I Can Haz an Internet Aesthetic?!? LOLCats and the Digital Marketplace

LOLcat memes and viral cat videos are compelling new media objects that engage questions about the ontology of the thing and the politics of affect within digital media flow and the Internet marketplace. As such, I will suggest that close study of LOLcat memes and viral cat videos raises issues important to feminist media studies. This paper presents the following preliminary areas of inquiry as central to a discussion of LOLcats and viral cat videos: their invocation and reconfiguration of key analytical categories in film, television, and new media aesthetics; the ways that their circulation does and does not engender community within a fragmented media landscape; and, their silly, furry goodness.

Cat videos – mainstays of early internet video exhibition – resemble the early objects of both cinema and television exhibition. They're short, they communicate a commitment to recording "live" events, they are mostly shot by "amateurs" with access to emerging technologies, and they dramatize the familiar. I believe it is easy to trace an evolution of 20th century media from early cinema's actualities, to early television's variety sketches, to early Internet cat videos. As examples of the Internet's early aesthetic forms, for example, viral cat videos invoke and re-frame the aesthetic forms of early cinema, with its emphasis on spectacle and actuality. One of Thomas Edison's earliest films was, in fact, something we would now recognize as a cat video.[1] When I speak of spectacle and actuality, I refer, in part, to the work of cinema scholar Tom Gunning, who writes extensively on early silent cinema.

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[1] Edison, Thomas. *The Boxing Cats (Prof. Welton's) (1894)*. N.d. video. Archive.orgWeb. 21 Dec 2012. <http://archive.org/details/TheBoxingCatsprof.Weltons1894>.

In his article 'The Cinema Of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde,' Gunning states, "it is a cinema that bases itself on … its ability to show something," (230). It directly interacts the viewers with the images they see, stimulating on a level that is purely exhibitionist. While narrative film aims to give the sense of being a voyeur to the unsuspecting characters, the cinema of attractions is aware of the audience, and in reply is creating images specifically for them to see.[2]

Cat videos are generally non-narrative, like early films of people sneezing or arriving trains. Like early films, cat videos celebrate the quotidian and are set in everyday locations: they evoke the visual pleasures of the ordinary, and turn the commonplace into the spectacular. One of the more compelling ideas in this gloss of Gunning's work is the idea of the "awareness of the audience". Filmmakers are always aware of their audience, but films and videos that acknowledge this awareness are read as having a more radical and decentered orientation than films with classical Hollywood editing, which place a premium on manipulating the audience into a state of uncritical transport. This is why cat videos present interesting objects of inquiry for feminist media studies, whose praxis is invested in both decentering and acknowledging the labor of both producers and consumers. Further, in cat videos on YouTube, the awareness of the audience is both an aesthetic orientation and a literal, numerical computation of number of viewers, which you see within the exhibition space of the video. The extreme theatricality of the visible view count suggests that readings of cat videos need to take into account not only the content of the videos but the emphasis lent by the exhibition space to the communities

[2] . "The 'Cinema of Attractions' in Relation to Early Film / Tom Gunning." *Authentic Society*. N.p.. Web. 21 Dec 2012. <http://www.authenticsociety.com/about/CinemaOfAttractions_TomGunning>.

formed around participation in the phenomenon of cat video-watching. The idea of direct interaction invokes not only the interactive exhibition practices of Internet viewing, but also the affective appeal of cuteness: cat videos will make you LOL. (In a longer version of this paper, I use the cat video to raise the following question about comedy: does the affective power of the LOL rewrite the radical potential of the cat video's awareness of its audience?)

Cat videos also reflect key trends in early television, with its emphasis on variety entertainment, the "feminized," and domestic spaces. Along with their partner in crime, the LOLcat meme, viral cat videos offer a potent mixture of Pop Art banality, an avant garde delight in juxtapositional word play, and a commitment to surreal objectifications. LOLcat memes and viral cat videos are an anachronistic remainder from the early DIY days of the Internet: as such, their continued popularity provides an opportunity for analysis of the shifting economics of the neo-liberal new media landscape. One thing that is fascinating about new media objects is that they are metrically traceable: which interestingly complicates their status as aesthetic objects – this is something I'm just now starting to think about, when I consider how to read objects like a graph of the "peak search volume" of the phrase "I can haz". Again, the way that the apparatus surrounding cat videos and cat memes engages audience scale and measurability invokes key practices of the televisual, with its emphasis on ratings and targeted demographics.

The issue of gender is central to a discussion of LOLcat memes and viral cat videos, from the way that their "televisual" aesthetic has historically been linked to "feminized" forms of entertainment, to the way that their ubiquity stands in as a kind of

comic analogue for that other pervasive Internet obsession: the pussy. This is, itself, a

kind of playful surreal logic based on wordplay, but I think it is more than relevant –

aesthetically, politically, and affectively. Any reading of the LOLcat memes and viral cat

video phenomena must necessarily address the ways that their aesthetic conventions do

and do not mirror those of Internet pornography, and the ways that the representation of

bodies, as such, both distracts and conglomerates views in the Internet's attention

economy. One particularly interesting link between pornography and cat videos is their

international circulation: you don't need to know Japanese to LOL at a cat video shot in

Japan. Cats, like sex, are ubiquitous worldwide. This raises interesting questions about

affective lures: do they increase global communities? Or, do they colonize previously

diverse cultural associations? Or, as it is probably some mixture of both, how do we

interpret their transnational scope? In a longer version of this paper, I link the furry

affective qualities of internet "pussy" to discussions of the transnational languages of the

Internet via what Chantal Nadeau, in her book on feminist national identity, *Fur Nation*,

calls the "careful regime of circulation and commodification of female skin."[3]

In a discussion of pervasive Internet memes, their DIY origins, and the websites

that facilitate the mass production of video and image objects for viral exchange, the

question of how and what creative practices engender spaces ripe for occupation is

particularly germane. The circulation and popularity of LOLcat memes and viral cat

videos suggests that ever growing virtual communities are being built around the

exchange and creation of, as well as the pleasures afforded by, these cat objects. In what

ways do these affective communities act as conventional communities? Do they offer any

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[3] Nadeau, Chantal. *Fur Nation: From the Beaver to Brigitte Bardot*. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.

radical potential? Recent news stories about the circulation of the song "The Day the LOLcats died" as a response to SOPA blackout day, and podcasts by Internet activists about the links between LOLcats and social media activism suggest that this phenomenon may offer productive political possibilities.

I want to conclude by offering a few suggestions about where this work is going next. My preliminary inquiries here lead me to the following questions: (1) How should we read the "community" of viewers (abstracted as "views") that grow up around these popular texts? (2) In what ways have LOLcat memes and viral cat videos established an aesthetic grammar for Internet objects, and what are the discursive effects of this grammar on the languages of Internet commerce and exchange? (And, as a corollary, how do these languages of internet commerce and exchange engender a "discourse" around issues of spectacle, the metrics of flow, and the gendering of digital objects?) And, (3) perhaps most compellingly, why do people love watching furry things do stupid stuff on the Internet?