GIF today
Daniel Rubinstein

The revival of the animated GIF marks a point in the history of the web when it finally became sufficiently advanced to take pleasure in its own obsolescence. Like the rusty engines and the leaking pipes of the derelict spaceship in Alien, the lo-fi jitter of the GIF signals a moment when the novelty of technology fades off and becomes the backdrop rather then substance. Technology, it seems, repeats itself twice, first as a breakthrough, second time as nostalgia. It is salutary to remember that until the first GIFs started to twist and flicker in browser windows the computer screen was a motionless and silent place populated only by columns and tables. These early experiments with frame-by-frame animation introduced the online version of neon lights and delivered the pages of the web from stasis. The current resurgence of the GIF is not only part of the nostalgic turn towards the blurred, the unsharp and the faded but it is also a marker of a moment when the history of the network becomes the material from which the digital image draws its living energy.

The content can be figurative or abstract, lyrical or macabre, but because the primary materials that the GIF artist uses are rhythm and repetition the resulting effect has something comical about it. It is the inevitable outcome of the infinite circular motion which combines in an economic gesture the pathology of compulsive reiteration with the cheerfulness of a carousel. The comedy however is constructed from a series of tiny affective shocks delivered every time the sequence coils back on itself and in so doing reveals the stationary nature of mobility that shatters the illusion of truthful representation. This is particularly so in the case of the photographic GIF that contains nano-traces of both movement and rest and therefore seems to question the very desire for an image to say something meaningful and so it acts as a reminder - for those who need reminding - that representation is only one system among others. The eternal return of the same might seem unproductive and impractical to those who are used to thinking of photography in representational terms, and yet this circularity suggests the possibility of an alternative structure sustained by the

reversal of roles: It is not I who is looking at a still image but it is the blinking GIF that affords me the experience of stillness by flashing at me any number of times.

The GIF is a minor art form not only because it escaped – at least for now – the attentions of critics and collectors, but mainly because it does not owe its existence to the binary oppositions between image and matter or form and content that dominate the discourses of art and photography. Even the most realistic and life-like photograph is bound to lose its truth value as an animated GIF, hence the GIF evacuates the photograph of meaning; it destroys its cherished qualities of truth and memory and in so doing it opens up a space for photography to happen.

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