# THE THAUMATROPE AS A TEXTUAL OPERATOR IN SLEEPY HOLLOW AND THE WONDER

**ENRIC BURGOS** 

#### **INTRODUCTION**

In 1999, Tim Burton released Sleepy Hollow, his personal adaptation of Washington Irving's well-known horror story. The film transports us to the late 18th century and immerses us in the story of Ichabod Crane, a police constable from New York City who is sent to the town of Sleepy Hollow to solve the murders allegedly being perpetrated by a ghostly headless horseman. Dismissing the supernatural interpretation of events embraced by the locals, Ichabod employs scientific methods that prove insufficient to solve the mystery. With the help of Young Masbath, an orphan who wants to avenge his father's death, and the support of Katrina van Tassel, to whom he feels increasingly attracted, the investigator tries to overcome his fears, open his mind, and solve the case.

Almost a quarter of a century later, *The Wonder* (Sebastián Lelio, 2022) hit the screens. This

film tells the story of Lib Wright, an English nurse sent to an Irish village to monitor Anna O'Donnell, a girl who has allegedly survived for four months without food. Lib's scientific perspective soon clashes with the village's religious mentality, which is especially marked in the case of the girl's family. Lib and Anna get to know each other and help one another to overcome the traumatic past experiences that they have been keeping to themselves. With the aid of the local journalist Will Byrne, Lib will come up with a plan to try to save the girl's life and pursue a better future.

Based on the novel of the same name by Emma Donoghue, Lelio's film is quite faithful to the original story. However, there are a few differences between the novel and its film adaptation. Notable among these are numerous reflexive (or metacinematic) strategies not present in the original. This self-conscious layer—especially identifiable at the beginning and end of the film—

revolves around the metaleptic character of Kitty, who is given a transcendent role that she does not have in the book.

Beyond the fact that both films are adaptations of literary works that draw on the Gothic folk tale tradition and that both accurately reflect the gloomy, oppressive rural atmosphere of their source material, there are narrative parallels between Sleepy Hollow and The Wonder that become especially clear when comparing their plotlines and the character arcs of their protagonists. In both films, the main character travels from the city to the countryside to solve a mystery that will put his or her scientific worldview to the test. And in both cases, the clash between this logical outlook and the superstitious inclinations of the locals is first made evident in the protagonist's initial encounter with the village's community leaders. In these scenes, both Ichabod and Lib are depicted as unwaveringly rational, while at the same time we are given the first hints of the traumatic past experiences that explain their emotionally repressed conditions. Moreover, both characters will only make progress in the accomplishment of their respective missions when they come to terms with their own past and open themselves up to a personal transformation with the help of a character who awakens their capacity to understand, trust, and love. The resolution of both mysteries is thus contingent upon reconciling the two conflicting worldviews, and also upon the protagonists overcoming their inner struggles. And in both cases the story ends with the protagonist embarking on a new life with the character they became close to in the village, along with a child who, although not theirs, ends up forming part of a new family with them.

In addition to these and other less crucial similarities, both films are notable for the repeated appearance of—as well as indirect allusions to—the motif of the thaumatrope.¹ The visual and narrative recurrence of this optical gadget at different key moments of each film invites us to

ALTHOUGH THE LITERATURE ON OPTICAL DEVICES, SPECTACLES, AND TOYS IS ABUNDANT AND THEY HAVE BEEN STUDIED FROM DIFFERENT DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES WITH A DIVERSE RANGE OF APPROACHES, THERE IS VERY LITTLE RESEARCH TO DATE THAT TAKES THE PERSPECTIVE OF FILM ANALYSIS TO CONSIDER THE REPRESENTATION OF THESE GADGETS IN CINEMA

consider its role as a textual operator connecting various basic elements of the plot and contributes to the creation of new meanings. The objective of this article is therefore to identify and compare the rhetorical and symbolic functions of the depiction of the thaumatrope in Sleepy Hollow and The Wonder, emphasising its contribution to the main parallels mentioned above. To this end, after a description of the thaumatrope and its depiction in cinema, an analysis will be offered of the scenes in both films in which it is present or referred to. The procedure adopted for this study is thus similar to Zunzunegui's methodological approach of film microanalysis (1996: 15), involving the examination of small fragments of a film in order to study its main constituent elements in condensed form. The exploration of these scenes is also informed by the analytical model proposed by Marzal and Tarín, and especially by their suggestions concerning the descriptive-interpretative phase of this model (2007: 16-17). This article thus focuses mainly on narrative issues—and more specifically on the protagonists' character arcs and the development of the plots and subplots-without dismissing the usefulness of considering expressive resources, especially the components of the shot and the relationship between sound and image.

# THE THAUMATROPE AND ITS DEPICTION ON SCREEN

The thaumatrope is an optical toy consisting of a circular disk with two strings attached to each side. The two sides of the disk bear images that complement each other in some way, one of the most common pairs of motifs being a bird on one side and a cage on the other. By twirling both strings with the fingers, the disk spins rapidly to the point of creating an optical illusion whereby the two images seem to merge into one. As is often the case with optical toys of the 19th century, there is some debate over the author and exact date of its invention, although John Ayrton Paris, who presented it publicly in 1824, is usually given credit for it. It was Paris who decided to name it the thaumatrope, a neologism resulting from the combination of the Greek words thauma (astonishment, wonder, miracle) and tropos (turn, direction, course), which would subsequently be translated into English as "wonder-turner". The name of course refers to the astonishment caused by the toy when it is turned.

The thaumatrope belongs to the long list of inventions preceding the development of the cinematograph that have commonly—and almost exclusively—been considered precursors to the motion picture (El-Nouty, 1978; Hecht, 1993; Frutos, 1996; Zotti, 1998). More recently, however, there have been a number of authors who have eschewed this historicist approach and focus instead on the study of these devices in their own right. One such author is Tom Gunning (2012), who dedicated a whole article exclusively to the thaumatrope, some of the most relevant ideas of which will be considered below.

In his article, Gunning (2012: 497-498) seeks to demonstrate the key role that the perceptual experience offered by the thaumatrope played in the new way of producing and viewing images that emerged in the Victorian era. Gunning argues that this "philosophical toy" offered a new form

of thauma by adding the possibility of transformation to the conception of the image: in contrast to the traditional static image of the painting, the thaumatrope points to the labile identity of the image and "embodies the power and uncertainty of thauma" (Gunning, 2012: 504). What it produces is not so much an image of movement as an image that involves an optical transformation, an image for which change is crucial, whose nature is not fixed (Gunning, 2012: 506). The protean nature of this image makes us feel that we are surpassing our ordinary boundaries, seeing in a different way, glimpsing another possible world (Gunning, 2012: 512). The thaumatrope thus confronts us with an image that does not strictly correspond to anything in reality and makes us believe we see something that does not exist (Gunning, 2021: 508).

In consonance with Crary's (1990: 106) observation that the thaumatrope exposes the rupture between perception and its object, Gunning (2012: 507) stresses that the special image created by this philosophical toy arises only as a result of the interaction between viewer and device. The image of the thaumatrope should therefore be understood not as a representation but rather as an event, as a process that requires the viewer's participation, as in fact this image is nowhere but in the viewer's perception (Gunning, 2012: 510-511). In relation to this viewer-device interaction, it is also worth noting that Gunning characterises the thaumatrope—as well as other inventions of the

FOR A FEW SECONDS, THANKS TO THE COMBINATION OF THE SPINNING THAUMATROPE AND THE CINEMATIC TECHNIQUE OF THE LAP DISSOLVE, THE NURSE'S FACE APPEARS FRAMED IN THE DISK OF THE TOY, TRAPPED INSIDE THE CAGE

time—as intensely self-reflective. Its simplicity makes its perceptual and phenomenological paradoxes—that is, its visual trick—more transparent and, through an experience of wonder, draws our attention to how its effect is generated (Gunning, 2012: 498, 512).

Although the literature on optical devices, spectacles, and toys is abundant and they have been studied from different disciplinary perspectives with a diverse range of approaches, there is very little research to date that takes the perspective of film analysis to consider the representation of these gadgets in cinema. González de Arce (2018: 119-120) identifies this research gap and aims to correct it with an article that analyses various films, in addition to providing an exhaustive list of motion pictures produced between 1903 and 2017 that feature inventions of this kind. Her study offers a pertinent—and necessary—overview of the question but is understandably limited by two conditioning factors. On the one hand, the fact that she considers five case studies-including Sleepy Hollow-prevents her from offering a detailed analysis of any of the scenes or of the films in general. On the other, her studies disregard certain rhetorical and symbolic functions of the devices depicted because her analysis is aimed primarily at confirming her hypothesis that cinematic depictions of optical toys, apparatuses and spectacles invented prior to the cinematograph fulfil a metafictional function (González de Arce, 2018: 120).

The rest of this article offers a comparative analysis of the various functions of the thaumatrope as a textual operator in *Sleepy Hollow* and *The Wonder*. As it is a relatively recent release, scholarly output on *The Wonder* is limited, and none of the studies that have been published so far (Fuentes, 2022; Price, 2023; Hanifah, Hkikmat & Nurholis, 2023) consider the significance of the thaumatrope's depiction in the film. *Sleepy Hollow*, on the other hand, has received considerable scholarly attention, and so this article will occa-

sionally refer to and establish contrasts with studies—mainly Siegel (2013), Benton (2014), Parks (2016) and the recently published book by Cheron (2023)—that explore the role played by the optical toy in the film to varying degrees.

#### **SLEEPY HOLLOW**

The first appearance of the thaumatrope in Burton's film takes place just after the headless horseman chases Ichabod through the forest and throws the jack-o-lantern in his hand at his head. The impact causes the protagonist to fall off his horse and hit the ground. We then discover, with Ichabod, that the rider was actually Brom, Katrina's suitor, who disguised himself as the dreaded ghost in order to taunt the investigator. Relieved, Ichabod lies back on the ground and closes his eyes. A dissolve then plunges us into a dreamlike setting with fairytale music and a treatment of light and colour that contrasts with the gloomy atmosphere of the film so far. In this scene, a very young Ichabod approaches his mother, who is spinning around blindfolded in a garden while pink flower petals fall gently from the trees. His mother kisses him, and he gives her a bouquet. Bookmarked by two very fast fades to white is the fleeting image of a red door, while the fairytale music is interrupted by a menacing motif. We then see Ichabod's mother throwing the bouquet onto the flames of a fireplace and drawing something in the ashes with a stick. Another flash—again, between two fades and with a haunting soundshows a medium close-up shot in black and white of Ichabod's grim-faced father approaching the fireplace. The next shot shows little Ichabod in his bed, frightened by a storm. His mother spins a thaumatrope (Figure 1) that blends images of a red cardinal and of a cage, and the boy smiles calmly at it. Ichabod's reverie ends with another flash of his intimidating father and some very brief shots-of the aforementioned door opening and of the interior of the room behind it—juxtapo-



Figure 1

sed in a vertiginous montage accompanied by the sound of thunder.

The thaumatrope is presented here as closely associated with the maternal figure and as a distraction that provides Ichabod with a refuge from his fears. Moreover, this scene offers the first hint of the crucial weight of the past on the protagonist. Ichabod's first experience with the supernatural in the town—even if it was not real—brings him face-to-face in a dream with the trauma that could be described as keeping him caged. Metaphorically, the thaumatrope's images of the red cardinal and the cage allude respectively to the protagonist and the prison of his trauma.<sup>2</sup> They also represent the liberating journey that will characterise his experience in Sleepy Hollow, already suggested at the beginning of the film when Ichabod himself releases the cardinal he has in his aviary just before he travels to the village. At the same time, the opening shot of this dream sequence recalls the scene in which the investigator first meets Katrina while she is playing blind man's buff, thereby establishing a connection between the protagonist's mother and the young woman that will prove important for the resolution of Ichabod's inner conflict.

After accepting—albeit with reservations the book of spells and charms that Katrina gives him, Ichabod accompanies her to the ruins of the house where she lived as a child. When the young woman approaches the fireplace and—in another sign of her connection with the investigator's mother-traces circular motifs on the floor, Ichabod reacts with a shock that is underscored by the music. The couple hears the chirping of a bird, and when the scene cuts to the shot of a cardinal perched on a tree branch Katrina's exclaims: "A cardinal! My favourite! I would love to have a tame one, but I wouldn't have the heart to cage him."3 Ichabod pulls his mother's thaumatrope from his pocket and shows it to Katrina (Figure 2) and replies: "Well then, I have something for

you. A cardinal on one side, and an empty cage. And now..." Ichabod spins the toy and a frontal detail shot of the object shows us the optical illusion. Katrina exclaims in amazement: "You can do magic! Teach me!" With a certain air of superiority—emphasised by slight differences in the vertical angles used in the shot-reverse shot series—Ichabod explains: "It is no magic. It is what we call optics: separate pictures which become one in the spinning... It is truth, but truth is not always appearance."

As Benton suggests (2014: 125), the thaumatrope can be understood in this scene as representing the binary thinking of an Ichabod who separates the head from the heart, the bird from the cage, one side of the disk from the other. Without contradicting Benton, and taking into account that this dichotomous view conforms to-and is part of—the epistemological model in which Ichabod takes refuge, this optical two-sided toy could be conceived of here as an illustration of the two ways of understanding the world that the scene brings into dialogue, which constitute one of the key underlying themes of the whole film: on the one hand, Katrina's emotional and magical tendency (which would converge with that of Ichabod's mother), and on the other, the rational, scientific-and, as Plate (2000: 3) suggests, even fanatical—approach embraced by the protagonist. The conflict between magic and science is reflected Ichabod's last remark—with its clear Cartesian resonances, which González de Arce (2018: 127) considers the film's hermeneutic key-underscoring his desire to distinguish between truth and appearances.4 With this remark he dismisses the intrinsic interest of the instant when the spinning of the thaumatrope combines truth and appearance and, by extension, evades the opportunity for the magical and scientific gazes to converge in order to glimpse other possible truths.

The optical toy appears for the third time in the film after Ichabod witnesses the decapitation of Magistrate Philipse by the headless horseman.



Figure 2

The encounter with the ghost (this time, the real one) leaves the investigator in a state of shock. Cowering in his bed with the bedsheet covering part of his face (like the child Ichabod during the storm), an extremely disturbed Ichabod shares his disturbing experience with Katrina, her father, and Young Masbath. The police constable fades away and we enter another dream scene that underlines young Ichabod's intimate bond with his mother, reveals the friction between his mother's witchcraft and his father's religious fanaticism, and repeats the reference to the threat lurking behind the red door. Upon regaining consciousness, Ichabod paces his bedroom as he ponders and compulsively twists the string of his thaumatrope. Finally, he leaves the room and informs those present of his decision to overcome his fears and pursue the phantasmal criminal.

The contact with the supernatural has once again dredged up repressed memories in Ichabod's dreams, while at the same time provoking a crisis of faith in his scientific procedures. This sequence is a turning point in at least two interrelated ways: first, it shows us how the event challenges Ichabod's exclusively rational attitude and opens the door for him to accept the value of the spiritual world he associates with Katrina and his mother; and second, it vests Ichabod's use of the thaumatrope with an ambiguity very much in

keeping with the metamorphosis he is beginning to undergo. In this sense, it could be argued that he continues to cling to the toy as an object that assures him of the truth of the still images on each side of the disk, just as he clings to the analytical mentality that keeps him safe from what cannot be logically explained and calms his anxiety like the gadget did in his childhood. But at the same time, there is a suggestion that Ichabod is drawing closer to what the spinning thaumatrope can offer him: the possibility of combining—for the benefit of himself and of the investigation—the scientific with that which is beyond reason.

Shortly after this scene, Ichabod's progressive transformation will be confirmed. First, when the investigator and Young Masbath venture into the forest, the red cardinal killed by the witch suggests the end of one Ichabod and the impending birth of a new one.5 Later, Ichabod's confession to Katrina reveals the depth of his transformation and also exposes the connections between the subplots and their relationship with the main plot. This confession takes place after Ichabod's direct confrontation with the headless horseman and the subsequent dream sequence that completes the recovery of his repressed memory, revealing what really happened on the other side of the red door: the murder of Ichabod's mother by his father. Ichabod wakes up startled and melts into an embrace with Katrina, to whom he explains his childhood trauma and how it undermined his faith. When Katrina asks him what he believes in now, Ichabod replies: "Sense and reason, cause and consequence." The protagonist's traumatic experience took away his faith in the spiritual (the religious, the magical) and propelled him to place it instead in science, in a hyperrationality that Benton suggests functions "as a self-defense mechanism rooted in powerful emotion" (2014: 125). Once the cage of the past is opened, Ichabod will be able to take flight. However, his words to Katrina in this scene suggest that the moment of his release has not yet come: "I should not have

come to this place where my rational mind has been so controverted by the spirit world..."

Continuing with his investigation, Ichabod concludes that Baltus Van Tassel, Katrina's father, controls the headless horseman and has been ordering the executions. Katrina tries to convince him of his mistake, but the constable is pinioned by his chain of reasoning and distrusts the young woman, believing that she has used her spells to prevent him from proving her father's guilt. When Baltus is decapitated by the horseman, Ichabod gives up on his investigation and decides to leave Sleepy Hollow. In the carriage that is taking him back home, he begins turning his thaumatrope with a thoughtful look. Through the window, he sees the supposed corpse of Lady van Tassel (who, Baltus had claimed before he himself was killed, had also been decapitated by the horseman) being taken to the morgue. He keeps turning his thaumatrope. Then suddenly, he takes out the book Katrina gave him and realises that the young woman's spell was not intended to cover up for her father, but to protect Ichabod himself from danger. He orders the driver to turn around with the intention of solving the case at last.

Ichabod's thoughts with the optical toy in his hands seem to take a different turn this time. While we might interpret that he is using his powers of deduction to consider a different hypothesis when he sees the body being taken to the morgue, his sudden realisation while still playing with the thaumatrope moments later suggests that what guides him is intuition. And ultimately, what makes him glimpse another possible truth—an alternative answer to the mystery—and turn back change direction—is his faith in Katrina and her good intentions. The thaumatrope is no longer a refuge in the cage of reason, but a trigger for a kind of thinking that is capable of combining the logical and the emotional, the scientific and the extra-scientific. This last appearance of the thaumatrope thus entails the end of the inner conflict that has afflicted Ichabod ever since his traumatic

childhood experience. With Katrina's help, he will be able to solve the case once and for all and overcome his past, taking a new direction in his life, together with Katrina and Young Masbath.

#### THE WONDER

The first half of *The Wonder* plunges us into the mystery that the nurse Lib will have to unravel. It introduces us to Anna, a girl who has allegedly survived for months without having eaten any food, and to her family, as well as to Lib herself. The opening sequences highlight the clash between the nurse's scientific outlook and the superstition that reigns in the village, while also offering clues to another mystery, concerning Lib's past. Will, a journalist sent to the village to cover the strange case of the fasting girl, seeks Lib's support and tries to extract information from her. The growing closeness between the two culminates with a se-

xual encounter, and the nurse's subsequent confession to him that she lost her baby and was abandoned by her husband. From that moment on, Lib and Will work together to crack the mystery surrounding Anna.

In the middle of the film, just after the scene of Lib's confession, Will is able to meet with Anna with the nurse's help. He walks with both of them through the countryside and gives the girl a thaumatrope. Following Will's instructions, Anna twists the string between her thumbs and forefingers. Watching as the images of the bird and the cage merge, the little girl asks: "Is it trapped or is it free?" Will

replies: "That's for you to decide. Inside, outside. Inside, outside..." The girl continues to spin the thaumatrope while repeating "in, out, in, out..." These words serve as an anchor for the image of the spinning thaumatrope and reinforce the diverse but interconnected meanings that the references to the optical toy convey at different moments in the film. In this particular scene, the thaumatrope serves the purpose of representing the girl's imprisonment in the religious narrative that her family and community have built around her miraculous fasting. The fact that the object is also known in English as a "wonder-turner" and that Anna herself is referred to as "the wonder" supports this interpretation and also points to the possibility of turning-changing, escaping from the cage—that is offered to Anna and, as discussed below. to Lib as well.

The thaumatrope acts as a textual operator that also illustrates the parallel situation in which







Figure 4

the nurse finds herself, shackled to a painful past from which she has yet to be freed. The transition into the next scene is particularly significant in this respect, as the scene discussed above ends with a detail shot of the gadget spinning and displaying its optical illusion. While we hear the girl repeating "in, out," the image of the thaumatrope dissolves into a medium close-up shot of Lib in the centre of the frame. For a few seconds, thanks to the combination of the spinning thaumatrope and the cinematic technique of the lap dissolve, the nurse's face appears framed in the disk of the toy, trapped inside the cage (Figure 3).

A few days later, Anna's deterioration is evident. She is no longer able to walk, and she lies in bed, suffering from severe coughing fits. Lib examines her and looks into her eyes. Anna returns her gaze, seeming to understand the seriousness of her condition from the nurse's concerned expression. The shot closes in slowly, leaving Lib out of focus and focusing on Anna, who turns her gaze to the thaumatrope in her hands and begins to squirm (Figure 4). The girl repeats again "in, out, in, out," seeming to suggest that despite her unwillingness to renounce the act of faith that her fasting represents, she would like to reverse her situation. But this will not happen without Lib's help, and that help will not be effective unless the nurse can form an empathetic bond with the girl.

After nightfall, the dialogue between the two about the circumstances of Anna's fasting reflects the clash between the rational perspective that the nurse obstinately clings to and the blind faith that the girl places in the family story:

LIB: I do understand that your mother spat chewedup food...

ANNA: Manna from heaven! LIB: ... from her mouth...

ANNA: From God!

LIB: ... in order to sustain you.

ANNA: Manna! LIB: Food. Anna. Food.

The rapid-fire exchange that brings these opposing worldviews up against each other resembles the two different sides of the disk of a thaumatrope at rest. Only movement can reconcile them and turn the verbal exchange into a convers(at) ion—or more precisely, a conversation that makes conversion possible. Lib begins to achieve this movement when she gives in and agrees to speak Anna's language: "What if God could provide manna again?" Anna sees her demand for understanding satisfied and opens up to Lib. With her euphemistic religious rhetoric, the girl explains to the nurse that her fasting is meant to save her deceased brother from hell, which he has been condemned to because he sexually abused her. Lib then begins to be able to combine her analytical thinking with a more sympathetic gaze facilitated by her feelings for Anna. This change of perspective will enable the nurse to imagine an alternative story that will be convincing enough to Anna to bring her out of her cage, while also allowing Lib to free herself. Valuing stories and believing in their transformative power, the nurse will design a plan to flee the village with Anna and Will, assume new identities together, and start "a new story and a new life."

The film's last shot opens with the newly formed family eating in a dining room with other diners on a ship to Sydney. The girl looks at Anna and Will, smiles and raises her spoon to her mouth, confirming that Lib's story of death and resurrection has resonated with her. A waiter passes behind them both and a tracking shot follows him, continuing on where the waiter stops and revealing that the dining room to be on a film set. As was the case at the very beginning of the film, the shift from one narrative level to another occurs within a single shot. The camera keeps moving and the actress who plays the role of Kitty in the story—and who has also served as the narrator—appears on screen wearing contemporary clothes, thereby revealing the split nature of her character and her metaleptic status. Once she is in

the centre of the shot, the camera stops tracking and zooms very gradually in on her. The music stops and as she stares at the camera she utters the words: "In, out, in, out..." Then a ghostly sound coincides with a quick fade to black that effectively ejects us from the film.

The film ends by reinforcing its questioning of the boundary between the diegetic and the extra-diegetic, while also tempting us with the illusion of treating the extra-diegetic as extra-fictional. Without the need to appear on screen, the thaumatrope is invoked by the words uttered by the woman. The reference to the optical toy, which in the other cases helped us to understand the complexities of Lib and Anna's situation, serves here to explain the relationship the film seeks to establish with us. Thus, while previously the fusion of images triggered by the spinning thaumatrope was associated with the possibility of combining the scientific and religious approaches to life, this last reflexive twist now prompts us to value what unites cinema and reality above what separates them. After all, as the narrator reminds us at the beginning of the film, we, like the characters, "are nothing without stories."

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

Through the analysis of certain key scenes and their contextualisation in the film to which they belong, this article has explored the rhetorical and symbolic functions fulfilled by the depictions of the thaumatrope in *Sleepy Hollow* and *The Wonder*. As has been shown here, in each of these films this optical toy acts as a textual operator that helps connect the main plot with the subplots in a suggestive way. These conclusions summarise the results of the two case studies in order to highlight the similarities between the three main functions of this textual operator in the two films.

Firstly, the thaumatrope provides the metaphors used in both films to illustrate the personal situation of their respective protagonists. In this THE REFERENCE TO THE OPTICAL TOY, WHICH IN THE OTHER CASES HELPED US TO UNDERSTAND THE COMPLEXITIES OF LIB AND ANNA'S SITUATION, SERVES HERE TO EXPLAIN THE RELATIONSHIP THE FILM SEEKS TO ESTABLISH WITH US

case, the importance of the appearance of the thaumatrope lies not so much in the peculiarity of the optical device as in the value of the images on its two sides—the bird and the cage—for defining the character. In both films, the protagonists' painful past is a prison that impedes their progress. The masterful dissolve that places Lib's face inside the cage of the thaumatrope is a graphic representation of this. Sleepy Hollow, on the other hand, focuses more on identifying Ichabod with the red cardinal motif repeated throughout the film. It is also worth noting that in Lelio's film the images of the cage and the bird also serve to represent Anna's circumstances.

Secondly, the repeated references to the two sides of the disk—conceived statically as distinct elements—emphasise the conflict between the rational and the extrarational that both films associate with their protagonists. This conflict is made explicit by Ichabod himself when he shows both sides of the thaumatrope to Katrina in order to make a clear distinction between science and magic. The Wonder contains a similar moment shortly after Anna is shown playing with her thaumatrope in bed, in her dialogue with Lib in which Anna's religious use of language clashes with Lib's determination to give a rational translation to her words.

The protagonists of both films reach a turning point where they begin to open up to the conciliatory movement of the thaumatrope (after Ichabod's shock following his encounter with the ghost in *Sleepy Hollow* and after Lib learns of the abuse suffered by Anna in *The Wonder*). The

constable and the nurse both glimpse the value of the other side of the disk—of magic, or of the religious story—while at the same time taking the first steps to overcome their internal struggles. Indeed, the refuge that both take in an exclusive allegiance to reason is presented to us (albeit more veiled in Lib's case than in Ichabod's) as the result of wounds as yet unhealed. The outcomes of Ichabod's and Lib's stories are marked by what the spinning thaumatrope—in its dynamic conception—can offer them: the possibility of seeing in a different way, of glimpsing another possible world and of being aware of their participation in that world.

Finally, the appearances of the thaumatrope encourage a metacinematic reading of both films. However, while in *Sleepy Hollow* the thaumatrope constitutes the basis of this interpretation, in The Wonder it functions as an element that operates in conjunction with the film's various reflexive strategies. It is important to stress that the possibility of a metacinematic interpretation does not depend exclusively on the fact that the optical toy can be considered one of cinema's precursors. The self-reflexive character of the thaumatrope itself and the way this is played with in both films cannot be ignored. Thus, just as the films urge the spectator, together with Ichabod and Lib, to reconcile the two different sides of the disk (the rational and the extrarational), they also urge us to reconsider the distinction made between cinema and reality. After all, cinema is both science and magic, or alternatively, both science and storytelling.

In keeping with the messages they convey, both these films try to engage us emotionally rather than intellectually. By moving us, it could be argued, they invite us into the transformative movement of the thaumatrope, the spinning that makes us aware of our role in the film and of the fact that without our subjective perception there is no truth to hold on to; the movement that gives us the opportunity to question our beliefs and our own narratives of the past, present and future.

#### **NOTES**

- 1 As Manning (2016: 195) and Cheron (2023: 79) point out, the appearance of the thaumatrope in *Sleepy Hollow* is in fact anachronistic, given that the film is set in 1799.
- 2 Siegel (2013: 209) makes a similar observation, arguing that the caged bird implies a powerful image of Ichabod's childhood relationship with his mother and his identification with her subjectivity against the sadistic torturing father.
- 3 In light of the aforementioned association of the cardinal with the protagonist, Katrina's words emphasise the attraction she feels for Ichabod and his need for liberation.
- 4 The conflict between truth and appearances is associated with the importance *Sleepy Hollow* places on the act of seeing in the studies by Parks (2016: 66), Plate (2000: 4) and Cheron (2023: 163).
- 5 This is in line with Cheron's interpretation (2023: 231).

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# THE THAUMATROPE AS A TEXTUAL OPERATOR IN SLEEPY HOLLOW AND THE WONDER

#### Abstract

This article aims to establish and compare the rhetorical and symbolic functions of the representation of the thaumatrope in *Sleepy Hollow* (Tim Burton, 1999) and *The Wonder* (Sebastián Lelio, 2022). In doing so, and after some brief reflections on the optical toy and its representation in cinema, we focus on the analysis of the scenes of the two films in which the thaumatrope appears. The results of the two case studies allow us to identify the three functions that the textual operator performs in both *Sleepy Hollow* and *The Wonder*: 1) to provide the metaphor that illustrates the personal situation of the protagonists, 2) to emphasize the conflict between the rational and the extrarrational and 3) to promote the metacinematographic approach to both films.

#### Key words

Thaumatrope; *Sleepy Hollow; The Wonder;* Film Analysis; Comparative Analysis; Tim Burton; Optical toys.

#### Author

Enric Antoni Burgos Ramírez (València, 1976) holds bachelor's degrees in Philosophy (1998) and in Audiovisual Communication (2002) from the University of Valencia and a PhD in Communication Science from the Jaume I University (2017). He is a teaching assistant at University of Valencia and a member of the R&D group Mediaflows. He has authored a book, numerous book chapters and several articles in scientific journals like Fotocinema, Communication & Society, Cinema. Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image, Área Abierta or Comunicación y Hombre. His research interests include subversive cinema and TV series as well as the thought of Stanley Cavell. Contact: enric.burgos@uv.es.

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# EL TAUMATROPO COMO OPERADOR TEXTUAL EN SLEEPY HOLLOW Y EL PRODIGIO

#### Resumen

El presente artículo se propone establecer y comparar las funciones retóricas y simbólicas de la representación del taumatropo en *Sleepy Hollow* (Tim Burton, 1999) y *El prodigio* (The Wonder, Sebastián Lelio, 2022). Para ello, y tras unas breves reflexiones sobre el juguete óptico y su representación en el cine, nos centramos en el análisis de las escenas de las dos películas en las que aparece el taumatropo. Los resultados de los dos estudios de caso permiten identificar las tres funciones que el operador textual cumple tanto en *Sleepy Hollow* como en *El prodigio*: 1) suministrar la metáfora que ilustra la situación personal de los protagonistas, 2) enfatizar el conflicto entre lo racional y lo extrarracional y 3) promover el acercamiento en clave metacinematográfica a ambos films.

#### Palabras clave

Taumatropo; *Sleepy Hollow; El prodigio;* Análisis fílmico; Análisis comparativo; Tim Burton; Juguetes ópticos.

#### Autor

Enric Antoni Burgos Ramírez (València, 1976) es licenciado en Filosofía (1998) y en Comunicación Audiovisual (2002) por la Universidad de Valencia y doctor en Ciencias de la Comunicación por la Universidad Jaume I (2017). Es profesor asociado en la Universitat de València y miembro del grupo de I+D Mediaflows. Es autor de un libro, numerosos capítulos de libro y diversos artículos en revistas científicas como Fotocinema, Communication & Society, Cinema. Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image, Área Abierta o Comunicación y Hombre. Sus intereses de investigación incluyen las desviaciones del modelo hegemónico en cine y series de televisión así como el pensamiento de Stanley Cavell. Contacto: enric.burgos@uv.es.

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