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The Cat's Pyjamas: Cats in Culture and Society 25-26 May 2023

Abstracts

- In alphabetical order by surname (of first author)
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Bakker, Barbara (Dalarna University): Cats in contemporary Arabic children's literature

Cats are and have always been a constant presence in the Arabic culture: from Ancient Egypt to the pre-Islamic era, in the Islamic tradition and even in proverbs, cats have always played a conspicuous role. The traditional Arabic significance of cats is also clearly reflected in contemporary Arabic children's literature, and a large number of tales for children are featuring cats in a variety of roles. However, how are cats portrayed and what do they stand for in these stories? Scope of this paper is the representation of cats and their symbolism in contemporary Arabic children's literature. A brief introduction covers the role of cats in the Arabic culture in very general terms, followed by an overview of the genre of contemporary Arabic children's literature that accounts for its mostly educational, didactic character and its latest trends. The central part of this paper presents and analyses a number of Arabic picture books, authored by Arabic writers and illustrated by Arabic artists, where cats are protagonists, either as embodiments of human traits or as companions of human beings. The stories are discussed in terms of their symbolism and their themes.

Berg, Lovisa (Dalarna University): The Feminine Feline – Cats in Arabic Love Poetry

The well-known Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani (1923-1998) broke cultural, religious and political taboos with his famous poems on women (Kahf; Loya). In his poetry, Qabbani alternated between fierce attacks on the lack of women's rights in the patriarchal Arab world and descriptions of love encounters with various women. A number of these poems feature cats as representations of women (Qabbani). Qabbani is not the first to connect between cats and feminine traits, the Jungian psychologist von Franz asserts that cats, when they appear in dreams and folk tales, represent feminine values, self-assurance and independence (von Franz, 1990). She further adds that cats often symbolise fertility, creative processes, and consciousness (von Franz, 2002). In this paper I will examine six of Qabbani's poems which contain images of cats. I will read the poems through the lens suggested by von Franz in her article 'Analytical Psychology and Literary Criticism'. I will focus on the psychological traits attributed to the cats by Qabbani and how that contributes to the understanding of the poems.

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Bodin, Per-Arne (Stockholm University): Ukrainian and Russian Cats – On Language and War

One of the differences between Ukrainian and Russian is that in many words where Ukrainian has an “i” sound, the Russian has an “o” sound. The most quoted example is the word cat – in Ukrainian “kit”, but “kot” in Russian. This difference is exploited in ethnic anecdotes, but during the last twenty years this difference has got more and more of political implications especially after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Posters and especially memes are produced from both sides alluding to the name for cat in the two languages and expressing different political agendas.

In photos from the war cats are used in two different ways: on the one hand from the Russian side showing the “good and polite manners” of the Russian soldiers, in the Ukrainian war photos the pictures of cats stress the devastation resulting from the war and cats as victims rescued from the horrors of war.

Bourns, Timothy (University College London): Cats in Medieval Icelandic Life and Literature

A variety of domestic mammals were introduced to Iceland during the first centuries of Norse settlement, including horses, dogs, cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, and, most importantly of course, cats, which inhabit domestic spaces but are never truly domesticated. Archaeological evidence indicates that cats were kept as pets in medieval Iceland, but they appear far less often than other domestic animals in saga literature, and when they do emerge, they play deviant roles and are linked with socially subversive individuals.

This paper will survey and closely study the depiction of cats and cat-owners in the Old Norse-Icelandic literary corpus. For example, the troublesome character Þórólfr in *Vatnsdæla saga* dislikes human company and lives with twenty large black cats, which he magically enchants to defend his home when he is attacked by the people in the district. Another medieval Icelandic text, *Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar*, features a cannibalistic troll named Brúsi; his mother is an

extremely large black cat, with fire burning out of her nostrils and mouth, and she too kills men and eats them. This monstrous cat-mother is imbued with pagan significance and can only be defeated by the male ‘hero’ once he calls upon the power of Christianity.

With these and other narratives in mind, I will demonstrate how cats are an especially interesting case study for questions about the origin of animal symbolism in medieval Iceland. Rather than writing about cats in experiential terms, medieval Icelandic authors seemingly borrowed conventional symbolic associations from learned continental sources. I will further argue that the devilry of cats and cat symbolism in post-conversion literature became retrospectively associated with paganism, and that this may have been a response to the cultic significance of cats in pre-Christian Scandinavia, potentially connected to the goddess Freyja.

Carbone, Elettra (University College London): Animals or Children? Representations of Cats in Bjørg Vik's *Reisen til Venezia* (1992, *The Trip to Venice*)

In her article on the semiotics of literary cats, Maria Nikolajeva points to the ‘enigmatic nature’ of cats, a characteristic that seems to be shared by all ‘feline characters’ despite the fact that their ‘uses and functions’ may vary dramatically in the narratives in which they are employed (Nikolajeva 2009: 248). Nikolajeva gives particular attention to cases where ‘feline traits are featured in combination with certain human traits’ creating ‘a hybrid human-animal character’ (Nikolajeva 2009: 252). This combination of human and feline characteristics is key to understanding the representation of the many cats in the comedy *Reisen til Venezia* (1992, *The Trip to Venice*) by Norwegian feminist writer Bjørg Vik, in which the elderly couple Edith and Oskar Tellmann lives in a cosy but shabby place swarming with cats. While we do not meet any hybrid cats with anthropomorphic features, in Vik’s play the function of the many cats rests on the tension between their human-like status and animal features. Edith and Oskar view them both as replacement children and as companions that mirror their own life and condition. The two characters visiting the Tellmanns’ in the course of the play, on the other hand, the plumber Kristoffer Karlsen and the home help Viviann Sunde, both see them as animals – though the former as pests and the latter as pets. In this paper I will examine the role that cats play in Edith and Oskar’s real life – as an impoverished and lonely elderly couple – and in their imagined reality – as, using their imagination, they travel to the places they visited earlier in life without leaving their living room. The cats are part of their ‘carnavalesque’ existence which resonates with Bakhtin’s ‘carnival categories’ (Bakhtin 1984) and, in the play, appropriately culminates in their imaginary journey to one of the most famous homes of the carnival tradition, Venice.

Doesburg, Charlotte (University College London): Irregular since 1974 – The Dutch Pussy Cat Newspaper and Graphic Design

The Dutch *Poezenkrant* ‘Pussy Cat Newspaper’ is an irregularly appearing periodical with some focus on cats. The newspaper is designed and published by Dutch graphic designer and publisher Piet Schreuders. Its irregularity is not the only surprising aspect of the Pussy Cat Newspaper, every edition has a different appearance. The newspaper sometimes mimics other well-known publications, such as the Dutch tabloid magazine *Privé* or the *National Geographic Magazine*. At other times, its layout seems to be based on Schreuders’ own creativity.

The paper's contents are unique to the Pussy Cat Newspaper. Unlike its name suggests, the paper gives no news and its articles are sometimes only loosely based on cats. The paper prides itself on not giving any information on cat care, breeding, history, or behaviour. Instead it feature articles that sometimes have a connection to cats, and letters and pictures from readers. The Pussy Cat Newspaper is characterised by a tongue in cheek attitude from its creator. There are several returning contributors who share their cats' latest adventures including the late writer Willem Frederik Hermans.

This presentation will introduce the Pussy Cat Newspaper to an international audience by discussing its continually changing appearance and giving insights into its contents. The main question I will try to answer is: 'What is the point of the Pussy Cat Newspaper, if any?'

Guin, Tonisha (Indian Institute of Technology Jodhpur): Decolonising Gender through Feline Femininity – Reading “Shashti, the Benefactress” as a Colonial Queer-Feminist Critique

Shashti, the Hindu folk goddess of childbirth, is known to have cats as her vahana (the cross between her choice of mount and familiar). She continues to be venerated, worshipped primarily by women through acts of storytelling and folk rituals, well outside the Brahminical Sanskrit high religious iteration of mainstream (often hegemonic) Hinduism. This paper seeks to read a colonial/modern Bengali short story—“Shashtir Kripa” [“Shashti, the Benefactress”] by the Bengali author Rajshekhar Basu, published in 1918—that has a cat appointed as a guardian to an orphaned child and granted not just anthropomorphification, but subjective agency over the transformation. While it is common to use animals as metaphors and allegorical figures, especially in folklore, this satire's treatment of its feline subject is a marked departure.

The young, ill wife of a male chauvinist invokes Goddess Shashti in her deathbed/childbed and asks her to watch over her infant. Shashti grants her wish by appointing a female cat as the caretaker of the child. The kitty, lactating with her latest litter, asks how she may keep her own kittens alive if she transforms into a human caretaker. The goddess grants her the ability to transform back into a cat by will; the cat is thus able to care for her kittens and the human child in turns. Eventually, the man returns, is immediately enamoured, and marries her. He questions her disappearances, and follows her when she does not alter her pattern of behaviour, suspecting a sexual dalliance: he sees her transform into her feline body and is himself transformed—without hope of alteration—into a tomcat. The cat calls back his erstwhile abandoned first wife and children, asks them to take care of the newborn, and departs the story, presumably en route to her kittens.

The story follows the familiar structure of the folklore in the vehicle of a modernist short story with elements of dark comedy that may appear anachronistic. The cat appears as the stereotype of desirable femininity—attractiveness, fecundity teamed with motherly instincts—especially to the villain of the tale; the story pushes this sense of cis-heterosexual femininity to its utmost extremes and subverts it in part. Along the way, what George Canguilhem calls the distinction between social norms and biological norms is deliberately evoked: It is normal for a female cat to be polygamous and give birth to litters with multiple partners. It is also as normal for her (within this story) to be protective of infants—human or feline—evoking the goddess she is the familiar of. This only becomes a problem when the human husband expects fidelity to his bed and progeny.

This paper argues that along the way, not only do we see a human-animal modern retelling that creates opaque ambiguities in the place of the relatively simple structure and polarisation typical in an allegory, it also—following Bonnie Zimmerman’s notion of the lesbian continuum—pushes for the curious, performative femininity of the cat and her instinctive queer-feminist actions. This story, written in deeply colonial/modern patriarchal conditions that not only normalise but validate the man’s thoughts and actions, performs a queer-feminist critique in its telling. As such, even as it appears to stereotype the feline lead—Meni [female cat] in Bangla—as the heterosexual female object of desire and angel of house, the narrative performatively disrupts and subverts the stereotype in the very same act. The felinity of the cat is crucial to the storytelling, which is at once essentialist and subjective.

Kahn, Lily (University College London): The Representation of Cats in the Jewish Textual Tradition

In this presentation I will examine the representation of cats in Jewish literature from antiquity to the twenty-first century, arguing that they tend to be portrayed as aggressive predators. I will start with the oldest text in the Jewish canon, the Hebrew Bible, from which cats are curiously absent while dogs feature quite prominently (Schwarz 2014). The lack of cats in the biblical text may reflect a desire for differentiation from the ancient Egyptians, the Israelites’ archetypal slavemasters and enemies, who worshipped cats. When cats begin to appear in Jewish texts in the postbiblical period, they often play a violent, predatory role. Like their absence from the Hebrew Bible, this negative portrayal may stem from the taboo against emulation of Egyptian cultural and religious practices. For example, the Talmud, the sixth- to eighth-century compendium of Jewish law, contains a story about a cat who bit off the hand of a newborn baby at his circumcision feast (BT Bava Kamma 80a-b). This conception of the cat as exaggerated aggressor is also evidenced in medieval Jewish texts; for example, in the popular sixteenth-century Passover song *Had Gadya* ‘One Kid Goat’, a cat stars as a voracious carnivore that devours a kid goat. The tendency to depict cats as aggressors has persisted even into the contemporary era, when Jews are more likely to keep cats as pets than in earlier periods. For example, in Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel-format Holocaust memoir *Maus* (1991), the various ethnicities are depicted by animals, and Spiegelman chose to represent the Nazis as cats, while their helpless prey the Jews are represented by mice. Even Joann Sfar’s graphic novel series *Le chat du rabbin* ‘The rabbi’s cat’ (2002-21), which contains perhaps the most prominent sympathetic portrayal of a cat in modern Jewish literature, is based around a plot point whereby the eponymous cat gains the power of speech by devouring the rabbi’s pet parrot and then lying about the murder. As these examples show, the ancient drive to separate Israelite societal norms from those of the Egyptian oppressor has persisted over more than two thousand years and can still be seen in twenty-first century Jewish literary culture.

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Lillbroända-Annala, Sanna (Åbo Akademi University): The Making of Stray Catness

In my paper I will focus on the making of stray catness and how places and multispecies interaction play an important role in this making. My paper is linked to the Greek island of Rhodes. I am familiar with the stray animal situation on the island as I am one of the founders of a Finnish charity association that helps homeless animals there. Thereby, my presentation will be based on my personal experiences and observations, combined with theoretical aspects on spatiality and multispecies relationships.

My aim is to explore the relationship and premises of the interaction between humans and stray cats, and how certain places in the town of Rhodes are strategically important for both the stray cats as for the humans concerned for them. Questions of interest are: What kind of places in the town of Rhodes are important for the stray cats and how are these places influenced by the presence of the animals? What does stray cats and humans do with places and what does places and spaces do with them? What can be observed and what is left out when observing the making of stray catness linked with spatiality?

According to Henri Lefebvre (1998), space is produced in three different ways: by spatial practices, by representations of space or conceived space and through representational spaces. In the case of three strategically important places (the park, the mills and the entrance to the old town) the practices implemented to acknowledge or to ignore the presence of strays is palpable. As Margaret Rodman (2003, 204-223) states, places are socially constructed and have multiple spatially constructed meanings. Based on this multiplicity, places can be understood as multilocal and multispecies carrying various meanings for different users. Therefore, I look at places for stray cats from the perspective of what they do instead of what they are.

Lindgren, Charlotte (Uppsala University): The Swedish Cat Findus on Book Covers

One of the best-known cats in Swedish children's literature is Pettson's cat, Findus. The Adventures of Pettson and Findus is a series of illustrated books written by the Swedish author Sven Nordqvist. It has been published in many languages since the publication of the first book in Swedish in 1984. The books tell the story of the old man Pettson and his chatty cat, whose origin we learn in the course of the series. The series has also been adapted for the television and the cinema, as well as in video games and board games. There is a theme park in Sweden dedicated to the characters. Studies on the French translation of Pettson and especially the character Findus have shown that the cat is less active in the French text (Lindgren, 2016) or even depreciated (Lindgren, 2015). The present study proposes to use functional systemic linguistics applied to images (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, Björkvall, 2009) to make an analysis of the cat character on the cover pages of eight Pettson and Findus books (the cover pages are here considered fundamental to the presentation of a book, cf. Moody, 2007). A modified version of the Multimodal Ensemble Analytical Instrument (MEAI) of Serafini et al., which is adapted to the analysis of covers, will also be used (Serafini et al., 2015). The aim of this presentation is to show that the cat Findus is the focus of the covers of these albums and undoubtedly the main character of the books.

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Paris, Antoine (Université Bordeaux Montaigne): Fritz the Cat, Blacksad and the No Man's Lands of Anthropomorphism in Comic Books

Robert Crumb's Fritz the Cat (1965-1972) and Juan Díaz Canales and Juanjo Guarnido's Blacksad (2000-ongoing) are two comic strip series, whose main characters are anthropomorphic cats evolving in universes of anthropomorphic animals: Fritz is a dressed cat living in a world similar to Robert Crumb's contemporary underground United States, whereas Blacksad is a private detective cat in a film-noir 1940s-1950s America. In this way, both series mingle the codes of anthropomorphic animals tales and cartoons with a very mature universe.

They also share a way to reintroduce in a fictively human universe very animal characteristics, especially in terms of cruelty and violence. Among others, Fritz the Cat undresses a cat woman before eating the fleas from her back. He also seduces a pigeon girl in a very human way, take her off to his bedroom then eats her. In the same way, Blacksad dresses like a human but fights while hissing and with his ears down like a real cat.

We suggest that this importance of the margins of anthropomorphism has two functions in Fritz the Cat and Blacksad, which we'll elaborate. First, an intertextual one: it is a way to parody more traditional animals story, especially Walt Disney ones. Second, it breaks the fictitious illusion and, so to speak, the fourth wall and by, so doing, creates a deep discomfort.

Robertson, Ben & Katona Weddle (Troy University): Revolutionary Cats – The Symbolic Paradox of Felinity

The unique relationship between domestic cats and human beings has existed for millennia, and over the centuries, the way cats have found their way into people's lives has changed considerably. For example, the ancient Egyptians worshipped Bastet, daughter of Ra, who had the head of a cat and was associated with positive maternal influences. More recently, cats have found their way into digital media such as YouTube, where computer users can watch a wide array of cat videos, from simple clips of kittens purring to lengthier videos of cats navigating elaborate obstacle courses. The versatility of the domestic cat's image has made these small predators truly ubiquitous in human culture. Our talk will discuss the paradoxical nature of the idea of the cat with emphasis on how these small, furry creatures have become symbols of much broader revolutionary intent.

Syrjämaa, Taina (University of Turku): Affections and Agencies. Photographed Cats in Finland at the Turn of the 20th Century

Cats may not have been among the easiest models for early photographers, yet they have been eternalised in different occasions. Following international trends, also Finnish gentry cats have posed with silk ribbons around their necks in modern studio portraits. Some cats have been immortalised at home, by their human companions, who happened to be enthusiastic amateur photographers. But not only cats living in wealthy or educated families ended up in photographs. For example, rural cats living in poor families were photographed as part of households by ethnographers.

In this paper, I examine not only how cats have been photographed, but what these pictures tell us – explicitly and implicitly – of the history of cats. Despite being fragmentary and belonging to different photographic genres, these visual glimpses disclose important aspects of feline lives and multispecies families. The examination focuses on feline–human family relationships, foregrounding affections and agencies. This research draws from animal history and multidisciplinary human-animal studies. It is based on the conception that species are by necessity interdependent and all human and non-human agencies are interrelated and relative. Furthermore, it adapts Michel de Certeau’s theory on everyday life, focusing on practices, in a multispecies context.

The Finnish case brings out similarities with the highly influential Victorian pet cult(ure), but on the other hand it also highlights divergent modes of (feline and human) living in a different kind of social and natural environment. The paper is based on qualitative historical examination of cat photographs, most of which are digitally available at Finna.fi, a database of Finnish museums, libraries and archives. In addition, the non-digitized collections of the Uusikaupunki museum will be examined. The photographs are analysed in their historical context in conjunction with other contemporary sources such as oral history collections, private correspondence and printed media.

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Valijärvi, Riitta-Liisa (University College London, Uppsala University): Cats and Language Pedagogy

The purpose of this talk is to explore the connection between language pedagogy and cats. Language pedagogy refers here to the teaching and learning of languages, more specifically second (L2), additional (L3), and heritage/community/home languages. Adopting an Animal Studies approach, I will focus on three aspects: inclusivity, emotion, and visuals. First, strides have been made in the creation and study of more inclusive teaching materials (e.g. Lee & Collins 2009, Gray 2013, Paiz 2019, Bowen & Hopper 2022). Yet, textbooks and exercises do not always reflect the fact that families have changed, and we live in multispecies households experiencing “peternal” feelings toward our “furbabies” (Laurent-Simpson 2017, Owens & Grauerholz 2019, cf. Peterson & Engwall 2019). I will show examples of how teaching materials could challenge our anthropocentric views of the world. Second, negative feelings and lack of motivation have been proven to be detrimental to language learning (Oxford 2021). I will demonstrate that cats can boost language learning by fostering positive emotion and engagement by being funny and cute (cf. Nittono et al. 2012, also Schmitz 2002, Bell & Pomerantz 2015, Dewaele et al. 2018). Third, the fact that the internet is dominated by visually pleasing and agile cats in videos, memes, and other social media posts can be used in the language classroom (see Thibault et al. 2018, Sewell & Keralis 2019). For example, students can make their own cat-related content and thus take part in experiential learning (cf. Smith 2021, Victoria 2021). Featuring cats in teaching materials and exercises can help explain abstract concepts, boost grammar learning, and create drama that helps memorisation.

Vasas, Vera (Queen Mary University of London): In the Eye of the Cat

Cats see the world differently to humans. Already the anatomy of their eyes - the disproportionately large, elliptical pupil, the existence of the light-reflecting tapidum lucidum, among others - translates into optics specific to their species. For example, cats can see well both in daylight and at light levels of a fraction that a human needs; on the other hand, their focus is less flexible, meaning that, in human terms, they are both near- and far-sighted. The receptors in cat eyes are sensitive to different wavelengths of light, too, and so they see different colours than we do.

Despite the differences in how and what kind of light is captured, the visual perception of cats shows remarkable similarities to humans. Cats have been shown to fall for two visual illusions aimed at humans. The Delboeuf illusion is an optical illusion of relative size perception: when offered a choice between two same-sized portions of food, the cats perceived the one served on a smaller plate as larger. The Kanizsa illusion evokes the perception of contours when there is none. In the tests cats treated an illusory square as they did a real square (and sat inside it, following the well-known principle of ‘if I fits I sits’). Yet not much is known about the

cognitive aspects of their vision, mainly due to the difficulties of testing cats in laboratory settings.

Here, I address how cats see the world and us - literally and metaphorically. From running through the basics of collecting visual information and illustrating what cats see, to discussing visual processing that gives rise to illusions, I review what we know about the sensory and cognitive aspects of cat vision, with the aim of providing a biologist's summary on how our cats see and understand the world.

Vitale, Kristyn: Cat Social Lives: The Current Science on Cat Behavior and Cat-Human Interactions

Cats and humans have a long history of coexistence. Despite the ubiquity of cats in the lives of humans, we know relatively little about cat behavior. This talk will explore the current state of science on cat social behavior and cat-human interactions. The talk will include details on the social behavior of both captive and free-roaming cats, such as factors which impact the formation of cat social groups. The talk will also discuss the cat-human relationship and cover topics such as cat social cognition, attachment bonds between cats and their caregivers, and factors that impact cat-human interactions. The talk will end with a consideration of how to apply this knowledge to promote healthy cat-human relationships and increase the welfare of cats.

Walker-Meikle, Kathleen (Science Museum Group): The Paradoxical Medieval Cat

There are few animals in history with a reputation as nefarious as the medieval cat. Outlandish claims have stuck to them, including that they were condemned in papal bulls, associated with witchcraft, or were demonised by all and killed en masse. This lecture will go beyond these myths and present the complicated history of the medieval cat. The pampered pet, the valued mouser, the entertaining animal, the untamed creature in a domestic setting, the theological symbol of heresy, will be among the many facets of the cat that will be presented in this lecture, drawing on an extensive variety of written and iconographic sources.

Quan, Yinhe (Waseda University) & Yuying Lai (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies): Analysis of the Status of Cat Ownership in Japanese Society and the Spiritual Soothing Effect of Cats

Cats have always played an important role in the kawaii (cute) culture of Japan. For example, a cat named Tama is in charge of Kishi Station, and is said to be in charge of advertising as a mascot, and cat characters are used on anti-violence posters seen in train stations. At the same time, the cat has been ranked among the top two popular pets. In recent years, due to the spread of Covid-19, people in big cities are spending more time working at home and less time interacting with society, and more people are feeling isolated and nervous. Therefore, the number of people who have pets has gradually increased.

Today, more and more foreigners are choosing to work and study in Japan. According to the Immigration Bureau, the number of foreigners in Japan has increased from 2,033,656 in 2012 to 2,760,635 by 2021. Foreigners are becoming an increasingly important group in Japan. This

study investigates the current situation of cat ownership in Japanese society, and the main target group is foreign residents.

By studying the lives of foreigners who own cats in Japan, we aim to understand the spiritual impact of cats on foreigners in Japan. Firstly, we will conduct a documentary study to understand the important place of cats in Japanese culture. Secondly, a questionnaire survey is used to understand the current situation of foreigners' lives with pet in Japan. Finally, the role that cats play in the lives of foreigners in Japan was elucidated using qualitative research methods through interviews and analysis of the research participants.