

How to Steal an Emotion: Memetic GIF as (Re)Mediation of Emotional Contents

Inside GIF

Our paper will try to focus the dynamics that make GIFs a tool through which the users can immediately and easily communicate an emotional state, showing more than describing it, in a kind of overturned *ekphrasis*.

As argued by Maria Rosaria Dagostino, “the accumulation of fragments is not made to transform images into a cathedral of ghosts, but in a receptacle of possibilities of meaning”.¹ **End of quote** Our purpose, here, is to put the attention on the emotional connotations of this “receptacle”, displaying how GIFs can steal the frame’s emotional load and become a vehicle to express affective inclinations.

Extrapolating a textual content, the users take also its specific emotion, which becomes an additional value once it is associated to the personal emotional state the user wants to share, then representing an ideal tool to create a community.

The speech aims to demonstrate how the communicative efficiency of the GIF is formally intrinsic, starting from its inner conformation.

In order to construct a GIF, two are the essential operations, definable as decontextualization and appropriation.

During the process of decontextualization, a selected frame is cut-off from its legitimate space-temporal continuum and context, creating then a fresh meaningful item, physically and semantically autonomous. Even if the frame, pulled-out and looped – hence actually transformed in a GIF – becomes a closed entity, frozen in its own repetitiveness, circularity and brevity, it is quite polysemous and open to interpretations.

During the process of appropriation, this looted fragment, stopped in a palindrome and objectified in a stable and fixed conformation by the format ‘dot-GIF’, is inserted by users in a particular context, then investing it with a new sense, more or less akin to the previous one. In this way, thanks to the tie-up between the original semantic and emotional charge of the fragments, and their insertion into a new situation, GIFs re-allocate their meanings, strengthening or reforming them, and create a short-circuit between the starting material and the fruition context.

¹ Dagostino Maria Rosaria, *Cito dunque creo*, p. 11

From this perspective, GIFs could be seen as a new form of what Guy Debord called *Détournement*, that is to say “the reuse of pre-existing artistic elements in a new ensemble”², **End of quote** 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, as written by the Situationist³ in 1959, is, **quoting** “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”. **End of quote**

In Debord ‘s words, “leaving the imbeciles to their slavish reference to “citations”, **End of quote** we must think a GIF as what Maria Rosaria Dagostino instead calls ‘cit-action’, defining it as “an active cross-reference for the construction of a new sense”, **End of quote** 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” **End of quote**, 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 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 completely independence, GIFs seems to

² International situationist online, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline///si/definitions.html>

³ written on n. 3 of the *Internationale Situartionniste review*, dated 1959.

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”⁴. **End of quote** In fact, it is quite obvious that GIFs have an intense affective power even without this recollection.

Take for example three GIFs used to comment on Twitter the presidential debates Trump-Clinton:

1- <https://twitter.com/TheFix/status/789090575249125376> (trump)

In the first one, the recognisability of the original context is fundamental for the communicative capacity of the GIF, because of its being directly tied-up with the context of fruition.

2- <https://twitter.com/sadydoyle/status/780596513550589952>

In the second case, we don't have this connection, but the original locus where the GIF comes from is quite identifiable (in this case, the TV series *Game of Thrones*). The user here exploits the recognisability of the raw material and he detours it, in order to create the short-circuit mentioned above.

3- <https://twitter.com/TrumpSniff/status/780599494245134337>

In the last one, instead, we are consciously or semiconsciously unable to determine the original source and its context, and nevertheless it connects to deep layers of the cultural memory shared by a community: even if we don't grasp the reference, we can interpret it and use it to communicate.

Then, GIFs are able to state a perfectly eligible emotion, independently from the images' origin, recognisability and relevance.

Sally McKey⁵ associates GIFs to the cinematographic close-up which, in Mieke Bal's words “immediately cancels out the whole that precedes it, leaving us (...) alone with a relationship to the image that is pure affect.”⁶ **End of quote** Speaking in terms of the emotional load, this “pure affect” expressed by GIFs, their being free from the bond of the original context and their being at the

4 The User's guide to detournement, orig. “Mode d'emploi du détournement” originally appeared in the Belgian surrealist journal *Les Lèvres Nues* #8 (May 1956). This translation by Ken Knabb is from the *Situationist International Anthology* (Revised and Expanded Edition, 2006).

5 Sally McKey, *The Affect of Animated GIFs* (Tom Moody, Petra Cortright, Lorna Mills), 2009, su Art&Education

6 Mieke Bal, “Exhibition as Film,” in *Exhibition Experiments*, Sharon Macdonald and Paul Basu, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007) p.81).

mercy of users' choices and purposes, in a certain way, make them quite similar to Duchamp's Ready-Made.

As Marco Senaldi argues, ready-mades are “everyday objects covered of artistic significance thanks to the simple choice of the artist”. **End of quote** Detouring this sentence, GIFs could be defined as “everyday images covered of communicative and emotional significance thanks to the simple choice of the user”. In fact, when the user inserts a GIF in a conversation, he bends the manifold emotional values that the ‘pure affect’ may include to his communicative purposes. For its part, thanks to the disconnection between the GIF and its original context, the ‘pure affect’ never consumes itself, always being ready to be recycled and reinvested with new meanings.

This affective isolation and completeness confers to GIF a *memetic* connotation. The GIF is, in fact, as much as a meme, a “virally-transmitted cultural symbol or social idea”,⁷ which people identify with and share, spread from person to person within a culture.

Hence, GIFs are ‘emotional, and memetic ready-mades’: versatile objects immediately usable that, after the arbitrary work of decontextualization and appropriation made by users, become popular and easily spreadable in different contexts, adapting themselves, and their emotional load, while are replicated and imitated. GIFs show what Carlo Martino, apropos of ready-made, calls “the infinite possibilities of the originals”: extrapolating a frame, we extract its meanings and emotions, which can be used and combined in infinite ways and contexts to express, within a community, a variety of states of mind and feelings.

Outside GIF

The easily spreadable GIF, thanks to its memetic connotation, can be seen as the emblem of a culture defined by Lawrence Lessig as Read/Write which, in contrast with the Read Only culture that characterized the Twentieth Century – upon which most of the Copyright laws have been drafted – proposes again forms of creativity and communication based on the Remix. We can define Remix as the possibility to use texts assimilated by people with the aim of creating new contents that do not only quote the previous ones, but propose these originated excerpts as original elements or, more precisely, creatively legalizing the act of theft, then surpassing the mere quoting act.

Similarly this communicative capability seems intrinsic in the GIF's principles of decontextualization and significance appropriation.

⁷ Paul Gil, lifewire,

Our thesis is that these two processes are both moved by the user's willingness or need of emotions' communication (which etymologically derives from the latin *communico*, meaning “to put something into communion or harmony”). That is to say that, regardless the initial user's intent, both quoting or stealing a text, the same user tends to activate the GIF as a mean of aggregation of identities through those emotions that are connectable to it.

To prove this thesis I bring to your attention some cases where GIF can be recognized as a mean for communication and therefore as an emotional tool for the creation of a community. To do so, I mostly focused on the use of GIFs on the social network Twitter, since it is here that GIFs maybe better fullfils with a communicative purpose.

We can discern, in the first place, two distinct possibilities of GIF, one tending to the concept of quote, the other to the concept of theft and to détournement as properly defined, and as a consequence of what my colleague said before.

- The **quoting** GIF happens when the new significance defined by the user strengthens the original narrative significance, grounding on the already known text that is used.

The extraction of the audiovisual element emerges as an awared use, largely maintaining the signifier's purpose, as we can see in this example where GIFs are used to explain the “shot-counter-shot” technique by François Truffaut in “The 400 Blows”.

Taking into account the emotionality involved in the text usage, this kind of appropriation, in turn, can be devided regarding the level of reference to the *text*, which affects the GIF's capability to communicate an emotion.

- The GIF appears more *static* when the topic is directly connected to the original text, gaining an indicating value. As in the previous example the GIF was used to explain something, in this case, taken from the official twitter account of the american TV series American Horror Story, the GIF is used to promote the main content;

or it can be used to confirm the affinity within a group, as in this status from a fan of the same series.

- The GIF appears as *dynamic* when it gains a new and original significance which is unrelated to the text it references to. In this case the GIF's capability to communicate is strengthened by the new context in which the text is integrated.

As we can see in this movie review blog, the Gif is taken from the Harry Potter movie the author is talking about, to highlight the emotion of fun/divertissement, that the author wants the readers to perceive

- In the **detourning** or **stealing** GIF – which is more frequent online than the previous ones and then gave me the possibility to bring many examples –, the new emotional significance is given to the excerpt regardless the knowledge of the text. The distinction, in this case, could be made regarding the *user*, who can be
 - a *passive communicator* if he is completely stranger to the original product (an unawared thief), completely relying on GIFs research browsers
 - or an *active communicator*, when he directly supplies with the process of decontextualization, acting as an awared expropriator of the significance.

Obviously in these cases, as much as in the examples that my colleague made before, GIFs cannot show the users' knowledge of the content. Indeed the user does not quote the original content at all, but he exploits it to give new significance.

That is clear in this Citizen Kane's GIF. In the context of the movie this frame would be seen as an hysterical applause,

but it usually becomes an expression of appreciation when it comes to a social network.

The online existence of whole databases of animated GIFs for the research of the “audiovisual emotion” to use (from giphy to the implementation of a GIF browser inside the Twitter platform) confirm this tendency, which fulfills a more efficient communicative purpose.

Indeed, it is in these cases that GIF works as an «uber-emoji», as defined by Linda Huber, communicating an emotion immediately, even if in a more articulate way than an emoticon. As an

emoji precisely refers to a visual or gestural human trait, similarly the GIF, once it is decontextualized from a storytelling, only shows visual or gestural elements to be appropriated of.

GIF works as gags in the early cinema; as Walter Benjamin argued talking about Chaplin, they invert «the logic of narrative causality, and their repetitive nature opens it up to multiple contexts» – end of quote. This opening to the significant multiplicity redefines the use, and more precisely, the choice of a GIF by a user, as it is deriving from a recreational **experiment**.

The choice can be easily read as a 2.0 Kulešov Effect, in which the face of the actor is substituted by a short narrative situation that, after being extrapolated, can accept several meanings according to the context in which it is included, and therefore according to the user's intent.

Like the actor Mozzuchin's face, or the emoticon's yellow circle resembling a face, the final meaning of the message is obtained by the association of one element to the others.

Moreover, if GIFs – as Uhlin points out – «retain the memory of the spectatorial experience beyond its initial encounter» – end of quote –, users engaging a conversation online are always encouraged to look for the reference. It follows that GIFs behave as constant and potential access points to the referring texts, resembling and actually working as memes or, quoting Richard Dawkins,

as a unit of cultural transmission able to aggregate people. This is evident when the original text in a stealing GIF is recognized by one or more users.

Again getting close to meme, defined by Francis Heylighen as «an information pattern, held in an individual's memory, which is capable of being copied to another individual's memory» – end of quote –, after this recognition the real conversation tends to arouse the original text, focusing on it. The original content, in these cases, becomes the centre of the discussion, emotionally strengthened by the participation of the communicators of the same group or of the same community of fans.

This event is particularly common on Twitter, where GIFs can often overcome and make the written words obsolete. That is what happens when, as in these examples, ONLY after the recognition of a referring text – more frequently when it comes from the popular culture and so even more often from the television broadcasting, but not only, as in the second example –, the discussion proceeds

not using from 1 to 140 types, but almost none of them and just with GIFs, creating chains of GIF-based communication.

By integrating in such an exchange, the animated GIF acts as a preferential tool to deliver emotions, thanks to its pre-existing payload of emotional information, and so acting as memes.

This is particularly evident in this case, where Italian Twitter users talking about a general topic, begin to reply each others with GIFs taken from similar or from the very same content – in this case contents deriving from very popular TV shows and icons in Italy. As we can see, the conversation becomes almost-only-GIF-based, and grounding on a same pattern of contents which defines a specific community, in this case the LGBTQ one.

Although the recognizability of the text increases communication, the quoting GIF seems to be less foundable online because of its narrow use, while the use of stealing GIFs appear certainly more frequent because of the higher possibility to deliver emotions without a constraining narrative.

In conclusion, the purpose of such an exchange involving emotions, cit-actions or uber-emojis, appears as a mean to trace or build a shared ground of discussion, and to confirm or create communities that, in many situations, show several levels of recognition and individual skills – as we can see in this last slide –, and therefore several levels of social reputation based on this recognition, which is a basic element in a gift economy environment.

When it comes to social networks, the extrapolation of the frame from a narrative context deletes the usefulness and also the need of knowing the original text. This process doesn't necessarily happens at the moment of creation, neither at the moment of choosing the GIF to use, but it can happen in the latter one, inside the mind of the addressee of a message which is there interpreted.

That's why the reference to the original narrative is communicatively useful only in the chance the identified text brings the specific emotion the user wants to communicate, therefore increasing its intensity and meaning, and echoing a prospective or existing community.