vision of the military as populated by harmless - even lovable – cuties who appear incompatible with genocidal violence. This mechanism relies on gendered assumptions that link femininity with innocence and moral purity. Here, cuteness becomes the key affective device through which violence is normalized and emotionally deflected.



Image 5. MICCHAN (2024). Noura Tafeche and Tobia Paolo Bettoni, commissioned by Simiyya

In this way, the work points to how such feminized self-aestheticization of innocence and belittling operates not only on an affective level but also as a geopolitical strategy – what media researcher Moran Yarchi identifies as Israel's "victimization strategy" (Yarchi & Boxman-Shabtai, 2025, p. 11). Thus, even though the violence remains explicitly visible within the frame, encapsulated both in Micchan's disturbing messages (the explicitly sarcastic comment "violating

human rights is no big deal" (in her speech shortened to 'NBD')), and in the weaponry, the sexualized over-cutification replacing the violence with desire. In this way, violence is not erased but aesthetically



Image 6. MICCHAN (2024). Noura Tafeche and Tobia Paolo Bettoni, commissioned by Simiyya

displaced and softened through eroticized cuteness. In exaggerating these contradictions, *MICCHAN* mirrors the psychological double-bind of digital spectatorship itself. As Ngai reminds us, the cute evokes equivocal feelings, and certainly the MilTok aesthetic creates an epistemic clash between what what can be *seen* of war and what can be *known*: cute online soldier-celebrities dancing in cat ears versus soldiers participating in a genocidal occupation of Gaza.

TONE AND NARRATIVE

I argue, that Micchan seduces the viewer both through heteronormative sex appeal and through cultural habits that make her seem likeable and fun, even when she talks about violence. Aside from hiding violence in plain sight via the cutified looks, Micchan's voice is a central instrument in this seduction: silky soft, child-like and delivering every message with the same excited intonation. Never wavering from her enthusiastic tone, Micchan's overtly sweet and enticing voice utilizes cuteness as a diversion from the horrors carried out by IDF solders in Gaza. Instead, it functions to selling war as a fun computer game. Disregarded whether she's announcing a merch drop or the dropping of a missile, Micchan always starts and ends on a high tone. This repetition of tone collapses the apparent clash between triviality and atrocity. For instance, pitching a new drop of "moral patches" her tone goes up at the last word: "all patches are fine vowed and finely *embroidered*!", delivered with the same bubbly intonation as "the line between warfare and gamification has been *redesigned*!". Much like a dog responds instinctively to tone of voice, Micchan's excitement functions to draw the viewer's attention, reflecting the ways in which platform logics can mediate affective engagement with violent content. As Micchan speaks, real soldiers move through rubble behind her, yet the pink overlay, the excitement, and the intonation all contribute to a normalized and dulled down experience of the violence onscreen. Thus, the cute voice is a central part of cutification's camouflage: because the voice is cute, the viewer becomes inclined to taking the content less seriously.

While Micchan's tone is consistently cheerful, the content of her sentences differs wildly. This creates a narrative rhythm that oscillates between subtle irony, sarcasm, pretend-promotions of military gear and critical comments. For instance, leaping from presenting a "limited capsule-collection of moral patches featuring the cutest army of the moment" to the biting remark, "when you're down bad for occupation [..] then yeah, violating human rights is NBD if it means being with your favorite e-girl all the time". Media theorists William Merrin and Andrew Hoskins' (2024) concept of *sharded war* points precisely to how contemporary wars appear

not as coherent narratives, but as a stream of algorithmically fragmented, personalized clips circulating on social media. In the art work, this rhythmical structure creates a narrative that follows a social media pace, like that of e.g. TikTok and Instagram. Merrin's and Hoskin's description of "split, splintered, fractured, streamed and shattered" (2024, p. 1) conditions matches *MICCHAN*'s montage-like format: a visual language of rapid, short-form content designed to hold attention through the affective volatility of the quick alternations between emotional states which keeps viewers engaged in an attention economy mediating wars through shards.

However, the very lack of distinction between opposites, that such a montage-like format facilitates, is also what might ultimately jerk the viewer awake of the seduction: snapping out and realizing that a blurring of the line between warfare and gamification is probably not – as Micchan's tone indicates – a celebration worthy development. The illusion that influencer-Micchan sells – a seductive parallel reality, where drone strike footage is streamed as entertainment – is rooted in the real-world phenomenon of "war tourism", such as the so-called "Sderot Cinema", a hilltop in Israel where civilians gather to watch and applaud airstrikes on Gaza. In this context, Micchan's opening line in which she announces the cancellation of "today's FPV drone footage and review," met with faux-disappointed comments in the gamer-style sidebar, resonates as more than satire; it reflects a grotesque proximity to reality. By exaggerating the dissonance between aesthetic pleasure and political violence, the work does not merely parody MilTok tropes but accentuates their underlying violence, compelling the viewer to critically reflect on the normalizing power of the visual logic MilTok is a part of.

ACCELERATION & RHYTHMIC RUPTURE: BREAKING THE SPELL

In the end the critical potential of *MICCHAN* is strongest in its utilization of exaggerated cuteness. This functions by exposing the seductive power of cute militarism, by pushing its logic to the point where it breaks: turning cuteness into *exposure* as I will demonstrate in the following.

Through its contrast with photos streaming out of the war in Gaza Micchan's cheerful announcement that "the line between warfare and gamification has been redesigned", seems so absurd that it appears directed at the artwork's spectator – rather than the fictional live-stream audience. Addressing the viewer directly in this way, breaks with the narrative rhythm and distorts the seductive surface appeal of cutification. By drawing attention to the political agenda of MilTok, MICCHAN uses a strategy that explicitly critiques, rather than subtly hints at such criticisms. This kind of pairing of Micchan's super-cute voice and her outrageous statements like "violating human rights is no big deal," exaggerates the performance to a point where it feels unmistakably satirical rather than merely imitative. In doing so, *MICCHAN* exercises a sort of subversive performance that Kollective Pil and Galia (2023) conceptualize as *overidentification*: the work does not just adopt MilTok tropes of cutification, it distorts them. As the Kollective further describe: "Instead of speaking from an impossible position outside power, [these practices] assume power performatively" (2023, p. 6). Similarly, *MICCHAN's* overidentification exaggerates the platformed structures, taking the system "more seriously than it takes itself seriously" (Ibid), thus exposing the artificiality and performativity inherent in influencer culture. Put simply, the work does not simply critique this system from the outside but performs it to its extreme, inviting the viewer to critically experience how affect circulates as power in a digital war regime.

However, halfway through *MICCHAN*'s visual progression, the whole structure ruptures. The tone and pace changes; a new faster, and much more serious, voice enters with the sentence: "TikTok dances are fully integrated into military training programs". This line is delivered bluntly, without a trace of cute affect, contrasting Micchan's child-like voice, hereby implying a shift from Micchan addressing the fictional audience of the live stream to explicitly addressing the art work's audience. The rhythm breaks, the seduction

collapses. This disruption has the potential to prompt viewers to recognize how they may have hithero been seduced by the cutified violence. This is the artwork's decisive move, where it chooses between hiding and exposing: it mimics the algorithmic logic of MilTok until the viewer is fully immersed in it – and then interrupts it to expose the mechanics of ideological camouflage.

The rupture pushes a recognition of how seamless aesthetic pleasure can dull political judgment. What felt somewhat harmless moments earlier is now pushed to the point of appearing grotesque. This moment exaggerates the short-form rhythm of sharded wars to absurdity, transforming habitual scrolling into a moment of shock. This marks the point where *MICCHAN* stops exaggeratingly mirroring the algorithmic logic of cute militarism and begins to outright expose it, forcing the viewer to snap out of the immersive flow of cutification, irony, and desire. The chock effect is even bigger here, as the work has succesfully lulled the viewer into this Kawaii universe of harmless femininity: confronted with this break, the viewer is left foolishly aware of this almost hypnotic state that blurred the realities of war, distracting from the violence of the reality in Gaza.

In my reading then, *MICCHAN* seeks to expose the affective logic of cute militarism. By exaggerating its tropes, mimicking its structures, and rupturing its rhythms, the artwork provides not only critique but a model for diagnosing how images operate as tools of contemporary warfare: pointing to concrete examples of the ways in which cuteness functions not merely as a style but as a soft weapon, a visual tactic used to aestheticize, distract, and repackage colonial violence. The key function of the the artwork shows that in the digital war regime affect is operational.

OPERATIONAL CUTENESS

This article has traced a shift in the visual economy of war: from the hypervisible spectacle and fetishized masculinity described by Baudrillard and Pasquinelli, through queer and sexualized reworkings of the soldier's body, to a contemporary regime in which militarized power increasingly circulates online through feminized cuteness. What emerges from this genealogy is not merely a stylistic change, but a transformation in how war becomes perceptible, affectively felt, and culturally normalized within platformed media.

Taken together, the dynamics sketched out position cuteness as an operational aesthetic with the power to reorganize how militarized power is felt, shared, and normalized. Rather than countering the phenomenon of MilTok with shocking images of suffering, *MICCHAN* intensifies MilTok's own aesthetic logic through which militarized femininity gains traction. By exaggerating, distorting, and ultimately rupturing cute military tropes, the artwork reveals how cutification can carry ideological force, rendering domination emotionally palatable without hiding it.

This analysis reframes how contemporary war imagery operates. Where earlier accounts of war porn relied on spectacular exposure and masculinized excess, platform-native militarism increasingly moves through intimacy, parasociality, and algorithmic optimization. Influencer genres, post-feminist performance, and cutified sexualization do not merely represent military power; they help mobilize it by cultivating emotional attachment, redirecting desire, and normalizing violence. What may appear as female empowerment or harmless femininity thus becomes a mechanism through which militarism is softened and sustained.

New media scholar Jussi Parikka's concept of *operational images* helps conceptualize this. As he notes, contemporary images are increasingly entities that are processed, circulated, and acted upon within technical systems (Parikka, 2023, p. 23). In a similar vein, the cutified military aesthetics examined here function not primarily as symbolic representation but as what visual culture scholar Aurora Hoel terms active *image agents* (Hoel, 2021) processed by platforms, optimized for circulation, and calibrated to guide attention, emotion, and behavior. Their

political force lies less in what they depict, than in how they operate – in other words what these images *do*: how they format war as content, transform violence into affective ambience, and convert spectatorship into participation within platform capitalism. In this sense, cuteness becomes executable: an effective instrument of power that works subtly through repetition, circulation, and by modulating emotions. This operationality is inseparable from virality. Following Sampson and Parikka (2013), virality can be understood as a core platform logic through which content propagates via social relations, shared feelings, and habitual micro-actions rather than through explicit persuasion. Within this framework, cutified militarism thrives on virality: it spreads through affective attachment, imitation, and parasocial identification, transforming individual emotional responses into scalable political force.

Seen through this lens, MilTok is not simply entertainment or personal branding. Existing research on Israeli public diplomacy and media strategy has already shown how gendered imagery and affect are strategically mobilized as tools of soft power (Avraham, 2009; Berick-Aharony, 2013; Yarchi & Boxman-Shabtai, 2025). At the same time, scholars such as Birlea (2023) and Dale et al. (2017) demonstrate that cuteness is not politically innocent, but a productive affect that can attach to power and violence. Building on this work, I argue that MilTok operates as a form of aesthetic governance in which cuteness helps metabolize militarized authority into emotionally appealing media. Within this system, the desire for figures such as Gun Waifu does not remain confined to the influencer persona; it is gradually transferred to the IDF itself. To paraphrase Micchan: if you can interact with desireable online personas like Gun Waifu anytime, the violation of human rights becomes less important.

MICCHAN intervenes in this platform economy by performing a critical acceleration of its logic. Its strategy of mimicry, overidentification, and rhythmic rupture renders visible the mechanisms through which affect circulates as power in a digital war regime of sharded war. By allowing viewers to feel seduced, then estranged, then confronted with their own implication, the artwork models a mode of critique attuned to the operational realities of platformed warfare, where interruption, distortion, and aesthetic overload may disrupt affective flows more effectively than direct counter-imagery.

Understanding cuteness as an operational aesthetic reshapes how we conceptualize contemporary militarized visibility. War today is not only spectacular or sexualized; it is platform-native, driven by virality and affect. It is also malleable: sometimes it moves through charm rather than command, intimacy rather than intimidation, and cuteness rather than overt coercion. Recognizing this transformation expands the analytic vocabulary available to critical studies of war, media, and platform capitalism and foregrounds the need for artistic and political practices capable of interrupting how violence circulates under the guise of innocence, relatability, and attraction.

NOTES

[1] Like most internet-trends, MilTok is an inherently distributed phenomenon, making the precise connections between each MilTok influencer and the IDF impossible to verify. According to Gun Waifu's Instagram caption from 2023, she enlisted in the IDF in 2016, and judging from her recent posts, she still is (gun practices, arrow shooting, posing on tanks in complicated military gear). Her military thirst-traps in combination with the subtext on her X-account "the Zionist propaganda is PROpaganding - also on Instagram", more than suggests an image-political agenda.

[2] For clarity, I refer from here on to the gijinka-narrator as 'Micchan' while the video work is referenced in capitalised letters, MICCHAN, as the work itself dictates.

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