

OUR (NOT SO) GUILTY PLEASURE

Her large paws are close now, she's going to pick me up and put me on the high surface to give me my daily attention – or at least I thought she would. Instead, there is this thing lying there. I cannot describe this 'thing' except by its soft appearance. I walk toward it, aiming to move my head over the softness, a habit I like to do. I hear her making that sound, the same as when I do something that doesn't correlate with my natural instincts. She moves her large paws over my head and body, scratching me in the places she knows I like. And then she picks this thing up...

Conflict

For me, a West European citizen, it takes a lot of effort to stay up-to-date and take responsibility for conflicts I am confronted with on the 8 o'clock news, online videos, posts, tweets, etc. The amount of messages we receive creates a disconnected 'worldview' escalated by the media and political agendas. So I'd rather watch the "Funny Santa Cat Costume" YouTube video instead.

Our guilty pleasure

Watching cat videos does something relaxing, entertaining, and I feel the left side of my brain relax after twenty minutes. Just typing 'funny' and 'cats' on the YouTube search bar gives too many results to ever watch, so watching these videos can easily become a short refreshment in between studying or working. And by watching these 'internet cats,' I 'think' I release myself from other responsibilities.

Searching for 'cat video' articles shows, overall, the positive influences of watching cats. A scientific study was conducted by assistant professor Jessica Gall Myrick from Indiana University Media School;

in it, she addresses the positive reactions of people watching cat videos, and how they react to online cats the same as they would with real pets. If this is true, Myrick says, watching cat videos influences the mood of the person and 'improves emotional well-being'. However, watching cat videos can also trigger a negative experience if the person feels guilty for watching cat videos instead of studying or working.

This 'thing' has a shape I can't really describe. The colour is striking though, and it almost blinds my sight. With the tip of my nose, I approach the 'thing' curiously. I smell the 'thing' and it makes me think about that time when the big tree with flickering lights in it is parked in the room, on which I like to stretch my paws. This 'thing' also has a weird tail at the top. She holds the 'thing' before her and makes this 'face' just like mine, when I am asking for something... I don't trust this...

Dog vs. cat

Edited cat videos emphasise the climax, the 'funny' moment of the video. Most of them also have a 'wait for it, wait for it' setting, like "the OMG cat" video on Youtube (which has almost 23.5 million views). You can see a 'preview still' of the video; however, you

still want to know what's going to happen, because it is 'too weird and strange' that a cat could open its mouth at that width and simulate a recognisably human 'omg' look as it keeps glancing at the camera.

In the article "*The Million Dollar Question: Why Does the Web Love Cats?*" by Amy Mae Turner, Sam Ford – director of digital strategy with Peppercom, research affiliate with the MIT Convergence Culture Consortium, and co-author of the forthcoming book *Spreadable Media* – explains that cats are 'particularly fascinating because they are not necessarily as easy to read' as are dogs: 'Dogs' forms of communication – and understanding of language – are more closely aligned with humans'.

As cats don't deliberately manipulate their behaviour in communicating with humans, the cat behaves according to its own instinct and seems more 'careless' and 'distanced' from humans. These aspects make filming a cat interesting. The cat is unpredictable and, in a way, as 'honest' as an animal can be. This makes the cat unreadable, and videos can have a more spontaneous output.

I'm punching my paw toward the 'thing' as she moves it my way. The sounds she makes are persuasive and her touch is compelling. She picks me up, places me on my back, and there it comes. The 'thing' is a skin! It fits around my paws, both of my front paws! The skin is warm and takes over my own.... I ask her why, why, what's this all about. She pulls me back to her and covers my head, what's this? I try to reach my head with my paw, but I can't...

Non-human

In her article, Turner writes: "*Cats get themselves into all kinds of amusing predicaments, and when there's a human on hand to capture the moment, whether in a photo or on video, that's raw material just begging to be shared. And because lots of people have cats, that's lots of content.*" This article does not implicate the environment of the cat, which is – when held at home – influenced by the human. The sort of 'predicaments' are designed by the human and lived in by the cat. The cat has no influence on the set-up of furniture, for example, but they do use their surroundings for their own habitat: to 'gain' territory, to ambush other animals, etc. I believe if I could put a costume on my cat without it protesting, I would try to put it on again; or, for example, I might change the location or use another costume to try out different settings. This develops an excitement for me to re-create the same situation and 'influence' another possibility to catch the cat on film. As such, the cat is an unaware actor in its own life.

I keep repeating my question 'why, why, why'... She reacts with a frown and a curling mouth and then she moves her paw again toward my head to touch me. As she doesn't respond to me, I start to move my body in weird positions, but I can't get rid of this second skin. She walks away quickly and I start to scream from the top of my little lungs. 'Don't leave me here!' She knows I won't jump from this high surface, so now I am stuck. She comes back with another 'thing'; she's been looking

and carrying in her large paws since it entered my territory. She holds it before me...

Non-speaking

The cat is being 'spoken' for, as the cat is unaware of being filmed and can't 'speak' in a language humans can understand. It communicates with its body as sound. As I mentioned earlier, the cat becomes an actor in its own life and has almost no control, as its life can be 'directed' by the human in caring as attention. Its behaviour is filmed because the owner or another human wants to film it. The cat can't express its emotions as a human can; for example, it can't grasp the microphone to express its pain. Does the human oppress its power upon the animal?

Yes, it does. And it's not only the cat we oppress to have our 'careless fun' – it's other lives we irresponsibly point our cameras at. By not realising what is wrong with such oppression, we don't take responsibility for the act. From our human perspective, we think it has no impact; we are not confronted with the direct consequences of our act in filming another. As it is posted online, however, it gains another audience, which puts its own interpretation on what has been filmed. How does the animal feel while being put into a costume? Can you put yourself in the cat's condition?

Another important aspect is the staging of the video. In this way, the cat is being provoked and oppressed to repeat a certain act. Through provoking, we are not aware of the living circumstances of the other. But in the case of the cat, certain scenes can be reproduced because they are not convincing or 'real' enough, and the cat won't communicate its suffering as a human would. So on a human level, we can 'wash' away our guilt of putting the animal in a certain position.

In what psychological state are the famous 'Youtube cats'? Have they changed their behaviours toward their owners because after doing a certain act, they receive anything the owner might think they want? Toddlers, at a certain age, respond directly by refusing an act, so in the case of babies or toddlers there is something else occurring. As Professor Nicola Whitton of Manchester Metropolitan University says in her article "*Could children one day sue parents for posting baby pics on Facebook?*": "*I think we're going to get a backlash in years to come from young people coming to realise that they've had their whole lives, from the day they were born, available to social media.*" A recent University of Michigan study found that children aged 10 to 17 "*were really concerned*" about the ways parents shared their children's lives online. The human learns to speak, to defend, and to react, so the person can recall videos or photos taken years before. Humans are irresponsible toward other lives; we can post videos and texts online but we don't take responsibility for the fact that the presence of the other is locked online forever, as Professor Sonia Livingstone says in the article.

It's not only an irresponsibility; it is also related to boredom, Susan Sontag says in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*. First it was switching channels on the TV; now it's scrolling web pages, images, and videos. Humans need constant stimulation and, as Sontag says, *"A more reflective engagement with content would require a certain intensity of awareness – just what is weakened by the expectations brought to images disseminated by the media, whose leaching out of content contributes most to the deadening of feeling."*

The 'thing' she holds in her paw comes closer to me. She starts to make seductive sounds and expresses movements with her paws to follow her. I'm walking toward her and then again she makes this awful sound and keeps the 'thing' in my face. As I'm done with this circus, I lay down and start licking myself. She walks away and comes back surrounded with a smell I absolutely adore.

The pain of others

As I am watching a cat video, I am still watching 'suffering' – the suffering of the cat, dressed up and put into a situation it didn't want to be part of, but is being forced into. I interpret this action as 'funny' and I think it should relax me to watch a video. I know what is coming, but the video still triggers my laughing muscles. This unconscious situation gives me a liberating feeling. I am watching the videos to 'relax,' and it can be seen as relaxing from the human perspective. But we are still watching 'suffering'. What makes this thought unquestionable for me is that the suffering doesn't correlate in any way with the perspective of the cat. 'I' think watching the cat video is funny and, as I can adjust the video, I can edit climaxes. But doesn't that make the appearance of the cat as a tortured victim of human pleasure even more obscure? The cat is offended in its natural instinct and will react to every commotion in its nearest presence, because there can be danger. The human is irresponsible toward the instinct of the cat for a purpose of copulating 'funny cat videos'.

She brings back a stick attached to a rope, connected with a plate carrying delicious food. She knows I am always in for a bite. She holds the 'thing' up again, while she moves the plate away from me. She makes me walk for forever, walking behind the food like an idiot. When she has a certain frown on her face, she lets go of the stick and goes into the other room, where the others were while making awful sounds. I sprint to the plate... Mmm I deserve this...

Responsibility

In the case of watching the pain of the cat in videos as related to watching conflict-related news items, there is a correlation in taking a responsibility for someone else's pain. The cats are a means to serve a 'higher' cause: a funny and relaxing service for the human. As this service reaches millions of views, it creates 'wealthy' cats – or, more accurately, cat owners. I am not taking responsibility for the cat's life. The filmmakers interrogate the cat by filming it live and thereby speak on behalf of the cat. I, a cat video watcher, should take responsibility for what I am seeing and laughing about. Why don't I feel

the same responsibility when watching a cat video as reading the news about a conflict? I think it's just as Sontag says: *"The problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs"*. Current society has stopped seeing the 'complete story' when looking at conflict footage as a cat video.

As we don't want to take responsibility for conflict in the world, we type "youtube.com" into our search bar. We watch funny videos (in this case, cats), and we believe we are relaxed – the only guilt we feel is that we stopped working or studying, when 30 minutes later we are still watching a continuous stream of Youtube videos. We are looking for other materials to consume, to have a 'safe' feeling, a relaxed feeling. As our worldview regarding conflict becomes more disconnected, we even lose the ability to see the pain of the other, or as in this essay, the cat. So it's better, to when watching cat videos again, to take the following perspective: who's pointing the camera, who created the stage, who repeated the scenes and interfered in the natural habitat of the cat. So perhaps you'd rather watch conflict related news items instead?

I hear that awful sound again from the other room, but then in multiple settings. Another person walks into the room, grabs me from the surface, and touches me all over. As I am removed from my delicious meal, I start to scream as loud as I can. Then 'she' walks back into the room and holds that 'thing' backward before my face. She repeats a short sound, as I see a mate, looking quite like me, locked up in that thing, as it walks around. Ha, who is that, I ask? What a dull fella, he must be mental. The other puts me down, takes the skin off of me and lets me go.

"You silly, silly cat."

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