

The Painting that Moves: the Internet Aesthetics and the Reception of GIFs

Abstract: The visual content is an important part of social media, combining several key functions: communication, protest, art. In spite of its limitations, GIF is a popular tool that uses different supports (films, photographs, paintings). In its creation, usage, and sharing of GIFs, people make active a veritable “practical aesthetics“. Also, GIFs bring into play the exemplification of the “remix culture“, the “participatory culture“ or even of the “Internet ugly aesthetic“. This paper focuses on the GIFs that (re)use famous paintings and on their reception in social media. The process of reception is a complex and creative form of production, in which the value of art is recognized in the same time with a subtle irony or even humour. This kind of GIFs may conduct to the (re)discovering of great pieces of art and culture, and also to their inclusion in everyday life, as a part of everyone experience. This process of democratization of art makes it also alive, as a movement of still and as a transformation of the artistic canon. The example of *The Scream* GIF illustrated some of the actual trends of its reception in social media.

Keywords: GIF, Internet’ aesthetics, visual content, reception, remix, repetition, movement, nostalgia, Edvard Munch, *The Scream*

The cultural implications of GIFs

For a long time, people have been fascinated with the images and with their motion. The use of still images in order to create movement was one of the dreams of the humankind, but “before photography was invented and subsequently used to make movies, cameraless devices such as zoetropes, thaumatropes, phenakistoscopes, and flip books gave life to drawings and photographs“ (Counts 2000, 357). After cinema and TV, the computer came into the scene as a powerful tool even for the celebrating of motion. Thus, GIF – Graphical Interchange Format – was created by CompuServe Inc. and is used intensively for integrating images into the web pages. GIFs may be still graphics, but also animated ones, created with software named GIF builders. In fact, animated GIFs are an electronic kind of flip books that produce the impression of a continuous movement. They are very popular on tumblrs and blogs, and not just because of the brevity of the

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format, but also because “it has an ethos, a utility, an evolving context, a set of aesthetics. GIFs are encountered not in theaters or in living rooms, but on networked screens that are physically private but socially public. They are not simply viewed; they are created, used, posted, collected, copied, modified, performed“ (Eppink 2014, 298). As Eppink pointed out, the history of GIF, with its obvious technical limitations, does not explain its success; it is shared as a form of identity, as an answer, as a substitute of non-verbal cues or “a cinema of affiliation“ (2014, 298). Its creator is not essentially important, being at least unmentioned, a situation that recalls Barthes’ ideas about author and its legitimate role.

GIFs are celebrating the technological format in capacity of an art form, delineating the “hyperaesthetics“ as a “dynamic aesthetics applied to dynamic arts. Hyperaesthetics requires theorization in real-time“ (Lunenfeld 2000, 173). The works of art created or simply mediated through the means of technology need the speed of hyperaesthetics in the quest of finding how technology affects the understanding of visual culture and of our world (Taylor 2004, 328-342). As Lunenfeld pointed out, “there is a world of technological wonder, where the equipment has such sheen that the aura of art pales in comparison“ (Lunenfeld 2000, 2). This recognition of the media support in the act of creating or presenting a GIF is, in my opinion, another exemplification of Bolter and Grusin’ concept of “remediation“ (1999). Thus, the capacities of the new medium are emphasized, in the same time with the use of other forms of older media: “In the logic of hypermediacy, the artist strives to make the viewer acknowledge the medium as a medium and to delight that acknowledgement“ (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 33). Thus, new media reorganize our perspective of earlier technological forms and also allow their creative reinsertion in new complex ways.

One of the aesthetic trends of the Internet is named “Internet Ugly“ that uses especially memetic content created by amateurs (for which the aesthetic is not a purposed goal) or by artists (that use it as a kind of “cultural dialect“ (Douglas 2014, 315)). It employs several sets of tools in order to beautify, muss, and communicate certain things about the user. One of its major characteristics is the authenticity, seen as a counter-value of the mainstream values such as purity or symmetry. It remains a creative choice that recognizes the user’s irony and internet savvy. Although Internet Ugly is not “the only core aesthetic of the internet, it is the one that best defines the internet against all other media. It is certainly the core aesthetic of memetic internet content. The ugliness of the amateur internet doesn’t destroy its credibility because it’s a byproduct of the medium’s advantages (speed and lack of gatekeepers), and even its visual accidents are prized by its most avid users and creators“ (Douglas 2014, 315). Thus, it distinguishes clearly between the opportunities offered by Internet and those offered by other media, such as TV. In this respect, Douglas considers the Internet

Ugly as the Internet's "folk art" (Douglas 2014, 336), with cultural and social implications that also shape the ways of conversation. Thus, Internet Ugly is "the aesthetic of the mundane conversation and idle doodlings that have always existed, but which the internet makes shareable by default" (Douglas 2014, 337). It comprises a set of users and communities values and sometimes it is used also for political or corporate objectives.

The pop-cultural GIFs are the manifestation of participatory culture, where the media recipient is no more a passive one, but an active generator of content. The participatory culture is one "in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content" (Jenkins 2006, 290). In this process, digital technologies provide a large tool box for exploration of many practices and styles, the user generated content being an important part of the cyberculture. In this variety of information, the remix is a key element of this culture that makes possible many activities, from copy – paste practices to politically practices. For Linda Huber, the GIF is "one particular phenomenon that exemplifies the power and the pervasive everydayness of remix. The gif is a very simple and accessible form of remix that draws directly on the power of mass media, but subverts it for extremely everyday kinds of creativity and expression" (Huber 2015). GIFs led to an entirely set of practices related to creation and consumption, pointed out the ascending importance of the visual content to new media, seen as being very well incorporated in the everyday life. As Highfield and Leaver think, "the contemporary visual social media landscape replete with GIFs, selfies, emoji, and more is the latest iteration of networked communication with a long-running theme: we have always found ways to be visual online" (Highfield and Leaver 2016, 48).

Hagman criticizes the idea that GIFs are the perfect instantiation of the contemporary culture of distraction, in which the abbreviation, the shortcut, the compression are some of their favorite tools. The social decrease of "temporal commitment" – significantly visible in the new forms of communication, such as Twitter – could integrate GIFs in this routine of speed. On the contrary, Hagman thinks that this perspective fails in detecting something important for the reception of GIF and of its popularity: GIF is "more a matter of creation than recycling. At the heart of this creative intervention lies a recognition of cinematic movement as a force of differentiation and metamorphosis" (Hagman 2012). Thus, GIF is a symptom of our times, but also a significant gesture that recalls in attention its dynamic and intertextuality.

The GIF reinforces the process of democratization by making use of pieces of films, ads, political speeches, awards shows, or photography and paintings, and thus redirecting the attention to the details. In this vein, the repetition is one of its key aspects, creating a sort of Benjamin's "room for play". But the GIF "employs repetition not as a principle of sameness but

as a principle of difference“ (Hagman 2012). The meaning of the repeated image is evacuated from the large meaning of the whole, and the temporal narrative can't be accomplished. The viewer is magnetized by the repetition in itself and not by the goal of making sense. The animated GIFs transform movement into a strange repetitive moment, into a metamorphosis of a singularity. They don't have a closure and, as suspended elements, they describe a perfect loop. Being decontextualized, the movement becomes powerful in transmitting new ideas and interpretations, emphasizing a certain gesture and the meaningful side of the human embodiment. In this vein, GIFs can be interpreted as an excess that denies the narrative: “the animated gifs that are encountered all over the internet very seldom tell a story: on the contrary they seize hold of those purely excessive moments that carry little to no narrative purpose“ (Hagman 2012). The logic of GIF is slightly different from the logic of the story with a defined path of meaning. The hypnosis of repetition accentuates the relevance of a separate frame without the prerequisite of searching the link with the rest. In Barthes' terms, GIFs contain a “third meaning“, generally accessible through a fragment which carries an emotion.

The phenomenon of GIF has been discussed also in the newspapers, indicating its dissemination and its vogue in the large public. For instance, Alex Williams noted that GIFs are the digital accessory of the moment, being positioned between the still and the moving image. In this respect, “the Internet, it seems, has found its version of vinyl chic“ (Williams 2013), revitalizing nostalgia for earlier technological forms, such as the early cinema or even the animism. The cycle of formats and devices and the speed of their development recall techno-nostalgic flashbacks. The older forms are surrounded by an inexpugnable aura of emotions, a relic of the past times. Nick Douglas pointed out that “as in the offline world, this nostalgia cycle will likely continue as each generation rediscovers the tools of its youth and replicates their effects with new tools. Internet creators use nostalgia, constricted platforms, and trickled-down professional tools to invent unintended uses for tools, redevelop forgotten methods, and create internet culture outside the ‘best practices’ of professionals working with cutting-edge tools. The results are passed around and further uglified or beautified in a perpetual cycle“ (Douglas 2014, 334). Even the old types of Internet Ugly may come back through the means of “nostalgic affectation“.

For Hampus Hagman, GIFs represent a commitment to cinema in the very act of altering the original and differentiating from it. The fascination for movement (seen as the key element of cinema) puts GIF near the early cinema. In this respect, following Agamben's ideas, GIFs can be conceived as a “form of gesture“, a “manifestation of pure mediality“ (Hagman 2012). Thus, “the main difference from earlier cinema is that the gif makes our fascination with movement communicable and shareable, rather than just

being the source of private consumption“ (Hagman 2012). For Uhlin (2014), GIF recalls not only the liberator potential of early cinema, but also it is linked with gaming. GIF animations are seen as “a mode of play with moving images“ (Uhlin 2014, 517), being characterized by repletion, citationality, and deployment of gesture. Their spectator is considered “dispossessive“, since “is not interested in claiming the image for her own. Instead, she transforms the image into an object of play, available to be used by anyone and whose meaning is partly dependent on these uses, just as play is conducted through the consent of the players“ (Uhlin 2014, 524). This mode of play has its own independence and the creation and circulation of many GIFs represent a turning away from the mainstream. Being more than wordplay, Uhlin situated GIF in a gift economy, typical for the Internet culture. The ludic aspect is born also from this separation of GIFs from the logic of commodity and from the appropriation with the sharing economy of the cyberspace. Thus, GIFs put to the issue some traditional dichotomies, such as art – commerce or play – work, high culture – low culture.

The visual is most of the time in tandem with the textual; reaction GIFs that repeat a moment of dialogue, a gesture, a body position are inserted in communication as a response to other posts. What is interesting for that function is its efficacy, whether the communicators know or not what is the source of the GIF (the movie, the painting, the show, and so on). Of course, in the case when the initial source is recognized, the recipient will go on a more profound level of meaning. The procedures of framing, deconstruction, reuse, parody are blurring the authority of the original and maintain a fruitful conversation with the postmodern stances.

Tolins and Samermit conceive GIFs as embodied enactments in text-mediated communication, since they can be used in many different modalities: as emotional responses, as emphasis of a certain point, or as “co-text demonstrations of affect and action“ (Tolins and Samermit 2016, 75). A particularity of those GIFs is that they are a kind of simulacrum of face-to-face communication. Thus, they are meant to substitute emotions or actions that in offline do not need any kind of demonstration. They also display gestures, behaviours, facial expressions, as a general insertion of a well-known philosophical secundarity – the body – in the conversation. What is interesting is the fact that they use the bodies of other people in order to underline our own bodily stances: “the use of animated images, displaying the bodily and facial expressive behaviors of others, acts as a novel form of demonstration within technologically mediated dialogue. In producing the actions of others as demonstrations attributable to oneself, the use of GIFs can be analyzed as a novel form of reenactment, making embodied resources available to the texters to create meaning in a way that was previously limited“ (Tolins and Samermit 2016, 87). Thus, the content

of other established forms of art or communication are freely used as a tool for interpersonal conversation and as a form of personal expression (Huber 2015). GIFs differ from emoticons by the procedure of reproducing recordings of actions realized before by another source. Thus, “GIFs offer opportunities to isolate emotions, underline humour, and break sequences into key moments“ (Highfield and Leaver 2016, 55). In this respect, they provide “visual depiction of affect“ (Tolins and Samermit 2016, 83) and also a type of addressee response.

Moreover, the reaction GIF leans on the distance between the source and the actual context of its use. This situation instantiates once more the idea of “context collapse“ that was much discussed in new media studies. Huber remarks that “this ironic play between different levels of meaning, both from the original source material and the new context into which it is being used, requires a particular kind of expertise“ (2015). The expertise is multi-stratified, at the level of cultural literacy, at the level of remix, at the technologic level, and at the conceptual one. Even if the reaction GIF is not seen as an “objet d’art“, but as an instrument for online communication, and in this respect it needs only much “smaller remix-acts“, all the same it supposes the control of the practices that surround its creation, dissemination, and reception. Thus, we have to notice that “in the reaction gif we see that remix not only pervades through our culture, but has infiltrated into our first and most basic form of media: language“ (Huber 2015).

The reception of *The Scream* GIFs

The most part of the literature dealt with the analysis of GIFs that re-use frames from movies or TV shows. My preoccupation is to investigate the reception of GIFs that have as their source famous paintings. We all know, for instance, the GIFs with *Mona Lisa* (for instance, <https://www.tumblr.com/search/mona%20lisa%20gif>) that rolls the eyes and performs different facial expressions, including scary hypostases. Kajetan Obarski (<http://kiszkiloszki.tumblr.com/>) made animated GIFs based on famous paintings (Goya, Magritte, Leonardo da Vinci and so on) that are altered by the insertion of cybercultural tropes. These GIFs can be described as “darkly absurd“ (Dunne 2016) and present, for example, how Leonardo da Vinci (*Lady with an Ermine*) uses Photoshop in order to restyle his Lady’s ermine into a giraffe, how the “raining men“ from Magritte’s *Golconda* are torn into bloodily pieces, alerting the newscasters, or how van Gogh (*Self-portrait with Bandaged Ear*) receives as gift a pair of blue headphones with a bow. The aversion to the art canons and mainstream interpretations are obvious and the mocking of them is included into a larger keeping the receiver guessing about the end.

On the one hand, the play with consecrated works of art is a suggestive strategy in order to destabilize the canon and to introduce the irony and the parody in the scene. On the other hand, even if the “treatment“ of these pieces of art is not one of piety and respect, the introduction of them in the speedy feed of social media represents a step onward in the process of familiarization with the art world. Also, these great works are not anymore at distance, in an intangible space with particular rules, but they are positioned in the very ordinary and mundane everyday life. All the same, GIFs have been present in the art galleries of New York, Berlin, and also have brought together people at dedicated festivals.

The citationality involved by the GIF contains an intrinsic recognition of the source and in this vein we can affirm the capacity of rediscovering the art through GIFs. Thus, the GIFs can play the role of the trigger in view of accessing the vast path of deciphering and understanding the cultural and artistic suppositions of an art work. The subsequent subverting and distorting of the original can offer a sense of freedom for both the creator of GIF and its receiver. Of course, these strategies (irony, parody, mocking) may be interpreted as diminishing the reception of the original work of art or as a form of vulgarization or, putting it crudely, as bad taste.

As an example, I tried to perceive the reception of *The Scream* GIFs and to analyze the dimensions of their “practical aesthetics“. This concept represents “the ways in which people, in ordinary circumstances, discriminate, evaluate, and experience objects and artifacts in museums and galleries“ (Heath and vom Lehn 2004, 44). For the purposes of my paper, I adapted this term in order to include also the aesthetic experiences produced outside the walls of the museum. It is important to stress the fact that the public reception of GIFs is not just an act of passive spectatorship (see the concept of “dispossessive spectator“ at Graig Uhlin (2014)), but a very active one. Moreover, it supposes a creative act of production. The original is transformed in different ways and used to express an emotion, an idea, or simply an answer to an interlocutor.

The Scream transmits per se a very eloquent and powerful message, so its takeover was at hand. In this respect, we notice that Edvard Munch’s painting lends oneself at many interpretations, such as the short video made by the Romanian animator Sebastian Cosor (Springer 2015), that brought together different temporalities and media supports: *The Scream* and Pink Floyd’s *The Great Gig in the Sky*.

The conversation between various types of art is, anyhow, totally inscribed in the history of this painting. Thus, the version in pastel-on-cardboard from 1895 (there are four versions of this painting and many other lithographs) is “a singular instance of a modern painter bringing a poem he wrote into direct physical relationship with his artwork. To fit the

space at the bottom of the frame while preserving his line breaks, Munch recorded the poem in two columns separated by a vertical line.

“I was walking along the road with two friends
The Sun was setting – the Sky turned blood-red.
And I felt a wave of Sadness – I paused
tired to Death – Above the blue-black
Fjord and City Blood and Flaming tongues hovered
My friends walked on – I stayed
behind – quaking with Angst – I
felt the great Scream in Nature“ (Ahn 2012).

Even if this heart rending poem originated into 1892 entry diary, the differences between these two versions reveal the expressionist power of the painter. As Sue Prideaux remarks, Munch saw his work as a confession realized through the pieces of his paintings, marked with his ambition that “by looking inside himself he would be capable of building an image of eternal truth from the transitory and particular laboratory of his own life’s experiences“ (Prideaux 2007, vii). This quest was accomplished, philosophers, psychologist or men of letters attesting the veracity of the ideas expressed through his works.

His love for reading and books seemed to underlie in part the links between several philosophical ideas and the interpretation of his paintings. Thus, for instance, the link with Schopenhauer’s concept of dread was denied by Munch, as the later made contact with Schopenhauer’ philosophy subsequently. The proximity with Nietzsche’s ideas was also brought to the fore in *The Scream*’ interpretations: “if every self-portrait is a portrait of the soul to some degrees, *The Scream* was the portrait of the soul stripped as far from the visible as possible – the image on the reverse, the hidden side of the eyeball as Munch looked into himself. ‘We paint souls’. It has come to be seen as a painting of the dilemma of modern man, a visualization of Nietzsche’s cry, ‘God is dead, and we have nothing to replace him’.“ (Prideaux 2007, 151)

Far from suggesting an interpretation of this masterpiece, we have to observe that its expressive force and its power to speak general truths of humankind made it the perfect “candidate“ for relapses and “replays“. The animated GIFs seems to “give voice“ to the scream, but not through audio meanings, but through movement. Even if Tumblr is one of the favourite “spaces“ for GIFs, I chose to observe the ways in which *The Scream* was received on Facebook, because of its large use. Thus, for instance, a “Daily Art“ post from 25 May 2016 received 333 appreciations, 81 shares, and 4 comments, an “Abyss of the Mind“ post from 15 January 2016 has 116 likes, 3 comments, and 41 shares, and the “Incredible Art Department“ post from 25 October 2015 has 49 likes, 4 comments, and 86 shares.

The “Art People Gallery“ post from 24 May 2015 (<https://www.facebook.com/artpeople1/?fref=nf>) received 5.5K of likes, 1.1 K of shares, and 131 comments. Hereinafter I will briefly analyze these comments, because they are numerous and diverse, and may delineate some patterns of reception. The comments can be classified in three main categories: comments that express the fascination and admiration for the painting (and subsidiary for GIF), comments that express the disturbing feelings and a certain psychological discomfort done by the artistic reception, and comments that do not advance appreciations, but indicate associations with other works.

In the first category, the prevailing words are: “magic of the gothic“, “great idea“, “I love it“, “I like it“, “awesome“, “cute“, “great“, “cool“, “epic“, “amazing“, “good“. Two posts are directly related to the GIF itself: “great idea for an animated movie“ and “looks better than the real thing (the most awful painting ever)“.

In the second category are appreciations such as: “creepy“, “disturbing“, “nightmares“, “strange“, “scary“, “grotesque“, “dramatic“, “freaky“. Also, opposite constructions such as: “cool and creepy in the same time“, or “beautifully disturbing“ may indicate a multi-layered perception of this GIF.

In the third category are several references to other works (Sebastian Cosor’ movie, an art work by Prithviraj Maallick and even Gollum) or to the personal mood of that moment (“looks how I feel“). Only one comment expresses the indifference: “not impressed at all“.

Also, GIFs with *The Scream* were posted by users as a reaction after personal problems or after some political news (a user, DH, noted: “After watching the debates last night“ and then posted this GIF). In this vein, the GIF is a visual modality to emphasize a variety of states (despair, discontent, rampage, anxiety or pain for the most part).

What is interesting to remark is the technologic simplicity of this GIF. If other GIFs that have as source famous paintings interfere significantly with their message or structure, as an act of disobedience from the canon, *The Scream* GIFs are made just to accentuate the intensity of the painting through movement and through the procedure of “zooming“ and on-coming. The movement of the character and also that of the surrounding nature underline the angst, the concentric lines created through the motion producing the sensation of a dead end.

Conclusions

In spite of its limitations, GIFs are still in the headlines, emphasizing the users’ enjoyment of visual content. In the processes of creation, sharing, and reception of GIFs, people put to work a veritable “practical aesthetics“. Also, GIFs can be conceived as examples of the “remix culture“, the

“participatory culture“ or even of the “Internet ugly aesthetic“. This paper focused on the GIFs that (re)use famous paintings and on their reception in social media (with a special attention to *The Scream*). These GIFs can be posted as such, because they can be funny, provocative, and anti-canon. Moreover, they send a powerful message and they also can be used as reaction GIFs. They supplement the lack of online communication by pointing out ideas and emotions. They also emphasize a certain point of view, having on their side the power of visuality. Nevertheless, their meanings are multi-stratified and the receiver can get one or many senses, based on her familiarity with the art world. If the receiver is a versant one, she can access the deeper meanings and the intertextual layers.

Anyhow, the reception of GIFs is, in fact, a complex and creative process, in which the cultural and artistic values are recognized frequently in an ironic, parodic or humorous manner. This kind of GIFs may also help us discover great pieces of art and culture, and also help us include them in our everyday life, as a part of our immediate, yet meaningful experience.

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Webography

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