

*wants moar*

the appropriation of text in the framing of visual media

a comparison between LOLcats and intertitles

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In early 2007, a strangely named website entitled I CAN HAS CHEEZBURGER? was started by Erik Nakagawa. It was an image posting board that allowed users to contribute photos and comment on others. The first picture, and the inspiration for the website's name and theme, was equally strange (see Figure 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.



Figure 1: Frequently attributed as the first LOLcat, this image was the first posted on Nakagawa's website I CAN HAS CHEEZBURGER?

While seemingly simple combination of digital photos and super-imposed text, LOLcats draw on a robust collection of internet-based cultural practices that structure the content of the photo and text, as well as the relationship between the two. This relationship between text and image has a striking similarity to the development of intertitles in silent films. Film makers in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century were able to use intertitles to increase the complexity of their films, intersplicing text to provide structure to their shots, while increasing their audience's understanding of the film's progression. As developing new mediums, creators of LOLcats and film both appropriated text, and their audience's understanding of this older media, to expand the possibilities of their own.

## IR 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



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

recognizable LOLcats themes, and the reason for their popularity.

To understand the history of LOLcats, a quick discussion about the development of image macros is helpful. Image macros can be traced to internet forums where image macros 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<sup>1</sup> where posting image macros was common. As image macros spread across the internet, some 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.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.somethingawful.com/>

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 phenomena "Caturday." On Saturdays, LOLcats would flood the 4chan "/b/" board (a section designated for random images), and soon 4chan users began referring to the day as "Caturday." Despite the anonymity of its contributors, posting LOLcats on Saturday/Caturday was adopted as a community practice (see Figure 2), as well as the ridiculing of those who posted LOLcats on other days of the week<sup>2</sup>. Like "moar" (a hybrid of "roar" and "more"), Caturday became a known LOLcat term, and transcended the pictures and entered 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 as a staple of workplace humor. It was one such email that introduced Nakagawa to his first LOLcat, leading to the creation of I CAN HAS CHEEZBURGER? and an accessible focal point for the LOLcat phenomena.

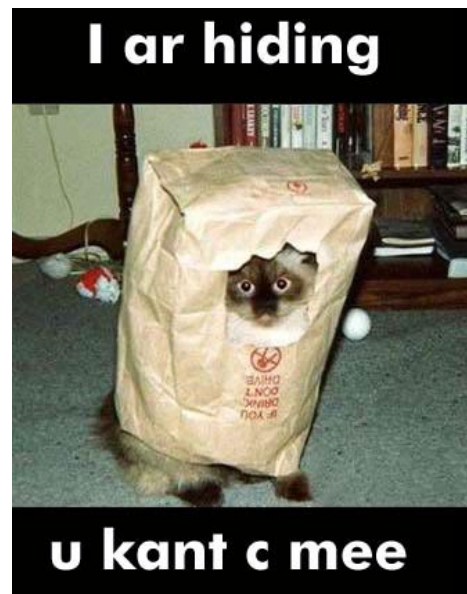


Figure 3: LOLcat text draws from a number of digital text practices.

But what is it about these images that make them so popular? Anyone who spends a substantial amount of time looking at a LOLcat will notice that without the text, the image frequently loses its appeal. Non-captioned

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

photos of animals have a similar history of internet distribution<sup>3</sup>, but don't share the LOLcat's level of impact. There is something undeniably compelling about the way in which the decidedly bad grammar of a LOLcat enriches its digital photo (see Figure 3). The superimposed text frequently anthropomorphizes the cat, and its spelling and word choices borrow extensively from the digital text practices of domains such as text messaging, instant messaging, and leetspeak<sup>4</sup> (Rutkoff, 2007). These clever phrases extend digital photography as a medium by both expanding and framing the meaning of the image. Creating relationships between visual content and text in this manner, however, is not a new practice.

### “100 Years Ago”

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, film-makers were also exploring the 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 re-implement stage practices on celluloid. Film-makers were able to compensate for the loss of narrative that speaking actors provided by cutting intertitles into their shots.

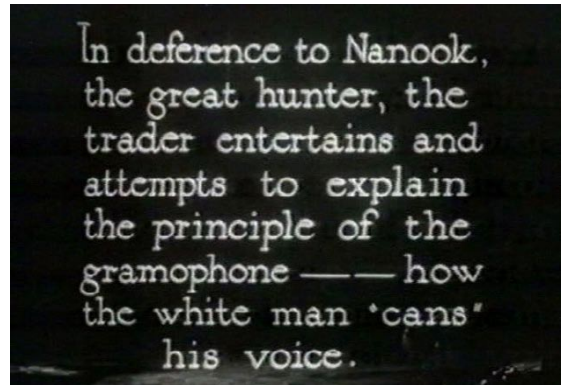


Figure 4: An expository style of intertitle from *Nanook of the North* (1922).

Also known as “title cards”, “titles”, “calling cards”, or “posters”, intertitles were made by filming a piece of fabric with printed text (see Figure 4). They entered general use around 1910, flourishing through the 1920s

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<sup>3</sup> See Cute Overload (<http://www.cuteoverload.com>), a popular image board for the cutest images on the internet.

<sup>4</sup> Leetspeak is an internet dialect that entered popular use in online gaming culture. For more information see (2007).

until the advent of sound films, at which point they were rejected in favor of sound based solutions.

The use of intertitles was pioneered by exhibition halls where they used to project announcements before and after features. They were originally a separate piece of media (first a glass slide, and then later a separate reel), which gave projections the advantage of being able to show the intertitle between features while changing reels. Around 1904, distributors began including intertitles for title and copyright information<sup>5</sup>. In response, film-makers began lengthening their titles in order to take of advantage of the orienting benefit of the text. Bordwell, et. al (1985) note a 1905 chase comedy entitled *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 film-makers worked around production limitations by composing their features as a series of separately copyrighted shots, each beginning with a summarizing intertitle. Within a few short years, however, use of intertitles would spread beyond title information and producers would begin intercutting intertitles throughout films<sup>6</sup>.

It is hard to overstate the intertitle's importance to the development of film. Much like LOLcats' use of text, film-makers used intertitles to structure the audience's experience of the visual content. Without sound, film makers were restricted to the visual content captured by the camera. Using text, however, intertitles provided a lens

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<sup>5</sup> The first catalogue produced by Gaumont 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).

<sup>6</sup> 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%.

through which audiences could understand the feature, enabling a wider range of directorial vision and cinematic narrative. The semiotic relationship between text and the visual has been a dominant focus of academic research on intertitles. Scholars have explained the function of an intertitle as a Bathesian anchor; the intertitle's text provides a fixed meaning to the film sequence (La Tour, 2005).

Perhaps of greater importance, intertitles 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 scenic, established the film's point of view as belonging to the narrator. The elimination of live-narration in favor of the cheaper intertitle was crucial in establishing a cinematic framework that disembodied the narrative and allowed audience member 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. "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" (p. 329). It was this development that created new possibilities for cinema and marked a departure from the attempt to recreate the stage.

### **Different Mediums, Different Voices**

So what has made LOLcats so popular? They are certainly easy to create, and easily shared. There is undoubtedly something viral about the ways in which they spread

socially between friends and from inbox to inbox. And like much of office humor, they do not take long to enjoy. More than anything else, the success of LOLcats, however, must be attributed to the text.

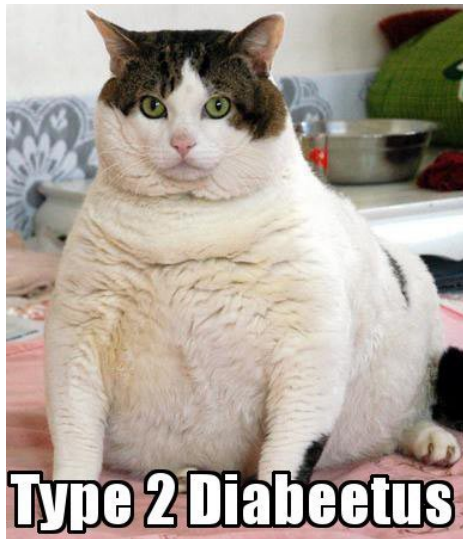


Figure 5: Expository text that describes the cat is one common LOLcat theme.

LOLcat and intertitle text share conventions related to style and point of view. Intertitles have been broken into two categories, expository and dialogic, each with its own unique point of view. The dialogic intertitle was attributed to a character on the screen, and the expository style establishing 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 have similar implications for the point of view. In fact, the familiar bad grammar of LOLcats is generally limited to dialogic text that the reader is intended to attribute to the cat. 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.

This distinction between expository and dialogic text is reinforced through grammar choices, and has important

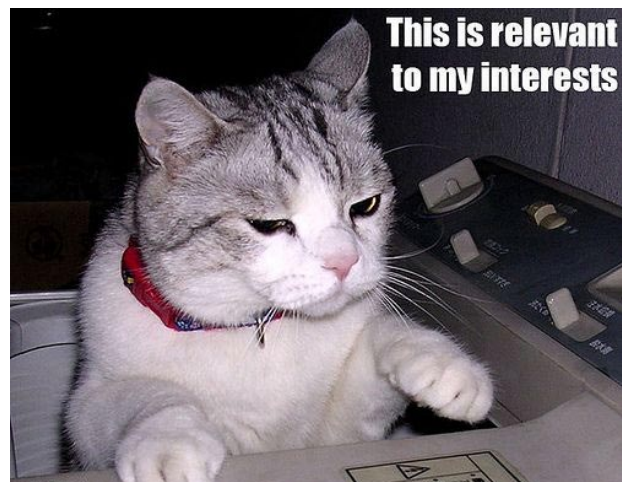


Figure 6: Dialogic text in LOLcats are frequently used to establish the relative maturity of the cat.

implications for the relationship between the text and image. When a LOLcat’s dialogic

text is not poorly formed, the cat is granted a level of maturity that is not afforded to other images (see Figure 5). This is common when establishing hierarchical relationships between multiple cats in an image, or when the humor is more subtle in nature.

The graphic development of LOLcat text also has similarities to the text of intertitles. LOLcat text appears deceptively simple, but in fact it uses highly evolved stylized conventions; original posts to 4chan frequently used a white Impact typeface with a thin black line (see Figure 7), a style still regularly used today. One explanation holds that the use of the dated font and style adds to a retro appeal.



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

Typographic consideration existed for intertitles as well. Even prior to the art-title, film-makers 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).

Despite these similarities, distinctions can be made between LOLcats and intertitles based on the ways in which they relate to their mediums. Despite the liberties

that intertitles afforded narrative film, they remained a solution to a media that had not yet developed sound. Film makers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> 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 more effective, and intertitles were largely discarded once sound became a viable option.

But sound, especially dialogue, is not always the natural evolution for this relational usage of text. It is in this way that LOLcats are distinct from intertitles. Sound is undoubtedly a technological limitation of digital photography, but for LOLcats, it is one that has been embraced. Instead of seeking to overcome limitations, LOLcats embrace the restraints of their medium, focusing on a construction of the photo's meaning via text. If this were not the case, LOLcats would have been abandoned for video, especially given the recent growth of YouTube. But unlike intertitles, 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 phenomena by approximately a year.

LOLcats enact much of their humor from extending the possibilities of both the text and its relationship to the image. The text structures the viewer's understanding of the image, frequently to a humorous effect. Barthes (1977) clearly understood that a plurality of cultural meanings could be ascribed to any photograph, and that captions helped anchor the producer's intent. But does Barthes' cultural duplicity 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 his garbled text? Arguments could 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<sup>7</sup>. The most meaningful analysis might lay in the ways that text in both LOLcats and intertitles structure the point of view for the visual content. If the advent of intertitles disembodied film, then the creation of LOLcats might be considered as a form photographic embodiment achieved by anthropomorphizing the cats.

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. But when it comes to LOLcats, are we discarding the technologically constructed meanings to which Barthes refers, in favor of socially constructed meanings? If so, these social constructions thrive off of ridiculing the very technologically oriented construction to which Barthes is referring (see Figure 8).

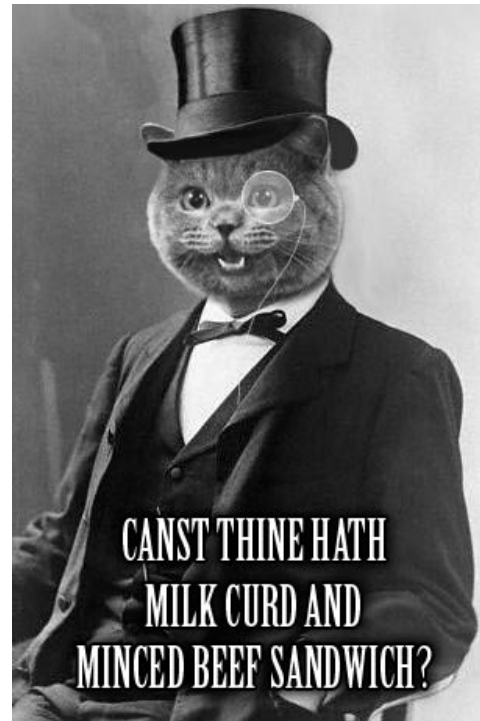


Figure 8: This LOLcat, created in response to the original LOLcat, pokes fun at the relationship between LOLcats and older mediums.

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<sup>7</sup> LOLcat speech has recently inspired project 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."

## k thx bai

It is clear that both intertitles and LOLcats developed as a result of technological limitations in their respective mediums. Both LOLcat and intertitles are a response to film and digital photography's inability to sufficiently frame its content. These deficits left film-makers looking for other means by which to convey their intent, and for a short while intertitles were the answer. 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 provide a specific interpretation of the image. It is the text's relationship to those limitations, however, that make them distinct. For film, intertitles served as a temporary solution to a larger problem that was solved by the addition of sound. But the relationship between text and image due to the limitations of digital photography are central to the construction of a LOLcat. This relationship might permanently restrict the LOLcat to a fad. Where film continues to search for new ways in which to expand visual possibilities, the continuing development of LOLcats is tied to the socially constructed textual content, whose endurance is fueled by our interest in augmenting the photos of our cat with clever phrases.

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