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## *SpyXFamily* and the *Kawaii*: The Commodification of Girlhood

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### **Abstract**

*SpyXFamily* is a manga-adapted anime series, currently streaming on Netflix. The main plot centres on Loid Forger (alias, Twilight) and his spy work for the Westalis government which necessitates an elaborate ruse of constructing a fake nuclear family and having secret identities within the family unit, thus adding multiple layers of complexity to the plot. However, as evident from the numerous comments on “Kissanime”, the focus of the spectators is drawn towards Anya-Loid’s adopted daughter, rather than the very real politics of the Cold War which influences the plot. It is further interesting to note that most of Loid’s actions- espionage and otherwise, are often influenced by Anya and her actions. Being telepathic and keeping her telepathy a secret from her pretend family, Anya is the only one who has complete knowledge of her fake parents’ true identities. What happens then, when the entire truth of a situation, an elaborate ruse, is made privy to a little girl who wields her cuteness with as much ruthlessness as a trained spy and an assassin? Cuteness or *Kawai* (in Japanese) becomes a way through which this series draws our attention to the figure of the “girl”, an orphan who was left unchosen for a long while and looked upon as a freak. How do such representations of cuteness, smallness, and fragility portrayed in the series, coupled with an absolute means of knowing the truth, affect the image of the little girl? Combining this image of “freaky powers” and cuteness that the figure of the child elicits; I claim that the representation of the “cute” in *SpyXFamily* inherently becomes an aesthetic tool through which the body of the all-knowing child is gendered and is represented as helpless and innocent. Thinking through Sianne Ngai’s concepts of the aesthetic category of the “Cute”, I further claim that this gendered child becomes a commodity through which the audience is invited into the culture of consumption, thus masking the far larger political issues that the genre of espionage usually entails.

*Keywords:* *kawaii*; cuteness; commodification; girlhood; anime

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“Cuteness’ has always been considered to be in the realm of children, especially among girls”(Shiokawa 94).

Browsing through social media or OTT platforms for “cute” content, one often comes across this association of the “cute” with the “childlike” and “feminine” rendered into the body of little things - essentially portrayed as unthreatening, vulnerable, and desiring protection. Anime often becomes a source of such “cuteness” for those who know where to look. With the quite recent burst of anime content on OTT platforms such as Netflix, the realm of Japanese “cuteness” or *kawaii* - as it is referred to, has become more accessible to the “cute”-thirsty audience. *SpyXFamily* becomes one such example of *kawaii* aesthetics on Netflix. Watching the anime, one often feels attacked by “cuteness”. The *kawaii* aesthetics of “in-yer-face” cuteness in *SpyXFamily* is noticeably restricted within the little body of Anya- one of the three protagonists of *SpyXFamily*.

Entrenched in the genres of espionage and fantasy, *SpyXFamily*’s plot is a curious amalgamation of the Cold War politics of intrigue and the postwar Japanese obsession with the *kawaii*. The plot centres on Loid Forger (alias, Twilight) and his spy work for the Westalis government which necessitates an elaborate ruse of constructing a fake nuclear family and having secret identities within the family unit, thus adding multiple layers of complexity to the plot. The first episode introduces the spy Twilight as well as the mission which drives the plot of the series. As a Westalis spy, he is required to spy on Donovan Desmond- the leader of the National Unity Party of Ostania, and “a grave threat to the truce between Westalis and Ostania”. To gain access to the reclusive Donovan Desmond, Twilight needs to enrol a child in the elite private school that Desmond’s son attends (“SPY×FAMILY Episode 01 English Sub” 2:53-3:18). The plot begins with Twilight assuming the fake identity of Loid Forger- a psychiatrist and adopting a girl- Anya, from a nondescript orphanage. Anya’s admission process necessitates the presence of a mother. Loid thus allies with Yor - a secret assassin for the Ostanian shadow government, to pretend to have a family. Interestingly, the only

person in this family who is privy to the knowledge of Loid's and Yor's secret identities is Anya who is a telepath, but she in turn, must keep her telepathy a secret from her family.

The extreme covert operations, themes of espionage and assassination, and the division of Westalis and Ostania are the cultural legacy of Cold War politics. It is a well-known fact in *SpyXFamily* fandom that the political setup of the series is heavily influenced by East and West Germany during the Cold War. The politics of the Cold War is indeed a fertile ground for covert operations as well as espionage fiction. Fictions like *James Bond* achieved immense heights of popularity by ensconcing the Cold War rhetoric of espionage, masculine spy work, and building an American model of the perfect spy- cool, logical, suave, and good at combat. Loid's character is built upon this American model of the spy but has added qualities of realism to his character. As Loid says, espionage work is one where one should not draw too much attention, should be able to disguise himself perfectly, and must not expect any recognition or reward for risking one's life ("SPY×FAMILY - Episode 03 English Sub" 19:11-19:13). This reflects one of the formulaic conceptions of the spy's body as one which is a site of contradictions. It must "remain visible to the narrative, [but] the spy should, by all accounts, remain invisible" (Hepburn 09). However, the focus of the series is drawn towards the child Anya and not the complexities of identities that the plot incorporates. As evident from the numerous comments by the audience on the website "Kissanime", Anya and her *kawaii* aesthetics become the driving force for the series. One of the comments encapsulates precisely this sentiment: "I came for the story but I stayed for anya [sic] she's such [sic] ball of cuteness and comedy" (Ranger Joe).

The paper will endeavour to look at the first three episodes of *SpyXFamily*. For accessibility purposes, the paper would quote from the episodes uploaded on YouTube rather than on Netflix, although the content and timestamps on both platforms are exactly similar. Further, the paper makes use of the English subtitles while quoting, claiming that the English translations on the dubbed versions are quite similar to the subtitles on the Japanese audio version. This decision has been taken to preserve the *Kawaii* auditory aesthetic for the readers who would want to follow the links and watch

the sections quoted. Although the paper would make use of discourse analysis to look at the aesthetics of the series, it would also connect such representations of the *kawaii* to larger discourses of gender, age, and politics. Further, by utilising Sianne Ngai's take on the "cute" as an aesthetic category of a hyper-capitalist world, the paper will investigate the politics of commodification that takes place when a girl child's body is seen and desired through the lens of *kawaii*. Moreover, the paper will also include comments by viewers of *SpyXFamily* to see what kind of responses the *kawaii* elicits from the audience.

The first part of the paper will delve into the aesthetics of the *kawaii* and investigate how it has historically been associated with the childlike and the feminine. Following this, it would then investigate how the *kawaii* aesthetics are represented in *SpyXFamily* primarily through the body of the girl child Anya and contrast the visual representation of Anya's face and body with that of Loid and Yor's, claiming that the *kawaii* necessarily finds its place within Anya's body and sees a lack in Loid and Yor. The second part of the paper will primarily focus on Anya's role in the series, claiming that the actions and events that transpire within the diegetic space occur because of Anya. Thus, this section would argue that Anya becomes the focal point of the series, not just through her *kawaii* aesthetics but also through her instrumental skill of telepathy which informs and guides most of the actions analysed in the first three episodes. The third section of the paper would pick up the argument formed in the preceding section, and investigate how Anya's extremely central role in the series reworks the *kawaii* aesthetics. It would attempt to answer how the *kawaii*, which portrays the object as being innocent and childlike, even vulnerable, gets reworked when the object embodying *kawaii*-ness possesses potentially lethal information and powers. The fourth part of the paper will finally look at the commodification of Anya's body and how the notion of "cute" is inherently linked with that of the commodity and the "child". It attempts to explain the popularity of anime like *SpyXFamily* and the burst of production, circulation, and consumption on OTT platforms like Netflix. It also focuses on how the commodification of Anya's *kawaii*-ness pulls the focus of the

spectators from the problematic representations of West and East Germany during the Cold War.

### **The Political Aesthetics of *Kawaii* and Gender Representation**

The *kawaii* aesthetics in Japanese pop culture is generally associated with the “cute”. However, as Kanako Shiokawa points out, *kawai* or *kawaii* originally appeared in Lady Murasaki’s *Story of Genji* (around 1000 A.D.) and it was used to refer to the sentiments of pity and empathy, also expanding to such objects or situations which invited such sentiments (95). Although *kawaii* did not begin as a gendered aesthetic category, during the Shogunate period (1192-1867), the helplessness of *kawaii* objects was seen as pitiable and charming. Soon *kawaii* became the standard aesthetic category to describe the ideal woman and girl child- who is demure, docile, fragile, slightly hysterical, but largely, lacking any threatening qualities. As Shiokawa notes, till the early 1960s, *kawaii* indeed had a negative intonation and was used to refer to a lack of inherent danger and aggressiveness in a person, animal, or object. However, in the late 1960s, the connotations of *kawaii* expanded. Whereas earlier it was used to denote those who had lesser political valence, post the 1960s and by the late 1980s, it had acquired the status of a commodity in the mass market (95). However, the commodification of *kawaii* aesthetics worked differently in Japan than in the rest of the world. Japan favoured the prepubescent girl with smooth skin, a round face, and big eyes that had glitters and sparkles rather than the American Cabbage Patch doll with its realistic face and “grotesque” dimples (Shiokawa 96). Thus, even when the *kawaii* transitioned from a social and political setting to a commercial commodity-driven one, the figure of the tiny, prepubescent girl with round edges, a flat chest, and a non-threatening demeanour continued. “Smoothness and roundness are preferred over shades and angles” (Shiokawa 97). This, quite significantly, links *Kawaii* to the figure of a girl who seems vulnerable on two accounts- her age and her gender.

Through this gendered lens of *kawaii* aesthetics, Anya Forger’s body becomes a commodity that is consumed, reproduced, and disseminated. Ngai, while talking about “cute” objects, says that even if cuteness serves to outlaw certain aspects of erotic activities- such as child molestation, by eliciting a response of aggressively protecting

that which is “cute” from harm, it nevertheless also becomes a way of “bringing that sexuality out” and gendering the “cute” object (60). In the journey from manga to anime to the Netflix OTT platform, Anya’s body is gazed at through the lens of *kawaii*. Whereas in the manga form, Anya’s body and face see an almost lack of sketching and shading, in the anime, she is filled with colour. Her hair is made pink, her big eyes glitter, and there are almost no angular protrusions of her nose or lips on her face. She is often shown as a wide-eyed child, blushing, with her mouth slightly open in wonder. Further, Anya’s style of walking and her voice, as shown in the anime, contribute to her *kawaii* aesthetics. She is usually shown to either skip or shuffle around, taking wider and uninhibited steps, arms thrown wide open to portray an image of infantile trust and negligence towards dangers. She is made to lisp, and mispronounce words, for example, “walk” becomes “wok” to her (“SPY×FAMILY - Episode 03 English Sub”, 10:15-10:19) She elicits incoherent sounds of surprise, distress, and happiness-suggesting that her innocence often gets reduced to mere sounds and cannot be encapsulated in “adult” speech. Such an image of Anya propagates her extreme vulnerability and innocence- stressing the stereotypical conception of the “child” as one who is innocent and must be protected at all costs. One of the comments by a viewer- “King Wxves” on the “Kissanime” forum voices exactly this sentiment that the *kawaii* aesthetics of Anya invites: “Anya is adorable and shall be *protected* at all times” (my emphasis, King Wxves).

In contrast, Loid Forger is drawn and represented through angular strokes. His eyes are perpetually drawn close in doubt and scepticism, his lips are pursed, rarely smiling, and his nose protrudes out of his angular face. Loid’s figure and the angular pen strokes are used to hint towards the danger he poses as a spy- both physical and political. Loid’s profession as a spy makes him a formidable threat to his enemies. This threat is manifested in the way his figure is represented, his measured steps while walking, and his deep staccato voice. Most of Loid’s dialogues are interior monologues and the ones which do take place with other characters, are extremely measured and short in content. Meanwhile, Yor is portrayed alternately as vulnerable and threatening. Her face is also angular like Loid’s, her chin sharp and defined. Her eyes

are drawn as slightly larger but slanted, allowing her features to transition between the role of a blushing woman and a dangerous assassin. Yor is given the body of a grown woman, her large breasts often peeking through her clothes, but which can be covered under layers of loose clothing which give her figure a more rounded and hence a slightly *kawaii* aesthetic. Yor is shown to be more agile with her feet, drawing the male gaze upon her shapely thighs and waist. Thus, Yor's representation in both, the anime and the manga function dually to represent the femininity of the dangerous assassin.

### **The Centrality of Anya in *SpyXFamily***

The gendered body of Anya- portrayed, as we saw in earlier sections, through the *kawaii* aesthetics, serves more than one function. The plot surprisingly does not revolve around Loid and Yor striving to protect the helpless and vulnerable Anya from their respective enemies. Rather, it is because of Anya that their respective missions seem to progress. Taking instances from the first three episodes to limit the present study's scope, this section of the paper will see how Anya's skill of telepathy, through her *kawaii*-ness, aids the formation of the family necessary for Loid's and Yor's respective missions and how she becomes instrumental in safeguarding Loid's and Yor's identities from each other.

In the very first episode, when Loid approaches the orphanage to secure a child who can read and write, for his mission, Anya who hears Loid's thoughts and knows about his requirements, makes herself available for his scrutiny. She exposes her vulnerability to Loid and declares, very cutely, that she is six years old, and uses her telepathy to solve a highly advanced crossword puzzle by listening to Loid's thoughts (06:02-06:41). Her performance of her intelligence combined with her portrayal of vulnerability and non-threatening demeanour make her a desirable candidate for Loid's secret mission. It is also due to Anya's intervention that Loid and Yor collaborate. As episode two unfolds, the audience is introduced to Yor- an assassin from Ostania who goes by the name "Thorn Princess". To avoid the suspicion of her co-workers, Yor needs to play the part of a "normal" woman in her late twenties. As a result, she is required to bring a boyfriend to a party thrown by her co-workers. Loid, whom she meets perchance in her coffee shop, becomes the ideal candidate for a date,

but she gets discouraged when she sees Anya referring to Loid as “Papa”. In an interior monologue, Yor considers her options and discards Loid as a possible candidate for her date since she believes he is married, and such complications might compromise her secrecy. Anya, being a telepath, comes to know that Yor is an assassin and that she kills people for a living. In her mind, the prospect of having a spy for a father and an assassin for a mother becomes so interesting that she deliberately puts herself to work to manipulate the situation and bring about the collaboration between Loid and Yor. As soon as Yor considers disengaging herself from Loid’s presence, Anya pretends to cry, saying how she feels lonely without a mother. Once it has been established that Loid does not have a wife, it becomes easier for Yor to approach him and ask him to accompany her to the party as her boyfriend. Meanwhile, in return, Loid asks her to pretend to be Anya’s mother for the interview at Eden College (03:21-13:14). Thus, a partnership between Loid and Yor is forged through the machinations of Anya. Here, Anya wields her vulnerability and cuteness as a tool to bring about a collaboration that would serve her twofold interest- one, to provide entertainment and two, to have a family.

Not only does Anya become essential in forging her new family, but she also directs and helps her foster parents in their missions. For example, in episode three, Yor, upon spotting a robbery, immediately jumps into action and runs away to trace the thief. Loid searches in vain too, but both are unable to locate the thief in the crowd. Anya, using her telepathy, locates the thief by listening to his thoughts, and to draw Loid’s attention towards him cries for cake by pointing at the shop in front of which the thief was standing. Loid, who recognizes the thief, catches him and returns the bag to the old lady (17:00-18:53). In this way, without drawing attention to her telepathic powers, but performing the part of a *kawaii* girl, Anya directs Loid’s righteous actions.

### **Reworking the *Kawaii* Aesthetic through Anya**

How then, do such actions rework the *kawaii* aesthetic? How does *kawaii* become a tool through which Anya shields her much more lethal power of telepathy? Since

*kawaii* works to render the body vulnerable, child-like, and innocent (Ngai 59), it lies slightly at odds with Anya's powers of telepathy. We have already, in earlier sections of the paper, seen how *kawaii* for Anya becomes a means to achieve her ends within the diegetic space. Here, however, we will see how the aesthetics of the *kawaii* get reworked and modified by the audiences' knowledge of Anya's powers. *Kawaii*, in Anya's case, does not render her helpless but makes her seem so within the diegetic space. Her telepathy becomes a lethal tool through which she is privy to all knowledge and secrets. This effectively compromises the Romantic notion of the innocent child who is oblivious to the evils of the world. Anya, very evidently, is not the romantic child. She has been prodded upon by scientists who were responsible for conducting cruel and alienating experiments on her to generate a telepathic child to win the war. She was also left without a family repeatedly and mistreated by the orphanage officials. Anya understands what it means to be a spy or an assassin. Therefore, she is definitely not an innocent and oblivious child. Although her past elicits a response of pity and empathy for her- keeping up with the old definition of *kawaii* - her knowledge of the secret identities of her foster parents makes her as much a part of the ongoing war as they are.

Shiokawa mentions that with later manga and anime, the *kawaii* girl/woman was endowed with magical and mystical powers- potentially deadly, but linked it to the market drive for such "cute but deadly" female protagonists (117). However, Kenny Wei Lun Liew posits that the *kawaii* can be reworked to question, if not unhinge, its patriarchal roots (4-5). We do see such an investigation of the masculine espionage genre taking place in *SpyXFamily*. As John Cawelti chalks out the history of the genre of espionage, one cannot help but note the masculinity of the genre. Most instances he refers to in the history and development of the spy story feature either a male spy who gains information through physical and mental superiority or a *femme fatale* who uses her sexuality to gain information ("The Spy Story's Story: A Brief History " 34 -54). Here, however, Loid Forger is less capable of extracting information than Anya. Whereas Loid has to go into elaborate ruses and disguises in order to extract information, Anya just has to tune in to their thoughts. This relative ease with which she can possibly fulfil Loid's role as a spy makes her a far more competent candidate.

Further, as we have seen in previous sections of the paper, it is because of Anya's interventions that Loid and Yor can fulfil their missions. Without her telepathic powers, Loid's espionage mission would have failed and Yor would be caught as a possible spy.

However, the *kawaii* also serves to cover up Anya's deadly powers. Behind her big glittering eyes, secrets pile up, but the *kawaii*-ness of Anya resists their spilling over. Through her cute voice and gesticulations, Anya effectively masks the fact that she is much more powerful than either Loid or Yor. Her telepathy makes her deadly. This reworks the aesthetic of *kawaii* as appearing non-threatening. But her *kawaii* effectively also masks her lethal powers from not just the other characters in the series but also from the audience. Even through the audience's gaze, Anya's telepathy becomes an incidental event rather than a subversion of patriarchal notions of the genre of espionage. Thus, the *kawaii* works here to subvert as well as assert its feminine and child-like qualities.

### **The Commodification of Anya and her *Kawaii*-ness and Suppression of Cold War Politics**

*Kawaii* propagates this image of helplessness to provide a cover through which Anya's deadly power can be practised as well as to make lethality in a female child protagonist seem acceptable. This lines up with Shiokawa's argument that cuteness makes the female protagonist's lethal powers and deadly presence more palatable to the patriarchal audience (120). Thus, the "cute" or the *kawaii* is further fetishized in order to elicit gender-appropriate and infantilizing responses for the "cute" object. Sianne Ngai stresses this double function of the "cute":

Revolving around the desire for an ever more intimate, ever more sensuous to objects already regarded as familiar and unthreatening, cuteness is not just an aestheticization but an eroticization of powerlessness, evoking tenderness for "small things" but also, sometimes, a desire to belittle or diminish them further.

(03)

While talking about the marginal aesthetic and affective categories of the “cute”, the “zany”, and the “interesting”, Ngai claims that these three categories become more important to capitulate the hyper-capitalist world precisely because they reflect the commodification of various aspects of life (1-2). It is not surprising then, that *SpyXFamily* got a space in the OTT platform of Netflix. The *kawaii* itself has become a market-driven phenomenon, but the use of the “cute” aesthetic in *SpyXFamily* serves a function other than the economic benefit of production and consumption. As Ngai further claims that the “cute” elicits an affective response of “not just to lovingly molest but also to aggressively protect” (04), Anya too, generates such an affective response in the audience. One of the comments in “Kissanime” says “NO HARM SHALL FACE THIS CHILD. I WILL RIOT I SWEAR TO GOD” (emphasis in original, Ethan Senpai). Note the capitalisation of the comment. It aggressively stands out, conveying protective violence in the stylization of the comment. The fact that this comment suggests apparent violence in the form of rioting if Anya- the Child, is harmed, reflects Ngai’s theorization of the response that the “cute” aesthetic elicits.

Girlhood itself stands commodified here. Here the child being referred to in the comment is a girl who is shown to be the epitome of *kawaii*-ness. Her status as a child, and as a girl is exaggerated and magnified by the usage of the *kawaii* aesthetics discussed in the previous sections. As Shiokawa has mentioned already, the *kawaii* has been the domain of the girl child subculture in Japan for ages but has now proliferated to the rest of the world (98). The success of the anime series is symptomatic of this commodification of the girl child in anime through the *kawaii* aesthetic. As Ngai notes, commodification itself has been linked to the “cute” by Marx. While quoting Marx, she points out that he envisioned commodities as being “helpless” and “powerless” against the hungry and ravishing man, going further to equate the commodities to that of the women- “very delicate things”, who would, in the twelfth century, make themselves available to the gaze of commodification (61). Ngai underscores Marx’s ironic and mocking tone which uses children and women to explain the fetishization of commodities and suggests in turn that the “cute” has always been associated with the childish and feminine and also with the commodity (61).

Further, this commodification also explains the production, circulation, and consumption of series like *SpyXFamily*. Anya becomes the focal point of the series rather than the very real political allusions to Cold War Germany. The Cold War was not only a war between two superpowers – the United States of America and the Soviet Union, but it was rather a war between two different ways of arranging life, culture, and politics (Gienow-Hecht 399). The two warring ideologies of Capitalism and Communism found a battleground in Germany post the Second World War. Splitting Germany into East and West Germany – the former controlled by the Soviet Union and the latter under the influence of the United States, Germany became the representative country for the Cold War rhetoric and politics of bloc thinking. West Germany was valorised by the Western bloc led by America as the epitome of modernisation, freedom, liberty, and technological advancement, while East Germany was condemned by the Western bloc as being totalitarian and “Stalinist” in its outlook. It is also in this division of East and West Germany that spy work proliferated. With constant infiltrations and attempts to destabilize the opposing bloc, espionage became a routine activity in East and West Germany, and paranoia became the general affective atmosphere in both blocs.

By depicting *SpyXFamily* as a predominantly *kawaii* anime, not only is Anya’s deadly power of telepathy made more acceptable to the audience, but it also serves to cover up and make the gruesome reality of East and West Germany seem trivial. The problems of the Cold War in Germany effectively get overlooked in the face of Anya’s *kawaii*-ness. The anime essentializes and valorizes Western German politics through the fictional construction of Westalis, wherein it portrays that the West aims at maintaining peace, however tenuous it might be, whereas the East or Ostania wants war. Thus, the anime plays along with the stereotypes created and propagated by the Western bloc without looking at the nuances of the extremely convoluted conditions of Cold War Germany. By pitching Loid and Yor together in a sham marriage, the series also underplays the politics of the Cold War by situating the entire rhetoric of the series firmly on the Western side of the binary. The portrayal of the nuclear family, the corruption of the Ostanian government and the attempted goodwill and image of

peace propagated by the Westalian government are all symptomatic of the series' inclination towards the American ideology during the Cold War. The blatant demonization of Ostania goes unnoticed and unquestioned in the face of Anya's embodied and performed *kawaii*-ness. Thus, here Anya's *kawaii* aesthetics effectively elides the political undertone of the series by belittling, misrepresenting, and fluffing one of the most important political and territorial upheavals of Modern History.

### Conclusions

The *kawaii*, through its "in-yer-face" violently cute aesthetics, necessarily covers up more than it seeks to uncover. Not only does it become a mask for a lethal all-knowing child, but it also becomes a tool through which this child can manipulate those around her. It is through her *kawaii*-ness that she wields her powers of telepathy, but it is also through this aesthetic and affective characteristic that she hides her powers from those closest to her. Similarly, the *kawaii*, for the audience, also covers up the ideological battlefield of Cold War Germany, but it also renders Anya's body a very visible commodity to be consumed and recreated. The plot no longer matters to the audience as long as Anya is kept safe. The triumph of either bloc does not matter in the face of Anya's cuteness and portrayed vulnerability.

The problematic and simplistic representations of Cold War Germany go uncriticized since the audience's gaze is firmly planted on Anya and her cute antics. Her *kawaii* aesthetics thus make her a product of the capitalist market – produced in order to be consumed voraciously by a "cute"-hungry audience. Thus, it is also the aesthetics of the *kawaii* that render Anya's little body into a commodity in the consumerist and capitalist market. Needless to say, Anya's *kawaii* aesthetics align with the Western bloc's ideology of Capitalism and Consumerism, and her girlhood is effectively commodified within the space of this Cold War genre of Espionage fiction.

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