

A Cat is Watching

Excerpts from book by Roger A. Caras

How do cats see and react to us? We are large and do not as total beings elicit any pounce reactions. A hand can, if moved back and forth in front of a cat, and a foot can, if jiggled, become a practice session target, but a whole human being must be a little awesome. Our skin is not particularly colorful and since we are without real fur and certainly without feathers, our clothing must supply any color display a cat can distinguish. We are, then, more or less stimulating to the cones of a cat's eye (depending on what we are wearing), but distinctly interesting to the rods. Either way, we are visually notable, if pretty gray in the flesh.

Most of us move fairly smoothly. We are not all Fred Astairs, but sitting, standing, reaching, or walking, our actions have fairly discreet beginnings, middles and ends. When we perform certain tasks, winding yarn, sweeping the floor or sorting strawberries, our actions can become a little jerky and therefore far more interesting to a cat. If a cat is not hungry or not in need of a little rubbing – scratching, petting or rubbing a cat is a sign of unending, in fact, unendable infancy in relation to their human owners; mothers lick their kittens and our petting actions are, from a cat's point of view an imitation of that highly desirable sensation – we are probably pretty ordinary visual experiences. We are large, impossible to miss for an animal as acutely sensitive to its surroundings as a cat. So we almost never get to surprise them. They do, after all, combine their vision with their other sensory cluster, and we would have to loom large.



Image by Nickolay Lamm, comparing human vision to cat vision, however, cats see movement better than we do.

Times have changed. Animal cognition is now a legitimate subject for consideration. Animals apparently do think. Since cats are carnivores, rather high-on-the-scale mammals, they would have to qualify if anything does below the apes and whales. We can now say with a fair degree of certainty (absolute certainty in my mind) that cats think. That surely, is worth consideration since they probably think about what they are seeing and hearing, and very often that is us.

It would seem highly unlikely that cats think the way we do, although we can't really define the way we think. It would be a pretty unprofitable pursuit to try to understand how cats think. Since that is in the realm of 100 percent speculation we might just set it aside and consider the matter from other angles.