



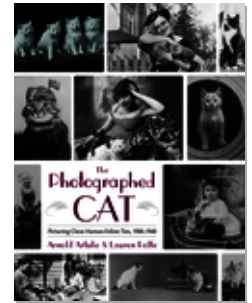
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## The Photographed Cat

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# Foreword

John Grady

The original narrative of progress casts people—armed with science and technology—as warrior kings subduing nature. Confidence in this tale, however, has eroded since the mid-twentieth century. Today, people no longer admire large corporate organizations for their machinelike efficiency but instead view them warily as entities that could genuinely nurture intellectual creativity and teamwork but often do not. The successes of the civil rights movement legitimated demands for inclusion by those relegated to the bottom levels of any social hierarchy, while the women’s movement challenged patriarchal ideals and entitlements that celebrate male aggression as a social value and that, among other ills, make despoiling nature seem, well, a natural thing to do. Finally, a renewed environmentalism has nurtured an ecological awareness that places humanity within, and not above, nature as one link in a horizontal chain of being that spreads throughout the biosphere. Granted, human beings inevitably will place themselves at center stage in anything that concerns their interests, but today this new and emerging consciousness reminds them that they need to imagine—and conduct—their transactions with the “rest” of nature not just as stewards but also as partners.

Animals have been more recently drawn into the conversation we are having about what it means to be human and where we fit in with the rest of nature. Animals were first considered as resources

worthy of being conserved for various human pleasures, but over time more and more initiatives have focused on delineating—and protecting—their claims to existence. Thus, a vibrant animal rights movement has emerged that includes commitments to making zoos more comfortable for their inhabitants, eating vegetarian, protecting endangered species, and espousing numerous other causes. The sociologist Norbert Elias (1998) has warned that our awareness of how we manage our affairs and arrangements with other people has often been distorted by facile dualisms that identify conflicts between, say, the individual and society, as though it could even be possible to understand anything about a human society without discussing particular people and their affairs or acknowledging that every single person is a thoroughly socialized being.<sup>1</sup> Much the same criticism can be leveled at the distinction we so easily make between animals and society. Apart from the fact that other animals also live with tangled social arrangements, our lives—and the institutions we have developed to sustain our existence—are intellectually and materially inseparable from the doings of other animals. Human history and values have emerged from our relationships with them, whether they are sources of food, beasts of burden, pests and vermin, or carriers of disease.

1. The best introduction to Elias’s work is Mennell 1999.

And then there are pets! There is a long history to the custom of keeping various types of animals as ornaments or companions, but it was only in the mid- to late nineteenth century that a fashion among the few became a mass phenomenon, mixing up our relationships with other animals in new and far more intimate ways. We feed pets and keep them in the house, but just what do they do for us in return? And why was it at that particular point in history that so many of us found an intimacy with birds, dogs and cats to be rewarding? This is the question that Arnold Arluke, a distinguished scholar of human–animal relationships, and Lauren Rolfe, a collector of early-twentieth-century animal photographs, have posed for us in *The Photographed Cat*. Their focus is on the house cat, a species that fascinates us because cats seem to have maintained their connection to the wild while adapting with relative ease to their human caretakers' ways of life. In great detail, Arluke and Rolfe document that our relationships with these animals are multifaceted and socially and psychologically nuanced. The authors are meticulous and thorough scholars who make a careful and convincing case that our treatment of cats is an important development in that long transformation of manners and sensibilities that Elias has called the “civilizing process.”

Put simply, Elias (1998) reasons that over the last five centuries or so the expansion of Western society into ever larger social units put pressure on monarchs to disarm a feudal nobility that was, in essence, little more than territorially based groups of armed thugs who ran their domains as protection rackets, which then allowed them to expropriate as much wealth as possible from the peasants under their control. By creating a monopoly over the instruments of military force and wealth, the monarchs disarmed the feudal nobility and absorbed them into their courts. Thus reinvented as courtiers, they were compelled to channel their aggression into increasingly elaborate and choreographed displays of manners to flatter and influence the king and his ministers. The most important long-term

psychological effect of this process of social and political change was that members of an emotionally unbridled warrior caste learned to rein in their appetites and desires and to devote themselves to cultivating the art of what we today would call “impression management” and “impulse control.”

The next stage of the civilization process occurred when human settlements—and the resources that flowed into them—became larger, denser, and more complexly intertwined; cities were transformed into huge agglomerations that for the first time housed those who ruled society and garnered the lion's share of its wealth in close propinquity to those who actually produced this largesse through their labor. This latter group was a heterogeneous lot that included industrial workers and the businessmen and shopkeepers of the middle class. The interactions between rulers and producers were conflict-ridden and engendered a moral crisis of social expectations. How, then, should people live and interact in what was increasingly becoming a community of strangers, which pushed them together with people they were expected to distance themselves from but now were unable to avoid? These new classes of urban dwellers initially addressed the problem by mimicking the code of conduct that the nobility had developed when the royal court pacified them. During the nineteenth century, however, the middle class embrace of this code took on an enthusiastic and religiously informed moral earnestness, which encouraged elaborate practices of self-control and, by extension, a self-righteous commitment to control those other groups that the middle class experienced as disorderly.

Needless to say, because these “others” resented the middle class's attempt to control them, and because their resistance to such attempts made the struggle for control a generally unpleasant experience, it took several generations, from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, for the middle class to be able to balance self-restraint and sensitivity to others with the experience, open expression, and management of feeling and emotion.

Elias refers to this maturation of the “civilizing process” as “informalization” and describes it as a general relaxation of rigid moral standards (Elias 1998). These relaxed values included respect for marriage as a form of friendship, increasingly open sensuality and sexuality, the rearing of children through tenderness, and the development of strong bonds of friendship with people who are not related to you. Informalization as a cultural configuration had become deeply rooted by the mid-twentieth century, especially in the immediate aftermath of World War II.

While the civilizing process can be seen as an adaptation to social and economic opportunities, the informalization phase set in motion a cultural imperative of its own—a sort of polymorphously perverse desublimation<sup>2</sup>—where the self yearns for diversity, the transgression of established boundaries, and the embrace of new experience. Nevertheless, the generations that have come of age in the aftermath of the 1960s have learned that the many pleasures and opportunities that an openness to embrace the world makes available still require manners and a moral code that conjoins a respect for the rights of others and a responsibility for personal conduct even while exploring new possibilities of being human. And this code—for all its flexibility—may become just as demanding as that which regulated the Victorians over a century ago. Moreover, *The Photographed Cat* strongly suggests that a loving concern with the rights of animals should be seen as an important component in this emerging code.

*The Photographed Cat* clearly illuminates how one dimension of the informalization process took form. The book focuses on the period from

1890 to 1940, yet it delineates how this period emerged from what preceded it and subsequently established the basis for current arrangements and sensibilities. As Arluke and Rolfe report, dogs and cats initially performed useful functions for their masters. They could either warn or mouse and were granted the freedom to patrol the immediate environs of the home. Dogs and cats were gradually invited to move into the physical confines of the house as privileged servants. In time, they were reimagined in a unique way: as beloved kin and boon companions. Dogs are eager for human attention, but cats have a different temperament and, as popular lore has it, often seem to accept humans only on their own terms. Accordingly, building a relationship with a cat is harder to do than with a dog and requires that the cat’s “master” actively pursues and nurtures a new type of relationship. Whatever this relationship may be—friend or companion—in the end, being a “master” is no longer quite apposite.

One of the most distinctive aspects of *The Photographed Cat* is its use of visual materials to explore how a new moral order and sensibility were formed. Photographs can show us how a photographer decides that a scene or situation should be depicted and what we should value in the various elements in the frame and in the relationships established between them. There are individual vision and taste in all of this, of course, but even more salient are cultural conventions. Reflecting customary values in this fashion is especially true of vernacular photography, where the photographer is very much aware of what a community likes and desires. Many of the photographs of cats in this book are by commercial photographers who made their living pleasing their customers and who often shared their communities’ values. Arluke and Rolfe use more than a hundred portraits of cats produced during the early part of the last century to show how people first imagined them as aesthetic objects—not unlike still lives of inanimate objects—to seeing them as prized companions with distinct personalities. The authors are

2. I have blended the concepts of “polymorphous perversity” (Brown 1985) and “repressive desublimation” (Marcuse 1964), which were put forward separately by two influential social theorists of the late 1960s. Each of the texts, within which these ideas appeared, sought to define—whether to legitimate or to caution—this cultural imperative especially as it was embraced and performed by younger Americans.

interested in what the photographs reveal about the pet “owners” as they reevaluate the human-animal relationship. Thus, we see that the people in these photographs are actively letting go of something—the keeping of another species at a distance—and gaining something in return, a way of expressing a sensual love of nature embodied in a particular relationship with a specific animal that is clearly an “other.” In explaining such a possibility, E. O. Wilson (1984) has suggested that human beings have an innate love of nature or “biophilia.” Elias would argue that should this be so, it would have to have been cultivated. It is Arluke and Rolfe’s contribution to show us just how this process of cultivation emerged during the first decades of the past century.

Apart from their obvious intellectual and analytic skills, the authors have been greatly aided by the existence of an enormous repository of photographic data that is largely unknown to the public and community of social and cultural researchers. It is only in recent years that this treasure trove of arrested experience has been recognized for what it is: an exhaustive documentation of how we as a people saw ourselves when we were becoming modern.

The vast majority of the photographs in this book are composed of “real photo postcards,” a widespread craze that was at its height from about 1907 to 1912 but nevertheless lasted in attenuated form well into the 1940s. In a nutshell, thousands of commercial and amateur photographers took photographs of an amazingly diverse array of communities and people, which they printed directly onto postcards and sold by the millions. These cards often were commissioned to keep in touch with loved ones and friends in a society where few, if any, people had telephones. In addition, many merchants had portraits made of their establishments and wares, which they used for promotional purposes. Finally, local photographers took photographs of just about anything in their town and nearby communities, which they thought they could sell on their own or through local

establishments, such as pharmacies and general stores. In any event, these photographs were generally of extremely high quality and were mailed with postmarks, names and addresses, signatures, and accompanying messages, all of which provide a rich context for interpreting the images.

*The Photographed Cat* mines innumerable archives and private collections to tell its story. It builds on a rich body of work that includes Robert Bogdan and Todd Weseloh’s *Real Photo Postcard Guide* (2006), Bogdan’s *Picturing Disability* (2012), and the precursor to the present book, Arluke and Bogdan’s *Beauty and the Beast: Human–Animal Relations as Revealed in Real Photo Postcards: 1905–1935* (2010). Each of these books provides penetrating insights into social and cultural history and models the use of photographs as evidence in historical and sociological research. Furthermore, Arluke and Rolfe explore new territory by drawing on sociological and psychological investigations of gesture, body language, movement, and the ways in which relationships are presented for public display in everyday life. Relying on a close reading of Erving Goffman and visual sociologists such as Howard Becker, Dick Chalfen, Doug Harper, Eric Margolis, and Jon Prosser, *The Photographed Cat* is one of the most carefully executed, sustained, and insightful uses of visual data for social and cultural inquiry produced in the past quarter-century. Along with Arluke and Bogdan’s *Beauty and the Beast*, it joins Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead’s *Balinese Character* (1942) and Erving Goffman’s *Gender Advertisements* (1976) as a contemporary masterpiece of visual analysis. Arluke and Rolfe also enrich and expand upon Norbert Elias’s powerful insights concerning a dimension of human existence that he treated only in passing.

The view of the world that the images in this book embody—as the authors are quick to remind us—is an “official story” of individuals, families, establishments, and communities. Nevertheless, it is important to note that what people believe, or want to believe, about themselves is as much

an aspect of their lives as what they may actually do. The authors remind us that photographs of people smiling and cuddling cats are not saying that there were not moments when they, or people in their communities, were neglectful of, or even cruel toward, the same or other animals. But what is depicted in the images they consider is usually quite different from what came before the period covered and appears to be consistent with important changes in attitudes and behaviors toward cats in that period, suggested by other documentary sources. Moreover, as time passes, even this new way of photographing cats continues to evolve in the same direction of increased openness and emotional warmth. People smile more, cuddle more, play more, and—together with their families, friends, and, yes, cats—create new worlds of human possibility.

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