

## When to Give an Illustration Legs



With art direction from Françoise Mouly and inspiration from the inaugural cover of *The New Yorker*, Malika Favre created still and animated versions of *The Butterfly Effect* (left), her cover illustration for the magazine's 2018 anniversary issue. In the animated version, the poised woman lowers her monocle as the butterfly flutters by. For a *New York Times* Sunday Review op-ed on the retail vacancies of Main Street, Rebecca Mock “used Google Street View to look at the actual street mentioned in the article, and directly referenced a lot of architectural and street details,” she writes on her blog. The crosswalk sign in the animated version of her illustration flashes red as the sign above the vacant storefront sways in the wind.

In February, *The New Yorker* marked its 93rd anniversary as it has most of its anniversaries—with a riff on its inaugural cover. Back in 1925, Rea Irvin, the magazine's first art editor, introduced Eustace Tilley, a foppish, top-hatted gent examining a fluttering butterfly through a monocle. In illustrator Malika Favre's latest iteration, *The Butterfly Effect*, it is a chic Black woman who observes a butterfly through a monocle.

And this butterfly actually flutters.

For its 2018 anniversary issue, *The New Yorker's* digital cover was an animated GIF. Readers of the print edition saw a static illustration, the butterfly frozen midair. But online readers watched as, over the course of a few seconds, the illustrated creature entered the frame, beat its delicate wings and flew gracefully over the woman's head as she nodded in debonair response. Over and over, the image looped, silent and mesmerizing.

*The Butterfly Effect* is one of more than a dozen animated GIFs that have appeared on *The New Yorker's* digital cover since 2014, and one of a growing number of animated GIFs that are delighting, surprising and stirring readers of all sorts of online editorial content.

Just what is a GIF?

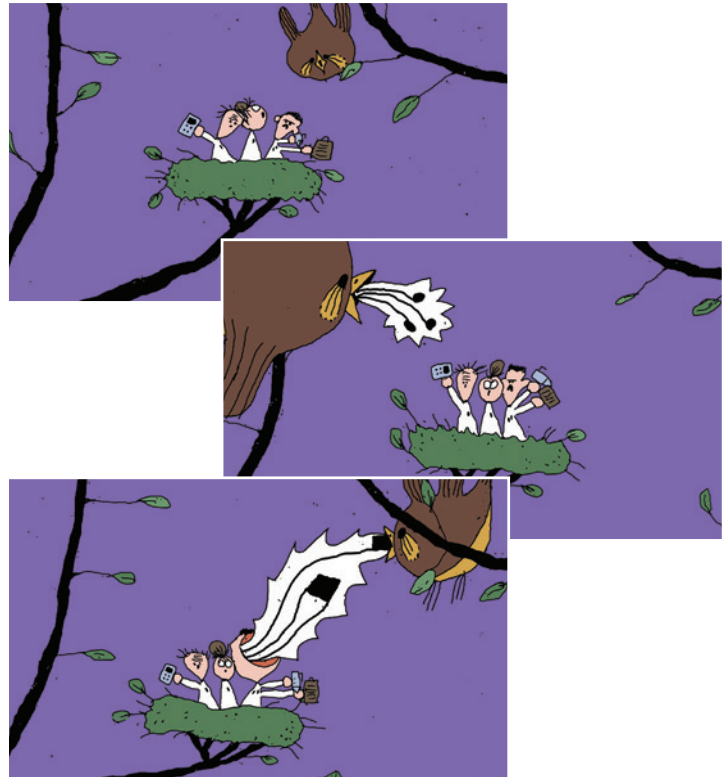
Technically, a GIF—the initials stand for Graphics Interchange Format—is an image file format. Popular on the web for its small size, it includes animation capabilities with a palette of up to 256 colors and plays and loops automatically.

Historically, the GIF was released by CompuServe in 1987, when the internet was mostly text, to enable color images to load using low-bandwidth dial-up modems. Its pronunciation has since been debated: soft G, a play on the Jif peanut butter slogan, “Choosy developers choose GIF;” or the widely accepted hard G, for the G in “Graphics Interchange Format.”

Culturally, the GIF has become a meme. GIFs made of snippets of found video clips—eye-rolling celebrities or cavorting stuffed animals—have flooded the web, used to express an array of sentiments, like gesticulating emojis.

Editorially, the animated GIF brings illustration to a whole new level, incorporating time and motion to enhance what in print remains static.

Consider the piece that accompanied “Main Street's Landlord,” an op-ed in the *New York Times's* Sunday Review back in 2012. In print, the image is a deserted streetscape by Rebecca Mock, a 29-year-old



In the animated version of Christoph Niemann’s cover illustration *Rainy Day* (left), raindrops roll down the glass. “The beauty of this image is that only at *The New Yorker* can one publish a cover where the main action is a raindrop—a raindrop slowly sliding down a windshield. And it really makes you feel what it’s like living here,” says Françoise Mouly. Stills from an animated GIF (right) by Max Litvinov show scientists swallowing birdsong as they toss to and fro in a nest; the piece accompanied an *MIT Technology Review* article on decoding “directly from neural activity” which song a finch will sing.

freelance illustrator based in Brooklyn. Online, a red “Don’t Walk” hand flashes on a traffic light, and a sign rocks slowly in the wind above a vacant storefront. The rest of the illustration is still, allowing the understated movements to deepen its moodiness. “The two signs heighten the feeling of desolation and abandonment in the scene,” says Erich Nagler, currently an art director on the Google Doodles team, who commissioned Mock’s piece when he was an art director at the *Times*.

For Mock, the design reflected her experience: “Usually in life, only one or two things are moving,” she says.

Jordan Awan deems Mock a GIF pioneer. Awan teaches illustration at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, in Boston, and at Lesley University, in Cambridge; he previously worked as an art director at *The New Yorker* and then as the creative director at *MIT Technology Review*. “She pioneered the idea that GIFs can be subtle,” he says of Mock. “She made them her own: these compacted moments in time, with a quiet peacefulness about them. That was important in changing the way people approached GIFs. You could make them do anything you wanted. And you could develop a personal style.”

Awan contrasts Mock’s style to that of Max Litvinov, a Russian illustrator whom Awan hired to produce GIFs for *MIT Technology Review*. While Mock’s animation is minimal, in Litvinov’s GIFs, Awan says, “everything is constantly in motion.”

In a dizzying example, which appeared alongside a 2017 story titled “Scientists Can Read a Bird’s Brain and Predict Its Next Song,” tree branches sway as notes spew from the beak of a flying bird into the mouths of three scientists lurching in a reeling nest. Unlike Mock’s streetscape, every element of Litvinov’s illustration shifts. “There’s so much happening,” Awan says, “but it creates this seamless, beautiful animated experience.”

Regardless of aesthetic, the use of movement should not be gratuitous. Brian Stauffer, a 52-year-old illustrator living in Marin County, California, prefers to call GIFs “conceptual motion.” Stauffer’s hard-hitting visual commentaries on social issues have appeared in the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Rolling Stone* and *TIME*. “Calling it a GIF is like calling an illustration a JPG,” he says. “‘Conceptual motion’ is my way of telling an art director, ‘Let’s not make the arms wiggle unless that’s the point.’”

Nagler concurs. “The time and motion of the GIF have to further the main concept, a central theme or a special detail in the illustration,” he says. “If it’s just motion for motion’s sake, it’s not worth the extra file size and the extra distraction for the reader.”

Not to mention the extra considerations for the illustrator and art director. Financially, adding a GIF to an assignment increases the budget. Abbey Lossing, a 26-year-old freelance illustrator in Brooklyn whose assignments average about half static illustration and half animated GIF, says she tries to double her fee when a GIF is involved.



A man sweeps a vacuum cleaner from room to room in this GIF that Abbey Lossing illustrated and animated for a *New York Times* home cleaning guide.

“It usually takes double the time to animate it after I’ve drawn it,” she says.

Deadline-wise, Sarah Williamson, a freelance art director at the *New York Times*, rarely has the luxury of using GIFs. She works on the Opinion section, where artists have the option of submitting a GIF, but turnaround is tight. “I assign between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m.,” she says. “I need sketches in two or three hours, and the final by 6 p.m.”

There are also technical concerns. “If the file size is too large, the GIF will take too long to load on computers, and especially on mobile devices,” says Monica Racic, the multimedia editor at *The New Yorker*. “If the file size is too small, you will see the degradation in image quality. It’s a delicate balance.”

And a file has to run smoothly on different devices. “We have three major breakpoints: mobile, tablet and desktop,” Racic says. “We output different GIFs for those different platforms.”

About a year ago, Lossing made a GIF for a home cleaning guide published in the *New York Times*. The website features a fourteen-second, looping horizontal pan following a man on a hoverboard pushing a vacuum cleaner from room to room—through the living room, where pillows straighten and crumbs are sucked up; past a spinning washer and dryer; into the kitchen, where a cabinet door closes and the hands of a wall clock spin. The smartphone version applies the same concept and artwork, but the loop is shorter—less than four seconds—and the action is limited to a single room, the kitchen. Along with the animation, Lossing delivered seven related still illustrations.

Like Mock and Stauffer, Lossing uses Adobe Photoshop and After Effects to create animation. Like them, she taught herself to make GIFs. “Honestly, I just watched some YouTube videos,” she says. “It’s not super complicated if you know how to use Photoshop.”

Perhaps. But Awan believes GIF-making should be a requirement in a contemporary illustration curriculum. “I think it’s the single most important thing a new illustrator graduating school should know how to do,” he says.

In a digital world where GIFs are proliferating, editors, art directors and illustrators agree that the use of GIFs in editorial should be judicious. “We don’t do them arbitrarily,” says Françoise Mouly, *The New Yorker’s* art editor since 1993.

She recounted a recent decision not to add movement to a cover illustration. The issue was from February, referencing the Pyeong-Chang Olympics, and the cover, Mark Ulriksen’s *Slippery Slopes*, was an image of a skier, seen from below, soaring over a narrow demilitarized zone as soldiers peer up at him. It isn’t hard to envision the composition in motion; indeed, the skier is midflight.

But Mouly said no. Animating the skier, she explains, would mean establishing his trajectory. “In this instance, you are better off not knowing,” she says. “You have to figure out where he is coming from and where he might land.”

“It is a precious moment when the reader is deciphering the image and investing it with meaning,” she continues. “Sometimes a GIF can interfere with that and leave less room for the imagination, which would be a shame.”

Sometimes, though, the addition of motion can rouse the imagination. It can tantalize, entertain or enlighten; it can drive home a point, set a tone or underscore an emotion. It can present a brief but powerful visual narrative that would not be possible in a still illustration. “It can reveal an extra dimension,” Mouly says.

Take *The New Yorker’s* very first animated cover, Christoph Niemann’s *Rainy Day*. The view is from the window of a car on a Manhattan street, framing the rear of a yellow taxi against the utter grayness of the day. There are raindrops on the car’s window, and here and there, one rolls down the glass, the way raindrops do.

The static illustration captures the aura of the city in the rain. The animation—though spare—brings it to life. “It was a very poetic approach to making use of the new technology,” Mouly says, “The image was great when it was still and wonderful when you saw it move. Watching the rain fall—it’s a great pastime.” 