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Film Review: “Cats are Excellent Conductors of Electricity”: A Review of *The Electrical Life of Louis Wain*

By Brittany Mondragon

Reaching the pinnacle of artistic fame at the start of the twentieth century in Britain and America, British artist Louis William Wain’s (1860–1939) legacy has slipped and faded over the past hundred years. A name once recognized by most for his famous anthropomorphic and psychedelic cats, Wain is often credited with changing the Western perception of the feline from a malicious creature to a cuddly playful house cat. In the words of the famed writer H.G. Wells (1866–1946), “[Wain] invented a cat style, a cat society, a whole cat world. English cats that do not look like Louis Wain cats are ashamed of themselves.”¹

Medieval Europe’s association of the cat with witchcraft and the demonic lasted up until the late sixteenth century, and by the nineteenth century, cats were either used as rodent catchers or biological test subjects. It was not until the turn of the twentieth century (with the help of Wain’s artwork), however, that felines also became objects of admiration and pedigree status.² The shifting perceptions of cats over the past hundred years are seen in the number of cat-owning families today; there were approximately 95.6 million house cats in America in 2017 and 110.1 million house cats in Europe in 2020.³ Despite his cheerful

¹ H.G. Wells quoted from Sam Kalda, *Of Cats and Men: Profiles of History’s Great Cat-Loving Artists, Writers, Thinkers, and Statesmen* (New York: Ten Speed Press, 2017), 33.

² “Cast as Pets: Historical Literature,” *Library of Congress*, accessed May 3, 2022, <https://guides.loc.gov/cats-as-pets/introduction>.

³ “Number of cats in the United States from 2000 to 2017,” Statista, accessed May 3, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/198102/cats-in-the-united-states-since-2000/#:~:text=According%20to%20a%20national%20pet,owned%20at%20least>

and lighthearted cat illustrations and paintings, Wain's life is considered a tragic one. Rarely earning money for his work and struggling with mental illness, a look into the life of Louis Wain and his family reflects the social stigmas surrounding mental health and socioeconomics during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

A renewed interest in Wain's life and his artistic works is captured in the 2021 film, *The Electrical Life of Louis Wain*, directed by Will Sharpe. Starring Benedict Cumberbatch as Louis Wain, the historical film—in its muted palette scheme—follows the life story of the artist and the tragedies that befell him. Born in London on August 5, 1860, Wain was born to a wealthy aristocratic family and was the first-born and only male child of six children.⁴ Often truant from school, possibly due to being bullied for his eccentric demeanor and the scar from a cleft lip, Wain eventually became a student at the West London School of Art and later a teacher for a short time.⁵ Other than the aforementioned details, the film does not mention much of Wain's earlier life except that he was plagued with recurring nightmares (which he documents in a personal illustrated diary) and that he grew a mustache as an adult to hide his scarred lip.

Narrated by actress Olivia Colman, the audience learns that at the early age of twenty, Wain became the sole provider for his mother and five sisters after his father, William Matthew Wain (1825–1880), passed away in 1880 and the family experienced economic hardship. He soon became a freelance artist specializing

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/516041/cat-population-europe/#:~:text=This%20statistic%20presents%20the%20estimated,approximately%20110.15%20million%20in%202020>, Statista, accessed May 3, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/516041/cat-population-europe/#:~:text=This%20statistic%20presents%20the%20estimated,approximately%20110.15%20million%20in%202020>.

⁴ His father was William Matthew Wain, (1825–1880) and his mother was Julie Felicite Boiteux (1833–1910). He had five sisters: Caroline E.M. (1862–1917), Josephine F.M. (1864–1939), Marie L. (1867–1913), Claire M. (1868–1945) and Felicie J. (1871–1940).

⁵ "Depicter of Cats," *The West Australian*, July 7, 1939, p. 18, Trove, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/46405823>.

in drawing animals and country scenes as a news illustrator in the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* and *The Illustrated London News*, a weekly magazine run by his friend Sir William James Ingram (1847–1924) in the 1880s. In 1883, Wain fell in love and married the Wain estate's governess Emily Richardson (1850–1887), a gentry woman who was ten years older than Wain, despite his sisters' disapproval.⁶ While contemporary films often romanticize love stories between two people from different socioeconomic classes, the stigma surrounding age differences continues to persist today, especially when the woman is older in a heterosexual relationship. Played by Claire Foy, Emily Richardson-Wain takes on a more youthful appearance and there is no mention of her age. For the unaware audience, she appears to be of equivalent age or slightly younger than Wain, which reinforces the continuous stigma regarding age differences. In real life (and as portrayed in the film), the scandalous marriage sent shockwaves throughout the London elite and the Wain family sank further down the social ladder. The marriage lasted a brief three years before another tragedy befell the newlyweds, and Wain's wife was diagnosed with terminal breast cancer. She died on January 2, 1887.

During those three years of marriage between 1883 and 1887, Wain and Emily rescued a black and white kitten which they named Peter. Peter became a beacon of hope for Wain and his primary companion for several years. "Peter the Cat" inspired the first of many famous sketches and paintings of cats created by Wain. In 1886, he began drawing anthropomorphized cats performing activities like playing golf or cards or sitting together for tea. His lighthearted works that buried his life-long pains became instantly popular and were featured in children's books, newspapers, and journals. In the 1890 issue of *English Illustrated*

⁶ The term governess is obsolete today but was a title used up until the twentieth century. Governess referred to a woman, generally of the gentry or middle class, employed to teach children in a private and often wealthy household. Unlike a nanny who cared for children holistically, governesses focused on education and learning.

Magazine, writer J.E. Paton's (n.d.) article "Cats and Kittens; or 'In Defense of the Cat'" featured some of Wain's illustrations. Believing that the public needed to "make a cat a real companion," the article included people's changing opinion of cats as rodent-eating alley pests, imploring "a cat who is properly treated, spoken to kindly, called by its own name, and has its senses cultivated by the appreciative owner, not only becomes in every whit as companionable as a dog, but in her turn bears progeny that are in advance of their parents."⁷ A journal titled *Louis Wain Annual* featured his works and ran from 1901 to 1915, a lengthy fourteen years.



Figure 1. *Carol Singing* (n.d.) by Louis Wain. This image is an example of one of Wain's possible earlier works done in the Victorian style. The black and white anthropomorphic cat featured on the right is likely a reference to Peter.

Courtesy of WikiArt.⁸

⁷ J.E. Paton, "Cats and Kittens; or, 'In Defense of the Cat,'" illustrations by Louis Wain, *English Illustrated Magazine 1889–1890*, accessed May 5, 2022, <https://archive.org/details/english-illustrated-mag-1889-1890/page/450/mode/2up?q=Wain>.

⁸ Louis William Wain, *Carol Singing*, watercolor, gouache, pen and pencil on paper, 15 x 22 inches, Wikiart, public domain,



Figure 2. *In the Vineyard* (n.d.) by Louis Wain. This image reflects one of Wain's more popular styles with anthropomorphic cartoon cats in vibrant colors. Courtesy of WikiArt.⁹

Wain's success as a cat-loving artist amounted to him becoming the president of the National Cat Club (founded in 1887) from 1898 to 1911 and a longtime member of the Society for the Protection of Cats.¹⁰ This marks a turning point in the film and the decline of Wain's mental state. While talking with Miss Judith Shenton (n.d.) at the National Cat Club pedigree competition, Wain describes his evolutionary theory of cats as "excellent conductors of electricity" with whiskers acting as antennas.¹¹ Wain claims that, in time, "they will turn blue, [and] eventually they will walk on their own hind legs and communicate to us in our own

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carol_Singing_by_Louis_William_Wain_watercolor.jpg.

⁹ Louis William Wain, *In the Vineyard*, Wikiart, public domain,

<https://www.wikiart.org/en/louis-wain/in-the-vineyard>.

¹⁰ The National Cat Club promoted the breeding of pedigree and pure-bred cats and also organized cat show competitions among the British elite. In July 1887, the first National Cat Club Show was held at the Crystal Palace in London. While Wain became president of the club from 1898 to 1911, the film portrays him as somewhat aloof to the pedigree competitions. "Depicter of Cats," *The West Australian*.

¹¹ *The Electrical Life of Louis Wain*, directed by Will Sharpe (Amazon Studios, 2021), 1:03:28 to 1:04:01.

language.”¹² The film, which began with a clearly focused camera, sees an increase in the frequencies of camera effects and optical illusions. As the film progresses, the increase in flashes, colorful floating orbs, fisheye-lens, and kaleidoscopic static parallels Wain’s mental wellbeing. Another important reference also takes place during the competition when Miss Shenton exclaims, “I’ve heard even gentry are keeping cats as pets now, and so handsome too.”¹³ The script writers’ (Simon Stephenson and Will Sharpe) inclusion of the sentence subtly acknowledges Britain’s and America’s shifting perception of the cat, as well as the socioeconomic status associated with being able to properly care for a pet.

Despite his fandom, Wain’s personal life continued in tragedy and his work became ever more fantastical. According to the narrator, “Wain wept without ceasing for several years, but at the same time, he was overtaken by an extraordinary discovery that the more intensely he suffered, the more beautiful his work became.”¹⁴ He never copyrighted any of his works and never received any monetary compensation for most of his art, often trading illustrations for meals or haircuts.¹⁵ His sister, Marie Wain (1867–1913), was admitted to a mental health institution and never left after struggling for years with diagnosed schizophrenia. The combination of Wain’s socially-unapproved marriage, the lack of business prowess, and his sister’s health condition diminished the

¹² *The Electrical Life of Louis Wain*, 1:03:28 to 1:04:01.

¹³ *The Electrical Life of Louis Wain*, 1:03:10 to 1:03:11.

¹⁴ *The Electrical Life of Louis Wain*, 1:15:15 to 1:15:26.

¹⁵ Lucy Davies, “The Innocence and Agony of Louis Wain: He was the most Sought-After Illustrator of the Late 19th Century, Famous for His Whimsical Cat Pictures, Yet Louis Wain Died in a Psychiatric Hospital Exchanging His Drawings for Biscuits. Now, Thanks to a Film Starring Benedict Cumberbatch, a New Exhibition and Collectors such as Nick Cave Reviving His Name, His Drawings are in Demand Once More,” *Telegraph Magazine* (December 2021): 11, 28,

<http://libproxy.lib.csusb.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/innocence-agony-louiswain/docview/2608693529/se-2?accountid=10359>.

Wain family's social status and the remaining four women never married.



Figure 3. "Untitled" (n.d.) (left) by Louis Wain and *Psychedelic Cat* (n.d.) (right) by Louis Wain (1875). These images are examples of his more whimsical and fanciful versions of cats. Courtesy of WikiArt and Wikimedia.¹⁶

After the heartbreaking death of his cat, Peter, in 1989, Wain moved to New York a few years later in 1907 and reached similar fandom in America. Despite his success, however, Wain struggled with his ever-deteriorating mental health and increasing nightmares. In a few short years, he also witnessed the death of his mother, Julie Felicite Boiteux (1833–1910), and sister, Marie, as well as his friend and employer, Sir Ingram. Then, in 1914, he fell into a coma after attempting to get off a moving trolley. Inspired

¹⁶ Louis William Wain, "Untitled," public domain, <https://www.wikiart.org/en/louis-wain/untitled-5>; Louis William Wain *Psychedelic Cat*, 1875, public domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?search=Psychedelic+Cat+wain&title=Special:MediaSearch&go=Go&type=image>.

by a vision while in a coma, Wain awoke to design a line of futuristic cat toys (*Figure 4*) that became a desired whimsical commodity for children during World War I (1914–1918) since his artwork became less popular as his colorful, cheerful artwork did not match the public's tone amidst the war.¹⁷ However, tragedy struck again after a German U-boat struck a cargo ship containing almost all of Wain's toy merchandise in 1915. Shortly afterward, Wain's oldest sister, Caroline Wain (1862–1917), died at home, and Wain's declining mental health initiated violent outbursts that became too much for his remaining sisters to properly care for him.



Figure 4. A toy line collection called “Futurist Cats” designed by Louis Wain in 1914, inspired by a vision while in a coma. Courtesy of CoArt Magazine.¹⁸

In 1924, at the age of sixty-four, Wain was diagnosed with schizophrenia and admitted to the lowly pauper ward at Springfield Mental Hospital. There, he continued to paint with the provided supplies but his work took on even more psychedelic and kaleidoscopic effects. After a year of living at the institution in rags and unkempt hair, Dan Rider (n.d.), an inspector and old acquaintance of Wain's, recognizes Wain. Rider immediately begins a campaign to relocate Wain with the help of Wain's sisters. Supported by Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald (1866–1937)

¹⁷ Davies, “The Innocence and Agony of Louis Wain,” 11, 28.

¹⁸ Louis William Wain, “The Futurist Cats,” 1914, CoArt Magazine, public domain, <https://coartmag.com/news/feature/futurist-cats-louis-wain/>.

and writer H.G. Wells, the Louis Wain Fund received enough money from public donations to relocate Wain to a better institution.¹⁹ One year later, Wain became a patient at the notable Bethlem Royal Hospital and later at the Napsbury Hospital in 1930, where they had access to outdoor gardens and could keep cats for company. In addition to transferring Wain to a more comfortable facility, Prime Minister MacDonald provided the Wain sisters a small Civil List pension in compensation for Wain's artwork to the public.²⁰



Figure 5. "Untitled" works (n.d.) by Louis Wain. These images are examples of Wain's later work of kaleidoscope cats. They were possibly created while he was institutionalized, but the lack of dates makes dating the pieces difficult. Courtesy of Wikimedia.²¹

¹⁹ Davies, "The Innocence and Agony of Louis Wain," 11, 28.

²⁰ "Artist in Focus II – Louis Wain," Bethlem Museum: Museum of the Mind, accessed May 3, 2022, <https://museumofthemind.org.uk/blog/artist-in-focus-ii-louis-wain>.

²¹ Louis William Wain, "Untitled," Wikimedia, public domain, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/75/Louis_Wain_-_Katzen3.jpg/800px-Louis_Wain_-_Katzen3.jpg?20100101204144.

Unfortunately, the film glosses over the horrific history of the rise of mental institutions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe and America. According to Disability Studies historian Sarah Rose, the surge in building mental institutions with state and federal funding was a “consequence of the burgeoning eugenic movement” that began in the mid-nineteenth century.²² While the hospital is dingy and dark in the film, the overall scene of the room is a cleaner version of the crowded beds and unsanitary conditions in which most patients lived. In reality, physical and mental abuse existed rampantly in custodial facilities and the abysmal conditions patients lived in resulted in needlessly high death rates.²³ There is no mention or indication of the brutal treatments patients often endured in these institutions, such as electroshock therapy, insulin-induced coma, or restraints like straitjackets or being chained to beds for extended periods. When Rider asks a nurse about the patient’s turn-out rate in the film, the nurse replies simply, “we have had some successes. It depends on the patient’s willingness to cooperate.”²⁴ At one point, Rider looks over a man lying in bed who appears to be asleep or may have received the insulin-induced coma treatment, which gained traction in the 1930s, but the scene is open for the audience’s interpretation.²⁵ Later, Rider asks Wain about his experience at

²² Developed by Sir Francis Galton (1822–1911), eugenics became a popular field in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries that examined how to arrange reproduction among humans to increase the occurrence of hereditary traits deemed desirable by society. Disturbingly based on racial biases and other biases that affected people of color, women, and those with disabilities, eugenics became increasingly discredited for being unscientific. Sarah F. Rose, *No Right to be Idle: The Invention of Disability, 1840-1930s* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2017), 50.

²³ Rose, 83, 85.

²⁴ *The Electrical Life of Louis Wain*, 1:34:48 to 1:34:54.

²⁵ The insulin-induced coma treatment was developed by Dr. Manfred Saket (1900–1957) from the University of Neuropsychiatric Clinic in Vienna. After conducting experiments with animals in his kitchen for years, he was granted access to research further in 1933 at the university and began publishing in 1934. The treatment was believed to help with several mental conditions including schizophrenia. Kingsley Jones, “Insulin Coma Therapy in

Springfield, saying, “Do you like it here, Mr. Wain?,” to which Wain woefully responds, “There are no cats. I cannot see... outside.”²⁶ Then, the scene immediately switches to show groups of people rallying support for the Louis Wain Fund, and then to a neatly groomed Wain painting by a window at a new facility before deciding to take a walk outside on the grounds.

For several decades, scholars and scientists have pondered if Wain truly had schizophrenia or if it was another condition. The film reflects this by never mentioning or showing Wain being diagnosed with schizophrenia specifically. Instead, the film focuses on his declining mental state without attributing it to a specific disorder. Unlike his sister Maria, Wain never concretely demonstrated the symptoms associated with schizophrenia. In 2001, psychiatrist Michael Fitzgerald argued Wain most likely had Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) rather than schizophrenia. According to Fitzgerald:

He did not show deterioration in his skill as a painter and this remained with him towards the end of his life. There is absolutely no evidence that “his pictures show a visual representation of the progression of his schizophrenia.” He did go through a paranoid psychotic period just like Isaac Newton but the fundamental diagnosis was Asperger’s syndrome. In adult psychiatry Asperger’s syndrome is very commonly confused with schizophrenia.²⁷

Similarly, art curator, Patricia Addridge, claims that while Wain’s style did change drastically, like many famous artists, his skill at

Schizophrenia,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* Vol. 93, no. 3 (2000): 147–49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/014107680009300313>.

²⁶ *The Electrical Life of Louis Wain*, 1:36:18 to 1:36:28.

²⁷ Michael Fitzgerald, “Louis Wain and Asperger’s Syndrome,” *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine* Vol. 19, no. 3 (2002): 101–10, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0790966700007217>.

the craft never diminished. If Wain did have schizophrenia, his quality of work would have decreased, but his later kaleidoscope cats continued to show artistic mastery in symmetry and approach.²⁸

However, there has also been a long-held association of cats with schizophrenia, and the correlation has been substantial enough to continue its research today. Bacteria from “cat-scratch fever” arguably plays a role in the development of schizophrenia.²⁹ However, with only one percent of the American and European population having schizophrenia (in correlation to the high number of cat-owners), the relationship between the neurological condition is more likely linked to the bacteria fleas and lice carry rather than cats themselves.³⁰ A research study from 2021 found that *Bartonella* bacteria can infect the blood of people diagnosed with schizophrenia and schizoaffective disorder. In their test group, seventy percent of their patients’ blood contained *Bartonella* compared to only one percent of their control group undiagnosed with schizophrenia.³¹ According to the study from North Carolina State University:

²⁸ Fitzgerald, “Louis Wain and Asperger’s Syndrome,” 101–101.

²⁹ A Fasseeh, B Németh, A Molnár, F-U Fricke, M Horváth, K Kóczyán, Á Götze, Z Kaló, “A systematic review of the indirect costs of schizophrenia in Europe,” *European Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 28, Issue 6 (2018): 1043–1049, <https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/cky231>; “Schizophrenia – Fact Sheet,” Treatment Advocacy Center, accessed May 4, 2022, <https://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/evidence-and-research/learn-more-about/25-schizophrenia-fact-sheet#:~:text=Schizophrenia%20is%20a%20chronic%20and%20severe%20neurological%20brain%20disorder%20estimated,untreated%20in%20any%20given%20year>.

³⁰ A Fasseeh, B Németh, A Molnár, F-U Fricke, M Horváth, K Kóczyán, Á Götze, Z Kaló, “A systematic review of the indirect costs of schizophrenia in Europe,” 1043–1049; “Schizophrenia – Fact Sheet”; “*Bartonella* Infection,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed May 10, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/bartonella/index.html>.

³¹ Tracy Peak, “Pilot Study Finds Evidence of *Bartonella* Infection in Schizophrenia Patients,” North Carolina State News Services, April 8, 2021,

There has been research suggesting that *cat ownership is associated with schizophrenia due to the zoonotic parasite Toxoplasma gondii, but to date there has been no conclusive evidence in support of a causative role for this parasite...Bartonella are bacteria historically associated with cat-scratch disease*, which until recently was thought to be solely a short-lived (or self-limiting) infection. Cats can become infected with Bartonella via exposure to fleas and potentially ticks, which are natural vectors of the bacteria. The cat is a host for at least three of the 40 known Bartonella species.³²

Nothing conclusive has yet to be determined and ascertaining what neurological condition Wain may have possessed is still unresolved.³³ Nevertheless, a conversation on mental health takes a prominent role in *The Electrical Life of Louis Wain*.

Wain's legacy as an eccentric and talented artist is memorialized in his works and the new film. Wain's art has been featured in various galleries including the art gallery at the Bethlem Museum of the Mind. His story is also one of the hardships of life and a mirror of the deficits of society when it comes to providing mental health care and poverty relief, which is adequately portrayed in *The Electrical Life of Louis Wain*. Cumberbatch skillfully portrays Wain as a struggling human being and talented artist, shifting between poignant scenes of utter desperation to inspiring clips of artistic devotion using Wain's

<https://cvm.ncsu.edu/pilot-study-finds-evidence-of-bartonella-infection-in-schizophrenia-patients/>.

³² Peak, "Pilot Study Finds Evidence of Bartonella Infection in Schizophrenia Patients," emphasis added.

³³ As of 2022, the CDC claims there is no evidence supporting that ticks carry Bartonella while fleas, lice, and sand flies are known carriers. "Bartonella Infection," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed May 10, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/bartonella/index.html>.

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two-handed painting technique. Thanks to Wain's unconventional way of seeing cats during a time when they were nothing more than pests in an alley, cats have found a way into our homes and our hearts.

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Author Bio

Brittany Mondragon graduated from California State University, San Bernardino in May 2022 with a master of arts degree in history. Backed with a master of science degree in geographic information systems from the University of Redlands, Brittany concentrates on issues revolving around environmental history, the history of science (specifically ethnobotany), colonialism, and trade. Her thesis explores the intersectionality of race, gender, and botany in the British colonial Atlantic during the eighteenth century by examining the appropriation and management of enslaved women, their uses of ethnobotanical medicines, and the power relations behind their depiction as witchcraft practitioners. She will start teaching at community colleges this year and possibly begin pursuing a doctoral degree in history. She currently works at Mt. San Jacinto Community College under the Professional Development department. Apart from scholarly pursuits, Brittany enjoys painting, hiking, gardening, playing board games, and learning the harp. She would like to thank Dr. Jeremy Murray and her editors for all of their support, guidance, and encouragement throughout the editing process.



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