Abstract
The paper focuses on the widespread resurgence of the animated GIF in the contemporary mediascape. This outdated digital format’s current significance seems to lie in its ability to resolve the age-old dualism between still and moving images. The GIF’s looping structure is analysed as symptomatic of many facets of today’s online environment in relation to issues of embodiment, indexicality and desire. The GIF is investigated as an object of longing, a source of mirth, and a tool used to enrich online interactions. Finally, the performance of the self that it entails is interpreted as centred on the category of affect.

Keywords
Animated GIF; still/moving images; fetishism; optical unconscious; emotions.

1. EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN

In the following pages, I will focus on the widespread diffusion of the animated GIF in the ever-evolving context of the contemporary on-line environment. GIF is an acronym that stands for Graphics Interchange Format: the format was first introduced by CompuServe Information Service back in 1987. Conceptually, it describes a fixed-sized graphical area (the ‘logical screen’) populated with one or more images. The feature of storing multiple images in one file has been used extensively since the early years of the web to produce simple animations aimed at livening up the static arrangement of websites. The GIF supports up to 8 bits per pixel for each image, allowing a single image to reference its own palette of 256 different colors. On the other hand, it doesn’t include any sound data, and is hence silent. Equally crucial to the enduring popularity of the format is its automatic looping. By endlessly repeating a very brief scrap of movement, the GIF produces a hypnotic commingling of instant and duration. It therefore makes for an enthralling area of investigation to consider issues of temporality and perception in what Francesco Casetti has dubbed the “post-media condition”.

Notwithstanding its moving images, the GIF retains a stillness of sorts. Both the shortness of its span and the insistent repetitiveness of its loop have the effect of underscoring the status of the fragment as such. Located on a somewhat paradoxical threshold between still and moving images, the animated GIF defies any clear-cut distinction

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between them. From a theoretical standpoint, it seems therefore to constitute conclusive proof of the necessity to reconsider the various visual media from an overarching angle, broadening our consideration of the issue of medium specificity.

While its origin may date back to a time as remote as the eighties, the GIF is nowadays enjoying a new youth. In 2012, the lexicographers of the Oxford American Dictionaries celebrated the format’s 25th anniversary by officially recognizing the term as both a noun and a verb, and by voting it their word of the year. This renewed importance was undoubtedly prompted by the widespread diffusion of smartphones: despite being relatively low-definition, the images offered by the GIF can be pleasantly enjoyed on the small screens of such mobile devices. And yet this GIF renaissance, while clearly due to the streamlined ductility of this kind of file, calls for a more detailed consideration. Particularly boosted by far-sighted platforms like Tumblr – which allotted it the space it deserved at its own inception in 2007 – the surprising ubiquity of this outdated, unsophisticated format in the current media environment seems to be due to its inherent affinity to the most crucial functioning mechanisms of the web. On the one hand, the GIF’s structure of compulsive repetitiveness mirrors the fundamental model of online content spreading, relying on the viral self-perpetuating motion of the meme. At the same time, the GIF’s obstinate reiteration appears to be the perfect embodiment of the Nietzschean idea of the eternal return, reflecting the format’s own refusal to disappear from the horizon.

Such a relevance of non-synchronous elements in contemporary online culture, and the enduring importance of historicity in the debate about media have been emphasized by the field of Media Archaeology. The GIF and its loop can for example be linked to 19th century optical toys relying on a similar paradoxical combination of movement and stasis. As Alessandra Chiarini proposes: “the GIF digitally reproduces the sudden starts and spasmodic pace of the animated figures portrayed in devices such as the phenakistoscope and the zoetrope, or the flickering effect produced by systems for reproducing photographic images in movement such as the flipbook and the mutoscope”. This kind of link between current media developments and previous moments of our collective experience of images is also one of the crucial elements of the emerging interdisciplinary field known as the Still/Moving studies. Combining the lesson of New Film History with the perspectives of Visual Studies, and interlacing art-historical considerations with the study of digital media, this field seeks to investigate the relationship between static and moving images, especially cinema and photography.

The assumption from which these studies move is that stressing the profound mutual interconnectedness of still and moving images is actually essential to both a full

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2 Facebook has viceversa shown a surprising tardiness in acknowledging the importance of GIFs, only enabling their incorporation in its pages in 2015.


comprehension of our multifaceted visual experience and the emancipation of the discussion from an excessively oculocentric paradigm. Underlining the dynamism inherent to photography and our experience of it, and vice versa highlighting the way moving images are haunted by the static element intrinsic to the operating principle of their apparatus, the Still/Moving field aims to trace alternative genealogies and counter-histories. The aforementioned optical toys must not be considered then as simple forerunners of cinema but as dispositifs producing an autonomous solution to the issues of absorption, spectacle and, most of all, bodily involvement with images. From this standpoint, their descendant, the GIF, appears to be the product of yet another moment in a long and complex history of images oscillating between movement and stasis.

While there are several different types of animated GIFs – from emoticons to illustrations, from frame-capture to mash-ups –, and while it may be argued that one of the most fascinating features of the GIF is precisely its abolition of the boundaries between different kinds of images in a general euphoria of movement, I will concentrate here on the relationship the GIF entertains with cinema and photography as an essential vantage point to ponder on its status in the contemporary online environment.

2. THE MOVING OBJECT

In the dialectic between stasis and movement, the latter term seems to have the upper hand in the current situation. According to Peppino Ortoleva, the online ‘iconosphere’ is dominated by movement on every level, and the static elements of vision seem to recede. The computer screen is acted upon by the mouse and the keyboard (i.e. the user’s own hands); the devices to access the online environment are increasingly transportable; the multiplicity of said devices facilitates our ‘migration’ from one to another in the span of a few seconds; and the smartphones follow a dynamic that has entirely accustomed us to turning the screen itself around, manipulating the device in order to better visualize the content we are interested in – mostly images. All of these elements confirm mobility and fluidity as the most important aspects of our contemporary apprehension of images. The structure of the GIF seems in itself to recall such an emphasis on ‘total mobilization’. Everything has to move in the online environment, as if single still images were no longer able to capture our attention.

Also intrinsic to the workings of the present mediascape is the questioning of any clear-cut distinction between vision and action. The role of our own body is absolutely

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7 The GIF shares many features with other, newer mobile apps (Vine, Video on Instagram and MixBit) that let the user record short videos on his/her smartphone (from 6 to 16 seconds) and share them instantly on social media. And yet, notwithstanding the numerous similarities – pertaining essentially to the tendency to transform each and every aspect of the contemporary world in partial images for immediate consumption and distribution –, the differences are equally crucial: first of all the reliance by these new apps on freshly-produced audiovisual material instead of pre-existing footage. The full examination of this topic exceeds the scope of the present essay.


9 As Fred Ritchin claims, “photography, as we have known it, is both ending and enlarging”: according to Ritchin the *hyper-photography* of the digital era can open itself up to different temporalities, moving away from the single image and its rhetoric of the decisive moment in favor of “a more elastic sense of time”. See F. Ritchin, *After Photography*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2009, 15, 142.
crucial to our current interaction with images, effectively blurring the lines between looking and touching, and emphasizing the haptic element involved in our gaze. Images are ever closer to us, ever easier to objectify. As dispositifs that enable us to carry a world wide web in our pockets, and to open up a whole environment with the touch of our hand, smartphones offer us a new negotiation between the conflicting elements of movement and objecthood, indicating a very significant shift.

To better understand the implications of this development it might be useful to go back to Christian Metz’s reflections about the different statuses of film and photography in the face of fetishism. According to Metz, while a photograph, given its average dimensions and its stillness, is easily transformed into a significant part-object that might assume the status of a fetish, film is much more difficult to turn into a fetish:

It is too big, it lasts too long, and it addresses too many sensorial channels at the same time to offer a credible unconscious equivalent of a lacking part-object. It does contain many potential part-objects (the different shots, the sounds, and so forth), but each of them disappears quickly after a moment of presence, whereas a fetish has to be kept, mastered, held, like the photograph in the pocket.

Film is, however, an extraordinary activator of fetishism, thanks to the paradoxical status of its images. Offering the spectator a space to delve into, only by looking from afar, the deep uncanniness of cinema lies in the presentification of an absence, in the creation of an alternative world. This world, always at hand yet out of reach, deludes the spectator with the promise of a complete, full access to meaning, bound to invariably and inevitably slip away of his/her hands in the end. Both the perception of the image’s ultimate ungraspability and the tension required to cover this lack are equally essential to the functioning of film.

Drastically shortening the distance between us and the image-populated screen, smartphone technology effectively disarticulates the state of affairs we just described (which had of course already been complicated by the arrival of television and home video). The recent resurgence of the GIF may then be seen as an expression of this radical turn: it represents the cultural attempt of our era to transform movement into a fetish, pushing it towards the status of object.

3. INDEXICALITY OF DIGITAL MEDIA

The forcefulness of the GIF seems to lie in its ability to provide a solution to the age-old dualism between cinema and photography. And yet the element of looping adds a further, crucial element to this discourse on movement objectified. The insistent looping of the fragment is so relentless it most evidently signals some kind of symptomatic excess. Such an insistence underlines, as a matter of fact, the importance of the element of indexicality that animates the current online environment.

I do not refer here to the same indexicality we talk about when discussing analogical images and their status as photochemical traces of the world of phenomena. Such a

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dimension may or may not be lost with the algorithmic turn – the theoretical dispute over this issue is still open and strongly debated. However, as Mary Ann Doane has shown, the definition of the index offered by Charles S. Peirce in his categorization of signs was actually twofold: apart from the index as trace (the footprint in the sand), Peirce also wrote about the index as deixis (the pointing finger). The usual discourses on indexicality rely on the first acceptation of the word, focusing on the image as a result of the imprinting of light on film. But cinema and photography are actually also indexical in the other sense, as they frame their object and enclose it inside the borders of the image in a manner akin to the pointing by the finger (though each does so in a very different way, of course). This wider acceptation of indexicality – to which painting belongs as well – is patently reinforced in the digital era. The loss of the index as trace corresponds to an increased importance of the index as deixis. Far from simply being a metaphor, the indexical quality of our current relationship with images actually represents the concrete, material way we interact with them. Images are ever more easily turned into objects we can work on with our fingers, and our longing for them becomes a concrete reaching out to touch them. They may not be directly linked to referential reality anymore, and yet as we navigate the online environment, we leave our fingerprints on them, marking the screen with the traces of our identity.

GIFs embody this emphasis on pointing in a particularly stunning manner: their persistent looping seems to synchronously signal both a euphoria for the new avenues of digital hapticity and an attempt to dispel a kind of anxiety about the impossibility of controlling the ever-evolving context of the world wide web. The attitude of the GIF towards the fragment it focuses on is remarkably ambivalent: on the one hand the fragment is granted an unprecedented attention and celebrated in its autonomous importance. On the other, the loop also works in the opposite direction, demolishing its own object by way of an obsessive and somewhat brutal pertinacity that brings to mind the way repetition compulsion is unavoidably linked, according to Freud, to the death drive. The GIF seems to elevate its fragment to the status of a fetish and at the same time to aim for its annihilation. In the remaining pages I would like to further investigate this deeply contradictory instance by taking a closer look at the world of GIFs.

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12 See E. Røssaak, “Algorithmic Culture: Beyond the Photo/Film Divide”, in Id., ed., Between Stillness and Motion, 187-203.


15 For a media-archaeological discussion of the relationship between screens and touch see W. Strauven, “The Observer’s Dilemma: To Touch or Not to Touch”, in Huhtamo, Parikka, eds., Media Archaeology, 148-163.

Without belying my previous observations, it may be useful to highlight how the loop should be primarily understood as a means for humor and irony. The GIF format seems particularly suitable for expressing nonsense scenarios, to intervene in the public debate with satirical commentary, and to produce downright funny effects. This kind of GIF most often relies on the human or animal body as a vehicle for laughter. Articulating a dynamic that balances the shock effect of the first time we see the fragment with the enhancement of the laughing potential that comes from the repetition of the amusing action, the GIF renews here the bodily comicality of slapstick comedies and candid cameras. Underlining the potential for hilarity some of the poses and actions we undertake have, it pokes fun at several ways of our being-in-the-world.

Working on our unending fascination with physiognomy, countenances, grimaces and bodily postures, GIFs give new relevance to the concept of the optical unconscious as developed by Walter Benjamin. It is a tendency we can also trace in pornographic GIFs, equally focused on details of movements of the human body that may otherwise go unnoticed in their specificity.

And yet, while the emphasis of the GIF on bodies and gestures clearly mirrors the physical dimension of our relationship with the digital image we analyzed earlier, there is also a further layer to this discourse. Most important among the several kinds of GIFs is the ‘reaction’ GIF. This is the format at its most utilitarian, employed as a means of self-fashioning and self-expression. ‘High Five’, ‘LOL’, ‘Shrugs’, ‘Thumbs Up’, ‘Eye Rolls’ and so on are inserted seamlessly into the texture of routine online interaction, to communicate concise opinions and replies while at the same time giving them a funny edge. The GIF is used here as a trenchant way to convey one’s mood, its functioning tantamount to that of the emoticons, as both partake to the same overwhelming tendency to replace language with images.

In the context of the online environment, these still/moving images are then created and/or appropriated by the users so that they can fill in for their own absent faces and bodies, in order to approximate their interaction with one another to the vividness of face to face communication. The unending archive of images and fragments of the internet works as the perfect reservoir to draw from to express ourselves and displaying a moving, embodied performance during our online sociality. GIFs become an extension of ourselves, a prosthesis of sorts.

It is not surprising that two young MIT researchers are working on this ability the GIF has to be a proxy for human presence at the opposite side of the equation, i.e. using them as tools to help machines understand feelings. By asking visitors of the website www.gif.gf to select which one of the two GIFs on display better depicts one particular emotion, the researchers aim at enabling computers to interact with their users’ emotional palette.

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18 Lev Manovich has talked about the database logic as essential to new media culture: Manovich, The Language of New Media, 194-212.


Whatever opinion we may have about the soundness of such an experiment, it proves particularly fascinating: not so much for the results it may attain, but in spite of itself, so to speak – for the tension it lays bare. What I mean is that this experiment does in effect reveal a discourse that is the exact opposite of the one it should supposedly bring forth: it ends up clashing with the fundamental impossibility to reducing images to language. Words, captions and taglines are often integral to the signification of the GIF, and yet ultimately its significance always lies elsewhere, in the ungraspable dimension of the image beyond language.

Taking a tour on a website like Giphy.com, the first search engine expressly created for GIFs, is a particularly instructive experience to reflect upon the problematic relationship the format – and of the online environment itself – has with language. The appearance of the site is particularly telling, as it attempts to rationalize the massive and chaotic amount of data by grouping it into discrete categories according to several tags every GIF is endowed with. These categories range from ‘actions’ to ‘decades’, from ‘transportation’ to ‘comics’, from ‘animals’ to ‘emotions’. If this initial groupings may already raise some eyebrows, their further subdivisions verge towards absolute arbitrariness. For example, why are ‘slow motion’ and ‘black and white’ considered as ‘adjectives’, and why are ‘vampires’ and ‘baby’ labeled as ‘interests’ (dozens of other examples are equally fitting)? This endeavor to put the frantic online world into some kind of order would probably be bound to fail anyway, but the slovenliness with which it is executed signals an utmost lack of interest in a serious taxonomy.

If it is true that the GIF proposes a new form of optical unconscious, it also shows a remarkable resistance to the emergence of that unconscious to the level of consciousness. The current online environment seems to claim the right to remain silent about its feelings. The emphasis of the GIF on the gesture – both as a means to access images and as their content – must then be seen as symptomatic of this refusal of language. As Giorgio Agamben writes:

The gesture is […] communication of a communicability. It has precisely nothing to say because what shows is the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality. However, because being-in-language is not something that could be said in sentences, the gesture is essentially always a gesture of not being able to figure something out in language; it is always a gag in the proper meaning of the term, indicating first of all something that could be put in your mouth to hinder speech.

5. FRAGMENTS OF DESIRE

The intimate relationship between the format and the ineffable dimension of our fascination for images is particularly evident in those GIFs expressly articulating a dynamic of longing for the image. The drive to seize a fragment of a film, holding it and repeating it incessantly is the work of the possessive spectator, as theorized by Laura Mulvey in relation to the introduction of electronic and then digital technologies for home cinema. The unique melodrama of abeyance and repetition performed by the GIF lends itself to these cinephiliac appropriations, allowing online subjects to grasp and share their own


significant moment from the pre-existing flow of images, without completely sacrificing its inherent dynamism. The bond the cinephile establishes with the image is a tie decidedly exceeding the narrative dimension, and involving what’s under, or beyond, the narration: “What cinephilia names is the moment when the contingent takes on meaning – a necessarily private, idiosyncratic meaning nevertheless characterized by the compulsion to share what is unsharable, inarticulable”23.

The disruption of the coherence of the filmic text by the cinephile has been metaphorized by Mulvey in terms of a sadistic enterprise, a violence acted upon the filmic text: “Film subjected to repetition and return, when viewed on new technologies, suffers from the violence caused by extracting a fragment from the whole that, as in a body, ‘wounds’ its integrity”. But in another metaphor, this process ‘unlocks’ the film fragment and opens it up to new kinds of relations and revelations”24. One may be tempted to metaphorize the relocation of cinema25 in the online context through the image of a dismembered corpse, its different parts quartered and scattered all around. But this rather gruesome image must be balanced by the element of joyful appropriation characterizing this operation, as these fragments become part of our performances of the self.

This ability of the GIF to purport a powerful condensation of the gestural pathos that underlies desire finds its uttermost embodiment in the realm of pornography. The pornographic GIF shares with the cinephilic one a drive to take hold of the passing moment as a source of pleasure. And in both instances the disarticulation of the narrative has a potentially liberating effect: disrupting the traditional progression in the representation of sexual act, the GIF manifests the possibility to transform any of its moments into the most significant one. While the masturbatory quality of the loop could not possibly be more literal than in this case, some porn GIFs enact a remapping of the trajectory to pleasure that allows us to catch a glimpse, albeit fleeting, of the polymorphous and fragmented nature of our desire.

6. PLAYING WITH AFFECT

Roland Barthes wrote about our fascination with images beyond the realm of language in relation to both photography and film. In the first instance, the French scholar described the punctum, the unforeseeable detail of the picture completely independent from the photographer’s intention and yet able to mobilize our utmost involvement, as “a power of expansion”. According to Barthes, the punctum, if present, has the effect of an explosion, suddenly turning the stillness of the photograph into an “intense immobility”. It reinforces the partial vision offered by the shot with a new openness able to disclose “the kairos of desire”26. Vice versa, Barthes also argued that the ineffable shade of our entrenchment with cinematic images – what he termed as the ‘third’ or obtuse meaning – can only be grasped, quite paradoxically, in the film still. Only the frame caption offers us, according to Barthes, “the inside of the fragment”, that “simultaneously emphatic and elliptic”27 accent that is the true essence of the filmic. In Barthes’ discus-

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sion there seems to be a constant slippage of meaning through the bodies of images, as if the key to our relation to them were only to be clutched through an endless play going back and forth between stasis and movement.

This quest for an object that cannot be actually pinned down, so aptly synthesized by the GIF, is a quest for affect. With this term Brian Massumi designates those intense sensorial feelings that cannot be verbalized, underlining their distinction from the more easily definable nature of emotions. It is the sensation of movement in affect that always places it outside of the scope of the captured state, as affect always moves on. Given its peculiarly ambiguous relationship with stillness and movement, the GIF may then be said to display a markedly affective structure.

According to Janet Harbord, affect is the crucial feature of the contemporary multimedia environment, an environment that could be conceptualized as a wide-ranging and multi-layered affective training camp, essentially because of the constant interaction it entails between human subjects and the non-human dimension. The impossibility to name the affect corresponds to an encounter with the unfathomable quality of our own identity, but also with the profound otherness of technological objects. Mark Hansen has underlined how this dimension of our relationship with images, while already important in the analog era, gained a new and different relevance after the algorithmic divide. With its renegotiation of the interaction between bodily experience and technological processes, digital media propose a new materiality centered on affect and an affective temporality. Eivind Rossaak, drawing on Hansen’s observations, suggests that we are now dealing with “a new technicity of the image” whose specificity lies in its exposing “time as a non-human nervous system.” The loop of the GIF may then be seen as an affective and effective signal of the existence of a temporality specific to the online environment, centered on automatism, and autonomous from our subjective perception. This is most evident when we happen to start looking at a GIF in medias res, and we don’t understand what’s going on in the image or where the depicted movement starts.

Though deeply uncanny, this temporality is at the same time always ready to be used as a diversion, as if the GIF were a toy, instantaneously ready to be picked up and employed. The GIF seems then to confirm the tendency of characterizing the digital environment as a place in which we are constantly able to play, since play has the unique ability to help us negotiate between the desire to plunge into the flow of life and the drive to contain said flow through fixed forms. The name of the most popular website for creating GIFs online, www.Makagif.com, seems to purposely recall the phrase: make a wish. The GIF seems to present us with an opportunity, however feeble, to see our desires and our identities magically appear before us in a still yet moving form.

31 Rossaak, “Algorithmic Culture”, 199.