wants moar: Visual Media's Use of Text in LOLcats and Silent Film

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Abstract – *Visual media has a history of using text to both frame and augment an audience's understanding of visual content. This paper compares the recent LOLcat Internet phenomenon with intertitles from silent film to explore the ways in which filmmakers and LOLcat creators have each used text to expand the narrative possibilities of digital imagery and film. LOLcats and intertitles both use text to establish content diagesis, and both utilize expository and dialogic text to establish specific points of view. These uses of text-based Barthesian anchors tell viewers exactly how the visual content should be read. These mediums differ, however, in their relationship with technology. Intertitles provided filmmakers a temporary narrative solution that was largely abandoned upon the advent of sound. LOLcat creators, on the other hand, made purposeful use of text despite richer alternatives. As such, LOLcats may seek to invent new textual practices, but the use of text is integrated into their definition.*

In early 2007 Erik Nakagawa started the strangely named website I Can Has Cheezburger? It was an image posting board that allowed users to contribute pictures and comment on others. The first picture, and the inspiration for the website's name and theme, was equally strange (fig. 1). Featuring a cat with an unusual grin and garbled text, I Can Has Cheezburger? quickly became the focal point of one of the latest internet phenomena: the LOLcat.

While a seemingly simple combination of digital photos and super-imposed text, LOLcats draw on a robust collection of internet-based cultural practices to structure a relationship between the image

and text. The use of text gives LOLcat creators the ability to frame and augment the viewer's understanding of the visual content. This relationship between text and image bears a striking similarity to the development of intertitles in silent films. Filmmakers in the early 20th century adopted the use of intertitles to increase the complexity of their films, intersplicing text to provide narrative structure to their shots while increasing their audience's understanding of the film's progression (La Tour, 2005). During the development of their mediums, creators of LOLcats and early filmmakers both appropriated text, and their audience's understanding of textual media, to expand the narrative possibilities of digital imagery and film.

Figure 1: Frequently attributed as the first LOLcat, this image was the first post on Nakagawa's website I Can Has Cheezburger?

I R IN UR HISTORIEZ

The term LOLcat is a compound word derived from the internet acronym "LOL" ("laughing out loud") and "cat." LOLcats are a subset of what are referred to as "image macros," user-generated images featuring a photo and superimposed text. "There's not much to it," Rutkoff (2007) of the Wall Street Journal said when explaining how to create a LOLcat. "Take a digital photo – often one of household pets, particularly cats – and purposefully place misspelled text on top." It is true, the barriers to participation in the LOLcat fad are low, but Rutkoff's statement over-simplifies the development of recognizable visual and textual LOLcat themes and the reason for their popularity.

To understand the history of LOLcats, a brief discussion about the development of image macros is helpful. Image macros can be traced to internet forums, where they are frequently used as avatars, message signatures or the content of the message itself. While the origin of the term "image macro" is unknown, it may have come from the Something Awful Forums, where posting image macros was common practice.[1] As image macros spread across the internet, many forums saw extensive use as disruptive and obnoxious, leading some communities to discourage macros or ban them outright. This was not the case, however, on forums like 4chan.org, an anonymous image posting board where the use of image macros flourished.

Figure 2: On "Caturday", LOLcats would flood the 4chan "/b/" board.

4chan's focus on image posting encouraged the development of many of the recognizable stylistic conventions used in image macros, and eventually produced the LOLcat-specific internet phenomenon "Caturday." On Saturdays, LOLcats would flood the 4chan "/b/" board (a section designated for

[1] Due to the ephemeral nature of image macros, a conclusive history is not possible. The Wikipedia entry on LOLcats (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lolcat) credits Something Awful (http://www.somethingawful.com/), and an account on image macros from Encyclopedia Dramatica (http://www.encyclopediadramatica.com/Image_macro) explains that the term was used in the Something Awful Forums to describe captioned photos that were exchanged on USENET prior to internet forums.

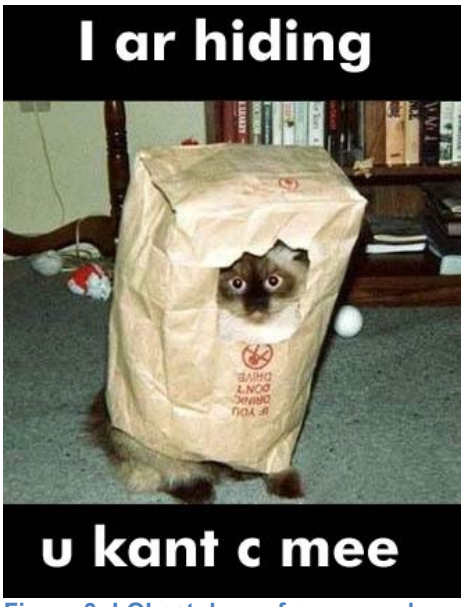

Figure 3: LOLcat draws from a number of digital text practices

random images), and soon 4chan users began referring to the day as "Caturday." Despite 4chan's anonymous posting system, submitting LOLcats on Saturday/Caturday developed into a community practice (fig. 2) as well as the ridiculing of those who posted LOLcats on other days of the week.[2] Like "moar" (a hybrid of "roar" and "more"), Caturday became a known LOLcat term, and transcended the images to enter 4chan vernacular (e.g., "It's Caturday, post moar cats!").

Arguably due to the cuteness of the photos, distribution of LOLcats expanded beyond internet forums; they are now commonly distributed over email and have become a staple of internet humor. It was one such email that introduced Nakagawa to his first LOLcat, leading to the creation of I Can Has Cheezburger?, a more widely accessible hub for the LOLcat phenomena.

What is it about these images that makes them so popular? Anyone who spends a substantial amount of time looking at a LOLcat will notice that without the text the image loses much of its appeal. Non-captioned photos of animals have a similar history of Internet distribution[3] but do not share the LOLcat's level of impact. There is something undeniably compelling about the way in which the text choices and decidedly bad grammar of a LOLcat enriches its digital photo (fig. 3). The superimposed text frequently anthropomorphizes the cat, and its spelling and word choices borrow extensively from the digital text practices of text messaging, instant messaging, and leetspeak[4] (Rutkoff, 2007). These clever phrases extend digital imagery as a medium by both expanding and framing the meaning of the image. Creating relationships between text and visual content in order to expand a visual medium, however, is not a new practice.

"100 Years Ago"

At the turn of the 20th century filmmakers were exploring ways in which they could frame their visual content. Early cinema was largely influenced by the theatre, but film's lack of sound proved problematic when trying to implement stage practices on celluloid. Filmmakers were able to compensate for the loss of narrative that speaking actors provided by including intertitles in their films. Also known as "title cards," "titles," "calling cards" or "posters," intertitles were made by filming a piece of fabric with printed text (fig. 4). They entered general use around 1910, flourishing through the 1920s until the advent of sound films, at which point they were rejected in favor of sound-based solutions (La Tour, 2005).

The use of intertitles was pioneered by exhibition halls. Intertitles were initially used as a technique to display announcements before and after features. Originally a separate piece of media (first a glass slide, later a separate reel), intertitles gave projectionists the advantage of showing an

[2] Due to the overwhelming popularity of LOLcat images, 4chan eventually abandoned the Saturday/Caturday restriction on posting. Members "voted" that "everyday was Caturday," at which point LOLcats with references to Caturday could use the term more broadly, applying it to a variety of noteworthy days, including holidays and birthdays.
[3] See Cute Overload (http://www.cuteoverload.com), a popular image board for the cutest images on the internet.
[4] Leetspeak is an internet dialect that entered popular use in online gaming culture. For more information see Rhoads, 2007.

announcement intertitle between features while changing reels. Around 1904, distributors began to include intertitles as part of the film reel with title and copyright information.[5] In response, filmmakers started lengthening their titles in order to take of advantage of the orienting benefit of text. Bordwell, et al. (1985) note an extreme example from the 1905 chase comedy A Dog Lost, Strayed or Stolen $25.00 Reward Apply Mrs. Brown, 711 Park Ave, one of the longest titles in the history of American film. Other filmmakers took advantage of the distributors' choice to include the film's title by composing their features as a series of separately copyrighted shots, each beginning with a summarizing title. Within a few years the use of intertitles spread beyond title information as producers began placing intertitles throughout their films.[6]

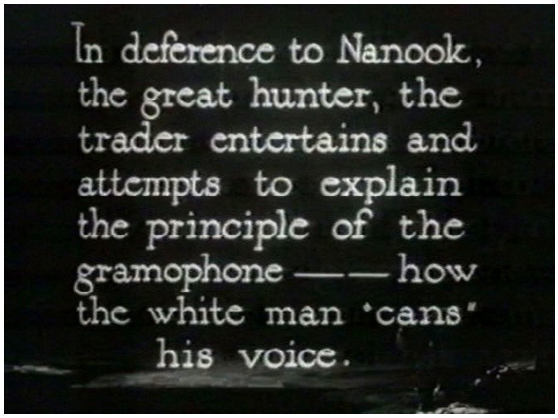

Figure 4: An expository style of intertitle from Nanook of the North (1922).

It is hard to overstate intertitles' importance to the development of film. Much like LOLcats' use of text, filmmakers used intertitles to structure the audience's experience of the visual content. Without sound, filmmakers were restricted to the content captured by the camera. Using text, however, intertitles provided a lens through which audiences could understand the film, enabling a wider range of directorial vision and cinematic narrative.

The semiotic relationship between the text and the visual has been a dominant focus of academic research on intertitles. Some scholars have explained the function of an intertitle as a Barthesian anchor that provides a fixed meaning to the film sequence (La Tour, 2005). Barthes (1977) argued that text is used to "anchor" meaning to visual images, concluding that because specific meanings can't come from the author of visual imagery, it must be actively created by the reader through a process of textual analysis. As Hall (1981) explained in his Barthesian analysis of photojournalism, "it is a very common practice for the captions to news photographs to tell us, in words, exactly how the subject's expression ought to be read" . Through Barthes' theories, we can understand how intertitles were able to structure an otherwise confusing new medium by placing visual and textual media into relationship with one-another.

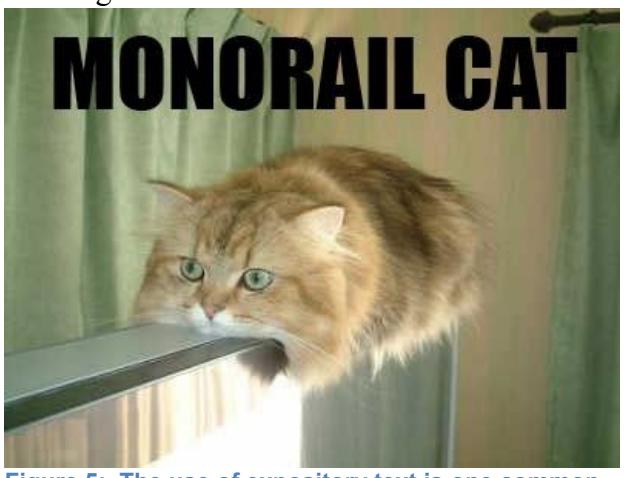

Figure 5: The use of expository text is one common methodology for LOLcats.

Intertitles also eliminated the need for live-narration. It was a common practice in early exhibition halls to have a narrator who explained the visual content to the audience. The presence of this narrator, especially when the visual content was

[5] The first catalogue produced by Gaumount Film Company read: "We are pleased to provide our customers with printed titles on film for all the films in our Collection. Titles on film for all the listed films of our collection, approximate length 5ft. In French, in a foreign language." Purchase was optional and titles could be ordered with a specific text (La Tour, 2005).

[6] La Tour (2005) reports that during the period from 1907-1909, 25% of films were using intertitles. By 1912 this number had jumped to 70%.

scenic, established the narrator as the film's point of view. The elimination of live-narration in favor of the cheaper intertitle was a crucial step in establishing a cinematic framework that disembodied the narrative and allowed audience members to identify with the point of view of the camera. Intertitles gave directors the ability to produce films in which "the story could unfold as though the diegetic world actually existed" (La Tour, 2005, p. 329). This was particularly true of the biblically styled intertitle that became commonplace (fig. 4). "The omniscient scriptural voice widened the range of possibilities for complex, original narratives. Intertitles made it possible to explain a less familiar or more elaborate narrative and to modulate suspense through the selective delivery of information" (Ibid). It was this development that created new possibilities for cinema and marked a departure from attempts to recreate the stage.

Different Mediums, Different Voices

So why are LOLcats so popular? They are certainly easy to create and share. There is something viral about the ways in which they spread socially between friends and inboxes, and like much office humor, they do not take long to enjoy. More than anything else, however, the success of LOLcats must be attributed to the text.

Figure 6: Dialogic text in LOLcats can be used to establish relational hierarchies between cats (above) as well as a maturity level relative to other images (below).

LOLcat and intertitle texts share conventions related to style and point of view. Intertitles have been broken into two categories, expository and dialogic, each of which frames the profilmic content within a unique point of view. The dialogic intertitle attributed speech to a character on the screen, while the expository style established an all-knowing character and point of view through what LaTour (2005) calls "the omniscient voice" (p. 329). These same conventions are seen with LOLcats, and they share similar implications. The familiar bad grammar of LOLcats is generally limited to dialogic text the reader is intended to attribute to the cat (figs. 1, 2 and 3). Expository text, on the other hand, either makes a statement about the image or casts the image into a theme. This text appears as if omnisciently delivered from the point of view of the LOLcat's creator (see figs. 5 and 7).

This distinction between expository and dialogic text is reinforced through grammatical choices and has important implications for the relationship between the text and image. Typically, bad grammar is restricted to dialogic text; as Dash (2007) noted, these statements follow consistent grammatical errors, sentence structure, and format. Moreover, various degrees of error are used to grant cats different levels of maturity. This is a common technique when establishing hierarchical relationships between multiple cats in an image, or when the humor is subtle in nature (fig. 6).

In addition to the textual content, the visual development of LOLcat text also has similarities to the visual development of intertitles. LOLcat text appears deceptively simple but in fact uses highly stylized conventions; original posts to 4chan frequently used a white Impact typeface with a thin black line (fig. 7), a style still regularly used today. One explanation holds that the use of the dated font and style adds to a retro appeal (Rutkoff, 2007).

Figure 7: Many original LOLcats used white text in Impact typeface with a thin black line.

Typographic consideration existed for intertitles as well. Even before the art-title, filmmakers were developing their own stylistic conventions. For example, D.W. Griffith's feature The Light That Came (1909) marks the beginning of consideration for intertitles as a visual element. Griffith organized the content of his intertitles hierarchically by using different sizes of capital letters, a practice that would quickly be adopted by the industry (La Tour, 2005).

Given these similarities, however, LOLcat text and intertitles are distinct in the ways in which they relate to their visual media. Despite the liberties that intertitles afforded narrative film, they remained a solution to a medium that had not yet developed sound. Filmmakers of the early 20th century were struggling to find ways in which their films could recreate the stage and needed techniques that could drive storylines and plot. Sound was simply more effective, and intertitles were largely discarded once sound became a viable option.

But sound, especially dialogue, is not always the natural evolution for text and its anchoring effects. It is in this way that the function of text in LOLcats is distinct from the function of intertitles. Sound is undoubtedly a limitation of digital images, but for the LOLcat phenomenon, it is one that has been embraced. Rather than attempting to use richer mediums such as video, LOLcat creators have accepted the restraints of digital images, focusing instead on the development of textual styles and conventions. If this were not the case, LOLcats would have abandoned digital images for video-based forms of humor, especially given the recent growth of video sharing sites such as YouTube. Unlike the intertitles from silent film, LOLcats have only become more popular in the face of richer mediums. In fact, while YouTube emerged after image macros were well established, it preceded the LOLcat phenomenon by approximately one year.

Ultimately, the success of LOLcats is derived from their ability to reorient the viewer's understanding of an image, a practice well suited to text. Barthes (1974) understood that a plurality of meanings could be ascribed to any photograph and that captions helped anchor the producer's intent. The importance of the anchor is readily apparent in LOLcats, but does Barthes' plurality fall away if we consider the cat and text as a unified creation? And if we consider them separately, which is more important: the cat or the garbled text? Arguments can be made either way. Cute cats that remain silent are commonly shared on the internet, and the LOLcat dialect seems to have recently developed enough stability and recognition to take on a life of its own.[7] Moreover, there is evidence of a circular

[7] LOLcat speech has recently inspired projects such as the LOLcat programming language named LOLCODE (http://lolcode.com) and a LOLcat Bible (http://www.lolcatbible.com), including interpretations such as Job 1:20: "Teh Ceiling Cat giv me cheezburger, teh Ceiling Cat takded mah cheezburger awai. I stil laiks teh Ceiling Cat." There are also

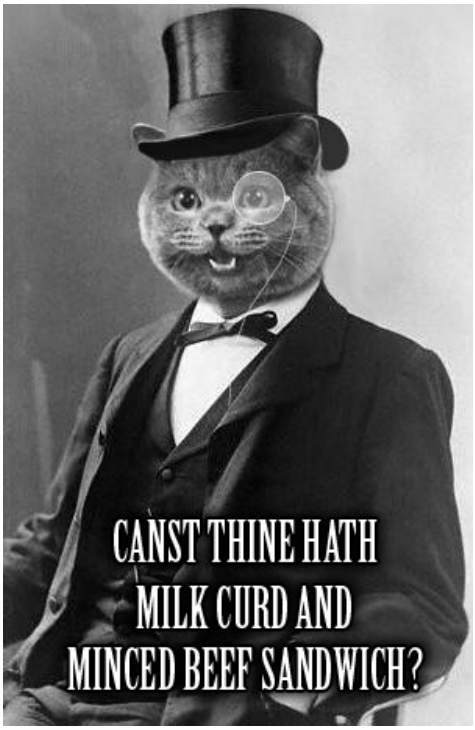

Figure 8: This LOLcat, created in response to the original LOLcat, pokes fun at the relationship between LOLcats and older mediums.

relationship between visual and textual content when the LOLcat creator chooses to augment the visual content in addition to the text (fig. 8).

Barthes (1977) claimed that, "the more technology develops the diffusion of information (and notably of images), the more it provides the means of masking the constructed meaning under the appearance of the given meaning" (p. 46). This is certainly true in cinema where the viewer's relationship with the camera is all but forgotten. When it comes to LOLcats, however, it appears we are subordinating the technological construction to which Barthes refers in favor of socially constructed meanings. After all, LOLcats thrive off of ridiculing the very constructions inherent to their medium (figs. 8 and 9).

k thx bai

Conventions in both LOLcat text and intertitles developed out of the desire to provide audiences with specific interpretations of visual media. The expository and dialogic textual styles seen in silent film and LOLcats attempt to frame visual content within a specific point of view and establish meaning that was otherwise not possible. However, there are important distinctions between the evolution of text in LOLcats and intertitles in silent film.

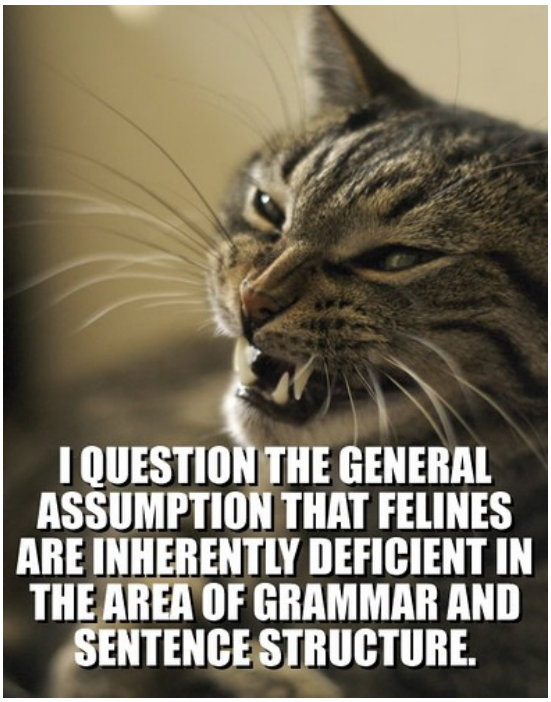

Figure 9: Some images play with the stylistic, technical and cultural conventions of the LOLcat.

In the early 1900s, filmmakers' inability to frame visual content left them looking for other means by which to covey their intent and, for a short while, intertitles were the answer. For film, intertitles served as a temporary solution to a larger problem eventually solved by the addition of sound. Eliminating the need for film house narrators, intertitles gave the feature and its characters a narrative voice, restructuring the relationship between audience members and the film and allowing filmmakers to establish a more effective diegetic.

The incorporation of text into digital photography allowed LOLcat creators to establish specific visual interpretations as well. The intentions behind the first LOLcats might be unknown, but we can see how the addition of stylized text to digital photography gave LOLcat creators the ability to derive humor from

many sites of analysis and debate focusing on the linguistics of LOLcat text, most notably its racist nature (http://icanhascheezburger.com/2007/02/28/me-no-rike-remonade/).

producing a specific interpretation of an image. Many of the textually dialogic LOLcats follow silent film's lead by using narrative to establish a distinct point of view.

LOLcats, however, may be unable to follow filmmakers' choices to broaden their medium. While contemporary film looks for ways to further enhance the narrative diagetic by expanding the range of visual possibilities, the construction of a LOLcat actively uses text despite the availability of richer alternatives. This choice might permanently restrict the LOLcat to a fad. Up to this point, the visual and textual relationships which give LOLcats their distinctiveness have been unable to transcend digital imagery. Given the narrowly defined LOLcat conventions regarding the combination of text and digital image, the continuation of this Internet phenomenon may be fueled only by our ongoing interest in augmenting the photos of our cats with clever phrases.

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