

Chapter 13

Digital Communication in a GIF Culture: The Graphic Interchange Format as a Behavioral Crossroad of Contemporary Paradigms

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ABSTRACT

GIF can be defined as a moving image characterized by brevity, repetition (loop), and an apparently low informative content; used as a pseudo-linguistic element, GIF is able to re-mediate a pre-existing text and to resemanticize it. The image originates from a process of decontextualization of an audiovisual element, quoting or referring to the original text (Uhlen) – taken from television, cinema, video art, or homemade. The fragment is then assigned with a new specific meaning, when it is used for a communicative purpose (especially on social networks), acting as a container of variable information designated to substitute articulate colloquial elements both emotional or explanatory. Through the analysis of the possible uses of GIF online, which exemplifies the actual concepts of post-truth and remix, the contribution aims to identify the communicative properties of the object, collecting cases within specific social platforms. GIF appears as a behavioral crossroad of contemporaneity, both in terms of re-use of creative contents and of demystification of current facts.

INTRODUCTION

GIF (*Graphic Interchange Format*) can be defined as a moving image characterized by brevity, repetition (loop) and an apparently low informative content; used as a pseudo-linguistic element, GIF is able to re-mediate a pre-existing text and to *resemanticize* it. In the first place, the image originates from a process of *decontextualization* of an audiovisual element, quoting or referring to the original audiovisual text itself (Uhlen, 2014) – which can be taken from several media: television, cinema, video art, home made. The

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audiovisual fragment is then assigned with a new specific meaning, when it is used for a communicative purpose (especially on the Social Networks), acting as a container of variable informations generally designated to substitute articulate colloquial elements both emotional or explanatory (Huber, 2015).

Background

GIF acts as the summation of the discourses about intermediality of cinema which, hybridizing with other media, as it happens for the audiovisual fragments stolen by a user with the purpose of assigning new meanings in an online conversation, changes its narrative function and becomes part of a more extended *storytelling* which is not played by fictional characters anymore, but by real actors (the users) using the original medium with new goals. From this perspective, GIFs could be seen as a new form of what Guy Debord called *détournement* (Debord, 1967), that is to say “the re-use of pre-existing artistic elements in a new ensemble” (Debord, 1959, p. 7), where the extracted fragment loses its own importance to be part of a new significant whole. The GIF follows the *détournement*’s fundamental rule that is “the loss of importance of each detoured autonomous element – which may go so far as to completely lose its original sense – and at the same time the organization of another meaningful ensemble that confers on each element its new scope and effect” (Debord, 1959). In Debord’s words “leaving the imbeciles to their slavish reference to ‘citations’” (Debord, 1959), we may think at GIF as what Maria Rosaria Dagostino instead calls *cit-action*, defining it as “an active crossreference for the construction of a new sense” (Dagostino, 2006, p.11), which applies independently from the origin of the raw material. Even when the frame is taken from a real life event – and not from audiovisual materials – we must rethink that excerpt as it was taken from a storytelling, which is longer than a TV episode or a movie since it refers to defined characters (the individuals) inside a context (their lives). Extrapolating and detouring frames from the real life, GIFs realize what the Situationists called *ultra-détournement*, that is, as Guy Debord and Gil J Wolman argued, “the tendencies for *détournement* to operate in everyday social life” (Debord, 1959, p. 7), where to gestures and words are given other meanings.

Then, independently from the origin of the detoured material, whether it comes from an audiovisual text or a real-life event, the emotional load is subjected to the *détournement* as much as the narrative and iconographic content. Notwithstanding, in some respect, especially speaking about carrying emotions, GIFs seem to exceed the *détournement*. In fact, when they pass from being part of a continuum (fictional or actual) to being a GIF properly defined, emotions are detoured indeed, but also re-mediated. In every remediation, the content, even the emotional one, adapts itself according to the features of the arrival medium: in the case of GIFs, it gains the brevity, circularity and the possibility of being an object in its own right typical of the looped structure. Therefore, the emotional load, remediated by the medium *GIF*, achieves rarefaction, abstracting itself from the emotions of the originally previous and following frames, so becoming expressive on its own. Taking into account these transformations, that is to say the passage of the frames from being emotionally dependent from the original context to the complete independence, GIFs seem to negate the rule according to which, as stated by Debord and Wolman, “the main impact of a *détournement* is directly related to the conscious or semiconscious recollection of the original contexts of the elements” (Debord, 1959). In fact, it is quite obvious that GIFs have an intense affective power even without this recollection. Then, GIFs are able to state a perfectly eligible emotion, independently from the images’ origin, recognisability and relevance. This is what makes GIF possibly definable as a para- or pseudo-linguistic element by itself.

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