# LOG:: 13 Phantom Worlds or even cats watch tv

This TV should change its form.

—KasputNiK

SCOTT me up, be me![[1]](#footnote-2) *Cats! Cats! Cats! Cats!* Why are all these people watching cat videos over and over again and again? What is it that makes cats celebrity brands? People watch cats doing hilarious and adorable things, strange and cheesy. An Indiana University study reveals that viewing cat videos *boosts positive emotions and decreases negative feelings*.[[2]](#footnote-3) Wow! Pleasure!

## SO CUTE

We have to come to terms with our understanding of reality. We are living in a cold and technical world. Seeing something *cute* is a relief for a few seconds, a let go from the perfectness, the operational, and excellence. Sianne Ngai calls it the *erotization of powerlessness*.[[3]](#footnote-4) Cuteness is not just about cats; it is part of a system and a matter of politics. Cuteness can be a strategy for individuals to resist or to gain some kind of status.

An excellence-cuteness syndrome drives our society. Everything is becoming the same in a world shaped by globalization and neoliberal work cultures. In the past, people found meaning in their religion and culture. Now, all we care about is being cute or excellent. But these don't give our lives any real purpose; they're just shallow ways of trying to look good. We only want to be cute or excellent to show off; it's all about ourselves. This obsession with cuteness and excellence is a form of self-absorption that people and societies use to define themselves. But who we are is about things that can't be measured, like our feelings, beliefs, and experiences. Our culture shapes these things. Importantly, they can't be quantified. Focusing on cuteness and excellence doesn't connect us to these more profound things. Instead, it just makes us chase after the latest trends and fads or try to outdo each other in superficial ways. It doesn't make us feel any better. Consequently, our obsession with cuteness and excellence can quickly become an unhealthy habit.[[4]](#footnote-5)

Sianne Ngai offers three categories or keys to how we experience today’s world as surfacing on social media: *zany blogs, cute tweets and interesting wikis* are categories creating attention.[[5]](#footnote-6) ‘The best explanation for why the zany, the interesting, and the cute are our most pervasive and significant categories is that they are about the increasingly intertwined ways in which late capitalist subjects labor, communicate and consume.’[[6]](#footnote-7)

They are the material through which we can have perceptions and share judgments that seem most closely related to what we do, say, and use in the 21st century. The *zany* is a performance style that's both anxious and over-the-top. It's energetic, sometimes even sweaty, and involves physical humor that can be suggestive. It blurs the lines between play and work, with elements of both being taken too seriously or not seriously enough. Think of Lucille Ball's physical comedy or Hugo Ball's Dada performances. It can be dangerous, like Charlie Chaplin getting caught in the machinery. The zany is similar to camp, which celebrates failed attempts at style. But unlike camp, the zany is more likely to turn success into failure, like the cartoon Coyote's constant struggles. It's a performance that's either too stiff or loose, creating tension between different roles or activities. It can be desperate or stressful but not wildly joyful or chaotic. It's like lousy pornography: trying too hard and missing the mark. Despite the effort, the zany can be attractive but never truly happy.

The *zany* concept comes from a stock character in an old theater, a peasant forced into service. Initially, these characters helped fix romantic problems, foreshadowing the idea of emotional labor. Over time, the zany became a comedic figure who exaggeratedly imitated others, a wild improviser. Today, we see the zany in characters like The Cable Guy, stuck between different types of work, or Kramer from Seinfeld, an exaggerated version of Jerry. These characters all represent the idea of *virtuoso labor* (Lazzarato's immaterial labor), where work becomes a kind of performance.

C*ute* comes from a sharper, more intense word, *acute*. Cute things are endearing and familiar, unlike the strange or wild (*zany*) that we keep at arm's length. We can control and interact with cute things, even though they need our care. The *zany* is about creation, while the cute is about enjoyment. It's like the difference between a worker and a finished product. We identify with cute things; they feel like *us*.

Cuteness is different from beauty. Beautiful things are rare, unique, and untouchable. Cute things are cuddly and approachable. They can be mass-produced and kitschy, appealing to our emotions in a simplified way. Cute objects often want our love and care, like a child asking, *Are you my mother?*

Cuteness can be a fixation, hiding the work that went into making it. But it can also be a hopeful dream, a world where things are valued for their usefulness, not just how much they cost. Cute objects want us to believe in the fantasy of a perfect thing. They hint at a world where things are helpful and safe, untouched by the harsh realities of buying and selling. This powerlessness can be strangely attractive, even arousing—pure pleasure.

The ultimate test of something being cute might be if it looks good enough to eat. This sweetness can be unsettling. The transformation of real work into abstract value (like in factories) can be compared to turning meat into a pink, formless paste. Cute objects, with their friendly faces, might be a way to escape this feeling of being used up. Cuteness makes production seem like a comforting household activity, even though it can be violent and sexual.

The third aesthetic category by Ngai, *interesting*, is about information and how it circulates, not about performance or emotions. It's like a small surprise, a deviation from the norm. Science finds interesting things that connect many ideas and social aspects. Interesting things are a balance between understanding and surprise.

The *interesting* is linked to exploring and observing the world, like a flaneur in a city. Literature, especially modern novels, became *interesting* through a focus on diverse characters and situations. *Interesting* things are not universal or timeless; they focus on everyday details and change over time. *Interesting* things make you think and question, but the feeling is mild. It's just a starting point for further exploration.

*Interesting* things happen in a flow of time, unlike the shocking or beautiful. They reflect the current moment. Photography captures everything, making it inherently interesting. Conceptual art uses everyday elements and processes, creating an *information aesthetic*. *Interesting* things ask you to pay attention to details in a fast-paced world. This attention might lead to new knowledge and understanding. Critics can help us see the interesting aspects of things, influencing public opinion and creating communities with shared interests.

*Diachronic and informational, forensic and dialogic: the aesthetic of the interesting can produce new knowledge. From Adorno on the products of the culture industry to Cavell on Hollywood screwball comedies [to Ngai on the interesting], all contemporary criticism is thus, in some sense, an implicit provision of evidence for why the object that the critic has chosen to talk about is interesting [...][[7]](#footnote-8)*

The *zany* is a subject, the *interesting* an object, and the *cute* a hybrid, and all are in between play and labor, signaling an era in which work becomes play and play becomes work. The three emotional responses to aesthetics in our modern, service-oriented world aren't grand or dramatic. Cute things are small and vulnerable, while zany is a feeling of awkward helplessness. Interesting things are constantly changing based on what's expected and different. These might seem unimportant, but they differ significantly from the classical ideas of beauty (calm and distant) or the sublime (powerful and overwhelming).

Ngai argues that art has become independent and fully integrated into everyday life. This seemingly utopian outcome is different from what anyone expected. Art has adapted by becoming less severe and more like a friendly ghost haunting us. It's still around, but it’s casual and doesn't demand respect or awe. The part of art that merges with daily life can even seem like mental health issues. Our interest can become obsessive boredom, cuteness can feel manipulative, and zaniness can be like a nervous breakdown. Everyday art is like watered-down versions of past artistic styles. Cute pictures are like calm landscapes in a digital format, zany jokes are like short online videos, and interesting things are like personality quizzes. This connection between art and information might explain the rise of these new emotional responses. Art is now tied to performance, products, and information. This reflects several trends, like the blurring of lines between art and commerce, the growth of a more personal public life and a commercialized private life, and the constant activity in both areas that can't be easily called work or play. While these emotions are less dramatic than the feeling of awe inspired by classical art, they still challenge traditional ideas of beauty. *Cute* things get too close, *zany* things aren't truly playful, and *interesting* things are observed coldly. The way we experience art just isn't what classical thinkers expected.

*If, in response to the loss of the sacred under conditions of secular, industrial modernity, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries plunged headlong into the resacralization of the aesthetic, the contemporary moment seems defined by a desacralization of the aesthetic turn, but a desacralization caused precisely by the aesthetic’s hyperbolic expansion.[[8]](#footnote-9)*

Hiroki Azuma offered critical insight into the postmodern era by identifying a shift in Japan during the 1990s. This shift moved away from grand narratives and embraced a vast database of *cute elements* or *moe-points*.[[9]](#footnote-10)

Ngai discusses aesthetics in a world dominated by capitalism and information technology. Her book analyzes aesthetics through the *interesting* lens, which acknowledges new trends within capitalism. Her concept of *zany* could have been an alternative way of looking—actively pushing against and exhausting existing constraints. A *zany aesthetic theory* could challenge the assumption that capitalism is permanent.

Ngai's work can be connected to a broader concept of *performative aesthetics*, celebrating the act of creation and embracing the possibility of failure, similar to *queer art*. The rise of information technology and control over data streams create a new *vectoralist class* with immense aesthetic power. Information is a commodity, changing how we perceive and interact with the world. Ngai's categories (*zany, cute, interesting*) help navigate this information-driven landscape. Still, they must be adapted to serve or survive in an AI-dominated future.

## Phantom Worlds

*Mensch ist was er isst*, says the German proverb: man is what he eats.

In his 1953 essay, “The Phantom World of TV”, the postwar German critic of mass culture Gunther Anders was among the first to relocate this proverb onto the terrain of cultural consumption. With the assertion, *it is through the consumption of mass commodities that mass men are produced*, Anders suggested that we are what we watch. He was already wary of the allegedly poor taste and potentially anti-social tendencies of *mass men*.[[10]](#footnote-11)

‘The world has now become an 'exposition'; and certainly an advertising exposition that is impossible not to visit, because we always already find ourselves in the middle of it.’[[11]](#footnote-12)

Television and modern technology are, for Anders, a new form of *Promethean shame;:* the shame of being confronted by the high quality of fabricated things compared to natural ones, a discomfort individuals might experience when faced with the power and influence over their lives, creating alienation, feelings of powerlessness, loss of control and disconnection from the world. Existence is technically mediated.[[12]](#footnote-13)

*Promethean shame is what we feel when we realize that the machines we have created are so powerful and perfect that we humans with our messy and mortal bodies cannot but feel very deficient in comparison. We recognize the superiority of the made over the born, and as a consequence wish to be made ourselves, which allows us more control over what we are, which is especially important when it comes to our sexual bodies.[[13]](#footnote-14)*

Key to Anders' notion of *Promethean shame* was his observation that we effectively adapt or suit ourselves to our technology, not the other way around. Provocatively, Anders argued that whereas the populace in the past (he was referring to Nazi Germany) required the techniques of mass psychology to manipulate and control, today we do this work on ourselves, in our own time, in our own space, using devices and subscriptions we pay for.  As we *do this to ourselves*, we actively *program* ourselves in an ongoing digital practice, constantly and in real-time, providing the means for our own surveillance.[[14]](#footnote-15)

We are entering into dependencies and addiction without awareness. We need to check our smart devices constantly. We fear obsolescence and being left behind. Skills like writing, communication, problem-solving, orientation, and spatial awareness are dangerously affected and reformatted. We are under pressure to perform and curate our lives, construct narratives, and showcase. The feeling of inadequacy leads to curating identities and idealized images.

Today, all media are social media.[[15]](#footnote-16) We use them to depict ourselves. Our bodies are now extensions of data networks, clicking, linking, and taking selfies. We render what we see and understand on screens that go everywhere with us. This understanding results from a mixture of seeing and learning not to see.

Anders argued that commercial broadcasting addresses the audience as consumers of commodities to increase sales. This dynamic is even more pronounced in today's targeted advertising on digital platforms, where user data is used to serve personalized ads.

Consuming commercial broadcasts is a form of *camouflaged labor* where the audience pays to sell themselves to advertisers. In the age of social media, users' content creation, data generation, and attention is a form of unpaid digital labor that generates profits for platforms. The monetization of user data on social media platforms is a form of commodity production. Boundaries between work and leisure are blurred. Streaming platforms curate and monetize user attention. The proliferation of fake news, filter bubbles, and echo chambers on social media platforms exacerbate this distortion of reality in contemporary media. Furthermore, the constant use of digital devices, immersion in virtual worlds, and social media platforms lead to feelings of estrangement from physical reality.

Technology platforms, the conventional wisdom now goes, are not neutral. Their design and structure encourage certain behaviors, and their algorithms control us even more. We may be paddling our boats, but the platform is the river, and the algorithms are the current.

Our situation is direr than in Anders' time, with centralized platforms making it nearly impossible to operate independently online. Geert Lovink argues the *platform has incorporated and then killed the network logic* and that talk of decentralized services is now a *farce*.[[16]](#footnote-17)

## §17 Anders

The person being informed is free because he has control over something absent; unfree because he only receives the predicate instead of the thing itself. So what is news? What does it do? It informs the person being informed about something absent in such a way that the person, the addressee, now knows about the absent indirectly, without his own experience, based on vicarious *perception*. The appearance of the word *absent* confirms that we have not left our field of questions, including the ambiguity of presence and absence.

Social media, as we know it, is a celebration of absence. To speak means to speak of something absent: to present that which is not present to someone who is not.

Absence might be close to forgetting.

1. Beam me up, Scotty! - Captain Kirk in Enterprise … [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, Why Are There So Many Cute Cats on the Internet? The World is Driven by a Cute-Excellence Syndrome. LA Review of Books. 23 December 2017 http://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/essays/many-cute-cats-internet-world-driven-cute-excellence-syndrome/ and Not-so-guilty pleasure: Viewing cat videos boosts energy and positive emotions, IU study finds. June 2015 http://archive.news.indiana.edu/releases/iu/2015/06/internet-cat-video-research.shtml, accessed 12 March 2025. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Sianne Ngai, Our Aesthetic Categories, Harvard University Press 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Botz-Bornstein 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. McKenzie Wark. Our Aesthetics. Blog Post 27 June 2017. https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3291-our-aesthetics, accessed 12 January 2025. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Ngai 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Ngai 2015: 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Ngai 2015: 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Hiroki Azuma, Otaku, Japan’s Database Animals, University of Minnesota Press 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Sure Wolton, Marxism, Mysticism and Modern Theory, Springer 2016. https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978-1-349-24669-4.pdf, accessed 12 March 2025. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Translation from German: Die Welt ist nun zur *Ausstellung* geworden, und zwar zu einer Werbeausstellung, die nicht zu besuchen unmöglich ist, weil wir uns immer schon ohnehin in ihr befinden (Anders 1980a, 161). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Oliver Marino, Günther Anders’ Theory of Media and Communication: Developing a Conception of Technological Domination, Alienation and Ideology with Marx beyond Marx. A PhD thesis awarded by the University of Westminster. https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/download/3efa6c34f14faefd556f244c01f6c28b2efa3ddc0852eba61cb3955b6f259d72/3773962/E-Thesis Submission.pdf, accessed 12 March 2025 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. M. Hauskeller, Promethean Shame and the Engineering of Love. In: Sex and the Posthuman Condition. Palgrave Pivot, London 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137393500_4> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Harvard Review of Philosophy Lecture: Babette Babich (Fordham University). Günther Anders’ 'Promethean Shame': Technological Ressentiment and Surveillance. https://philosophy.fas.harvard.edu/event/harvard-review-philosophy-annual-lecture-babette-babich-fordham-university [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Nicholas Mirzoeff, How to See the World. Penguin UK, 4 Haz 2015: 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Geert Lovink, Requiem for the Network, https://networkcultures.org/geert/2020/01/28/geert-lovink-requiem-for-the-network/, accessed 12 March 2025. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)