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Zepo as metapicture
of its making

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ABSTRACT
This article addresses Zepo as an extended reflection – a ‘metapicture’ – on the material conditions by which its sand pictures are made. It examines the film’s self-reflexive gestures by tracing its visual-narrative motifs of traces on surfaces (blood spots, footprints), together with covering layers and depth (breakable ice, trappings under snow).

The opening shot of Zepo rehearsing for our benefit the film’s most central motifs. It shows a blank, white screen invasively dashed with a handful of sand to the sound of a gunshot. The title ‘Zepo’, traced in the sand, is immediately covered by two more dashes of sand – this time connoting the look and sound of soil, not a splatter of blood. As a summary of Zepo’s narrative events, the shot suggests out-of-the-blue violence and, just as quickly, its concealment. But apart from its narrative allusions, the opening shot also summarizes decisive features of the fictional world that Zepo depicts: clear white surfaces; traces left on such surfaces; layers over the surfaces and traces; and – fatefully – unexpected depth below them.

By introducing us to these imminent visual-narrative motifs of the film, you might say that Zepo’s opening shot functions as what W. J. T. Mitchell (1994) calls a ‘metapicture’. Metapictures, to use Mitchell’s definition, reflect on their own constitution as pictures. Such pictures show us something about the nature of pictures, and do so by somehow invoking themselves and/or other pictures (Mitchell 1994: 35–38, 2005: 210).
Upon closer look, Zepo in fact presents us with a range of metapictures. First there is the opening shot as metapicture about other pictures, a summary picture anticipating the visual-narrative motifs of the pictures to follow. But the opening shot and those many pictures that it prefigures, taken together, add up to a second, global metapicture about the nature of Zepo’s sand pictures altogether. Metapictures typically flaunt their ‘self-knowledge’, as Mitchell (1994: 48) puts it, and the particular knowingness exuded by Zepo concerns the sand and clear glass layers as material means through which it came to be. Hence every incarnation of Zepo’s motifs – surfaces, traces, layers and depth – each bespeaks something of the material conditions by which it is constituted. And every such smaller, local metapicture flows together into the global metapicture that is Zepo: an extended reflection on the nature of its own making.

Of course this modernistic type of self-analysis is to be expected from a film that makes use of the uncommon medium of sand – no matter how accessible its narrative may be. And this is not only true of Zepo. Co Hoedeman’s landmark animation, The Sand Castle (1977), for example, comprises sculpted sand figures markedly different in nature from those of Zepo. On this basis, The Sand Castle develops its own self-reflexive interest in specifically the instability and impermanence of sand constructions – a theme that, remarkably, is also summarized in the film’s opening title shot.

Zepo, in contrast, appears much less interested in the transitory nature of sand as its medium, and instead concentrates on the particular material means whereby César Díaz Meléndez configures his moving sand pictures. These means are laid bare in the companion video, Zepo Trailer/Making Of: composed layers and tracings of sand atop a backlit glass surface – the ‘fore grounds’, as it were, often placed over further glass surfaces and layers of sand, creating depth as ‘back grounds’. So the recurrence in Zepo of depicted surfaces, traces and layers corresponds to the material presence of real surfaces, layers and traces of sand, and still deeper surfaces below, as manipulated and filmed by the sand artist. The visual-narrative motifs of Zepo are therefore by no means incidental. They reflect, and reflect upon, the material conditions from which they emerge. Zepo’s fictional motifs, as metapictures, divulge the facts of their making.

In clear white surfaces, first, we find the most patent concurrence of fictional motif and material condition in Zepo. The snow-filled setting of the film makes for a perfect symbiosis with the light box-produced tabulae rasae from which Díaz Meléndez’s depictions set out. To name just one example: the ice clearing, where the narrative will reach its climax, is of the same slippery, fragile nature as the glass surface through which it is depicted.

A major property of these clear white surfaces in Zepo is that any traces on them are rendered visible in a clear figure-ground contrast. It is by means of this contrast that we can perceive the artist’s sand marks and layers on glass; and it is by means of the same contrast that Zepo’s inciting incident can occur: a little girl noticing a trail of blood in a snow-covered forest. As fiction, these red traces testify to the movements of a bleeding fugitive; as filmed facts, they testify to the crafting movements of the sand artist who put them in place. Many similar traces also find expression in Zepo: the girl’s footprints (Shot 11), the crows as sign of impending death (Shot 13), finger scrapings on ice (Shot 46), and the hole in the ice surface as remnant of a violent deed (Shot 61). While as depicted fictional events all these traces emerge involuntarily, as facts they are still the intentional markings of the sand artist. But these
depicted traces in *Zepo*, as metapictures, invoke also the accidental traces that their maker leaves behind, as if Díaz Meléndez himself is the bleeding man moving through the snow. In composing sand images from frame to frame, he can never fully conceal the constant little disruptions that he causes on his material. *Zepo* divulges these side-effects of the artist’s activity – the ‘bleeding’ of his medium, if you like – through the continuously shifting textures of solid objects, like the characters’ bodies (Shots 28–35), as well as the ‘noise’ of disturbed sand making way for the shifting outlines of characters (Shots 3, 27, 29).

In *Zepo*’s narrative climax, a soldier kicks a crack in the ice clearing, leaving the girl to fall through the surface into the water below. At this point, the film demonstrates less the fragility than the layeredness and depth of the surfaces with which it is made. The ensuing sequence of shots consequently revolves around the interplay of surface, layer, and depth. The girl struggling to stay afloat is presented in high angle shots (Shots 46 and 54), to better emphasize her sinking into the previously unconsidered depths below the white surface. Her point of view shows the soldiers through the water above her (Shot 51), an effect achieved by photographing her picture through another transparent surface over it. The girl’s immersion in the water, physically, amounts to the covering of her figure under a layer of blue sand (Shot 54). And the final faint traces of the girl show her pushing against the see-through surface under which she is trapped (Shot 58). I imagine that in working with his multiple layers of glass, Díaz Meléndez must be acutely aware of the levels of free space underneath his sand figures. Perhaps he even dreamed up the possibility of his characters finding that space, by breaking through the glass surface onto which they are poised. *Zepo*’s depiction of a girl, meeting her demise on a glassy ice clearing, is most likely the fictional bringing to life of that artistic fancy.

The layered metapicture of the above sequence even has something to say about my own layered condition as viewer. Sometimes stray sand particles in the foreground, as seen against the sky for example (Shot 37), seem so tangible that I am tempted to reach out and wipe them off my computer screen. But doing so would amount to nothing more than the girl pushing up against the ice under which she is trapped. I too am locked behind a surface, on the ‘other side’ of which, seemingly, the many-layered world of *Zepo* unfolds. This surface, my screen, following the famous Cavellian dictum, is a barrier: it screens me from the world of *Zepo*, as much as it screens that world from me (Cavell 1979: 24). And the mysterious soldiers accentuate my separation even further: not only do they cover the girl under ice, but twice they cover with their bodies the entire visual field (Shots 35d and 64a), and with that my access to the world within it.

*Zepo* closes with the soldiers further spreading their leg trappings. And they cover these traces of their violent intent – recall the opening shot – by kicking layers of snow over them. The shrouded figures, it seems, specialize in all sorts of ‘cover-ups’. But it is these literal cover-ups with snow that show a curious tension between *Zepo*’s fiction and the fact of its making: for the soldiers to *add* a covering layer of snow, the sand artist has to *remove* sand to open up the blank glass ground. In this way *Zepo*’s overall narrative, with its dubious cover-ups, drives towards the restoration of the pristine, clear surface from which its making sets out. The soldier’s final footstep indeed bestows upon it a state of total blankness (Shots 64b–65). So on second thought, then, *Zepo* as metapicture does have a certain interest in the impermanence of sand...
constructions. For sand art of Zepo’s kind will always start with a blank white surface and, once finished, will end with one.

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