

The Pornographic GIF

A Navigation Of Movement, Labour and Anti-Capitalism

Gina Prat Lilly



GIF 1.

“Water Shoveling [sic] GIF.” A man stands scooping water out of a waterlogged ditch with a large shovel. The clip is three seconds long, looped to appear continuous. The GIF relies on the assumption that emptying the ditch of water is a repetitive task to create the illusion of an effort that is linear in time. As he shovels, the ditch remains full as ever, conjuring the farcical image of a sinking sailor scooping water out of their boat. The man’s efforts are rendered incrementally futile as he shovels ad infinitum. A truly Sisyphean task.

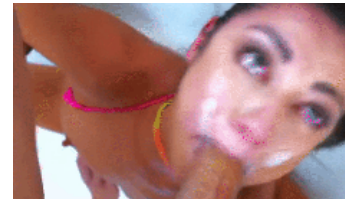
It came as no surprise to me to learn that the most widely shared GIFs (Graphics Interchange Formats) are pornographic. What else is Reddit used for nowadays (in lieu of Tumblr), other than to consume graphic graphics? Silent, looped, choppy, cropped, low-res fuckin’? As I watch a GIF replay on my phone screen, I am mesmerized by its self-propelled perpetuation. On occasion I find it greatly intensifies the sexual affectiveness of a smack, face-fuck, or intromission. In one, my attention is deferred to a minute movement that becomes apparent to me only through its reiteration. After I see a performer take a penis into her mouth three or four times, I begin to notice the glans creating a ridge in her left cheek, a muscle in her hand lightly clench, and her eyes twitch unnaturally as she tries to blink, before the GIF truncates her movements. In another, I see a performer’s leg stretch to better accommodate another performer between her thighs before snapping back into a bent position, only to recommence its Sisyphean task. The pornographic GIF’s fascination with movement materializes, evinces, and effaces the labour of sex work.

A GIF is a moving-image format that isolates a movement, usually from a commercial source material, for 4–10 seconds, and repeats it.¹ It is characterized by no sound, low resolution and a choppy, looping structure. Decontextualized, the movement it isolates prescind from an extended internal narrative and is bound instead by the urge to move eternally. *Pornographic* GIFs thematize *sexual* movement. The point of GIFs, as Hampus Hagman notes, is to make the looping structure enter into the perception of content (Hagman, 2012). This is why the format lends itself particularly well to the isolation of acts that are naturally circular or repetitive. The penetration of an orifice, masturbation of a clitoris, handjobs, blowjobs — while in filmic pornography these iterations are organic, the GIF intensifies and complicates their movement. Fervid repetition inscribes porn

GIFs among other symptoms of the hyperbolic sexual affectiveness of on-line pornography, causing an intensely sensorial and visceral reaction in the viewer (Paasonen 2011, 3). While the intensification of sexual movement occurs on a representational level, it also proves revealing for the analysis of pornography at the point of production. Like other found-footage formats, GIFs uncover a hidden or latent aspect of their source footage (Bering-Porter 2014, 180). Sexual movement repeated *ad infinitum* carries corporeal implications for the labouring bodies that carry it out. It is performers who fuck, cum, ride, finger, fill, smack, peg, bounce, fist, slide, suck, spit, squirt, stretch, grunt, choke. On the screen, movement becomes gesture and bodies become labourers.

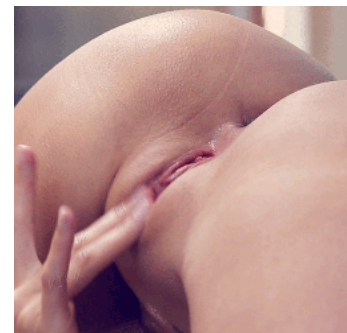
The repetitive nature of a thrusting motion can make the intervention of looping nearly indistinguishable from the original content. In the comment thread under GIF 2, a Reddit user appreciates, “It’s refreshing to see a GIF posted that isn’t badly looped and/or single second [sic] long. Well done.” (u/MisterStevo, 2018). The illusion of a linear sequence through looping to create a continuum *ad infinitum* is desirable in itself — *r/perfectloopsNSFW* is devoted entirely to archiving these GIFs. GIF 3 is appropriately titled “The *Perfect* Gif” not because it depicts the shaven pink pussy that is the crowning glory of commercial porn, but because it never tires, ceases, or cums. Indeed, the porn GIF can “suspend its own climax indefinitely,” writes Andrea Long Chu (Long Chu 2018, 8). No performer, however durable, could provide this dream of eternal surplus, as I-the-consumer continue to drink in the image without its supply drying up. Perpetual consumption without depletion, a characteristic of late capital that Bering-Porter notes in relation to a cinemagraph of wine being poured into a glass while the liquid in each remains at a constant level (Bering-Porter 2014, 188), becomes a grotesque excess when applied to the naked and human body. I perceive stimulation *in perpetuum*, an eternally masturbating hand that refuses climax, a vagina that never contracts and releases. Labour continues relentlessly, release-less, uncompensated. And perhaps this is what I desire — abundance for abundance’s sake.

As I keep scrolling, I realise GIF 3 is certainly an exception. The vast majority of GIFs do not adhere to the cinemagraph’s aesthetic gloss and stability. It is, after all, a found-footage format, and one sourced from hardcore pornography at that. Of course, glossiness is not the first word I’d use up to describe porn — grit with a touch of ennui, perhaps. As GIF 4 hammers itself home on my screen and Deen’s thrusting becoming increasingly lacklustre, Scott Stark’s film *Noema* (1998) springs to mind. Stark’s film is a motion study in performers’ bodies at the interstices of sex in commercial porn. *Noema* foregrounds the physical offshoots of the labour of performing sex, and the film is constellated from shots of performers awkwardly hesitating, changing positions, or getting in the way of the camera. Of course, conversely, the pornographic GIF is often concerned with mining some of the most carnal footage it can find. If shots like those foraged by Stark were posted on pornographic subreddits, they’d doubtless be found at the very bottom of the feed, downvoted by disgruntled users who, like me, peruse these feeds in search of double penetration, not a performer



GIF 2.

“Endless Facefuck.” This hardcore clip is three seconds long and is also looped to appear continuous (I found this GIF in the *r/perfectloopsNSFW* subreddit). In the foreground, a woman’s face hangs upside-down over the side of the bed, vigorously penetrated orally by a penis. Her head rebounds as the penis hits the back of her throat. Her eyelids flutter, eyes open and close, eyebrows raise. Relentless. And hot.



GIF 3.

“The Perfect Gif.” This is a cinemagraph, a still image in which a single element moves. The loop is under a second long, the frame holds a close-up of a perfectly still and raised ass and pussy. The only movement is that of the fingers of a hand from screen left, masturbating clitorally. The GIF forms a perfect loop, its beginning and end completely concealed.

scratching their leg. Nonetheless, I am soon familiarized with the now-naturalized illusion of Deen hammering himself home. Repetition becomes a principle of differentiation, diverting my attention away from Deen's banal compulsion to penetrate and towards the strange movements the format breeds in April's body. She is gripped by the GIF, her limbs flailing and jerking uncomfortably on a bathroom sink as the format cramps her body back to its initial point. I become aware of the harsh lighting glinting on the chrome tap and the cold, marble-topped surfaces underneath April, evoking the *mise-en-scène's* potential for cramping limbs. The frame itself seizes up, as the camera begins to move in towards the performers and is jolted back to its original position again. April's repositioning for increased comfort is refused as the GIF loops eternally, and her expression takes on a tinge of endurance (that perhaps had been there, latent, all along) over that of pleasure. In *Noema*, attention is purposely drawn to the awkward bodily movements that take place at the interstices between sexual activity. In porn GIFs, the inconveniences of sexual labour are (unintentionally) revealed by the deferral of the viewer's attention towards those gestures that become stranger in the intensifying of sexual movement.

The GIF crystallizes a tension between the two systems of movement that are at work in moving images, rendering movement strange and alien. The body in the world (the photographed body) and the body of the apparatus (the format) (Lippit 2008, 122) collide to create new meaning in GIF 4, revealing the inconveniences that April's body endures at the point of production. After I tap to activate GIF 5 in my Reddit feed, it rolls back and forth on the screen, the apparatus lassoing the bodies of the performers as if at the mercy of Martin Arnold's optical printer or, more likely in 2020, the boomerang effect on Instagram. I try to discern just what movement was indexed by the GIF — when the penis enters her mouth, or when it exits? — and wonder at its replaceability. The meaning of one of these gestures has been extrapolated to stand for both of them. Two signifieds reduced to a single signifier. I imagine a feature-length porn film as a chain of production, a series of performed sexual movements that contribute to a final, affective product that is to be consumed. Not unlike this GIF, capitalism functions on the assumption that its workers and their labour are replaceable, that intricacy should be done away with if it gets in the way of the highest extraction of value. Such are the ins and outs of capitalist sex.

Of course, what is often demanded of those who write about porn is to judge, once and for all, what is porn and what is not-porn, to conclusively condemn one, celebrate the other, and sit smugly. The United Kingdom's legislation on pornography exempts sexually explicit images or clips that are considered redeemed by a narrative context (UK HMSO, section 63.5). What a senseless distinction to make! The subreddit *r/watchitfortheplot*, replete with GIFs of explicit moments isolated from mainstream TV shows and films, recontextualizes them into a feed dedicated solely to sexual affect. For the online consumer of sexually moving images, what was not-porn is now porn! Rule number 7 of this subreddit, "No porn," only confirms this. To post a porn GIF here would be to miss the point: that re-narrativization can be pornographically transformative. Here, the disparity between the



GIF 4.

"James Deen and April in the Bathroom [GIF]." For two seconds, male performer Deen thrusts into April, who sits on a bathroom counter. Though the most fervid movement occurs at April's vagina, as Deen thrusts and fingers her, her lower extremities capture my attention. From her centre they stretch out, her right leg over his shoulder and her left reaching into the immediate foreground to rest on a sink. The toes of her right leg twitch in the mirror behind them. April's legs spasm as the GIF hiccups back to its initial position. Does she have a cramp?



GIF 5.

Untitled. In the shower, a female performer on all fours takes her male counterpart's penis in her mouth. As it hits her throat, her head jerks upwards momentarily, arching her back to raise her ass. His hands pivot around her head, clasping and unclasping, as he sways his groin back and forth. The GIF lasts one second, but it is looped so that it runs forward and then backward, a formal manipulation that mimics the in-and-out of fellatio.

**GIF 6.**

“Orgasmic Pussy Lick.” A woman lies on a bed as a man eats her out, the act itself obscured by his arm. As he spreads her legs and holds them high, the GIF captures:

- his deltoid, tricep, and bicep flexing to hold her down
- her body moving in response to the cunnilingus: her quadriceps tense, pushing her legs further up into the air.

**GIF 7.**

“Enjoying A Ride (reddit) GIF.” This GIF isolates a female performer’s face bouncing up and down in the frame, and I am reminded of Andy Warhol’s *Blow Job* (1963). The performer, who I recognise as Tori Black, bounces for twelve seconds before starting again and, in order, I see her:

- say (or mouth) “Fuck!”
- roll her eyes back
- part her lips
- smile
- bite her bottom lip
- purse her lips
- grit her teeth
- pant
- roll her head back
- right herself again
- look downwards
- furrow her brow
- repeat

incomes of film stars and porn stars clamours for recognition — no prizes for guessing whose is higher.

In this respect, the short duration of the porn GIF also challenges Linda Williams’s emphasis on the essential role of narrative in pornography’s affect (Williams 1999, 182). GIFs eschew the illusionary effects of a diegesis, as we are seldom fascinated by them for more than a few iterations. Indeed, these iterations can alienate us and reveal the bleak underbelly of the capitalist teleologies of productivity. In a digital age, we find pleasure in passing expressions and brief, hyper-localized movement (Lehman 2006, 89). The sexual affect of GIF 6 is due to the performers’ flexing extremities as the woman’s legs move in response to cunnilingus, the man’s shoulders tensing as he holds her down. I am witness only to the sexual act’s titillating indices. Whole feeds are dedicated to different kinds of gestural minutiae in performed sex, many of which are not explicit at all. In the *r/eyerollorgasm* subreddit I find GIF 7, evoking the tantalizing framing of Andy Warhol’s *Blow Job* (1963). These are only two examples among myriad other labouring intricacies that demonstrate performers’ prowess in delivering an affective sex act. It seems slighting for this labour to be so readily prescinded in GIF 5.

The intersection between GIFs and pornography brings to the fore the matter of bodily labour under capitalism. I borrow Heather Berg’s definition of labour within the porn industry, which does not except the critical analysis of sex work and porn from the analysis of work and labour as a whole. Calling something *work* does not erase the implication of exploitation or violence: all work under capitalism, and this includes sex work, constitutes exploitation because there is no viable and livable alternative to it (Berg 2014, 77). The GIF’s fascination with movement has motor ramifications that evince the conditions of bodily labour of the performers, efface the gestural intricacies of labour, and celebrate performers’ skill in the delivery of sexual affect. I concur with Berg when she puts forward that seeing sex work for what it is, *work*, can illuminate the nature of labour itself under late capitalism. Indeed, what is the difference between any of the sexually explicit GIFs and the shovelling man in GIF 1? And yet I have not mentioned the sex workers and amateur pornographers for whom the paywalled porn GIF is a real source of income. Finally, what effect does the online dissemination of porn GIFs have on the actual remuneration of the labour they replicate? Does this entail a financial loss for performers? How does the age of the internet facilitate the exploitation of workers and sex workers alike, and how can this be offset without stigmatizing the workers themselves, and continuing to afford open-access porn to the public?

Note

1. Due to the unfortunately static nature of the PDF format, the GIFs referenced will be animated somewhat unsatisfactorily by my own descriptions.

References

- Berg, Heather. 2014. "Labouring Porn Studies." *Porn Studies* 1 (1-2): 75–79.
- Bering-Porter, David. 2014. "The automaton in all of us: GIFs, cinemagraphs and the films of Martin Arnold." *The Moving Image Review & Art Journal* 3 (2): 178–92.
- Biggs, John. 2013. "What Is It About Porn? An Interview With The Founders of TheWorstDrug, A NSFW GIF Site." *TechCrunch*, May 22, 2013. Accessed November 14, 2019. <https://techcrunch.com/2013/05/22/what-is-it-about-porn-an-interview-with-the-founders-of-theworstdrug-a-nsfw-gif-site/>.
- Hagman, Hampus. 2012. "The Digital Gesture: Rediscovering Cinematic Movement through Gifs." *Refractory: A Journal of Entertainment Media*, December 29, 2012. Accessed November 14, 2019. <https://refractory-journal.com/hagman/>.
- Lehman, Peter. 2006. "Revelations about Pornography." In *Pornography: Film and Culture*, 87–98. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Lippit, Akira Mizuta. 2008. "Digesture: Gesture and Inscription in Experimental Cinema." In *Migrations of Gesture*, edited by Carrie Noland and Sally Ann Ness, 113–31. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- LongChu, Andrea. 2018. "Did Sissy Porn Make Me Trans?" Accessed November 14, 2019. <https://static1.square-space.com/static/5a9b1c0812b13f48e686fdc4/t/5a9c17e1f9619a449856c4fe/1520179170246/Chu-Did+Sissy+Porn+Make+Me+Trans%3F+%28QD2%29.pdf>.
- Paasonen, Susanna. 2003. *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography*. Cambridge and London: MIT Press.
- Sicinski, Michael. 2004. "Unbracketing Motion Study: Scott Stark's NOEMA." In *Porn Studies*, edited by Linda Williams, 461–78. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Stark, Scott, dir. 1998. *Noema*. San Francisco, California: Canyon Cinema. 16mm.
- UK HMSO. 2008. "Section 63 of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008." London. Accessed November 14, 2019. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/4/part/5/crossheading/pornography-etc.>
- u/MisterStevo. 2018. Reddit. December 03, 2018. Accessed November 14, 2019. https://www.reddit.com/r/perfectloopNSFW/comments/a2omdr/endless_facefuck/.
- Warhol, Andy, dir. 1964. *Blow Job*. New York. 16mm.
- Williams, Linda. 1999. *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible."* Berkeley: University of California Press.