Chapter 12
Gif as a Narrative Tool

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ABSTRACT

This chapter centres around a new type of creative and artistic expression, namely the gif. Positioned somewhere between an image and a video, the gif provides an interesting sense of narrative, since it presents itself on a never-ending loop. Although this type of moving image is currently associated with contemporary social media and the internet, its roots go back to the beginning of cinematic history, when the first recorded moving images were displayed repeatedly in from of the viewer. As such, starting from these cinematic roots, the present chapter will deal with the intricacies of the gif's narrative pattern and the status of art on the internet, before delving into the analysis of a series of gifs which were part of an art exhibition.

INTRODUCTION

To narrate means to show, to make known, to mean. This requires time, perception and meaning. The instant makes narrative impossible, since it itself is subjective. It becomes almost impossible to propose a zero degree of narrativity since subjectivity can use affective memory to create a narrative from any element. However, narrativity is more correlated to representation: the less significant elements, the more difficult it is to create a logical sequence. Even if the narrative does not develop in time, in duration, it can exist in space, on the surface of the work.

In the 19th century, with the increasing research in perceptual processes, many optical devices were created and displayed before the public. Because such a device presented a few pictures at its core, it usually stuck to basic questions of movement, without a narrative concern. Despite a link between cinema and these devices, their kinetic characteristics were denied and banned from history, probably due to the narrative issue that cinema embraced soon after. This transformation from cyclical to linear, supported with films, led to a change in production and narratives. The very notion of narrative comes into discussion with a constant return and in relation with micro duration. This attraction cinema basically used a small movement repetition mechanism.

The repetition these devices proposed often works as a break in the fourth dramatic wall, where the narrative itself is exposed, like a metanarrative. It is possible to refer to a greater intention of repetition, which is to turn attention to the mechanism. Once the image is already seen and memorized, the observer is lost in other ramblings or contemplations. It can be an internalized reflection-trance; it can be an external reflection, directed to other things that affect you; or directed to the mechanism and its functioning, intra-object. This thought in the device comes from the metalanguage often operated by the *mise en abyme*, which refers to the total form, or to the internalization mechanism of the form, namely to the pondering about why and how the idea was inserted there. From that point on, the viewer's thought goes to the way the device works, which will be the last step of the process; and since it is the most mechanistic / external / specialized, here the attention of the viewer is dispersed in the narrative.

BACKGROUND: NARRATIVE IN DIGITAL TIMES

According to Metz (1972), the narrative will be: a closed discourse that "unrealizes" a temporal sequence of events. In this case there is a notion of temporality, but also one of similarity in relation to reality (showing what happened or what was imagined), but above all, there is the "event". Something happens. Action. Movement. This action, if narrative, must comprise: a beginning and an end - that is, to be located in time, according to a reaction of happening.Time is understood twofold: there will be a time of the narrated and one of the described, or read; the "unrealization" of the story through its awareness (Gaudreault & Jost, 1990). But it is possible that this event develops not through the narrative, but through the sensoriality, the presentation of some mimetic element either lived or imagined. The memory in the body can make this a carrier of non-discursive narrative, and the same occurs with new digital technologies, when they recreate events and elements through graphics or sensory representations.

When the consumption of films is detached from an absolutely isolated absorbed visualization (in the dark, at 24 frames per second, in a narrative order and without outside interference), narrative cohesion starts to be pressured by external discourses. But digital spectatoriality also affects the internal structure of the narrative: sequences can be easily skipped or repeated (Mulvey, 2006, pp.27-28)

These moments are characterized by the cessation of the narrative, and can thus be called moments of pure spectacle, in which the reception persists only for the sensation, not for the legibility of the story. Thus, a materialized image is created, which will have more impact than the narrative structures that make up most films.

The more it coincides with the narrative motivation, the more the materiality of the image can go unnoticed; its excess, however, entails a suspension of the logical and causal plot, since the excess implies a gap or a delay in motivation. (Thompson, 1977, p.54)

When it comes to digital possibilities, perceiving or not the abandonment of the narrative by this materiality of the image, through the tools of pause, delay, overlap and repetition of images, will depend on the change in the state of attention or on some latent subjectivity in the viewer. These processes modify meanings and suggest a more reflective way of relating to images.

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