

Journal for Critical Animal Studies

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Issue Introduction: An Analysis of Feline Digital Culture
Amber E. George.....1-3

ESSAYS

Pet Keeping on the Internet: The Cultural Politics of Cat Internet Videos and the CatVidFest
Anna Feuerstein.....4-32

JCAS Submission Guidelines33

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Issue Introduction: An Analysis of Feline Digital Culture

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Issue Introduction: An Analysis of Feline Digital Culture

Mass media studies and communication scholarship has had a long and productive history of exploring representations of humans, with some analysis of nonhuman animals. With the advent of the Internet, we have lightening-fast, global transmission of information, images, and ideas, and as global connectedness spreads, increased visibility has ushered in a whole new need for a critique of cyber related representations. The essay featured in this issue, “Pet Keeping on the Internet: The Cultural Politics of Cat Internet Videos and the CatVidFest” by Anna Feuerstein, suggests that Internet cat videos are an integral part of digital culture, and as such, they possess a cultural capital worthy of critical analysis. Her analysis unpacks the cat video phenomenon, exploring how some specific case examples such as Grumpy Cat AKA Tartar Sauce and LiL BUB demonstrate the commodification of cats and ‘cuteness’ within digital

media. Furthermore, as Feuerstein argues, the charming, often comical videos have yielded significant capital, and are both constructed by and for capitalism, emphasizing rampant consumerism. These Internet videos carry with them what Pierre Bourdieu (1993) describes as a ‘cultural capital’ or resources that are used to achieve and maintain social standing, symbolic power, or status within a particular community.

Most humans, especially those who love and respect nonhumans, have, at one time or another, sent or received a ‘cute’ cat video. The videos featured in this analysis transmit cultural ideas, gain tremendous popularity, and can rapidly spread through replication via social media platforms such as Facebook, Reddit, and Twitter, although some are spread through internet email forwards, instant messages, and web pages. Often these videos go ‘viral’ when it is copied in its original form, in many different ways, for a long period regardless of whether it is useful or true. With the accessibility of the internet and the ability to self-promote through blogs and social media, the opportunity to convey complex or simple, clear or muddled, good or bad ideas about cats, pet-keeping, and their commodification has never been easier. It is unlikely that the average human stops to consider the biases, prejudices, and otherwise harmful perspectives about feline subjectivity inherent in these processes. These videos saturate our modern lives, yet the absence of critical analysis leaves those at its focus subject to further domination. Thus, one might argue that Internet cat videos not only shape minds, but are also in search of minds to shape, and as such, require serious critique. At the heart of their replication lies various media structures that maintain nonhuman domination and oppression. Mediating instances when oppressive images or practices are replicated is one way of creating awareness of issues that must change. As Feuerstein’s analysis proves, while it may seem like internet cat videos are silly, insignificant, or

irrelevant to understanding nonhuman animal realities, they are an important part of the digital culture that mimics and replicates issues inherent in speciesism.

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Pet Keeping on the Internet: The Cultural Politics of Cat Internet Videos and the CatVidFest

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Abstract

In this essay I argue that the contemporary cultural obsession with cat Internet videos exposes the politics of commodifying pets in postmodern, or late-capitalist, pet-keeping. I take as exemplary of this phenomenon Walker Art Museum’s Cat Internet Video Festival, which after its inauguration in 2012 toured the country through 2016, drawing crowds in the thousands. The larger frames of the festival – such as what the audience sees when they arrive, the ordering and categorization of the videos, and the festival’s sponsors – function as a form of training that affirms human domination over pets. Using Foucault’s notion of pastoral power, a power of care that regulates conduct, I claim the manipulation of feline subjectivity prevalent throughout the videos makes them more desirable for human consumption, thus perpetuating and increasing the commodification and domination of pets. CatVidFest, I suggest, illuminates the cultural politics of pet keeping, as it acts out the oppressive effects of the commodification of pets within late-capitalist society.

Keywords: pet keeping, cats, cat Internet videos, pastoral power, domination

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Pet Keeping on the Internet: The Cultural Politics of Cat Internet Videos and the CatVidFest

Although it has become something of a truism to claim that the Internet is made of cats, the oft-cited observation makes a telling statement about America's cultural obsession with Internet cats and with pets more broadly. Leading news media outlets regularly run segments on the popularity of cat videos and images, one citing a study by the cat food company Friskies that 15% of Internet traffic is related to cats ("Cat Videos Take Over," 2013). *The New York Times*, *Time Magazine*, *NPR*, and *BBC*, among others, regularly report on Internet cats, with one guest on *NPR*'s "On The Media" likening the circulation of cats on the Internet to the ancient Egyptian worship of felines ("Their Eyes," 2013). Some cat videos have YouTube views in the millions: Will Braden's "Henri 2, Paw de Deux" (2012), for example, has over 10 million views, while the original Grumpy Cat video (2012) has been viewed over 20 million times. Maru, the famous Japanese cat with a penchant for boxes, has won the Guinness World Record as the most watched animal on YouTube. His videos have been collectively viewed over 324 million times (Guinness, 2017). Cat videos have also emerged in the marketing world, and Internet cat sensations such as Grumpy Cat generate tremendous wealth for their owners as house pets on display. Will Braden, creator (but not owner) of *Henri le Chat Noir* videos, also supports himself off of Henri videos and products such as mouse pads, a book (*Henri le Chat Noir: The Existential Musings of an Angst-Filled Cat*), T-shirts, and coffee mugs ("Cat Videos Take Over," 2013). Cat videos are thus not a cultural niche, nor a cult obsession; they are a part of mainstream culture, and are a distinct phenomenon of what Fredric Jameson (1991) has described as late capitalism's insistence on commodifying all aspects of culture and daily life.

These cats' status as pets is further celebrated through the Walker Art Museum's Cat Internet Video Festival, also known as CatVidFest, which ran from 2012-2016. Taken as a marker of adoration for a specific kind of pet, the festival aims to celebrate cats, creates a community of cat-lovers, and institutionalizes cat Internet videos as a specific genre and cultural phenomenon. I argue, however, that CatVidFest reinforces human power over animals, celebrates the oppression of animals, and illuminates the commodification of animals that drives postmodern pet keeping and intensifies human domination. For not only do humans subject pets to forms of biopower – a manipulation and control of their physical lives, which Foucault (1976/1990) calls “a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death” (p. 138) – they also subject them to constructions of subjectivity, as pet owners create and circulate representations of animal lives, thoughts, and actions. As many cat videos feature human constructions of pet subjectivity, CatVidFest highlights this subtle yet pervasive form of power humans exert over pets. Thus exemplifying simultaneous forms of love and control, CatVidFest exposes the domination, manipulation, and commodification that structures pet-human relationships, and features a desire to control those who are often imagined to refuse human authority: cats.

The popularity of Internet cats has been around for just over a decade, un-officially beginning in 2006 with *LOLcats* and continuing in 2007 with *I Can Haz Cheezburger*, two sites dedicated to funny cat memes, images with text (“Cats,” 2013). While *I Can Haz Cheezburger* now posts videos and includes animals other than cats, Walker Art Museum's Cat Internet Video Festival is solely dedicated to Internet cat videos. Conceptualized by Katie Czarniecki Hill, The Cat Internet Video Festival is a part of the Walker Art Museum's Open Field Initiative, a drive for communal and experimental programming on the museum's lawn. Although Hill was not entirely in earnest when she suggested the idea, within months of soliciting nominations over

10,000 videos flooded in, and Hill and her colleagues narrowed down the entries to 79 videos for a 75-minute festival. The first official CatVidFest in August 2012 was a success: over 10,000 people attended (Ryzik, 2012). Walker took the festival on the road, and it toured major cities, drawing crowds in the thousands. It toured a second time in 2013, opening at the Minneapolis State Fair, where it outsold all other performers, including Sheryl Crow and Depeche Mode (Bradden, 2014 Dec 15), while a third and fourth annual festival toured America in 2014, 2015, and 2016.

Although cat videos are a wildly popular cultural phenomenon, scholars have yet to discuss how their wide circulation and mass consumption exposes subtle forms of animal oppression within pet-human relationships. The scant scholarly attention paid to cat videos may result from Randy Malamud (2012), Jody Berland (2008), and John Berger's (1980/2007) claims that visual culture and cultural institutions – such as pet keeping, Disney, and zoos – hide “real” or authentic animals. For Malamud, the hegemony of visual culture “overwrites the animals’ actual nature.... The visual acculturation of animals is compelling to the human viewer, and the corollary cost to animals is the erasure of their actual being” (p. 27), while Berland claims that cat photographs “distance us from the subject they seemingly embrace,” even if at times this distance is hyperbolized (pp. 445-446). Malamud and Berland seem to suggest there is an authentic animal we can access, yet for Berger, this possibility is denied due to industrial capitalism and the collapse of agrarian societies.

These pervasive cultural constructions of animals and animal subjectivity offer productive sites for understanding the multiple kinds of power structures occurring within pet-human relationships. Animal nature, and by extension animal interiority, is something humans most often must construct or imagine, and thus access to animals is mediated by cultural

conceptions stemming from human dominance. Taking species differentiation and the variance of domination across species lines seriously, in this essay I analyze the 2013 and 2014 CatVidFest, and the circulation, consumption, and commodification of cat videos, to suggest cat videos construct animal subjectivity in ways that privilege and solidify human power. Relying on Sianne Ngai's (2012) claim that "There is no judgment or experience of an object as cute that does not call up one's sense of power over it as something less powerful" (p. 11), I argue that the frames in which cat videos circulate, and the human manipulation of the videos and their feline subjects register a show of power over animals that manifests as affection. Indeed, something as innocuous as YouTube videos take part in and perpetuate this domination, showing how deeply ingrained animal oppression is within American culture, and exposing how this oppression is heightened through the commodification of our pets.

The Pastoral Power of Training Cats

Following Derrida's (2006/2008) claims that "the animal" is a violent concept that homogenizes the wide variety of species defined against the human, I analyze cats as a unique species, taking into account how they are historically and culturally conceptualized and represented. On a general level, cats have been and still are often associated with marginality and independence. In her discussion of pets in nineteenth-century France, for example, Kathleen Kete (1994) labels cats "the anti-pet of nineteenth-century bourgeois life, associated with sexuality and marginality" (p. 115), emphasizing the historical condemnation of cats and their association with non-hegemonic ideals. Rather than viewing cats as dominated and oppressed animals, writers such as Katharine Rogers (2006), author of *Cat*, conceptualizes them as more independent and free than other pets. Rogers writes,

The neat, demure cat, who seems so much more quiet and orderly than the boisterous dog, pays no attention to human rules and thus enjoys a freedom beyond reach of dogs or humans. The companion who seems so cuddly, congenial, and friendly can at other times seem to withdraw into a world of its own, unfathomable to humans. Although they live in our homes, share our comforts and enjoy our company, cats have retained their wildness more than any other domestic animal. (p. 177)

Rogers' conception of cats implies they enjoy a space beyond subjection, and that they have a choice of whether or not to be in an animal-human relationship. Indeed, this agency is implied in Rogers' formulation of "wildness," which here signifies a refusal of subjection; domestication, on the other hand, reads as a submission to human power.

Indeed, Western culture admires cats because they are seen as the epitome of independence, even having been historically associated with artists and independent thinkers. Philosophers from Montaigne to Derrida (2006/2008), for example, have questioned their own anthropocentrism when faced with cats. Although cats have also been understood as a marker of middle-class domesticity, Erica Fudge (2008) suggests that "rather than *constructing* the domestic sphere a cat might be said to challenge it.... a cat's refusal to conform to human expectations and desires makes it the ideal pet for philosophers to contemplate as they challenge the assurances of the dogmatic tradition" (pp. 79-80). Yet while Rogers suggests that cats enjoy freedoms that other pets do not, this is not always case. For example, although some pet cats may have the choice to go indoors or outdoors, depending on where they live, many are not allowed outside and spend their lives in a house or apartment. Indeed, even animal rights organizations like PETA encourage owners to keep cats indoors ("Why all Cats," 2010). Further, as with most pets, humans exert a large amount of biopower over cats, from neutering and spaying, to

declawing and the application of pesticides on their bodies. Claims that cats are free and independent thus mask their position within problematic power structures.

Taking into account such assumptions about feline independence, at first glance cat videos have nothing to do with human dominance; rather they celebrate cats' ostensible autonomy. Yet what appears as adoration toward pet cats exposes tensions between an animal-human relationship founded on affection but ultimately operating through pastoral power, which Michel Foucault (2004/2007) calls "a power of care" (p. 127). For Foucault, pastoral power is epitomized by the metaphor of a shepherd's relation to his flock. When adopted by the Christian church in the form of a pastor and his congregation, it becomes "an art of conducting, leading, guiding, taking in hand, and manipulating men, an art of monitoring them and urging them on step by step" (p. 165). Although the shepherd/pastor is considered a servant of his flock, Foucault emphasizes that pastoral power "is only concerned with individual souls insofar as this direction (*conduite*) of souls also involves a permanent intervention in everyday conduct (*conduite*), in the management of lives, as well as in goods, wealth, and things" (p. 154). As such, the shepherd/pastor's emphasis on conduct polices the individual from within, through their everyday thoughts and actions, rather than from a disciplinary institution.

I suggest that pet keeping functions as a power of care, and that constructions of animal subjectivity taking place in this institution operate as a form of power – a regulation of animal conduct – as animals are often constructed as self-regulating individuals who willingly participate in an animal-human hierarchy. Although humans can most likely never know if they affect an animal's subjectivity in the way Foucault believes discourse affects human subjectivity, humans imagine that animals think a certain way, and circulate such representations as a hegemonic ideal. Although the above conceptions of cats as independent and aloof seem to

challenge the construction of a submissive feline conduct through pastoral power, cat Internet videos work alongside such conceptions to discipline and train cats through regulating feline conduct and negating their “significant otherness” (Haraway, 2003, p. 7) under the guise of showcasing feline agency and individuality. For if cats are considered elusive and aloof, independent and untrainable, I suggest that cat videos capture cats and fix them in an anthropocentric frame fit for commodification. Understanding “cat keeping” as pastoral power illuminates the contradictions and limitations inherent in contemporary understandings of animal freedoms within the institution of pet keeping more broadly. This pastoral power, I suggest, is perpetuated by institutions such as the CatVidFest and the increasing commodification of pets in American culture.

Pastoral Power, Commodification, and Manipulation: The Politics of Cuteness at The CatVidFest

I attended the CatVidFest two years in a row at the Honolulu Art Museum’s Doris Duke Theater, in September 2013 and October 2014, and I also attended a special holiday screening hosted by Will Braden, in December 2014. There are certainly reasons why CatVidFest is not a film festival per se, yet taking into account its self-characterization as a festival helps elucidate its complicated politics. While film festivals aim to disseminate films and/or directors to new audiences and potential distributors, CatVidFest is composed of videos already viewed between hundreds and millions of times. Indeed, the fact that the videos submitted to CatVidFest *must* be freely available online suggests that the goal is not to find new audiences, but rather to create a space for audience members to view collectively videos they have already seen and enjoyed. However, Julian Stringer’s (2003/2013) claim that film festivals function as “key institutions” (p.

62) suggests that CatVidFest illuminates the popular institution allowing for their emergence in the first place: pet keeping. Stringer's belief that "the festival [is] a particular kind of external agency that creates meaning around film texts" (p. 62) corresponds to Malamud's (2012) understanding of how visual culture constructs problematic "frames" (p. 27) around animals. For in a fashion similar to understandings of film festivals as "policing" our understanding of cinema while reinforcing industry demands (Willemsen 1981/2013, p. 19), Malamud claims that visual culture "hegemonically monopolizes our modes of perception with regard to other species" (p. 27). While Malamud's overriding thesis is that within contemporary culture animals function as empty signifiers, his emphasis on the particular cultural contexts of visual animals, or their "frames," helps us locate cultural conceptions of pet keeping within the frame of cat videos' circulation and consumption.

Paying special attention to the larger frame of the festival, as well as the smaller frames in which the videos are presented (they are separated into distinct categories such as Comedy, Drama, Foreign, Hall of Fame, Animated, Documentary, Musical, and the People's Choice Awards/Golden Kitty Award) reveals CatVidFest's celebration of human domination over cats and the pleasure to be found therein. For example, a selection of videos in the drama category expose how humans construct and imagine the inner lives of house cats, and the possibility of their discontent, only when couched in humor. The other videos in the drama category, including videos with cats fighting with glowing swords (FinalCutKing, 2011), and a cat sitting on his haunches watching a heavy metal video (CatWatchingSlayer, 2011), undermines the drama that may take place in the minds of housecats, as these videos could easily be placed in the comedy category. Aside from the videos that do not have much to do with drama, videos in this category imagine the inner lives of disgruntled housecats entering existential crises, plotting escapes, and

looking at their human “captors” (Scher and Langager, 2012) or “authorities” (zefrank1, 2013) with scorn. Such placement next to blatantly humorous videos belittles the possibility of animal subjectivities that do not fit with human modes of domination and the belief that cats *desire* to be our pets.

“Sad Cat Diary” (zefrank1, 2013), for example, mocks the unhappy housecat. This video, which has over 26 million views on YouTube, shows images of sad-looking cats with voiceover diary entries. Narrated in a deep, monotonous tone, the voiceovers encourage laughter, instead of taking seriously animal emotions, particularly unhappiness or melancholy. “Dear Diary,” the narrator says, “It has come to my attention that the authorities have two hands but seem to have made it the sadistic policy only to pet me with one of them at a time. Half of love is just lo-, which is how I feel. My spirit is breaking.” This moment constructs feline subjectivity as centered around the physical attention cats receive from humans, and plays on beliefs that cats are spoiled. In this reading of feline depression, if cats are sad, it is because they are petted with one hand, not two, thus belittling their possible discontents. Another “diary entry” hyperbolizes feline subjectivity and desire to satirize feline unhappiness: “Dear Diary, the authorities have closed the door to the bedroom. I can only assume that they have forgotten about me and have left me here to die. As a last resort I will stand post for the rest of the night and sing the song of my people in the hopes that they will rescue me.” The cat’s response to the “authorities” closing the door suggests feline unhappiness or anxiety is laughable and exaggerated. Such anthropomorphism, taking place within the frame of the video’s title and the other comedic videos that surround it, prohibits the audience from seriously considering animal unhappiness or the alterity of animal communication.

The ending lines of “Sad Cat Diary” further demonstrate a refusal to acknowledge feline unhappiness while rejecting the possible monotony of house cats’ daily existence. “Dear Diary,” states the voiceover, “my attempts to destroy the terrible plant have all been for naught. Somehow, almost as if by some evil magic, a new one has appeared in its place. I will have to start over now. Like Sisyphus, I am bound to hell.” “Sad Cat Diary” here plays on the existential themes of the famous *Henri Le Chat Noir* videos, such as “The Cat is Sat” (Braden, 2013), “Blight of Spring” (Braden, 2014), and “Henri, Paw de Deux” (Braden, 2012), which all were included in both festivals, with the first two in the drama category and the latter in the “Hall of Fame.” With lines such as “time stumbles on like a marching band with no music and no leader” (Braden, 2014), “I wake to the same tedium,” “I am surrounded by morons,” “I alone feel this torment” (Braden, 2012), and “No party mix! Am I to live like a barbarian? Only dry food? Tyranny!” (Braden, 2013) Braden constructs an existential feline subjectivity displaced and made impossible by the audience’s laughter. As such, “Sad Cat Diary” and the *Henri* videos take part in pet-keeping’s pastoral power by regulating animal subjectivity to make it more pleasing to a human audience.

Indeed, the videos that most often induce laughter are those in which cats get hurt or look ignorant, even though at times the videos in the comedy category offer surprising moments of animal agency, what I understand as an animal’s capacity or ability to act independently of the human. However, the placement of such videos in the comedy category downplays the novelty of cats’ attempts to communicate with humans and fulfill their own desires. For example, in “Cat Knocks on Door at Machine Gun Rate,” a cat heavily and rapidly thumps her back paw on the door in an effort to gain human attention and have someone open it (murat sari, 2013). The video is funny because of the cat’s striking attempt to communicate her desires, yet such humor also

elucidates a tension between agency and human control. This cat lets the human know when she wants to go outside, and does this in a novel way, yet she still needs someone to open the door. The audience is faced with a cat negotiating her way around human domination, as if her thumps are actual signs of frustration with not being able to open the door herself. Yet through the frame of “comedy” it becomes funny to watch a cat communicate and have her desires unfulfilled. Just as the human recording the video chose to watch, dominate, and make the cat perform instead of opening the door, so too does the audience consume and laugh at the cat’s domination.

The above videos perpetuate such a hierarchy through the displacement of feline agency and the negation of feline unhappiness, thus constructing animal subjectivity in ways more reaffirming of the human viewer. As such, I suggest CatVidFest functions as a form of training, or what Donna Haraway (2003) calls “positive bondage” (p. 43). Haraway famously reads against the power inherent in pet keeping through conceptualizing training as communication and bonding; in this way the training of animals – dogs in her case – allows for a destabilization of anthropocentrism. Haraway’s understanding of pet agency manifests in her conception of “co-habitation, co-evolution, and embodied cross-species sociality” (p. 4), which emphasizes that animals and humans evolve together through living side-by-side in meaningful ways. Yet, Haraway’s desire to realize an ethic of co-existence within training risks reinforcing the anthropocentric frames around pet keeping. Haraway’s commitment to “positive bondage” underscores the subject position pets have in relation to humans, and neglects to take into account the power humans have in constructing animal subjectivity. While Haraway importantly acknowledges the “significant otherness” (p. 7) of her dogs, her emphasis on “positive bondage” is reminiscent of Yi-Fu Tuan’s (1984/2007) definition of a pet as someone who is dominated while given love and affection. This definition registers the tension between care and control as

inherent to the institution of pet keeping. Like Foucault (2004/2007), Tuan recognizes the contradictory politics of care when he explains that “The word *care* so exudes humaneness that we tend to forget its almost inevitable tainting by patronage and condescension” (p. 5). This is positive bondage indeed.

Given human desires to place their own readings of animal interiority onto their pets, CatVidFest shows how difficult it is to locate Haraway’s (2003) notion of “cross-species sociality” (p. 4) within pet keeping. While “cross-species sociality” – in which animals and humans interact in ways that challenge hegemonic anthropocentric categories and binaries – may not be impossible, and without denying the possibility of attunement and communication between animals and humans, I suggest our cultural productions emphasize and thus perpetuate hierarchy rather than the “significant otherness” Haraway locates in pets (2003, p. 7). In fact, CatVidFest reproduces types of power that negate feline agency and subjectivities that challenge animal-human hierarchies and the pastoral power of pet keeping.

Taking into account the commodification that has become a defining factor of late-capitalist pet keeping, and its connection to pastoral power’s regulation of conduct, helps nuance and build on previous analyses of the politics of pet keeping that recognize and critique human domination, such as those by Salt (1892), Tuan (1984/2007), Fudge (2008), and Anna Peterson (2013). The construction and regulation of animal subjectivity within pastoral power makes pets more fit for human consumption, thus increasing their commodification and exploitation. This intertwining of commodification and domination within pet keeping is emphasized by CatVidFest’s larger frame, or what the audience is introduced to as they walk into the theater. At the 2013 festival, for example, a representative of the Cat Fancier’s Association was present, along with a very rare type of purebred Siamese cat. Putting breeding – one of the strongest

physical markers of human domination and manipulation of animals – on display in this way reminds festival-goers of their ability to manipulate and control animal populations. Indeed, CatVidFest has roots in Victorian England, where animal breeding became popularized. The first dog and cat shows were in 1859 and 1871, respectively, and the possession of well-bred animals stood as a marker of the upper class (Ritvo, 1987). Just as middle-class Victorians could move up in society through the possession of their pets, so too can today's pet owners become millionaires through the exchange-value of their pets' representations.

Further, as the audience and I waited to watch the 2013 CatVidFest at the Doris Duke Theater, we were shown episodes from the Japanese anime TV show *Chi's Sweet Home*, modeled after the best-selling manga series by Konami Kanata. The story follows a lost cat brought home by a young boy to an apartment that does not allow pets. With huge eyes and human-like expressions, Chi instantly elicits sympathy. Chi's desire to remain with the young boy, and the audience's captivation, heard in the "oooohs" and "awwwwws" from audience members, suggest that overall, Chi exudes both cuteness and pity. Following Sianne Ngai's (2012) claims that cuteness elicits a "surprisingly wide spectrum of feelings, ranging from tenderness to aggression, that we harbor toward ostensibly subordinate and unthreatening commodities" (p. 1), *Chi's Sweet Home* represents human domination over a belittled feline. For what Ngai labels "The nonaesthetic properties associated with cuteness – smallness, compactness, formal simplicity, softness or pliancy," were all present in Chi, and "call up a range of minor negative affects: helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency" (pp. 64-65). Cuteness invites our domination, just as Chi's perceived helplessness as a stray kitten invited the dominance of the young boy in the film.

Although the commodification of cuteness was present in the 2013 festival, it was heightened at the 2014 festival. This stark difference demonstrates how cat videos and their feline stars have become more commodified, and showcases the increasing manipulation of the videos and their feline subjects. When walking into the Doris Duke Theater for the 2014 festival, my friends and I were faced with a display of merchandise. While the 2013 festival sold products solely related to the festival (CatVidFest posters and coffee mugs, for example), at the 2014 festival audience members could buy CatVidFest T-shirts, stickers and pens; Grumpy Cat calendars, notepads, and cards; LOL cat notepads, and other assorted cat merchandise. Grumpy Cat, whose real name is Tardar Sauce, stars in multiple Friskies Party Mix commercials. Along with a manager, Ben Lashes, she has a line of products, such as a calendar, a book, and an iPhone app. Grumpy Cat's first full-length movie, *Grumpy Cat's Worst Christmas Ever*, aired in November 2014 on Lifetime, and recent articles have estimated her worth at \$100 million dollars (Thompson, 2014). While her owner Tabitha Bundesen has stated that number is inflated, Bundesen quit her job as a waitress only a few days after Grumpy Cat's first photo went viral (Millward, 2014). The popularity of Grumpy Cat in this spectacle – who is very small due to her dwarfism – emphasizes the connection between cuteness and smallness, helplessness, or even pity, and demonstrates how the commodification and consumption of Grumpy Cat, and by extension other Internet cats, results from their simultaneous cuteness and domination. This commodification of cuteness framing the 2014 festival was further emphasized through the event's main sponsor, Animal Planet. Significantly, the audience was shown a commercial for their TV show, "Too Cute!" at the start of the screening. Thus at the 2013 and 2014 festivals, audience members were invited to belittle cats and buy products that feature them; in other words, they were asked to consume their cuteness both on screen and off.

The Lifetime movie *Grumpy Cat's Worst Christmas Ever* (Hall, 2014) emphasize this link between cuteness, commodification, and pet keeping. In the film, Grumpy Cat (Aubrey Plaza) lives at Whiskers, a mall pet store facing closure. After a lonely young girl named Chrystal (Megan Charpentier) makes a Christmas wish to gain a true friend, she discovers that she can hear the thoughts of “Grumpy.” Together the two foil a plot to steal a million-dollar dog, whom the pet-store owner was going to sell in order to save the store. The film is intensely aware of Grumpy’s commodification, and that of pets in general. In her narration, Grumpy calls the mall the “soul-sucking bastion of consumerism,” and acts exasperated when a human walks into the pet store and all the other animals yell “Choose me! Choose me!” Grumpy herself was returned to Whiskers twice due to her dour personality, demonstrating how humans expect a specific (reaffirming) personality in their pets. Grumpy says of the animals in Whiskers “They all think some human is going to walk in here and purchase someone,” emphasizing that pet subjectivity is predicated on the desire to be commodified. Indeed, as *Grumpy Cat* reminds us, “contrary to that sign on the door, we’re not pets. Until someone takes us home and cares for us and loves us, we’re just animals.” Along with advertisements within the film – interjections such as “now is the time to tell you about my new product line!” – *Grumpy Cat's Worst Christmas Ever* connects the commodification of pets with the larger cultural obsession with Internet cats, and places it in the realm of pet subjectivity. Ngai’s (2012) claim that “cuteness solicits a regard of the commodity as an anthropomorphic being less powerful than the aesthetic subject, appealing specifically to us for protection and care” (p. 60) helps locate the commodification of pets – cute cats in particular – within the realm of pastoral power, especially as it applies to the care of the “goods, wealth, and things” (Foucault 2004/2007, p. 154) of late capitalism.

Such themes are fundamental to CatVidFest, as the videos not only show the subjection of cats and constructions of their subjectivity that place them in a hierarchical framework, but also demonstrate how cat videos have become a genre aware of its status as a commodity and its potential exchange-value. Indeed, they emphasize British Social reformer Henry Salt's (1892) claim that

Pets, like kings' favourites, are usually the recipients of an abundance of sentimental affection but of little real kindness; so much easier is it to give temporary caresses than substantial justice. It seems to be forgotten, in a vast majority of cases, that a domestic animal does not exist for the mere idle amusement, any more than for the mere commercial profit, of its human owner; and that for a living being to be turned into a useless puppet is only one degree better than to be doomed to the servitude of a drudge.
(p. 33)

Although over 100 years old, Salt's focus on the contradictions arising when humans give affection as they dominate demonstrates how varying types of human control remain overlooked in pet-human relationships. Salt's critique emphasizes how heightened affection overshadows domination as he reads pets as sources of amusement, profit, and mouthpieces for human ideologies. With the rise of commodity capitalism, pets have further become sources of amusement and commercial profit, which often happens through their manipulation. The human manipulation present in cat videos, I suggest, displaces alterity and most clearly highlights the regulation of animal conduct at the heart of pet-keeping's pastoral power. We saw this above in the *Henri* videos and "Sad Cat Diary," where the human voiceover manipulates feline subjectivity to make animal interiority more pleasing to and reaffirming of the human viewer.

Although such manipulation is relatively harmless to animals physically, some videos emphasize a more disturbing side to manipulation. “Keyboard Cat” (Schmidt, 2007), for example, which has received almost 50 million views on YouTube and was included in the 2013 festival’s Hall of Fame, shows an orange cat wearing a shirt, “playing” a keyboard with her paws. The shirt hides the hands of the human holding her paws to make them look like they are actually playing. The cat looks visibly annoyed, and the audience’s enjoyment at watching a cat forced to become a spectacle suggests the human desire for funny cat videos is a desire for reaffirmation as the dominant species. Indeed, a similar video played at the 2014 festival, which features cats moved by humans to look like they are playing instruments (Barger and Akana, 2013). When the audience laughed, it was during these moments. Thus, while the cat in “Keyboard Cat” is more likely uncomfortable rather than injured, the video’s popularity – and its ensuing line of products – suggests humans enjoy watching cat videos at the expense of the cat, that even if the cat is not having fun, humans are, and that these videos are not about watching cats be cats, but watching human manipulation of a subordinate species. Indeed, they emphasize Fudge’s (2008) acknowledgment that domination is built into the structure of pet-human relationships, even if “the aim is cohabitation rather than coercion” (p. 97). Thus what looks like a lessening of power over pets, is actually a reinscription of such power.

This assertion of the human was emphasized halfway through the 2013 festival, when a video titled “12 Facts that Prove Cat People Are Crazy Awesome” (Boldly, 2013) was shown in the documentary category. Presented by BuzzFeed, this video outlined a recent study comparing dog and cat owners, which found that compared to dog owners, cat owners tend to be “more individualistic, more open to new experiences, more introverted, more likely to be lucky in love, more educated, more modest, funnier, more eco-friendly, more honest, more trusting, and

healthier.” Many of these qualities are valued in society, thus reaffirming the superiority of the human audience. We can most likely say that people are influenced by their pets, and perhaps that a certain type of person prefers certain pets, but this list projects cat owners as the best kind of people and grounds this superiority in facts. Shown halfway through the festival, this video reminds the audience of the good qualities they have, rather than those of the cats under celebration. Pet ownership looks less like domination when owners are represented as great people.

The ending category of the 2013 festival – “People’s Choice Awards” – was the high point of the festival, showing videos with which many may be familiar: “Kitten Meets Hedgehog” (TheSorryGirls, 2013), the infamous “Cat In A Shark Costume Chases A Duck While Riding A Roomba” (Texas Girly 1979, 2012), and the winner, “The Original Grumpy Cat” (Real Grumpy Cat, 2012). But the second place winner, “Catalogue,” highlights the tension between cat as an individual, and cat as a commodified object; between cat as agent and cat confined to the home. It illustrates the implications of Heidegger’s (1983/1995) claim that pets “belong to the house.... they serve the house” (p. 210). Written by Alana Grelyak and directed by Michael Gabriele (2013), “Catalogue” begins with a young couple faced with a cat who arrived with the bedroom set they ordered from a catalogue. The video opens with the couple staring at a cat on a bed:

What is that?

That came with the bedroom set...

The delivery guys put everything together and just left him at the foot of the bed. He’s been sitting like that for hours...I thought maybe you would’ve ordered him; you’re all excited about decorative pillows and he matches the comforter perfectly.

Unable to return the cat (no refunds, no exchanges, for “he’s a clearance model”), the couple keeps her. While the man immediately bonds with the cat, even deciding that she deserves a name, the woman remains relatively unimpressed, viewing her as another household chore (walking around disgruntled with a bag of cat litter as the man happily plays with the cat on the bed). While the video is tongue-in-cheek, it uncomfortably suggests that on a basic level, pets are a kind of furniture, or at least a commodity that, as Heidegger (1983/1995) suggests, belongs to the home. Indeed, the fact that the cat “matches the comforter perfectly” suggests that the cat is a decorative piece, an object of consumption for the human gaze. Coupled with the woman’s view of the cat as another household chore, this video highlights the commodification of pets and their inscription into a domestic anthropocentric framework.

Certainly, not all videos represent a negative power relationship between pets and humans, offering instead a surprising amount of animal agency that invites us to nuance claims that pet keeping is always a one-sided act of domination. Videos such as “Take off Your Glasses” (videomy, 2012), which features a young woman sitting in front of a computer screen while her cat keeps taking her glasses off with her paw, in order to rub her face against hers, demonstrates the amount of power pets can exert over the human. The video suggests that pet agency can function within human domination, while illuminating an interspecies affection breaking out of the constraints of pastoral power exhibited in other videos; there is no attempt to construct and regulate this cat’s subjectivity. Similarly, “Cat Song” (Animation Domination High-Def, 2014), an animated video that incorporates cats from other famous videos, such as Lil’ BUB and Grumpy Cat, critiques the desire to turn your cat into a commodity and emphasizes the extent to which cat videos have become a self-conscious genre created for mass consumption. At the beginning of the video, the young woman watches cat videos all day, “famous cats that make

their owners rich,” and as a result similarly watches her cat, phone in hand ready to record, hoping he will do something funny so she can post it online. Indeed, when she looks at her cat, it is through the mediated lens of her smart phone. She sees her cat as a commodity, yet her cat refuses to perform, and often “doesn’t even know his name.” Eventually, however, she becomes glad that her cat is just a “regular OK cat.” She sings, “Some people got a cat with a screwed up face / Lil’ BUB tongue all over the place / They make money off its funny walk too / but I’m glad the cat I’ve got is you,” emphasizing how the commodification of cats becomes a form of human power, grounded in the history of putting Othered people on display, from the differently-abled (Tromp, 2008) to the colonized (Qureshi, 2011).

Combined with videos featuring human projection onto animals, videos like “Cat Song” highlight the contours of the debate over pets and power, domestication and commodification, love and domination: how do we recognize human power over animals while allowing for animal agency and alterity? Are cat videos exemplary of the freedom and independence normally associated with cats, or are they a reflection of human power and constructions of an idealized animal subjectivity? I suggest that CatVidFest locks feline subjectivity within a frame that functions as a form of training subjecting cats to human domination and pet keeping’s pastoral power. Such training increases their exchange-value and shows how commodification intensifies when cats are manipulated to reaffirm human domination. CatVidFest is a confirmation of how much American culture loves pets, especially cats, yet is also a stark example of the commodity-spectacle pets become for the human, and the difficulties of lessening human control within an institution founded simultaneously on care and inequality.

Conclusion

At the holiday screening of the 2014 CatVidFest hosted by Will Braden, I asked Braden what his thoughts were on the estimated wealth of Grumpy Cat and the fact that her popularity is a result of physical difference. Braden seemed uncomfortable with my question, at first joking that the Q&A was over. He stressed that Grumpy Cat is a meme, and in this sense is (reduced to) a commodity. Overall, he explained, “my opinion of it falls somewhere in between this is horrible, they’re exploiting the cat, this should end soon, and this is the greatest thing ever.” When I suggested that both Grumpy Cat and Lil’ BUB, another famous cat who has a range of genetic abnormalities, might be a contemporary “freak show” composed of cats who look weird, Braden stressed context. Lil’ BUB raises money for charity, he told us, and his owner, Mike Bridavsky, will only do book signings at animal shelters. Both cats, he said, have dwarfism, which means they are easily transportable. He continued, “they are odd looking cats, they make people happy, they raise some money for charity.” His ending comment highlights my argument throughout this essay: the spectacle of cats and the phenomenon of cat videos is not about the cats, but is a reflection of human power over animals, their exchange-value, and the feelings of pleasure they give the human.

Pet keeping has become an unpleasant subject with which to grapple, particularly as critical animal studies promotes social justice for animals. For many of us who take part in this work, myself included, have close relationships with domestic animals. How then does one lessen or rationalize the power humans exert over pets, if liberation is not always an option, or might not be the best one? As we saw above with Haraway, some critics articulate a mode of understanding pet keeping outside of domination, emphasized by the recent move to use the term “companion” instead of “pet.” In their 2011 inaugural issue of *Journal of Animal Ethics*, for

example, editors Andrew Linzey and Pricilla N. Cohn set out the “terms of discourse” as follows:

Specifically, we are inviting authors to use “companion animals” rather than “pets.” Despite its prevalence, “pets” is surely a derogatory term with respect to both the animals concerned and their human caregivers. Again, the word “owners,” though technically correct in law, harks back to a previous age when animals were regarded as just that: property, machines or things to use without moral constraint. (p. viii)

Without denying the power structures perpetuated through language more generally, especially regarding other oppressed and marginalized groups, abolishing the term “pet” risks masking the power relationship inherent in the practice of pet keeping. For while “companion” implies equality, choice, and agency, pets admittedly have a limited amount. Similarly, for humans to deny they are “owners” obscures the commodification of pets. Suggesting that pets live in a companionate relationship with their owners posits them as complicit in the inequality foundational to pet keeping. Such complicity, I suggest, is magnified by cultural institutions such as CatVidFest, hinders the ability to recognize the problematic ways that pastoral power constructs animal subjectivity, and refuses a critique of the broader social institution that allows for this type of power in the first place.

CatVidFest may be one of the more telling markers of the alienation that results from late capitalism and the desire to find community within commodities. If watching cat Internet videos was originally a solitary endeavor, it is now a space of “public intimacy” (Ngai, 2012, p. 60) for pet owners to consume cat cuteness. In the confines of late-capitalist pet keeping, pet owners construct feline subjectivity to reassure them of their control, rather than contribute to their alienation. This is done through the commodification that occurs through the constant watching,

recording, and manipulation of cats and cat videos. The structure of CatVidFest registers how affection obscures power relationships; it is advertised as a celebration of cats, yet the videos destabilize this assumption. The festival becomes a metaphor for postmodern pet-keeping: on the surface, it is a form of love and affection; yet underneath is domination, manipulation, and the opportunity to make some cash.

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Editorial Objectives

The *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* is open to all scholars and activists. The journal was established to foster academic study of critical animal issues in contemporary society. While animal studies is increasingly becoming a field of importance in the academy, much work being done under this moniker takes a reformist or depoliticized approach that fails to mount a more serious critique of underlying issues of political economy and speciesist philosophy. JCAS is an interdisciplinary journal with an emphasis on animal liberation philosophy and policy issues. The journal was designed to build up the common activist's knowledge of animal liberation while at the same time appealing to academic specialists. We encourage and actively pursue a diversity of viewpoints of contributors from the frontlines of activism to academics. We have created the journal to facilitate communication between the many diverse perspectives of the animal liberation movement. Thus, we especially encourage submissions that seek to create new syntheses between differing disputing parties and to explore paradigms not currently examined.

Suggested Topics

Papers are welcomed in any area of animal liberation philosophy from any discipline, and presenters are encouraged to share theses or dissertation chapters. Since a major goal of the Institute for Critical Animal Studies is to foster philosophical, critical, and analytical thinking about animal liberation, papers that contribute to this project will be given priority (especially papers that address critical theory, political philosophy, social movement analysis, tactical analysis, feminism, activism and academia, Continental philosophy, or post-colonial perspectives). We especially encourage contributions that engage animal liberation in disciplines and debates that have received little previous attention.

Review Process

Each paper submitted is initially reviewed for general suitability for publication; suitable submissions will be read by at least two members of the journal's editorial board.

Manuscript Requirements

The manuscript should be in MS Word format and follow APA guidelines. All submissions should be double-spaced and in 12 point Times New Roman. Good quality electronic copies of all figures and tables should also be provided. All manuscripts should conform to American spelling.

As a guide, we ask that regular essays and reviews be between 2000-8000 words and have limited endnotes. In exceptional circumstances, JCAS will consider publishing extended essays. Authors should supply a brief abstract of the paper (of no more than 250 words). A brief autobiographical note should be supplied which includes full names, affiliation, email address, and full contact details.

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