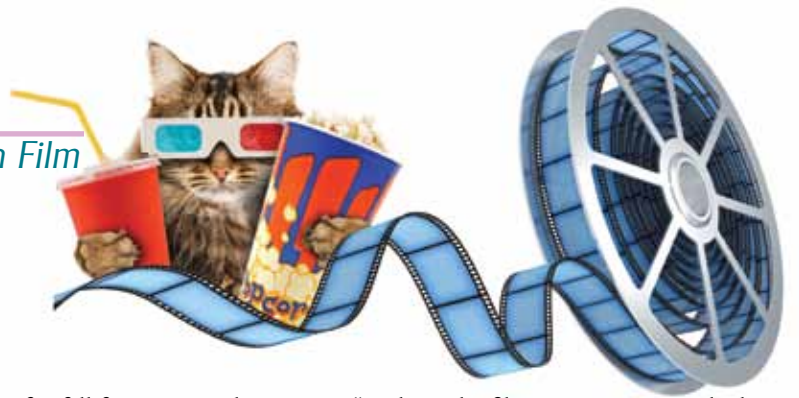


# Cinematic Cats

## A History of Felines in Film

By Ramona D. Marek, MS Ed.



Cinematic cats have accompanied us on cross-country road trips, wild adventures and incredible journeys. They have guided us through spiritual rebirths and awakenings, scared nine lives out of us, calmed us with their tranquil presence and added comic relief.

Grab the popcorn, sit back and roll the film.

Felines in film are as old as cinematography itself. Cats had leading roles in the earliest films produced by French cinematic pioneers, the brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière, paralleling acclaimed scientist and physiologist, Etienne-Jules Marey and their American contemporary Thomas Edison in the United States. In their 1892-1895 production of *La Petite Fille et Son Chat*, the Lumière brothers filmed a young girl feeding her cat and we watch as he gets up, stretches, jumps off the table and back up again. The cat takes up the majority of the screen and regarding feline movement and behavior; it could have been filmed today.

Devoted to the study of motion, specifically movement of humans and animals including horses, birds, dogs and cats, Etienne-Jules Marey is an early inventor of cinematography. Having trouble capturing birds in flight, in 1888, Marey created the Chronophotographe camera, the basis of the ciné camera. With dates varying between 1891 and 1894, Marey filmed humans and animals in motion, including *Chat en Chute*



*La Petite Fille et Son Chat*

*Libre*, the cat in freefall focusing on the cat righting itself before landing on its feet.

Concurrently, in 1894, at The Black Maria Studio in West Orange, New Jersey, Thomas Edison filmed his short entitled *Boxing Cats (Prof. Welton's)*. Two trained cats wearing boxing gloves paw-jabbing each other in a small boxing ring for 20 seconds make cinematic history.

With his epic 3-hour film, *The Birth of a Nation* (produced in 1914 with a 1915 opening), D.W. Griffith rocked the world with cinematic achievements pioneering many of the techniques still used today, 100 years later. Griffith's film heralded praise for innovations in the film industry but also disgrace for its vile racism. "Racist, yes, and Pauline tied up on the railroad tracks is sexist; but what we should focus on are the profuse cinematic advances," said media analyst, Shirley M. Joiner, PhD. "Discussing Griffith's achievements is like discussing the historical development of the wheel or electricity," she said.

A groundbreaking aspect of *The Birth of a Nation* is that it was the first film to use every cinematic technique known, whether invented by Griffith or someone else's invention improved by Griffith. One of the most significant innovations, and still used, is the "iris" effect. "Griffith created the technique for the purpose of focusing in, on, out of or away from an image or scene. The iris effect directed the viewer's attention to a particular characteristic of a scene or image that Griffith wanted to emphasize," said Joiner.

Another cinematic first was the use of animals for symbolic purposes. In *The Birth of a Nation*, several animals were used, including a white dove, squirrels, dogs and a kitten/cat. How a character interacted with certain animals represented a specific trait of that character and our feline friend carried a heavy burden of social context.

"Early in the film, two puppies and a kitten play together, symbolizing that socially all was innocent and idyllic in the southern way of life showing that slaves and plantation owners worked and played happily together but as separate beings," said Joiner. "However, it also symbolizes the difference in beliefs of Northerners and Southerners," she said.

The use of "flash card," another Griffith creation, ensured the audience understanding the innocent portrayal of the puppy and kitten and of the approaching discord.

"Later the cat is used metaphorically to show that the cause of strife between the two groups, Northerners and Southerners, was the importation of slaves into the United States, as someone off camera drops a cat onto a sleepy pup, thus disrupting the happy relationship within the southern context. It also symbolized the dominance of one group over another," Joiner said.

The difficulty dogging *The Birth of a Nation* is separating its polemic point of view from its revolutionary cinematic advancements for audiences and film historians. The film was inducted into the National Film Registry in 1992, 77 years after its 1915 premiere.

In 2012, The National Film Registry inducted Blake Edwards' 1961 adaptation of Truman Capote's novella, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* starring Audrey Hepburn, George Peppard and an award-winning feline named Orangey, best known for his role as "Cat" in this film.





Left: Ray Milland, Jan Sterling, and Orangey in "Rhubarb"



Right and far right: Audrey Hepburn and Orangey in "Breakfast at Tiffany's"



Cat gives the viewer an introspective peek into the character Holly Golightly but more importantly, he embodies Holly's self-revelation. Cat lives with Holly but Holly does not claim ownership, therefore she refuses to name him, saying that they met one day at the river. Cat represents Holly's independence and free spirit, and in an effort to demonstrate her carefree attitude toward Cat, she abandons him in Spanish Harlem. However, Cat does not go willingly and Holly shoos him away. Reality dawns on Holly that Cat is less independent than she realized and perhaps so is she.

Regretting her action, she searches in the rain for Cat. "When she runs into the rain trying to rescue and reclaim Cat, she is forgetting 'self' and taking responsibility for Cat, and in doing so taking responsibility for her own behavior," said Joiner.

In the film version, together Holly and Paul Varjak (Peppard) find Cat in the rain and embrace, a different ending from the novella. Does the film version mean Holly accepts that she is not as free spirited as she believed and is able to form meaningful relationships? "Actually, the conclusion depends upon the viewer's preference," Joiner said.

In 1961, Orangey won a Patsy Award (Picture Animal Top Star of the Year) for his performance in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, but this was his second award. He also won a Patsy Award in 1951 for his performance in *Rhubarb*, the story of a cat who inherited a professional baseball team, co-starring Ray Milland and Jan Sterling.

Audiences loved *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and Hepburn's iconic Givenchy black cocktail dress became a fashion must. But Orangey impacted society, too, as animal shelters reported increased adoptions for red cats resembling the veteran feline actor.

The archives are full of cinematic history and classic films featuring felines. Sometimes their presence symbolizes a social barometer, personal revelation, or beloved companions. Why not watch your all-time favorite or discover a new-to-you classic tonight? And, pass the popcorn, please.

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## Videos

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E.J. Marey *Chat en Chute Libre* posted by Huntley Film Archives: (between 1891-1894) [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8aU1RXkYZ\\_Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8aU1RXkYZ_Y)

Lumière Brothers *La Petite Fille et Son Chat* (between 1892-1894, suggested 1894) Posted by CinemaVintage: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AoiGT86BO1A>

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