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'He invented a cat style, a cat society, a whole cat world': *The Electrical Life of Louis Wain* and the origins of cat memes

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ABSTRACT

Will Sharpe, director of *The Electrical Life of Louis Wain* (2021), suggested that the subject of his biopic 'understood what a cat meme is.' This perception shapes his portrayal of the Victorian-era artist, an illustrator famed for his drawings of anthropomorphic cats. Cats are depicted communicating in meme-like 'lolspeak,' and the film's aesthetic, a collaboration involving various artists, evokes the reworking and remixing which drives meme creation. The companionship which cats provide for Wain recalls the anthropomorphic 'cuteness' embedded in present-day digital services to soften their impersonal nature. These characteristics reflect the tendency in biopics to represent artists as outsiders, figures who suffer in a cruel world. However, the suggestion that Wain's mental illness shaped the nature of his illustrations is more problematic: forging close links between Wain's illness and his work divorces him from his contemporaries whose own anthropomorphic cats could have influenced Wain and current meme culture. Representations of cats throughout history have presented these creatures as both familiar and strange, and this duality is evident in the film: while presenting Wain's work as the forerunner to the cat meme, the film relies on the tired discourse of the suffering artist which divorces him from the world in which he lived.

KEYWORDS

Biopic; Louis Wain; anthropomorphism; meme; artist; cats

Playing up the cultural significance of *The Electrical Life of Louis Wain* (Keslassy 2021), a biopic about the English artist and illustrator famous for his drawings of anthropomorphic cats, director Will Sharpe championed Wain as 'the guy who understood what a cat meme is' and suggested Wain's appreciation of cats put him at odds with the Victorian society in which he lived (quoted in Thompson 2021). Sharpe's film posits that Wain's obsession with cats and his distinctive approach to anthropomorphism anticipated present-day cat meme culture and discourses of cuteness. The biopic mimics the conventions of memes and cat videos within the story of Wain's life: sequences depict Wain's cats communicating in the 'lolspeak' evident in cat memes, accompanied with subtitles which evoke the captions in Wain's own artworks. Secondly, *Louis Wain* presents Victorian culture as one characterised by damning social judgement and suggests that the cuteness Wain detected in cats, one he addressed in his drawings,

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offered him and his wife Emily a means to cope in the wider society in which they lived. This representation builds on the established generic terrain of artist biopics, which frequently represents their subjects as outsiders who depart from social norms, but it also parallels current understandings of cute imagery in which the impersonal qualities of digital culture are made tolerable by displays of cute anthropomorphism. Furthermore, Sharpe's collaborations with different video artists led to the film's distinctive aesthetic, one with close visual similarity to the work of Wain himself. Artist biopics often imitate characteristics of the artist's work in their retelling of their life and the visual design in *Louis Wain*, which featured numerous video artists working together, reflects how memes are reworked by different users. Such imagery, coupled with the film's inclusion of direct references to the conventions of memes, illustrates a clear attempt to invest Wain's life and work with present-day resonance.

Yet, the biopic's formulaic tendencies reveal themselves in predictable ways, particularly in the film's reliance on discourses which link psychological suffering to the creative process. Such discourses themselves share similarities with the nature of memes: while traditionally (and problematically,) creative work has been used as a platform to generate understandings of the artist's personality and psychology, the content of memes, their combination of image and caption, are themselves often produced and shared to communicate abstract human thoughts and feelings. Though Wain's designs varied throughout his career, the film suggests that the more abstract and experimental work he produced was linked to his experience of mental illness in later life. Wain's cat illustrations are presented in a trajectory which indicates that he moved through cycles of creativity. The film depicts his earliest cat drawings as more life-like and suggests that Wain's subsequent drawings and their pronounced anthropomorphism were a means to entertain his sick wife, while later works became increasingly abstract as his illness became more evident following Emily's death. Scenes suggest Wain's approach to anthropomorphism escaped the confines of paper and manifested itself in his interactions with people, such that the humans Wain encounters have a cat-like appearance which threatens, rather than comforts. In presenting Wain's work in a series of cycles, the film claims that shifts in his artistic style were related to the lived experience of suffering.

This study first considers *Louis Wain*'s place in the history of British artist biopics and how the illustrator's 'kitsch' appeal offered means to forge links between his work and contemporary digital culture. It suggests that the comforting and humorous nature of Wain's anthropomorphic cats represents a departure from the association of cats with magic and superstition, and the humour evident in his illustrations has continuity with the comedy found in cat memes. The study then considers characteristics from the film, including subtitling as an overt reference to meme culture, the representation of cuteness, and the collaborative nature of the film's production and how this shares similarity to the practices of meme creation. Finally, it suggests that the film's commitment to relating Wain to this present cultural context sits uneasily with its representation of his mental illness and the implication that shifts in artistic style are caused by changes in psychological health. *Louis Wain* portrays the artist's approach to anthropomorphism as a means of liberating himself from the crippling constraints of Victorian society. At the same time, it represents that same anthropomorphism as imprisoning Wain within the time-worn discourses of art history, in which the experience of mental illness becomes intertwined with creativity. These themes reflect broader perceptions of cats and how '[t]

he feline conjunction of familiarity plus strangeness' is 'continually being updated from folklore into literature, art, and science, let alone into film and music' (Corfield 2021, 183). Like cats, *The Electrical Life of Louis Wain* displays strangeness in its novel approach and inclusion of meme-like imagery to frame Wain as a pioneer of meme culture. Yet Wain's story is also frustratingly familiar in how it falls back on patterns of representation which have long plagued the biopic genre. Wain may have been ahead of the curve in Victorian society, but he is also trapped in the timeless discourses of creativity which work to divorce the artist from their historical context.

The British artist biopic

Louis Wain was produced by Shoebox Films and SunnyMarch, with additional financing from Studiocanal and Film4. Making a biopic about the British illustrator marked something new in a genre which has tended to represent the lives of British painters. Films have centred on figures including Mark Gertler (*Mark Gertler: Fragments of a Biography*, 1981), Dora Carrington (*Carrington*, 1995) and Francis Bacon (*Love Is the Devil*, 1998), while Irish painter Christy Brown was the focus of *My Left Foot* (1989). More recently, figures such as J.M.W. Turner (*Mr. Turner*, 2014), L. S. Lowry (*Mrs. Lowrey and Son*, 2019) and Audrey Amiss (*Typist Artist Pirate King*, 2023) have also been depicted and continue this emphasis, although the release of *The Colour Room* (2021), a film about ceramic artist Clarice Cliff, suggests that other areas of British artistic practice are being represented. *Louis Wain* joins *Miss Potter* (2006), a film about Beatrix Potter, in contributing to a public history of British illustration. However, Wain's 'kitsch' appeal ensures he differs from Potter, an illustrator and writer whose cultural esteem is rooted in her children's stories including *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1901). It is a quality which makes the film distinctive among British artist biopics, one which makes it possible to forge links between Wain's practice and contemporary meme creation.

Kitsch's origins can be traced in Clement Greenberg's essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch,' published in *Partisan Review* in 1939, and refers to aesthetics perceived to be in bad taste, in opposition to the good taste offered by legitimate art(Greenberg, 1939). It is closely wedded to the everyday and mass culture. Before his death in 2012, the American artist Thomas Kinkade achieved success and controversy precisely because he embodied characteristics of kitsch: he sold reproductions of his works and embraced the commercial potential of licensing so that his works appeared on various consumer products. Both Wain and Kinkade were prolific, and it is suggested Wain produced some 200 books (Hughes 2024, 198). Both generated variations of their preferred themes of cats and landscapes, reflecting how 'kitsch advances the repetitive, the secure and the comfortable, supplying the reassurance that what is to come will resemble what has gone before' (Binkley 2000, 135). That such a theme should be addressed in the British artist biopic reflects kitsch's shifting position in broader culture and how distinctions between art and kitsch, high and low culture, have become hazy through the impact of artists such as Jeff Koons in the 1980s (Erlhoff and Marshall 2008, 239). A film about Wain also presented an opportunity to explore kitsch in relation to the digital manifestation so pervasive in contemporary digital culture. Memes are themselves a form of digital kitsch in that they are 'disposable' and 'brief ephemera' (Fazel and Geddes 2023, 233), affective because memes 'trade on what we already know' (Fazel and Geddes 2023, 236). While memes

illustrate one of the ways in which digital culture can be frivolous, it is significant that digital platforms and environments have also been understood as cold, uncaring and inhuman. The employment of cute imagery and anthropomorphism within such spaces has been one means to counteract these associations. This notion is utilised in the film's retelling of Wain's life. Within the film, cats are depicted in ways which accentuate their helplessness and cuteness and this is used to suggest that cats, and the illustrations of them he produced, offered Wain means of negotiating the alienating environment in which he lived. Where kitsch functions within the realm of the sentimental, working to 'reassure and comfort the observer' (Lugg 1999, 4), Wain's illustrations are presented in the film as a source of comfort for him in an alienating Victorian society, a representation which evokes the cute anthropomorphic characters incorporated into digital software to help users navigate the cold virtual platforms which govern modern life. The biopic suggests Wain's significance as an illustrator lies in his approach to anthropomorphism and the kitsch qualities evident in his work, characteristics which anticipated a pervasive form of communication in digital culture.

'They were not really appreciated'

Sharpe noted that Wain's attitude to cats rendered him an outsider in his own time: '[h]e was not put off by the fact that they were not really appreciated as beautiful or a creature to have affection for then' (quoted in Thompson 2021). The artist as outsider is a theme present in Hollywood and British biopics (Custen 1992, 162; Adriaensens and Jacobs 2015, 484), and *Louis Wain* contributes to the cultural discourses around Wain by linking his style of anthropomorphism to the position of cats in present-day popular culture. But the cat has not always been considered a beloved pet and instead serves as 'a prime example of the extreme variability in human perceptions of a species – its image ranging from god to demon' (Lawrence 2003, 625). Keeping domestic cats dates back to Ancient Egypt, artworks from 1950 BC depict cats in domestic scenarios (Lawrence 2003, 628), and their association with magic relates to their roles as sorcerers' assistants in the Middle Ages (Lawrence 2003, 629; Corfield 2021, 174–175). In the long eighteenth century, their willingness to sit alongside humans made them companions for intellectual endeavour and 'the feline admixture of caution and curiosity made them potent triggers to innovative thought' (Corfield 2021, 185). Cats also featured in nursery rhymes (*The Cat and the Fiddle*, 1765) and the verse of poets including William Blake, John Keats, Anna Seward and William Wordsworth (Corfield 2021, 169). Cats served utilitarian purposes as well, travelling with seamen and becoming mascots for those on board (Corfield 2021, 185), while their links to intellectual thought continue in works such as John Gray's *Feline Philosophy: Cats and the Meaning of Life* (2020). Cats are everywhere in popular culture, ranging from the *ThunderCats* franchise and Jim Davis' *Garfield* comic strip (subsequently developed into a television series and films) to *Hello Kitty*, an anthropomorphic cat girl which is the focus of theme parks, comics, television programmes and various consumer objects (see McVeigh 2000, 228–229). A film adaptation of Andrew Lloyd Webber's successful musical *Cats* (1981) was released in 2019 and a cat has even been the subject of a British biopic: *A Street Cat Named Bob* (2016) was based on the relationship between a cat and busker James Bowen (and spawned a sequel: *A Gift from Bob* (2020)). Just as the Bob films focus on a man's bond with a male cat, *Louis Wain* privileges the

artist's relationship with Peter, a stray who becomes his companion, and the film suggests this relationship spurred Wain to shift perceptions of cats away from the demonic and utilitarian, towards the ridiculousness that characterises cats in meme culture. Since the mid-millennium, owners have posted footage online of cats engaged in ridiculous activities (Shafer 2016). Such practices formed part of 'How Cats Took Over the Internet,' an exhibition held at the Museum of the Moving Image in 2015. In *Catland: Feline Enchantment and the Making of the Modern World* (2024), Kathryn Hughes posits that Louis Wain contributed to the creation of 'Catland,' a phenomenon taking place in Britain, USA, France, Germany, Italy and Japan from 1870 up to the Second World War 'during which cats transformed from anonymous background furniture into individual actors, with names, personalities and even biographies of their own' (Hughes 2024, 2). C*atland* contains detailed analysis of Wain's illustrations, including how they incorporated references to contemporary trends (such as the popularity of cycling in the 1890s, see 2024, 172). The biopic is only touched on briefly (2024, 5), making it important to consider how it forges connections between Wain's work and contemporary meme culture.

Decisions regarding the artist's worthiness for biopic treatment are shaped by potential appeal, hence successful books are often used as a basis (Berger 2014, 8), and Sharpe's film is no different. There are elements of Wain's approach which makes these links to meme culture appear persuasive. Rodney Dale, author of *Louis Wain: The Man Who Drew Cats* (1968), suggests a typical 'Louis Wain cat' is represented in human situations where viewers understand exactly what the creature is saying and thinking (1968, 26), a tendency evident in cat-based memes as well. The term 'meme' was initially used in Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* (1976) and refers to the small cultural units, such as melodies, fashions and catchphrases, transmitted between people via copying and imitation. Like genes, memes act as replicators which compete for the host's attention: those ill-suited to the cultural environment become extinct while others thrive and spread (Shifman 2013, 177). They typically feature an image accompanied with a caption and are often comedic in nature. At its core, a meme concerns 'the propagation of items such as jokes, rumors, videos, and websites from person to person via the Internet' and they form 'user-created derivatives articulated as parodies, remixes, or mashups' (Shifman 2014, 2). An important element of memes is their intertextuality, as demonstrated by the use of songs and material from films, and they may relate to other memes in complicated and inventive ways (Shifman 2013, 2). 'Nyan Cat' is an iconic example; it features an animated cat traveling through space away from a rainbow, backed by a Japanese pop song. Other notable examples include 'Grumpy Cat' and 'Brother Cream' in Hong Kong, memes so successful their creators have exploited their merchandising potential (Miltner 2018, 424). Furthermore, cats are ideal meme subjects because of the anthropomorphism which can be conveyed through them. For instance, 'Keyboard Cat' features home video footage of a cat supposedly playing a piano and is employed to indicate incompetence (Miltner 2018, 426). Cats thus demonstrate 'the perfect memetic figure, as they can be used as a substitute (or as an addition) to emoticons and emojis, in order to embody, in a humoristic fashion or ironically, human feelings and behaviours' (Thibault and Marino 2018, 487). Sharp's comments suggest Wain was key to the development of cat memes and helped to construct the particular type of anthropomorphism that cats have come to embody, one characterised by silliness and ridiculousness.

'I do my best, but I am cat'

Louis Wain's representation of meme culture reflects the 'familiarity' and 'strangeness' which has characterised cats, in that the film incorporates references to memes by threading them through the conventions of the artist biopic. Biopics have many generic characteristics, to the extent that they 'seem to refer more to each other than to the lives of the original characters they are dealing with' (Jacobs 2011, 40), and artist films have distinctive characteristics as well. The figure's private life is a feature of biopics and artist films tend to prioritise life over work, focusing on the romances and relationships assumed to shape creative output (Jacobs 2011, 39; Leach 2018, 165). *Louis Wain* is concerned with the artist's relationship with Emily (they are played by Benedict Cumberbatch and Claire Foy), while his illustrations are generally depicted in sequences where characters such as Emily and Sir William Ingram (the director of *The Illustrated London News*, where Wain worked, played by Toby Jones) are looking at them. Biopics often open with the artist's death before flashbacks recreate their life (Codell 2014, 160), and the opening close-ups of an elderly Wain (complete with wrinkled face and grey hair) indicate he is approaching that point. The artist's life may be compartmentalised: *Carrington* breaks the artist's life up into dated sections while *Louis Wain* includes distinct periods of Wain's life from 1881 onwards. His confinement in a pauper's asylum illustrates how biopics may begin at either a high point or a low point within the figure's life, before using flashbacks to go back to the start and exploring what led to that success or failure (Cheshire 2015, 12). His sisters chastise him for living in squalor following Emily's death, a representation consistent with the 'abject' artist who suffers in poverty (Codell 2014, 159). The artist's attitude to money can be an important theme (particularly in *Rembrandt*, see Landy 1991, 75), and Wain's lack of business acumen is highlighted in characters' criticisms of his failure to copyright works.

The film is therefore consistent with some generic aspects associated with artist biopics, and its novelty emerges in how cats are threaded through the artist biopic's conventions. The biopic's trajectory prioritises 'a single event (or small series of events) [which] serves as the spark that ignites the hero' (Radcliff 2008, 64): Wain's encounter with Peter leads to his first illustrations for Emily. Such pivotal moments are typically represented to suggest 'a cross over between the private and public sides of the subject' (Radcliff 2008, 66) and Peter's introduction does this: Wain's drawings are private acts of tenderness for Emily as she battles cancer, and she encourages him to make them public. Following her death, Wain's connection to Peter is partly shaped by his embodiment of Wain's relationship with Emily, reflecting how cats typically have a 'feminine image' in the human mind (Lawrence 2003, 623). Peter is also Wain's model and while in many artist biopics sequences of the artist with the model emphasise the time and effort taken to produce creative work (Jacobs 2011, 54), Wain's trade as an illustrator is reflected in the rapidity with which he draws. Famous drawings within the film include 'A Kitten Christmas Party,' Wain's contribution to *Illustrated London News*' 1886 Christmas issue, featuring large-eyed cats playing seasonal games. The film even features H.G. Wells (Nick Cave) making claims for Wain's importance after he is confined in the asylum: 'he invented a cat style, a cat society, a whole cat world.' Some scenes hint at Wain's relationship to meme culture: Wain dresses Peter in spectacles and talks in a special voice to please Emily, resembling the 'Business Cat' meme which features a black cat

wearing a tie against a multi-coloured background. It is after these scenes that Emily claims '[t]hroughout history, cats have been worshipped as mystical gods and maligned as the evil allies of witchery and sin. But I think you're the first person ever to see that they are in fact ridiculous. They're silly and cuddly.'

Wain's life is also invested with characteristics of 'meme' culture via the subtitles accompanying his cats' meows. While crossing a beach at the seaside Wain brings his cats in cages on a cart and one meow is accompanied by the subtitle 'Louis?', to which Wain responds 'Not long now Peter.' Wain is thus an outsider (he alone appreciates Peter's confusion), and the subtitle evokes the captions in Wain's illustrations such as 'I Am Happy Because Everyone Loves Me' (c.1928) which features a smiling cat. The film's talking cats also reflect how cats in Wain's illustrations address the illustrator to complain that they were not used for the cover (Hughes 2024, 196–197). Subsequent subtitles relate to memes directly: a doctor (played by Julian Barratt) visits Wain to assess his mental state and Wain explains that his cat, Brigit, is close to talking and Brigit's meow is accompanied with a subtitle reading 'I do my best, but I am cat'. Though the film does not suggest that Wain understands what his cats' meows connote in human terms, it suggests that cats such as Brigit understand precisely what their owner is saying. A close-up of a jumping kitten beneath a bed is then accompanied by the subtitle 'I like jomping!' Such scenes evoke internet cat videos which feature an 'absorptive focus on the cat in action' (Shafer 2016), but the mispronunciation and syntactical error align the scene with online practices such as 'LOLCats' which feature images of cats in situations accompanied by deliberately misspelled captions (Shifman 2013, 110). The 'LOLcat,' one of the most significant memes, orientated in 2007 after Eric Nakagawa superimposed the words 'I Can Has Cheezburger?' onto an image of 'Happy Cat', a grey cat which featured in Russian cat food advertisements. Once it was loaded onto icanhascheezburger.com, it popularised the subsequent phenomenon of 'LOLCats' and meme culture more broadly (Miltner 2018, 415). In *Louis Wain*, the captions reiterate Wain's outsider status, while the cats' syntactical errors work in service of the artist biopic's tendency to 'draw on and add to the cultural discourses surrounding a specific artist and the role of art in society' (Leach 2018, 166). Wain's illustrations, their anthropomorphism, captions and cuteness, are presented as a driving force in meme development.

Cuteness and comfort

The LOLcats phenomenon, and the behaviour of Wain's cats, also reflects how displays of cuteness frequently include the deliberate mispronunciation of words in order to emphasise vulnerability (Watts 2017, 212). Cuteness can be manifested in other ways as well: Peter's introduction reflects elements of cuteness such as smallness and helplessness (Ngai 2005, 816), particularly when he is discovered by Wain and Emily in the rain (a perfect environment for close-ups of the shivering kitten gazing at them). Cuteness has also been discussed as a quality which enables people to tolerate the impersonal nature of digital culture and in *Louis Wain*'s telling, the artist's pleasure in cats and cuteness was one of his means of coping with the pressures of Victorian culture.

Evidence suggests late-Victorian families used cats as 'emotional proxies' which could fulfil the desires that people could not address in other ways (Hughes 2024, 156), and there is some evidence of this in the film. Sharpe perceived Wain to live in a cold

Victorian society characterised by 'bizarre social prejudices' (according to Olivia Colman's voice-over), reflecting how artist biopics can take the form of 'melodramas of suffering and rejection, with the artist victimized by the cruel world he or she must live in' (Bingham 2010, 44). *Louis Wain* suggests cuteness helped him cope with the harsh realities of Victorian society, a society which disproved of his relationship with Emily, who is ten years older and the family's governess, and therefore of a lower social standing. The burden of social disapproval is highlighted via the 4:3 aspect ratio employed in the film, a technique which is effective when filmmakers have sought to present characters as overwhelmed by situations beyond their control. In *Marion and Geoff* (2000), a BBC television mockumentary concerning a divorced father (Keith, played by Rob Brydon), the vertical space offered by the aspect ratio enhances characterisation. For instance, as Keith approaches the law courts for his divorce hearing, his sense of anxiety is reflected in how he becomes smaller as he walks towards the courts and the vertical axis emphasise how the courts loom over him (Cardwell 2015, 91). In *Louis Wain*, it is Victorian social disapproval which looms. When Wain invites Emily to the theatre, a breach of protocol considering her status as governess, this violation of norms is conveyed in a low angle shot of the pair following their arrival within the auditorium. In the foreground they converse in hushed whispers and the camera pulls back to exploit the vertical axis, revealing that many audience members sitting behind them are staring down at the couple, in some cases craning to see them. They then escape to the countryside which is also where they encounter the helpless (and hopelessly cute) Peter, whose presence inspires Wain's illustrations.

In approaching Wain's life in this way, certain perceptions of digital culture are mapped onto the film's depiction of the early twentieth century. Though memes form one manifestation of digital kitsch, digital technologies have also been considered 'inhuman' and 'dehumanizing.' Cuteness, a quality which is also evident in Wain's work and cat memes, offers means to soften this: 'the feeling of being needed that is evoked by cute images is a kind of supplement to the cooler and more distant experience of computer-mediated relationships' (Wittkower 2012, 172). Examples include Microsoft's anthropomorphic paperclip 'Clippy' who guides users through more frustrating aspects of the developer's applications (Wittkower 2012, 171). Wain's obsession with cats, an obsession the film suggests led to his distinctive approach to drawing them, is rooted in the stifling, cold environment of Victorian England and its attitude towards convention.

'Multiparticipant creative expressions'

Many artist biopics take inspiration from the artist's work in their visual design, to the extent that the creative subject may be placed in locations and environments which correspond to those depicted in their art (Leach 2018, 166). This is evident in *Nightwatching* (2007) in which the colour grading evokes the chiaroscuro lighting which characterised Rembrandt's work (Hoyle 2019, 227) while gelatin filters located in front of the lights helped director John Huston achieve similar hues to those in Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings for *Moulin Rouge* (1953) (Jacobs 2011, 52). Sharpe also had ambitions to shape the film's aesthetic so that it reflected the work of the illustrator himself (Badame 2021). The 4:3 aspect ratio was, according to Sharpe and director of photography Erik Wilson, an attempt to reflect the 'storybook, fairy-tale quality' (Kemp

2021) of Wain's illustrations. Sequences of Wain and Emily's building of a snowman together recall Wain's 'A Kitten Christmas Party' for the *Illustrated London News*, an illustration of cats engaged in various group activities, including a walk in the snow, while sequences of the pair enjoying the English countryside are reminiscent of the hazy, colourful landscapes present in Kinkade's *Rosebud Cottage* (2011). Yet the manner in which Sharpe sought to achieve this suggested a collaborative process consistent with the philosophies which guide meme production. Sharpe worked with artists James Holcombe and Steve Pavlovsky, the latter an analogue video artist who worked with video feedback techniques. Sharpe described how Pavlovsky helped shape the film's aesthetic:

> to try and visually manifest some of what was going on in Louis' head, we would send him sequences from the film or some of Louis' art. Then he would send back hours and hours of footage that I'd go through, edit and work into the film. (quoted in Badame 2021)

There were other collaborations as well. Some of the images which are included shortly after Wain and Emily have married and moved to the country have a storybook quality and this is enhanced via the contributions of Leigh Took, a matte painter who worked on the landscapes. The vibrant colours and gentle blurring of the trees and clouds convey their happiness and developing romance, while framing strategies – depicting the pair between trees and bracketed off via branches – suggest an escape from the snobbery of Victorian society.

To achieve this design, the material underwent different stages of reworking. A collaborative approach is evident in other artist biopics as well, and each of the 65,000 frames in *Loving Vincent* (2017) was hand-painted by a team of oil-painters from a variety of different national backgrounds. However, the nature of sending, receiving and editing footage in *Louis Wain* is significant because it is similar to the way in which a meme is 'circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users' (Shifman 2013, 177). According to Alice Marwick, the principle of meme culture is one of sharing: 'memes harness the participatory potential of the Internet' (2013, 13) and these principles were embedded in the filmmaking process. Sharpe himself explained how the film footage was circulated to different film and video specialists and transformed by them to produce a distinctive aesthetic. It is typical that the world depicted in biopics is moulded to reflect the artist's paintings (Jacobs 2011, 53) and this remains the case in *Louis Wain*, but the method underlying this is indebted to the ethos which guides meme-creation: the sequences discussed are, in their own way, 'multiparticipant creative expressions' (Shifman 2013, 177).

'The more intensely he suffered, the more beautiful his work became'

Wain alone appreciates that his cats' vocalisations have significant meaning. His relationship with them is used to portray his psychological illness in a way compatible with the tendency in artist biopics to present subjects as psychologically and socially isolated (Adriaensens and Jacobs 2015, 484). Following Emily's death, Wain's only meaningful relationships are with cats and the film suggests these inspired his illustrations and his approach to anthropomorphism. At a ceremony marking his chairmanship of the National Cat Club, Wain announces cats will soon 'communicate to us in our own

language' and the biopic suggests Wain already possesses a language befitting meme culture and understandings of cuteness. The announcement is prophetic given the nature of the LolCats phenomenon and how one needs to understand the 'special language' which governs the genre to appreciate examples of it (Shifman 2013, 111). LolCats also 'serve as indirect ways to convey a wide array of feelings and states of mind' (Shifman 2013, 111), reflecting how memes can be representative of the experience of the person who has produced and/or circulated them. This has continuity with how speculations about an artist's mental state have been formulated based on perceptions of their creative output: just as the content of memes can shape understandings of human experience, the content of an artist's work has been taken to reflect their mental state. In *Louis Wain*, the nature of meme culture becomes interwoven with the artist biopic to suggest that the nature of Wain's work was directly related to his lived experience of mental illness.

By representing Wain's life via meme characteristics, the film portrays the inner workings of his increasingly fractured mind. This reflects the tendency in studies of artists to forge links between the artist's creativity and their psychological experience, links which divorce the artist from the wider context in which they lived. The most notorious construction of the suffering artist is undoubtedly Van Gogh whose art, act of self-mutilation and tragic death from a self-inflicted gunshot have been 'reworked into a complex but familiar image of the madness of the artist' (Pollock 1980, 64). The emphasis on the artist's internal suffering provided a rich base to represent artists in films because of the difficulties in representing the abstract nature of inspiration and '[o]ne solution embraced by the artist biopic was to highlight intense personal suffering as the outward sign of the creative forces that lay within' (Lent 2007, 69). One myth about Wain is that he was mentally ill, possibly schizophrenic, and that this was reflected in the shift in his artistic style towards abstract cat designs. Various illustrations were discovered in a Camden antique shop in the 1930s by psychiatrist Walter Maclay from Maudesley hospital. Maclay posited that these suggested a trajectory in which Wain's cartoon-like but relatively realistic drawings were superseded by his later experimental works (Thompson 2021). In his biography Dale argued that Wain continued to produce conventional cat illustrations later in life, sometimes *after* those experimental works: '[w]ith no evidence of the order of their progression, Maclay arranged them in a sequence which clearly demonstrated, he thought, the progressive deterioration of the artist's mental abilities' (1968, 126). Such perceptions support the view that Wain has been 'strong armed into a narrative of schizophrenic decline' (Hughes 2024, 359). That *Louis Wain* does not distance itself strongly from this claim is problematic, not least because the representation of mental illness in cinema remains a topical issue. In an article for the *BBC*, Araw Haider uses the release of *Mad to Be Normal* (2017), a British biopic about Scottish psychiatrist RD Laing, to consider wider representations of mental health. Though 'cinema does seem to be gradually opening up to broader, sensitive portrayals of mental illness' (Haider 2018), *Louis Wain* needs to be sensitive to the discourses which link mental illness to creativity.

The film indicates an awareness of the suffering artist myth – Olivia Coleman's voice-over suggests 'the more intensely he suffered, the more beautiful his work became' – yet the narrative mirrors the myth which has dogged Wain's legacy by suggesting that Wain's style changed following bereavement and the development of mental illness. *Miss Potter* offers a representation with some similarities. In that film, Beatrix Potter finds solace in

the world of her animated animals which respond to her feelings, particularly following her fiancé's death. These interactions 'occur within a private sphere, or "interior fantasy", where only she can see and talk to them' and 'the imaginary animals become the visual guides to Potter's inner psyche' (Ellam 2012). In *Louis Wain*, the imaginary relationship Wain has with his cats (which can of course be seen by other people) firmly suggests that he is operating outside social convention, but unlike *Miss Potter* his cat designs and approach to anthropomorphism become a threat to him: over the course of the narrative cats become interwoven with his growing paranoia and obsessiveness.

Early sequences emphasise realism: Wain calmly sketches Peter as the cat sleeps on the bed with Emily, the camera begins on Peter and pulls back to observe Wain's attempt to capture physical likeness. His subsequent 'cartoonish' drawings with enlarged eyes and smiles are a response to Emily's cancer: when a bespectacled Peter fails to comfort, Wain leads Emily to a room full of such drawings. Her death prompts him to work at a faster pace: a montage displays illustrations of felines on boat rides and cats playing golf, taken from postcards, books and newspapers to indicate Wain's growing popularity. Following Peter's death, Wain works at a frenzied pace on an abstract illustration of a cat with eyes bordered by petals. At other times he is depicted hearing the sounds of cats meowing when no cats are present in the scene. The creation of art is frequently represented as an obsessive process, linked to the subconscious, and accompanied by dreams and hallucinations, and such sounds characterise Wain as obsessive (Codell 2014, 160). His undiagnosed mental illness is then presented via a series of visions: during a lunch in New York he visualises the waitress and diners with cat's heads and paws, staring back in distorted shots taken with a fish-eye lens. The latter is conveyed via point-of-view shots, which serve to 'imagine "from the inside" the character's experience' (Smith 1997, 412), and here the contents of Wain's work become interwoven with his lived experience of mental illness. These cat people suggest that the style of anthropomorphism which once provided comfort now conjure paranoia reminiscent of the theatre guests who scrutinised him with Emily. This culminates in Wain's fighting his sisters in slow-motion shots which transforms into a psychedelic sequence of 'kaleidoscopic' cats (as Maclay referred to them). A metamorphosis of colourful cats, vibrant moving shapes and patterns concludes with a bedraggled Wain ('quite insane' according to doctors) drawing a psychedelic cat within the asylum. As the camera moves around, other vibrant patterned cats are evident in the background, on walls, and on the floor of the asylum. Dale's biography indicates that Emily's illness undoubtedly led Wain to focus his attention on cats as subjects (1968, 21) and Wain did draw 'cryptic stylised cats' in his later years (1968, 105), but he also produced more conventional cat pictures while staying in different hospitals (1968, 128). The film's trajectory suggests a more simplistic progression, and the conclusion that Wain's style changed in response to his mental illness is one the film makes little effort to avoid.

In forging links between Wain's personal suffering and his anthropomorphism, the film divorces Wain from contexts which indicate that he took inspiration from different sources. His inclusion of experimental cats and detailed patterns in his later works could potentially be explained in his upbringing and particularly his mother's interest in embroidery (Dale 1968, 120), while his father worked as a textile trader. His approach to drawing cats was also consistent with other contemporary practices. In eighteenth century literature 'there was a notable tendency to anthropomorphise feline characters'

and talking cats were present in writing for both children and adults (Corfield 2021, 179). This continued in the anthropomorphic cat represented in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), a novel published before Wain was born. Other creative practices involving anthropomorphism at that time might have shaped present attitudes to cats and memes: British photographer Harry Pointer produced Cartes de visite, postcard-sized photographs popular in the mid-nineteenth century that featured cats in jovial situations with humorous text accompaniments in a manner similar to modern memes (Sewell and Keralis 2019). Other examples include *Boxing Cats (Prof. Welton's)*, a short film created by Thomas Edison in 1894 which featured two cats sparring in a boxing ring. This 'proto-cute' cat video (Shafer 2016) includes cat-size boxing gloves, a feature one would expect in present-day cat videos. By concentrating on Wain's private life, his relationships and experience of mental illness, the biopic marginalises other examples of anthropomorphism and cat-based comedy which may also have contributed to the development of meme culture.

To say that Wain 'understood what a cat meme was' simplifies the history of cat memes as well. In *A Unified Theory of Cats on the Internet* (2020), E.J. White explains how the phenomenon of 'internet cats,' which includes memes and other manifestations such as celebrity cats and personal cat-centred blogs, has a complex development relating to various forces: the participatory culture cultivated in Web 2.0, fascinations with Japanese media (and its various cats) alongside digital bulletin boards such as 2channel, which offered predecessors to memes in how users communicated insider-jokes through sharing imagery (2020, 46, 68, 76). Sources such as online imageboard 4chan and platforms such as Something Awful were also critical in creating the conditions through which memes culture developed (2020, 86). Early animal-based memes also reflect the cultural context in which they were produced. The popularity of Japanese memes such as OMGCat and Maru can be linked to the place of cats in Japanese folklore, with Maru resembling 'bake neko,' a humanised spirit guide who serves as a symbol of good luck in Japanese culture (Miltner 2018, 415). He may have invented 'a whole cat world,' but the lineage of cat memes is complex and international.

Conclusion

The 'familiarity' and 'strangeness' that characterise the discourse on cats offer a productive framework through which to understand the generic workings of *The Electrical Life of Louis Wain*. The film evokes earlier artist biopics by locating Wain as an outsider through his communication with his pets and his uneasy relationship with Victorian society. Once he escapes this constraint, his happiness is visualised via imagery which matches the vibrant optimism of many of his illustrations. Such qualities are familiar conventions of artist biopics, but they are used to present Wain in a novel way: his communications with cats in lolspeak, the comforting cuteness he perceived in cats as he struggled to deal with the snobbery of Victorian society, and the collaborative quality of the film's production reflects a meme-like philosophy. Such features suggest Wain's relevance to the present cultural climate, one where online communications are staged via shared memes and where cuteness offers a tonic to the alienating experience of digital culture. Yet the film cannot completely commit to this project. Memes such as LolCats offer an indirect route to communicate and visualise psychological feelings, and the

filmmakers undertook a similar approach in shaping their representation of Wain. The representation of Wain's mental illness, an illness the film suggests shaped his artistic practice, pushes the artist into the realm of the 'suffering artist,' a discourse which marginalises other contemporary depictions of anthropomorphic cats which may have informed Wain's approach and themselves anticipated current meme culture. Like his beloved cats, Wain is himself familiar and strange in the film's telling. Such qualities encapsulate the duality at the film's core: at once attempting to project Wain's current cultural relevance, while falling back on the familiar discourses of creativity which deprive the artist of a grounded context.

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Matthew Robinson's main research interest is the British biopic. His research has appeared in journals such as *Celebrity Studies*, the *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* and the *New Review of Film and Television Studies*. He is a lecturer in design and media at the University of Derby.

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