

stimulus → *respond*



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The Politics of Cats

John Hutnyk embarks on a consideration of dialectics, structural anthropology, William Burroughs, anthropomorphism and warfare in his musings on the aberrance of cats. Images by *Jan Cihak*.

C*at, n.* Small mammal with an attitude problem.

I imagine that cats are aphorists, composing dialectical koans and licking their whiskers at the elegance of their arabesques. Though I recognise that Adorno himself noted that aphorisms were not admissible in dialectical thought, which should always abhor isolation and separateness (1951/1974:16), I concede that cats are separate and aloof. Since they are never owned by their humans, they stand apart, domesticated only by choice, self-grooming, dreaming of mice (rather than hubcaps—go figure), ignoring us in ways that transcend normal social, political and geophysical categories. We know these routines already, and recognise their outsider status with a mix of awe and disregard.

Projection. The anthropomorphic charge is more difficult to lay upon our conception of cats, yet it does apply. To think of them as yoga-masters, or as independent outsider spirits, is still to malign them as merely human. I am sometimes paranoid in thinking that my cat is mechanical. A twisted automaton designed especially to distort my brain. Uncle Bill Burroughs said that paranoia was being in possession of all of the facts. So let us consider the evidence: Cats purr—this could be very cute, or is it rather the calculated industrial production of cuteness? Cats wash themselves with their tongues—and if they were electric they would short-circuit (though consider how coiffing up a hairball might be just that). Cats growl and hiss when interrogated—clearly they could be

detained as non-combatants if only we had the will, and a strong leader. Cats have whiskers... More examples would only trap us in a dialectical game of catch and release, and so cats will have once again won. They always do, toying with us; ask the mice.

So I think we need to learn to learn from these philosophers of composure. First of all, I imagine Uncle Bill, stoned in the Bunker, communing in some feline comprehension with his cat Fletch: “Wouldn’t you?” But why is it that Lévi-Strauss exchanges a look of understanding with that cat at the very end of his book *Tristes Tropiques*? Why a look, a visual metaphor for knowledge? Well, not so much a look of knowing, but a “brief glance, heavy with patience, serenity and mutual forgiveness” (1955/1973: 544). Do cats forgive? Are they theorists of hospitality? That look bothers me some. If I were to elaborate on the metaphors of vision for knowledge I would ramble on about the way our disciplines are divided up into fields; how one strives to see the point of an argument; how instead of seeing your point, I hold a different view—so many ways in which the assertions of knowledge are visual. But with cats you do not know—the enigmatic Cheshire smile prevails.

Kurt Vonnegut died recently, having once written a great book called *Cat’s Cradle* (1963) which was later accepted by the University of Chicago anthropology department as a Masters thesis. In that book, the narrator, Jonah (referencing *Moby Dick*) investigates the life of the now deceased Felix Hoenikker, developer of the atomic

“*Felix is a quintessential cat’s name, and this Felix is appropriately enigmatic also, concerned only with higher science*”

bomb. Of course we all know Felix is a quintessential cat’s name (my first cat), and this Felix is appropriately enigmatic also, concerned only with higher science, the pursuit of knowledge as calculation, and an absentminded outsider. Though I suspect a certain identification on Vonnegut’s part, only this narrator, as Jonah, could hunt him down, tempt him with the fish perhaps. It’s not just the bomb, Felix invents a substance that threatens the planet—Ice-9, and his children take it and... To tell more would ruin the story for those who have yet to read it—as far as thesis goes, it’s anyone’s guess how Chicago Anthropology managed to assess this as a scholarly work. Credit due.

Burroughs also pursued anthropology. This at Harvard as part of the G.I. Bill where returned WW2 service personnel were offered places in university. Uncle Bill reports that he found the department grim: “I had done some graduate work in anthropology. I got a glimpse of academic life and I didn’t like it at all. It looked like there was too much faculty intrigue, faculty lies, cultivating the head of department, so on and so forth” (Burroughs 2001: 76). It makes me wonder how any of those cats ever get their act together and sit for their degrees. Concentration seems awry, consistency suspended. And a mischievous outsider’s critical countenance continues to leave them disturbingly set apart.

Burroughs in London in 1970 was strangely prophetic when he described America as vulnerable: “extremely vulnerable to chaos, to breakdown in communications, particularly to a breakdown in the food supply [a typical cat concern]. Bombs concentrated on communications, random bombs on trains, boats, planes, buses could lead to paralysis. But you must consider the available counters. We spoke about the ultimate repression that would be used. Once large-scale bombings started you could expect the most violent reactions. They’d declare a national emergency and arrest anyone. They don’t have to know who did it. They’ll just arrest everyone who might have done it” (Burroughs 2001:156).

There are suggestions that all cats be detained in

Guantanamo. We are close to such a repression. Just presenting the look of being an outsider is a dangerous thing. Cats threaten the Western way of life in this time of ‘war on terror’, and do so because we cannot ever tell if they are with us or against us. And they are not afraid of sacrifice—they believe they have nine lives! They adhere to ancient cult traditions (from Egypt no less, training camps in the desert we suspect). They are long past masters of undercover operations (consider CatWoman’s wily ways of entrapping the hero of Gotham). Just read the old Eastern book of war tactics, *I am a Cat* by Soseki Natsume (1905/2002) to see how internecine and dialectical warfare offers a tactical advantage to these furry miscreants. Danger, hiss, pttfft, grrrr.

The thing about cats, aberrant and inscrutable, is that they are the antithesis of the rat-race, and for this reason alone it is worth changing their kitty-litter. Meow!

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