

Title: Craft-based animation in *Zepo*

Abstract:

This article will focus on the use of sand-on-glass animation in *Zepo* as a way to understand the film in relation to craft-based, or 'handmade' practices. The aesthetic such a method can produce in this case has a direct correlation with the subject matter in terms of innocence, vulnerability, fear and isolation.

Keywords: sand-on-glass animation; craft-based animation; handmade; metamorphosis

Zepo is a short film made using sand-on-glass animation, and this technique results in a particular handmade aesthetic; the shifting and transient animated visuals are created through the constant movement of the tiny grains of sand. [Such a](#) continually transformative aesthetic created by this animation technique is one that can be explored [not only through this short film's core themes – isolation, fear and innocence – but also with regard to a staple concept of animation, metamorphosis](#). The film opens with what appears to be a classic fairy tale setting; we are deep in the woods with a young girl collecting firewood. She quickly sees the drops of blood that will lead her to the injured man, the image of the red drops in the snow evoking the story of Hansel and Gretel and their breadcrumbs through the forest. We are instantly aligned with the young female protagonist and the manner in which she is animated is core to our experience of the film.

Aylish Wood argues that 'animation has the capacity to re-invigorate how we think about cinematic space' going on to suggest that such space can be 'associated with an expression of intensive spatial experience and other kinds of transformation' (Wood 2006: 134). Wood's arguments refer to a range of animation techniques but one example is the use of sand or ink-on-glass, which she refers to as having the 'property of fluid spatial construction' where 'images fully metamorphose onscreen' (2006: 139). Wood discusses Caroline Leaf's *The Street*, which is animated using ink-on-glass, but her arguments about these kinds of animation techniques that prioritize fluidity can be illuminating when considering *Zepo*. It is worth noting that both sand-on-glass and ink-on-glass animation create a particularly 'handmade' aesthetic; in a similar way to seeing a thumb print on a model in an Aardman stop-motion film, the sand-on-glass technique allows the viewer to see the finger and thumb imprints made by the artist in the sand. Importantly, this aesthetic produced by the constantly shifting sand has particular implications for the characterization of the young girl.

Her dark figure in the frame is constantly shifting and moving, not just because the character is moving but because the sand is ever changing and we see 'in-between' the frames. Yet there are moments where the animation becomes less mobile and the fluctuation between her different levels of fluidity serves to highlight her innocence. For example, on her observation of the blood in the snow we see her in close-up in Shot 6, her eyes wide with surprise and fear. The moment is not static but it is closer to 'stillness' than much else in the film and allows for understanding her shock and fear at discovering a trail of blood. Similarly in shot 44 we see her frozen by fear as one of the men stamps a hole through the ice into which she will plunge. Here again she is animated with less movement than in other sequences. In moments of more speed and anxiety – for example when she runs away [having been startled by the man in the snow](#) (shot 19), or when she runs to find help on discovering him [to be alive](#) (shot 24) – the sand leaves little trails behind and around her. [This](#) emphasizes her speed of movement [and](#) also serves to accentuate her anxiety. Wood's suggestion of an 'expression of intensive spatial experience' in this case can be applied to the use of sand to depict her body within the space. Its [partial](#) formlessness and chaotic quality is evocative of moments of terror or panic when our bodies can move instinctively or more quickly than we might imagine or in ways we would not have imagined.

The close up shot (shot 6) of her as she notices the blood in the snow also contains much more detail in her facial features and expressions than is apparent in moments of speed, or in other significant moments such as when she first arrives at the edge of the frozen lake where she will find the man in the trap (shot 12). As she pauses at the edge of the lake, in a wider shot, her figure becomes much less defined than it has been in the first part of the film. We can clearly see grains of sand trailing behind her and her facial features are barely identifiable. This serves to intensify her vulnerability as she literally becomes less visible and less solid in the space. What is interesting in terms of characterization is that visually the girl can be likened to both the crow (shot 13a) and the two sinister men who first appear in shot 28. All these figures are animated with very dark sand and a constant very rapid shifting of the sand within the figures make them flicker continually while onscreen. This is in contrast to the man caught in the trap who is more 'fully' animated in terms of detail but is also less fluid as the sand that animates him does not move and flicker in the way that it does for the other characters. Perhaps so close to death he is indeed less animated in all sorts of ways.

Nicholas Sammond, in his thought-provoking article on Disney's *Dumbo*, attributes a further radical political edge to animation that demonstrates what Eisenstein referred to as 'plasmaticness'. Discussing the more classic technique of 2D cel animation, Sammond, drawing on Eisenstein, argues that where the film depicts Dumbo and Timothy's hallucinatory pink elephants morphing into various different shapes, they display the radical 'possibility that the stuff of life could be made into anything at all' (Sammond 2011: 152-3). This 'anything', this 'possibility' is something that is core to animation if one takes Paul Wells' view that animation has the potential to represent that which can be unrepresentable in live-action (1998: 11), and it becomes particularly poignant in animated examples where fluidity and metamorphosis are highly visible.

The sequence where the little girl is drowned can be thought through using Sammond's ideas in relation to metamorphosis and its possibilities, as well as Wood's thoughts on these concepts. As the girl is submerged in the water there are several moments where the sand that animates the water and the sand that animates the figure are merged together and the viewer cannot distinguish one from the other, all while seeing the sand change and move 'in-between' frames. Shots 46c, 47b, 48 and 50 all depict both the water and elements of the girl's face and/or body; the two sets of sand grains merge and mingle throughout. These shots are interspersed with the girl attempting to climb out of the hole in the ice where she becomes slightly more clearly defined, as in shots 46b, 47a and 53. The final shots 54a to 55 witness her gradually disappearing from view into the depths of the water. This disturbing sequence is made even more sinister by her lack of solid physicality; she seems easy to destroy because she is depicted as ultimately fragile. Her constantly shifting figure morphs easily into the water where it quickly vanishes.

To return to Sammond's point the 'stuff of life' in *Zepo* morphs into the water, becomes it, and is consumed by it. The 'radical' potential here lies in a lack of form; her body cannot maintain the shape of a human being and the borders of her wax and wane throughout until finally they exist no more. While it is true that the other characters also display varying degrees of fluidity, it is the female protagonist who is displayed as most fluid, and most vulnerable, ultimately

destroyed by the more solid mass of the sinister male characters. Wood argues that in animation such as the one discussed here 'space is caught in the act of changing', which allows for much potential in terms of spatiality and our engagement with it (2006: 134). Such an idea can be mapped on to the representation of identity, which in *Zepo* is figured through the vulnerable protagonist whose continual transience in how she is animated is symbolic of her very transitoriness as a mortal human being.

References

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