

## **Assumed Mobility**

### ***Thoughts on experiencing time online***

*By Marcin Ramocki*

As we progress through our lives and experience more of the world around us, a strange phenomenon occurs: the meaning of past events, our personal history, becomes rewritten according to the projections we hold for the future. In this Sartrean scenario, we find ourselves unpredictably stretched between the past and imaginations of the future. So, for example, the importance of your expensive college education would fade substantially if you decided that, instead of going to medical school, you wanted to pursue a career managing a rock band. This re-contextualisation of the past, due to a paradigm shift in the future, is not exclusive to our existential struggles; it seems to be a part of any subjective, documented history... including the history of media and art.

The way humans experience time evolves in close parallel to developments in the technologies and visual media of communication. Modern media represent and encapsulate the historic specificity of those experiences. In our times (that is, the first decade of the 21 century), the dominant platform used for such communication is the Internet and a whole spectrum of software and hardware devices that allow us to participate in its use. This platform is characterized by a variety of short, linear forms bundled together in sets of non-linear interfaces, all of which can be accessed instantaneously (in theory, at least).

Any manifestation of the Web: a simple HTML page, animated gif, Flash animation, social networking site or online multiplayer game all fall into this category. They all share one, extremely important aspect: their inherent temporal structure. More specifically, they share the way the experience of time is presented to the beholder/viewer/player. Before venturing into such exciting, new territory, let's backtrack a bit and start by looking at much older types of visual media. For the sake of simplicity, let's call them "images" and "movies". This drastic over-simplification, besides infuriating most media historians, illustrates a point related to the Sartrean scenario mentioned above. What was once a painting, drawing, cartoon or photo in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, returns online, redefined as an "image". Similarly, any film, video or animation becomes transformed into a "movie". Our projections of the networked future alter our memories of the past.

(The past of) images

You have been magically transported to a subway station. The train arrives at the platform, the doors open and you step into a crowded car. You encounter a new space: a compartment meticulously designed by some anonymous architect, a floor plan of seats, advertising on the walls, shiny surfaces of metal and plastic. Digital clocks, route information displays and graffiti covered windows: this is the microcosm you have just stepped into. All of these things, along with some, more or less colorful passengers, constitute the object of your contemplation. As you temporarily inhabit this space, you make choices about your physical location/position in the car and what is, ultimately, worth looking at. You wander around and explore your new environment, in pretty much any way you choose, within the constraints of the interior. And finally, when you get bored and there is nothing else worthy of your attention, you get off the train at the next station.

This voluntary mental mode of dwelling, as a temporary inhabitation of space, also describes the way you experience time in a painting or a photo; an image which is meant to be static. When you approach a static image, you become the master of the viewing experience. You come and go at will, allowing yourself whatever amount of time is necessary to form your own specific associations and interpretations. The category is so general that it seems merely secondary to specify how the image was produced. Its flatness or the amount of abstraction do not matter. Neither does the amount of conceptual buildup. All these features remain subservient to the dwelling experience itself; they remain open to interpretation, almost infinitely flexible, waiting for the viewer's attention, without demanding any specific response. Within this vast domain, a 17th century landscape by Lorraine, a Warhol silk-screen, a Suprematist square by Malevich and your childhood photo all seem to belong together on the same plane and display a surprising degree of interrelatedness.

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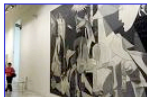
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Image Google search for "Guernica"

## (The past of) movies

One may argue that it was the invention of film which forever displaced and altered our ability to simply inhabit an image, to enter into it and let our imagination build a unique experience out of it. Film (and later video) claim to fully control the experience of temporary dwelling. By introducing a linear, pre-defined time structure, film demands the viewer's obedience and requires them to commit a specific amount of time. A film has to be watched from the beginning to the end: we cannot fully experience a work of cinema without submitting to its time frame, duration.

Let's return to our metaphor of a subway station. In the new scenario you are no longer inside the train car. Instead you are quietly resting on a platform bench, waiting for the train to arrive. It pulls into the station, but you just stay where you are and continue to observe the scene. You see all the action played out in front of you: the locomotive as it goes by, its front lights, a progression of silver cars, passengers packed inside, sparks caused by friction of metal wheels against the railway, and, finally, the prosaic back-end with somebody's face looking out of the window. All these appear to you in an order which is necessary and linear. Here, the object of your interest is the train as a whole, a horizontal collection of moving mechanical elements, defined by its physical length and speed. The train has now left the station and the show is over; whether you like it or not. You may, of course, keep thinking about it and imagining the scene, but the actual direct experience has ended: what you have now is a memory. Again, when it comes to the way we experience time, it doesn't matter if the given motion picture is a feature-length comedy by Chaplin, a single channel video by Bill Viola, a 30-second TV commercial or your uncle's 1994 Christmas VHS movie. They are all trains that we watch enter and leave the station.



Cellular photos of the NYC subway, 3 vantage points.

## The online condition

Sometime in the late 90's, a new visual landscape appeared on the scene: the web. At first mainly hypertext and picture-based, it very soon became a meta-medium, devouring every type of content and format imaginable. One may claim that what we experience online is not a new phenomenon, but rather an assembly of older and more familiar texts, pictures and videos. Although technically true, anyone who has recently spent time thoughtfully surfing the web will agree that a mini-rapture of sorts takes place. Any medium placed in the web environment changes at a most profound level, becoming somehow "softer" in its temporal and narrative specificity. One step further into the order of visual simulacra, images and movies sacrifice large part of their power to feed the amorphous cloud of interconnected data. Just like a film, which is a collection of still, photographic images, the web cannot be reduced to the sum of its elements. The

difference here is that the elements are far more complex and the relation between them is algorithmic, not linear.

Instant and practically unlimited access to information, history and knowledge has strained our interest in long, fictitious narratives. Our attention span and degree of patience are shaped by participatory social media and online games, where impact is either instantaneous or non-existent. Now we feel unable to digest videos that are any longer than three minutes, even if they involve nudity. Yet, within the constraints of these few minutes, we subconsciously build a deep understanding of editing and sound. We develop a special taste for, and degree of sophistication in communicating with short, minimal strings of text. We master the neo-minimal recycled-image Zen of a Google search. On a daily basis, we practice the functional micro-poetry of a Facebook status update. Where do we begin defining the online condition?

To return to the subway metaphor once again, this time the observer (you) would be back on the train, heading toward some obscure destination. However this time around you are not concerned with the interior of the subway car or even the train at large. You are looking out of the window, gazing at the flickering appearances of subway architecture, ads, people waiting on the platform, etc. All you can do is catch the most fleeting of glimpses, instant flashes of perception as you speed by: the train is going fast. The momentary, fragmented matrix-landscape of the "outside world" is now the object of your interest. Out of the bits and pieces, gradually, through repetition, micro-association and rhythm, an impression of the "outside world" builds up: fragile, subjective, disjointed and nebulous. You are the one moving, and this transient perspective is the essence of experiencing online content. The temporary place of dwelling, expected in older media, is no longer relevant. What is expected is the exact opposite.

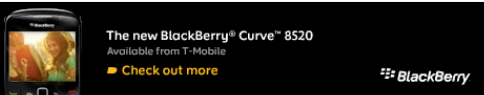
#### Assumed mobility

Painting and photography both **assume viewer staticity** and leave the time frame of experience open. Film and video **impose staticity** upon the viewer by strictly controlling the time frame. The Copernican break occurs with the advent of Internet and nonlinear electronic media, which **assume mobility** of the viewer. One has to be on the train looking outside to experience things this way. This condition of "movement" is a combination of medium-specific variables, but the most transparent factors are hyperconnectivity (a "link" is a visual form which by definition removes the viewer from his/her current position), multiplicity (several applications or pages running simultaneously and forcing the user to re-focus their gaze), and finally the reality of a screen-based experience (which works great for linear media, but is problematic when it comes to longer texts or still images). Web 2.0 inventions, such as RSS feeds, have only cemented our addiction to this changing landscape.

In this way, we are programmed to continuously propel ourselves forward.

This imperative condition has triggered a chain of historic consequences, one of which is the re-calibrating of all media embedded in the online universe. Static pictures become stripped of their openness, while moving ones lose their power to control the experiential time frame. We then witness them re-born as images and movies. Images and movies require the non-linear environment of the Internet and themselves invite users to keep moving on, to the next piece of content. They become mere threads of connective tissue: unreliable, leaking vessels of information. Torn appearances caught through the window of a moving train.





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### Rashomon (1950)



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Synopsis: A heinous crime and its aftermath are recalled from differing points of view

Director: Akira Kurosawa

Writer: Akira Kurosawa  
Shinobu Hashimoto

Cast: Toshirō Mifune  
Machiko Kyō  
Masayuki Mori  
Takashi Shimura

Genre: Crime / Drama / Mystery / Thriller

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"Rashomon" by Akira Kurosawa playing on Zapp Internet.

It should then come as no surprise that the second generation of web artists have picked the antiquated and somewhat silly format of animated gif to be their beloved medium. An animated GIF is a circular micro-narrative, which attempts to reveal its, equally micro, content to a viewer who is passing by. The mind-numbing repetition is a clear disclosure of purpose: to serve several frames of information, constantly, at any time, to someone who really doesn't care and is on his/her way somewhere else. So perhaps it isn't simply nostalgia, which has brought the animated GIF back from the early Internet days. It is the Greenbergian formalism of our college-educated art youth. It comments on the limits of the online medium in the same way that Elsworth Kelly comments on the flatness of painting.

\*

It seems that, in order to decode the aesthetics of the web era, we have to "fly" through a cloud of information, searches, images, emails, text and noise. It requires us to look through an unfocused, soft lens, allowing nebulous buildups to slowly reveal their meaning. The task of a net surfer is extracting content from a blur, to articulate a moment of clarity. A web artist is a philosophical scavenger. But, even on the level of everyday consumer web browsing, there is an astonishing discovery to be made: the time we spend online is structured according to certain algorithmic scenarios. Our job is to "perform" these scenarios and interpret them according to our needs and subjective tastes. The web comes to life when performed by individual surfers, often in a personal and reclusive environment, quite the opposite of the social setting of a film theatre. Therefore, structurally, the closest thing is an action of an art performer who is also their own audience (Marina Abramovic in the desert or Chris Burden locked up in a locker box). The Internet is a micro-theatrical medium. It happens in the "real" time of the viewer/user. As a matter of fact, to put it in Baudrillard's terms, that "real" time becomes its own simulacrum (likeness).

Although, in historical terms, we currently find ourselves forced to stare out of the window of a rushing train, it is important to remember that, ultimately, all other perspectives are still there and available to us. It is up to us to decide how we want to look at things. Without a doubt, the vantage points will keep shifting: the key is to remain a conscious, thoughtful passenger.

*Editing: Samuel Pink*



Anonymous animated GIF