

**MIZUKO (WATER CHILD)
AND EGG:
FROM THE POLITICS
TO THE POETICS OF
CORPORAL TRAUMA
THROUGH **EISENSTEIN'S**
PLASMACITY**

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Abstract: Soviet avant-garde filmmaker and film theorist Sergei Eisenstein introduced the term “plasmacity” almost one hundred years ago. He used it to describe Disney’s ability to play with his characters’ bodies by elongating them, making them bigger or smaller, or even by transforming them into other characters altogether. In his notes, Eisenstein mentioned that plasmacity is able to create a certain freedom for spectators and hinted at its ability to address traumata. However, he didn’t go into any details, focusing instead on spectators rather than creators. In this paper,¹ I am exploring two animated shorts, *Mizuko (Water Child)* and *Egg*, using the interviews I have conducted with co-directors Kira Dane and Katelyn Rebelo and director Martina Scarpelli. I am looking at the two films from the perspective of plasmacity in order to talk about the politics and the poetics of corporal trauma.

Keywords: Eisenstein, plasmacity, trauma, body, animation.

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Introduction

Before his premature death in 1948, Soviet avant-garde filmmaker and film theorist Sergei Eisenstein worked on a book he never considered finished. His goal was to analyze all kinds of artistic manifestations, from cave paintings to literature, painting, circus, to film and theatre by employing a certain model. This model implied seeing art as a means of repeating patterns that we, as human beings who are part of the universe, have lived through in three different stages of existence: our personal past, our past as a species, and our past as the start of life itself.

In this book, he included several texts on Disney, which he used to delve into a psychological interpretation of the American filmmaker’s creation, but, more importantly for the purpose of this article, to describe what he called “plasmacity” (Bulgakova and Hochmuth, 2011, p. 15). That is, a character’s ability to take on any desired form by elongating their arms and legs, to get bigger and smaller, or even to transform into other beings altogether.

In one of these texts, trying to give an existential meaning to his animations and relating it to plasmacity, Eisenstein described Disney as possessing

all the most secret chords of human contemplation, imagery, thoughts, feelings. . . His creation comes from somewhere near the zone of the purest, most primary depths. From the place where we are all children of nature. He creates at the level of human conception. . . . (Bulgakova and Hochmuth, 2011, p. 37)

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And further on, he compared him to Charlie Chaplin, saying that his work is a cry for a lost childhood, “a contemporary *Paradise Lost*”. All the while, “Disney’s epic is *Paradise Regained*. Paradise, specifically. Something unrealizable on earth. Only possible to create in drawings” (Bulgakova and Hochmuth, 2011, p. 37). Ultimately, he said, “Disney is a complete return to a world (and it’s not for nothing that it’s an illustrated one) of total freedom (and it’s not for nothing that it’s a fictive freedom), free of necessity at its other, original extreme” (Bulgakova and Hochmuth, 2011, p. 37).

Therefore, the Soviet theorist proposed an interpretation of animation very different from the one we usually see nowadays, meaning the one according to which animation is a medium dedicated to children (Duma, 2020, pp. 21-28). On the contrary, he saw it as a medium dedicated to adults with the ability to appeal to their inner child and, even deeper, to a state before birth, defined by “freedom”.

Even if animation does possess such power, in Eisenstein’s work it is not clear what the end goal of experiencing said freedom would be. The Soviet filmmaker was very political in his film theories and the furthest he went with answering this question can be observed in the following lines: “This is how the Americans, when they get down to building their golden age in the future, will warmly, gratefully reminisce about the man who cheered them with ‘golden dreams’ during the period of their depression” (Bulgakova and Hochmuth, 2011, p. 37).

However, first of all, he didn’t go into further detail about a clear traumata that animation could address, other than the general political context of the time. Second of all, his references consider solely audiences, and not Disney or other artists themselves.

As scholar Susan Young observes, when talking about animation and trauma, researchers usually focus on the spectators’ experience in front of trauma depictions (Young, 2021, pp. 96-113). Among the few exceptions are Young herself who sets out to investigate trauma and animation as a personal journey through cognitive theories, or Dana Duma who analyses trauma representations in the *Waltz with Bashir* and *Crulic* documentaries (Duma, 2020, pp. 21-28).

My goal with this paper is to investigate whether animation can be more than a political tool serving socialism. As societies and cultures are different from almost one hundred years ago when Eisenstein wrote his theses, people face different problems and traumas now than before. I am interested if animation can rather be a tool in opening discussions about the body, and more precisely about corporal trauma and how they are transposed onto animation film. And how can animation become the paradise Eisenstein talks about by using plasmacity.

In order to answer these questions, I am exploring two recent documentaries: *Mizuko (Water Child)*, co-directed by Kira Dane and Katelyn Rebelo in 2019, and *Egg*, directed by Martina Scarpelli in 2018, through the words of their filmmakers themselves.

Research methods

This article sets out to explore the role of animation filmmaking in relation to a traumatic bodily experience of the filmmakers. In order to find an answer, I have selected two evocative animation documentaries which deal with such traumatic subjects. *Mizuko (Water Child)* confronts the subject of abortion and will be referred to as “Interview 1,” which was conducted with both directors, and *Egg*, which confronts the subject of anorexia and will be referred to as “Interview 2.” I interviewed the three authors of said films using the method of semi-structured photo-elicitation interviewing, meaning I presented them with several images and asked them questions related to them. The stills represented screenshots from their own productions. However, the stills were chosen by me, therefore they were researcher-generated. The discussed works of art were created prior to our interviews, without the authors knowing that they would ever talk about them with me. For this research I used judgmental sampling which relies on the researcher choosing the subjects, both for the population and for the images. The interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded and then transcribed. These interviews are part of a larger research project, and therefore they covered multiple questions. The first interview lasted for a total of fifty-three minutes and it was conducted with the co-directors of *Mizuko*: Kira Dane and Katelyn Rebelo. Kira is a Japanese-American filmmaker with studies in paintings and illustration, who explores the space between fiction, documentary, and animation. Katelyn is an American filmmaker working with experimental film, documentary, and animation. Their fifteen-minute documentary represents Kira’s personal experience with the abortion she went through in the US. The second interview was conducted with Martina Scarpelli, *Egg*’s director, and it lasted for a total of forty-eight minutes. She is a filmmaker with studies in fine arts and experimental cinematography. Her twelve-minute short is an autobiography inspired by her short but very intense experience with anorexia.

Results

The politics of corporal trauma

Mizuko (*Water Child*) and *Egg* are both evocative documentaries according to scholar Annabelle Honess Roe's definition, because they translate "[c]ertain concepts, emotions, feelings and states of mind" (Honess Roe 2013, p. 25) into images. They are both films which offer a new perspective on corporal trauma by exploring the conscious and subconscious of the directors through a subjective eye.

Mizuko (*Water child*) is a combination of real footage, painted rotoscoping and stop-motion about two different ways of seeing abortion by creating a parallel between the busy and disconnected life of New York City, where Kira went through her abortion, and the warm, summery Japanese village she grew up in, where she revisits her childhood memories. Kira Dane dives deep into her memories at seven years old when, right after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York, her mother took her and her brother to Zamami, an island in Okinawa. In her own words in the film, ". . . in Zamami, time coagulates and crusts over, like honey on a carelessly screwed cap. Memories dissolve and leave hollow cavities of their shapes" (Dane and Rebelo, 2019). With this, she is suggesting a place of her memory she is eager to rediscover and reenact to a certain extent in a different context.

Egg is a 2D and 3D digital animation about relapses, showing the character's fight with an anorexic episode, the obsession for the perfect form and control, through the metaphor of a cube. Martina's film starts with the phrase "Although I don't understand what it means, or why I should keep coming back to it, I remember that moment. Clearly. For some reason, it must be important" (Scarpelli, 2018). Similarly to *Mizuko*, her line suggests that she is also exploring a moment which she herself doesn't fully comprehend, but which she will try to unravel with the help of her film.

Both of these shorts deal with traumas which are tightly connected to societal perception and are highly political. In *Mizuko*'s case, what the two directors are doing with the film is to bring forward a discussion about the emotional experience that a woman who has had an abortion goes through, finding a middle way between the religious and political rhetorics. They position themselves on a third perspective which seems impossible in the political context of these two extremes. First, the religious judgement, the 'pro-life' one, which labels abortion as murder and does not take a person's real needs and possibilities into consideration, but rather believes in a greater meaning of life. Second, the 'pro-choice' one, which completely depersonalizes the experience and denies it the emotional content that it comes with. As the two authors explain, [h]aving an abortion is an incredibly personal experience, but the way we talk about it

in this country (my note: the United States of America) is so political, and often only seen religiously through the lens of Christianity” (FTW Staff, 2020). Also, “I think people are afraid to admit to any harm in having an abortion, because that might leave a weak spot in the political argument. I’ve heard people compare it to the removal of a tumor, just removing an unwanted cluster of cells in your body” (FTW Staff, 2020). Rather, they take inspiration from the Buddhist philosophy which does not judge, but instead offers space and tools to process the experience. Unlike the patriarchal entities of religion and politics which regulate women’s bodies, the film and proposition come from a person who has actually been through an abortion. And even more so, Kira’s take isn’t inherent, but it is the conclusion of a process that also started from a pro-choice perspective. She says:

As in the case for a lot of people who are pro-choice, . . . I just saw it as a surgical procedure . . . It definitely felt different, felt emotional, . . . but I really didn’t think . . . much about . . . what it means. On a higher level. . . . [I]t was only a few months later, when I sort of realized that I had been pushing away all of these emotions, and I had a real [sic] big sort of moment where all those emotions came crashing down on me, . . . I realized it’s . . . really not as simple as calling it a surgical procedure (Interview 1).

On the other hand, Scarpelli deals with body shape perception. Her character explains that “anorexia is about form and shape. It’s about reaching the perfect form” (Scarpelli, 2018). At the same time, Scarpelli says:

Egg is a film about a woman that has to eat an egg she doesn’t want to eat. It’s a story about taking control over something you are afraid of, and then failing. It is also a film about victory. *Egg* is based on the day I had to eat an egg, as prescribed in my diet while recovering from an eating disorder (Interview 2).

However, similarly to Dane’s experience, hers also originated in external influence. Her character specifies that “no one was there to control me. No one to comment” (Scarpelli, 2018), suggesting a voice which did at some point judge her. It seems as though her character is trying to take refuge in her cube-shaped home from a society which still idolizes certain corporal norms, many of which arose from racism. As Sabrina Strings argues in her research (Strings, 2019), fatphobia stems from slavery of Black people who were considered inferior to white people and which manifested in the latter being concerned with their weight and a wish

to become thin (Mosley and Raphelson, 2022). Even though it has been proved that weight stigma causes more harm than obesity itself (leading to diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, eating disorders, sedentarism, bullying, constant physical discomfort and even premature death) (Bacon and Severson, 2019), prevalent in today's society is an attitude of fearmongering. Feeding on people's lack of confidence, it promotes the alarmist, unilateral, and dangerous one-size-fits-all rhetoric, not taking into consideration the large spectrum which the human body covers, and pushing people into an unhealthy relationship with food and, ultimately, into developing eating disorders.

All these political aspects of the film are made clear through the ways in which the authors use animation.

The poetics of corporal trauma

In order to evoke the third perspective on abortion, Dane and Rebelo use an open point of view in their film. More precisely, their perspective is pointed towards the *exterior*, towards another continent, towards the ocean, with a spiritual lens. On the other hand, *Egg* is focused on the *interior*, the inside of the body, suggesting closure and confinement, on a more sexual note. Kira's (water) child goes out of her body, sets off into the world, goes back into water, transforms, travels, and receives spiritual value, while Martina's egg goes inside her body, becomes her parasite, makes her look inside herself and not outside of it. *Mizuko* has a fluid, colorful, volatile, and aired shape; *Egg* is geometric, sharp, monochrome, fluid but encysted, and even "disgusting" (Ong, 2019). However, all of these juxtapositions do not mean that the two films label their subjects as negative/positive, but, on the contrary, both focus their attention on the healing process, rather than on a definitive solution.

Dane and Rebelo's film is based on Kira's need to escape the American structure which depersonalizes abortion (NB: she has meanwhile left the US and is now living in Japan). As mentioned before, the filmmakers divided the film into two different ways of seeing the world, which they combine at the end. First of all, the worlds are separated stylistically. The 'cold' and distant world is mainly shot on film on the New York subway where people give off the feeling of "being stared at, without actually being looked at" (Dane and Rebelo, 2019). It is also shot at the abortion clinic where the procedure is about to begin, waiting for a human empathic reaction, but only receiving a pile of papers to sign, all of these on an impersonal aural background, with day to day sounds. All these images come in contrast with the world where she takes refuge and where she searches for meaning, or to which she is drawn by meaning. The other universe is created

with watercolors, painting a dreamlike atmosphere. It is populated by colorful childhood memories accompanied by unearthly music, which altogether give the impression of a safe space that Kira accesses in her torment. Besides these, the two worlds are separated by the artist's monologue who juggles between English and Japanese depending on which of the two realities is shown on screen. Eisenstein's theory about plasmacity is most clear in the film through the moments when Kira represents the actual event of her getting pregnant and her trying to make sense of it. She shows herself through various black and white portraits of her body photographed from different angles on which she intervenes with animation through the pixilation technique. The first intervention is on one of the shots of her eye, where the actual paper gets ripped off piece by piece until a hole is created at the corner of her eye, while talking about something she would like to "keep a vague idea of" (Dane and Rebelo, 2019). We continue to see different photographs of anatomical illustrations, while she tries to understand how it is that she got pregnant despite using protection and the next day pill. Listening to her words of self-doubt, we see her hands covering her face in the pixilation and then again the paper being ripped off her face, uncovering many other layers of photographs underneath. A few shots later, we come back to the resolution of her questions: "I guess what got me here was a leak, a broken barrier of latex" (Dane and Rebelo, 2019). This time, her arm appears on screen and gets ripped off. Then, her spine, and her tummy get the same treatment. Colorful strings appear in the cavities created by the shredded paper which represents her body parts, but also in an anatomical image of a womb. The shredded paper suggests the physical and emotional scratches caused to her by the event, whereas the moving strings look like veins boiling on the black and white paper as the new life in her womb. This take is much more experimental than what Eisenstein was describing in Disney's worlds, but it has the same purpose of trying to visually explain a trauma by expanding one's body in a visual manner.

Martina does not create a parallel between two worlds, but she involves her audience directly in a convention with an impossible world: a claustrophobic space made from a cube she calls her home, to inside her stomach, and again to the cube. The film is inspired by the ancient belief that food causes pleasure by touch and not by taste. In this film, Martina chooses to sexualize the egg she had to swallow and its digestion. Its trip from being swallowed to the stomach, where Martina feels that the egg is reproducing itself and where she lets it "die," brings forward a new way of seeing food and the relationship to it. Scarpelli paints a portrait of the healing process through relapse. In her words, "Optimism is crucial. Relapses are part of the process. Relapses taught me balance and measure. I now know when to stop. Yes still, sometimes I don't. Relapses taught me forgiveness

as well” (Ong, 2019). Scarpelli creates a world full of symbols where the egg, this round and “nutritive” form, the opposite of the perfection she is looking for, becomes a sexual fetish. Eisenstein’s plasmacity can be seen all across this extremely personal and intimate sensorial portrait of anorexia. The cube itself, where the character lives—“back then, my house was a cube” (Scarpelli, 2018)—changes its volume, becomes heavy, duplicates, crushes, entangles. Her home could be seen as the illness itself, and so the illness gets a visual representation against which she retaliates by means of following the eating rules. In this framework, the egg receives an almost mythical value, and she swallows it. But the egg, which Martina refers to as *him* and not as *it*, comes to life—“life eating life” (Scarpelli, 2018)—and therefore has to be killed again. As the egg falls into her stomach, Scarpelli offers us another instance of plasmacity. The organs inside are fluid, they flow, they dive in water and juices, digest, and fatten, depicting yet another way of expanding one’s body’s possibilities in relation to a traumatic experience.

Conclusions

Analysing Disney’s animations, Soviet filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein identified the use of animation to elongate a character’s limbs as plasmacity. With this paper, I set out to discover how plasmacity is used in relation to certain corporal traumata nowadays. To do so, I have conducted two interviews. One with Kira Dane and Katelyn Rebelo, the co-directors of *Mizuko (Water Child)*, and one with Martina Scarpelli, the director of *Egg*.

There is a fundamental difference in how the three directors approached the process of filmmaking. Whereas Kira Dane and Katelyn Rebelo saw it as a personal journey, Martina Scarpelli took it more as a process of creating a product by constantly keeping the audience in her mind as the receiver of her work of art. However, all of them use plasmacity in animation in order to visualize their corporal traumata and expand their own bodies beyond objective reality.

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Filmography

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2. *Egg* (2018) Directed by Martina Scarpelli. [Short Documentary Film]. Miyu Productions and Latelove Productions.

Laura Pop is an award-winning animation filmmaker. She graduated from UNATC where she directed her first film, *Monster*, a coming-of-age story about a girl who sees her family as a monster. She then worked with Belgian studio Camera-etc, where she directed her second short, *Miroir*, depicting the voice in our head that constantly disagrees with us. In the following years, she created *Death*, an artistic documentary about how we see death; *Atriums, ventricles*, a microfilm about the 2020 quarantine; and *Fish (If you live in the way of the ocean, you have to eat the ocean)*, an experimental documentary about Taiwanese fishers. Her films have travelled across the world at festivals such as Ji.hlava, Anifilm, Sediciorto, or Animation Nights New York, and got numerous prizes including *Best Romanian Short* at Animest and the *Grand Prix* at TIFF's local competition. She has designed and has been implementing Animest's Animation Incubator program since its launch in 2020, and she has been invited to organize workshops and talks by various festivals and animation programs. Her interest in animation films as trauma narratives led her to her current PhD for which she received a Fulbright Scholarship at Arizona State University.