

SEMIOTIC PERCEPTION OF CUTENESS IN GROGU

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Abstract: This article explores the semiotics of cuteness, drawing from Konrad Lorenz's *Kindchenschema* theory and applying it to Grogu from *The Mandalorian* (Favreau 2019). The study investigates how Grogu's aesthetic and affectionate portrayal contribute to the show's success, employing a semiotic and zoosemiotic framework. The interest of this work delves into how visual and non-verbal expressive patterns convey meaning, analyzing the broader significance of cuteness in human and non-human communication. The analysis centers on Grogu's impact within the Star Wars franchise and discusses how he embodies the *Kindchenschema* attributes proposed by Lorenz, triggering positive affective responses. The article contextualizes the concept of cuteness historically, referencing the term's evolution, and elucidates how attributes aligned with *Kindchenschema* are strategically employed in characters in pop culture. This study underscores the narrative and communicative power of cuteness by examining Grogu's relationship with the protagonist, Din Djarin, and the affective responses elicited by the appearance and behaviors of Baby Yoda. Ultimately, this article showcases the significance of cuteness in captivating audiences and shaping narratives, emphasizing its broader implications in the entertainment cultural industry.

Keywords: Attributes, cuteness, *Kindchenschema*, semiotics, Star Wars, and zoosemiotics.

Nunnususe semiootiline tajumine Grogu näitel

Abstrakt. Käesolev artikkel tegeleb nunnususe semiootikaga Konrad Lorenzi *Kindchenschema*-teooria põhjal, mida rakendatakse siin sarja *Mandaloorlane* (Favreau 2019–...) tegelasele nimega Grogu. (Zoo)semiootilisest vaatepunktist uuritakse, kuidas Grogu esteetika ning tema armas kujutamiseviis aitavad kaasa telesarja edukusele. Tuntakse huvi, kuidas visuaalsed ja mitteverbaalsed väljendusmustrid tähendust edastavad, ning analüüsitakse nunnususe laiemat tähtsust inimlikus ja mitteinimlikus kommunikatsioonis. Analüüsitakse, kuidas mõjutab Grogu Star Warsi frantsiisi, ning arutletakse selle üle, kuidas Grogu – Lorenzi *Kindchenschema* kehastus – käivitab positiivseid afektiivseid reaktsioone. Samuti asetab artikkel nunnususe mõiste ajaloolisse konteksti ning näitab, kuidas *Kindchenschema*'ga kooskõlas olevaid omadusi popkultuuris läbivalts strateegiliselt kasutatakse, et luua armastusväärseid tegelasi. Uurides Grogu suhet peategelase Din Djariniga ning Baby Yoda käitumise ja välimuse esile kutsunud afektiivseid reaktsioone, rõhutab artikkel nunnususe narratiivset ja kommunikatiivset jõudu. Lõppeks näitab artikkel nunnususe tähtsust publiku kaasahaaramisel ja narratiivide kujundamisel, mistõttu on sel laiem tähtsus ka meelelahutustööstusele.

Märksõnad: omadused, nunnusus, *Kindchenschema*, semiootika, Tähesõjad, zoosemiootika.

Introduction

The entertainment world presents us with a window and a reflection of the human condition and communication. Despite the obvious economic interests of producers, since the middle of the last century, audiovisual cultural products have tended to be given importance as units of analysis of various social phenomena based on different conceptual and intellectual theories. This essay aims to extrapolate the concepts of cuteness and *Kindchenschema* proposed and developed mainly by the Austrian zoologist, ethologist, and psychologist Konrad Lorenz¹ by applying them to the worldwide successful streaming series *The Mandalorian* (2019). The case study of this series as a unit of analysis is possible thanks to the relationship between its protagonists: Din Djarin and Grogu, and the aesthetics and affection of the latter, which will be approached from the framework of semiotics and zoosemiotics.

This article argues for a semiotic understanding of perception. Because, although semiotics is the discipline that studies sense, by extension, it also analyzes the senses and how "meaning is actually conveyed through a specific combination of visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and haptic (touch) expressive patterns" (Leone 2015: 384). These patterns, that in both humans and non-humans, structure systems of communicative signs that guide, coordinate, communicate, and make it possible to share explicitly or evocatively (non-verbally) emotional states in the mental states of the interpreters not only to inform but also to alter the experience. (Cariani 2015: 919–920) that for this analysis is the relationship between the two protagonists in this series.

The zoosemiotic approach attributed to the cuteness in Grogu is premised on broadening the interest beyond the verbal to the prelinguistic. This is based on the maxim that "zoosemiotic research is indispensable in the study of human semiogenesis in general" (Nöth 1990: 155) considering the significance patterns that are evident in animals, which can be extrapolated to the cultural and social spheres.

Star Wars is undoubtedly one of the cultural phenomena with the most significant worldwide impact of the last century. Since the premiere of its first film *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope*, in 1977, it remains one of the most profitable franchises. The fictional universe that has been presented to us throughout these decades has not stopped expanding due to its movies, spin-offs, documentaries, manuals, TV series, animated series, books, comics, video games, parks, toys, etc., which have established this universe in a way that it is not even fair to compare with *Harry Potter*, *Pokemon*, *Marvel*, *The Lord of the Rings* or the book saga of the American writer George R.R. Martin, *Song of Ice and Fire*. Due to its success and the possibilities offered by this narrative, Disney bought *Star Wars* in 2012 to, among other projects, present us seven years later its own streaming platform called Disney+, having as a big surprise its first live-action series called *The Mandalorian*.

¹ The first appearance of this concept was in his book *Das Dogenannte Böse Zur Naturgeschichte Der Aggression* in 1963, whose English translation was presented in 1966 under the name *On Aggression*.

This story takes place a few years after the fall of the Empire in *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi* (1983) and 25 years before the rise of the First Order that already rules the galaxy in *Episode VII: The Force Awakens* (2015). It introduces us to Din Djarin or the Mandalorian, who is a bounty hunter from the planet Mandalor who despite not being of this race, as a founding follows the creed religiously and radically.(McCluskey 2019) The way of this lone gunfighter - which follows the archetype of "The Man with No Name" played by Clint Eastwood in the 1960s *Dollars Trilogy* directed by Sergio Leone - takes a twist when he accepts a mission in which he has to capture and deliver an "asset", preferably alive, who would turn out to be the co-protagonist of this series and the reason for this essay: Grogu. Baby Yoda, as he was popularly known until his real name was revealed in the second season due to his remarkable resemblance to the iconic Master Yoda, is an infant of only 50 years old of a species that is quite rare and powerful. This is due to its bond with the Force. And, furthermore, since his appearance in the last minute of the first episode, fans of the franchise, the general audience, and Din Djarin himself were captivated by its cuteness. Figure 1 shows the last frame of this chapter, where the urgency of contact between the two parts is illustrated with their fingers almost touching, which can be related to the famous fresco painting by Michelangelo called *The Creation of Adam*; just as God is the father of Adam, Djarin is also father to Grogu because the former sees his image and likeness in the latter.



Figure 1. Din Djarin captivated by the cuteness of Baby Yoda. Frame from *The Mandalorian*. (Source: TV Guide).

Case study

In this case study, the intention is to apply the concepts of cute and *Kindchenschema* as a premise to demonstrate how and why Grogü's instant success was achieved, taking as a theoretical basis the main postulates of the zoosemiotics of the American linguist and semiotician Thomas Sebeok. This article will be developed by first establishing the definitions of each concept, then presenting the reader with a brief cultural overview of 'cute' in popular culture, and finally analyzing Grogü, taking into account his appearances, interactions, and relationships with others.

First of all, the origin of signs has been controversial since the great boom of semiotics in the sixties because semioticians consider the sign as "ready-made entities" (Trifonas 2015: 24) which hardly explains its emergence and evolution within the human species. Hence, in the same year that the psychiatrist and "endemic semiotician" Friedrich S. Rothschild proposed the term 'biosemiotics', Thomas Sebeok coined the term 'zoosemiotics' in 1963 as "the discipline, within which the science of signs intersects with ethology, devoted to the scientific study of signaling behavior in and across animal species" (Sebeok 1972: 61). A scientific study that, along with the structuralist base of linguistics, facilitates understanding the systems, mechanisms, and functions of human and animal communication by understanding them as communicative systems that conduct behavior and action through explicit or evocative messages (Cariani 2015: 919). In other words, zoosemiotics as a transdisciplinary research field "extend the theory of meaning so as to account for presumably corresponding designative processes among the speechless creatures". (Sebeok 2001: 41) Moreover, it is precisely this extension and dialogue between ethology, linguistics, semiotics, anthropology, and biology that allows and provides us with more tools for a much deeper study of the origin of the sign as such, setting aside "the artificial boundary of culture" (Deely 2015: 57) from the core of the discussion. As humans, we must first understand the meaning-making and communication process of non-humans.

Therefore, regarding the various forms of communication and interaction encountered in human and non-human development and evolution, we are concerned this time with the nature and culture of cuteness.² However, what is cuteness, how does it operate, and why? One could begin by mentioning that the "[c]urrent usages of the word 'cute' can be traced back at least as far as the 1850s in American and British English, where the term was aligned with children, women, the domestic sphere, and a particular form of "feminine spectacle"" (McIntyre et al. 2016: 2). Over time this would mutate, thanks to its constant familiar and commercial use, so that in a more straightforward way it can be assured that in broad terms, 'cute' refers to specific attributes that provoke positive affective responses or feelings "of warmth and closeness accompanied by behavior patterns of caring associated with brood tending about beings or objects aroused by their specific infantile attributes." (Genosko 2005: 4) Those provocations,

² Both nature and culture (basically the West) are mentioned because the primary intention of the author is the cultural semiotic study of this fictitious character from its zoosemiotic features.

responses, and/or affects of the 'cute' towards the one who experiences³ it are the cornerstone of a series of social relations and interactions that, at the same time reproduce a “an aesthetic code inclusive of various cues, schemata, and social signifiers” (Dydynski 2020: 233).

In the previous paragraph, a key idea has already been mentioned: that of “infantile attributes”, which continues Charles Darwin's line of thought “that infants must have some quality arising from natural selection that prompts adults to care for them, Konrad Lorenz inaugurated the scholarship on cute affect in 1943 when he delineated his *Kindchenschema*, or 'child schema': a set of physical and behavioral characteristics common to young children and baby animals alike.” (McIntyre et al. 2016: 3) This theory of evolutionary biology, which has been applied to multiple fields of research such as aesthetics, design, and psychology, seeks to analyze and explain from the morphology of babies (human and non-human) the communicative needs that influenced physiological changes over time (Dydynski 2020: 225). This theory and mainly this schema will be the basis for the analysis of Groggu as a fictional character due to the physical characteristics that this figure possesses, following Lorenz's premise in which he extended the concept of cuteness also to inanimate objects such as dolls, toys, and stuffed animals, since in these there is in itself an anthropomorphic analogy (Dydynski, Mäekivi 2018: 8). At this point, it is appropriate to mention and illustrate (see figure 2 and figure 3 below) what he stated about the popular Kewpie dolls (1912) and their cuteness and affection, which:

[...] represents the maximum possible exaggeration of the proportions between cranium and face which our perception can tolerate without switching our response from the sweet baby to that elicited by the eerie. (Lorenz 1981: 164)



Figure 2 and Figure 3. Kewpie dolls (Source: Wikipedia: Kewpie).

³ Although the purpose of this article is not to reformulate or debate the definition of this concept, the author's point of view will start by understanding “cuteness” as something that is experienced - mainly - through our visual sense. Although we will take into account the ideas of Jason Mario Dydynski, Ph.D. in Semiotics, who argues that cuteness as an experience and phenomenon is multisensory due to its biosemiotics and affective bases and that the modes of understanding are not only represented through visual phenomena but also tactile, auditory or even linguistic ones. (Dydynski 2020: 232)

Secondly, the understanding and use of 'cute' has been seen throughout history, but more precisely, its value and prominence should be mentioned since the beginning of the last century. Not only do we have the example of the Kewpie dolls, but also in the audiovisual world, several cases remain and have great relevance today in popular culture, such as the beloved Disney mouse. Mickey Mouse has been an object of study because in him, the maxim of "Keep it cute!" (Genosko 2005: 1) is evidenced, where the exaggeration of specific aesthetic attributes was progressively established under the regime of cuteness that made animators align themselves to Konrad Lorenz's *Kindchenschema* over the decades (McIntyre *et al.* 2016: 3). However, what precisely was done to him? Mickey's eyes, head length, and cranial vault size were increased. His arms, legs, belly, muzzle, and ears were thickened with the purpose to "trigger 'innate releasing mechanisms'⁴ of caring and the related affective responses of adults to children" (Genosko 2005: 1) because IRMs react positively to the perception of intervals and relationships between the diverse attributes rather than absolute values. (Lorenz 1981) This commercial and highly successful formula with audiences and consumers is found in many other popular culture references such as *Bambi* (1942), *Hello Kitty* (1974), *E.T.* (1982), *My Little Pony* (1983), *Pokemon* (1996), *Groot from the Marvel Cinematic Universe* (2014) and of course *Grogu* (2019)⁵.

When we think of *The Mandalorian*, we think of Baby Yoda. While watching the recent finale of its third season (2023), a doubt arose in one of the scenes where we only see the two main characters: What exactly am I watching, and how is it possible for me to be excited about what I am seeing? That is to say, leaving aside the nostalgia, the narrative, and the hero's journey, what this series presents us with is the relationship between a 34-centimeter green figure who does not speak and very rarely makes a sound with a human covered in shiny, heavily armed metal which by choice does not remove his helmet and who does not utter more than two sentences in a row. So what is it in between that makes us want to know more about them and their adventures? The answer comes from the big-eyed creature without speech but with a gigantic virtue: his cuteness. First and foremost, at this point, it is necessary to introduce to the reader the characteristics of the *Kindchenschema* proposed by Konrad Lorenz in his book *The Foundations of Ethology: The Principal Ideas and Discoveries in Animal Behavior* (1981 [1978]) employing Figure 4 where each of the attributes of the scheme are enunciated and shown (Genosko 2005: 5)⁶:

1. Head large and thick in proportion to the body;
2. Protruding forehead large in proportion to the size of the rest of the face;
3. Large eyes below the middle line of the total head;
4. Short, stubby limbs with pudgy feet and hands;

⁴ In *Motivation of Human and Animal Behavior* (1973) Konrad Lorenz and Paul Leyhausen: Describes an innate releasing mechanism (IRM) in human adults that is triggered by configurations of key attributes, in this case those of cute infants, eliciting affective patterns of behavior such as the desire to cuddle, pat, use pet names in a high-pitched voice, generally care for, perhaps nurse, bend down one's head (Genosko 2005: 6)

⁵ This article will not analyze or reference the culture of cuteness in Japan known as Kawaii.

⁶ The eight attributes listed here integrate specific ideas postulated by Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt in his book *Ethology: The Biology of Behavior* (1970) that the philosopher, semiotician, and media theorist Gary Genosko groups together and adapts in his article *Natures and Cultures of Cuteness* (2005) to offer a broader and more accurate framework.

5. Rounded, fat body shape;
6. Soft, elastic body surfaces;
7. Round, chubby cheeks;
8. Clumsiness⁷ [stumbling movements]



Figure 4. Attributes of the scheme. Frame from the *The Mandalorian* (Source: Mashable).

This relationship between physiological attributes generates "a match between stimulus (cuteness) and response (caring)" (Levinson 2022: 4) that guarantees the survival of the infant regardless of whether they share a language or even if they are of the same species. If we go back to the first two episodes, we can visualize the instant effects Grogu has on the Mandalorian when the latter finds him in his "egg", because Din Djarin decides to keep him alive, which complicates the mission and forces him to kill his android companion. "Cuteness cultivates submissiveness, and it relieves one of the responsibility of understanding its physical and psychological consequences" (Genosko 2005: 4) The Mandalorian is not interested in fully understanding why he "betrays" his code and reputation as a gunfighter; he only assumes responsibility for the welfare of this 50-year-old child. Although he indeed ends up handing him over to the Empire, Din Djarin returns for him, endangering himself and his entire tribe.⁸

In the strictest sense, it is the facial expression and the body features of, in this case, an "inanimate object" that makes us link in the first instance with the schema of a human or animal baby while at the same time demanding an interpretation of the subject who feels that something is cute, which in the process creates a relationship between the two. (McIntyre *et al.*, 2016: 18) Each of the characters, no matter what fictitious species are, who crosses paths with Grogu as well as the spectator who perceives his cuteness through the screen,

⁷ Attribute number 8 points out the threat that is directed towards Grogu as a sign of his facility to always put himself in danger due to his lack of self-defense skills, which is somehow connected to clumsiness. Another attribute that would be interesting to analyze is the expressiveness of Grogu's ears as a tail

⁸ For the purpose of this article, the author is taking as motivation the perception of the "cuteness" because another reading that could be made of this decision is that the Mandalorian sees himself in the big eyes of Baby Yoda as a foundling.

demonstrates “similar responses of carefulness and attention to that of viewing infants or animals” (Dydynski 2020: 228). It is no coincidence that the “bad guys” are precisely those who do not flinch in front of Baby Yoda and want to take advantage of him at any cost, i.e., the pirates, mercenaries without honor, and agents of the Empire are the ones who, lacking or “ignoring” their innate releasing mechanisms, can evade the affective bond that the “good guys” do have.

The above mentioned clearly works as a communicative and narrative strategy this TV series uses to establish particular empathy and consensus with the audience to distinguish and identify the heroes from the villains through the relationship that triggers Grogu’s cuteness. In the interaction presented here, the Affection Disposition Theory does not apply from a psychological or interpretative point of view because the enjoyment of the spectators is not to evaluate and dialogue with a morally ambiguous narrative that guides the behaviors and motivations of the protagonists, provoking empathy, pleasure, indifference or disgust throughout the development of the story⁹, but thanks to Baby Yoda the spectator and the “good guys” know which is the light side of the force and which is the dark side since the beginning with no room for ambiguity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what Disney has achieved in so few years with this clumsy green character, who represents the opposite of Master Yoda’s wisdom, is another example that cuteness sells. Nevertheless, it should not be assumed that this is simply a mercantile aesthetic because these attributes are “vehicular and transferable from human to non-human creatures and hybrid forms. It is precisely this so-called illusion that unites biological with commercial and emotional concerns” (Genosko 2005: 2). Both in the *Star Wars* universe and in our reality as consumers, we are kidnapped under the yoke of the culture of cute and nostalgia, expecting to pay the ransom by searching for new hope in the same wrong place; the culture industry. According to the line of thought and critical theory of the Frankfurt School, philosophers and sociologists Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), establish that the omnipresence of entertainment culture is ideologically permeated by the logic of the capitalism where culture is nothing more than a commodity that recycles formulas to produce cultural products under the same parameters, thus achieving a universal and effective control (Adorno, Horkheimer 2002[1944]). Therefore, the *Kindchenschema* and the idea of cuteness are and have been practical theoretical tools for this type of industry composed of replication and consumption due to their characteristics exposed in this article from psychology and semiotics.

Finally, based on the premise that “semiotics is a field that studies patterned communication” (Sebeok 1972: 82), this article formulated and found

⁹ Raney, Arthur A.; Schmid-Petri, Hannah; Niemann, Julia; Ellensohn, Michael 2009. Testing affective disposition theory: A comparison of the enjoyment of hero and antihero narratives. *Annual Conference of the International Communication Association*, Chicago, IL, 21–25 May.

these conceptual patterns starting from a simple and concrete theoretical framework. Based on this framework, it was demonstrate that meaning is effectively conveyed by mainly visual expressive cues in the case of cuteness, applied to a streaming series that has been watched by millions of people around the world in order to justify, to some extent, the reason for its success inside and outside the fandom. The attractive empathy between Grogu and Din Djarin (Figure 5) that is presented goes far beyond the Mandalorian creed and the sense of duty to the foundlings because "they are the future"¹⁰ (Favreau 2019), but rather Baby Yoda is undoubtedly the perfect example of the properties of Kindchenschema reapplied to popular culture that triggers both fictional and real-world caring and affective responses. Their relationship is that of a father who, at first sight, perceives his son in the other with emotion but simultaneously with commitment because, after all, that is what *Star Wars* has always been about... Fatherhood.



Figure 5. Grogu. Frame from *The Mandalorian* (Source: *Entertainment Weekly*).

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¹⁰ As the Armorer, the leader of the Mandalorians warrior tribe, mentions to Din Djarin in episode 3: The Sin.

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