Dimensional crossover and driven interfaces in disordered ferromagnets

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We study the depinning transition of driven interfaces in thin ferromagnetic films driven by external magnetic fields. Approaching the transition point the correlation length increases with decreasing driving. If the correlation length becomes of the order of the film thickness a crossover to two dimensional behavior occurs. From the corresponding scaling analysis we determine the exponents characterizing the transition of the three dimensional system.

I. INTRODUCTION

We study interface motion in the random-field Ising model. In this model an interface separates regions of opposite spin orientation. A magnetic field forces the interface to move whereas this motion is hindered by the disorder. At zero temperature a permanent interface motion is found if the driving field $H$ exceeds a critical threshold $H_c$ determined by the disorder. The vanishing of the interface velocity at $(H = H_c \mid T = 0)$ is in general referred to as a continuous phase transition \[\square\]. Considering three dimensional systems, for instance, the interface velocity $v$ vanishes at the so-called pinning/depinning transition according to $v(T = 0) \sim (H - H_c)^{3/2}$ and $v(H = H_c) \sim T^{1/2}$, respectively (see e.g. \[\square\]). The correlation length diverges algebraically: $\xi \sim (H - H_c)^{-1/2}$ \[\square\].

This pinning/depinning transition can be understood within the framework of the renormalization group theory (see e.g. \[\square\] and references therein). Within this theory it is found that the order parameter of a continuous phase transition is a generalized homogenous function of, in general, several thermodynamic parameters \[\square\]. In many cases temperature and magnetic field belong to these parameters. Additional parameters may cause crossovers. Examples are spatial anisotropies in Heisenberg models \[\square\], dipolar effects \[\square\], or restrictions due to geometry like in thin films (see e.g. \[\square\] and references therein). In the case of thin films the system behaves like a three dimensional system only as long as the correlation length $\xi$ is small as compared to the film thickness $l$. Approaching the transition point the component $\xi_l$ of the correlation length perpendicular to the film layers is bounded by the film thickness. If $\xi_l/l$ becomes of the order of unity a crossover from three to two dimensional behavior occurs. Experiments which determine domain wall velocities in magnetic films typically image the magnetic state of a sample by looking onto the sample using the magneto-optical polar Kerr effect and a CCD camera \[\square\]. If the film is sufficiently thin it is possible to obtain the interface position from snapshots generated by the CCD camera and to calculate the interface velocity from the time dependence of this position. This was done in \[\square\] where a Pt(3.4 nm)/Co(0.5 nm)/Pt(6.5 nm) film with perpendicular anisotropy was investigated. Due to the film thickness the authors saw evidence to neglect the height dependence of the interface position and to treat the interface not as a two dimensional interface but as a one dimensional line. With increasing film thickness, however, this assumption fails because then the correlation length drops below the film thickness causing a crossover to three dimensional behavior. This scenario is investigated in the present paper in the context of driven interfaces in the random-field Ising model.

II. SIMULATION

The RFIM is defined by the Hamiltonian

$$\mathcal{H} = -\frac{J}{2} \sum_{\langle i,j \rangle} S_i S_j - H \sum_i S_i - \sum_i h_i S_i \, .$$

(1)

The first term is the exchange interaction of neighboring spins and the sum is taken over all pairs of them ($S_i = \pm 1$). The second term specifies the coupling to the driving field $H$. Additionally, the spins are coupled to independent quenched local random-fields $h_i$ characterized by their probability density $p(h_i)$ given by

$$p(h_i) = \begin{cases} (2\Delta)^{-1} & \text{for } |h_i| < \Delta \\ 0 & \text{otherwise}. \end{cases}$$

(2)

We use a random-sequential update with transition probabilities according to a heat bath algorithm in the limit of zero temperature. Since in the vicinity of the critical point finite-size effects may not only occur due to the finite film thickness but also due to the other finite extensions of our system, we calculated the interface velocities for each film thickness $l$ varying the other extensions of the system. For sufficient large extensions we observed no finite-size effects from which we concluded that the data presented in the following correspond within negligible errors to those of an infinite extended film of thickness $l$. Note that for this analysis the extensions of the system must be increased if one approaches the critical point. But this increase requires an increase in CPU time which restricts therefore the data to values not too close to the critical point. We investigate system sizes of up to $l \times L^2 = 8 \times 1024^2$ unit cells of a body centered cubic lattice.

We apply periodic boundary conditions in the directions parallel to the film and antiperiodic ones perpendicular to the interface (see \[\square\]). The interface moves
along the [100] direction of the bcc lattice resulting in a finite interface velocity for any driving field \( H \neq 0 \) in the absence of disorder. The same behavior is found, for instance, on simple cubic lattices with an interface moving along the diagonal direction of the lattice \( \Delta = 3 \) and on diamond lattices with the interface moving along the [100] direction. The schematic phase diagram in \( \Delta = 3 \) applies to all of these cases. In particular, a continuous phase transition is found for \( \Delta > J \) as long as nucleation does not occur. This is the case for \( \Delta = 3 \), which turns out to be a convincing choice because then the dimensional crossover is numerically accessible for a broad range of system sizes.

III. RESULTS

In our simulations we start with an originally flat interface which is built into the system. After a transient regime the interface reaches a stationary state. In Fig. 1 we show the snapshot of an interface configuration for \( H = 1.8 \) and \( \Delta = 3.0 \). Overhangs are not displayed since they are rare and small. We obtain the interface velocity from the mean interface position \( \bar{h} \) at a given time \( t \) according to \( v = \partial \bar{h}/\partial t \). In \( \Delta = 3 \) it was argued that this velocity is a generalized homogeneous function of temperature and driving field. We generalize this ansatz to the present situation and include additionally a thickness dependence of \( v \),

\[
v = \lambda v \left( \lambda^{-1/\beta_{3d}} \eta, \lambda^{-\beta_{3d}} T, \lambda^{-a_i} l^{-1} \right).
\]

Here, \( T \) denotes the temperature and \( \eta = H - H_{c}^{3d} \) the reduced driving field. In a bulk system we recover under the assumption \( v(l^{-1} = 0) \) finite [Eq. (3)] \( v \sim T^{1/\beta_{3d}} f(\eta/T^{1/\beta_{3d}}) \) which is known to be satisfied in the RFIM \( \Delta = 2 \). In the following we consider only \( T = 0 \). Choosing \( \lambda = l^{-\beta_{3d}/\nu_{3d}} \) in Eq. (3) we obtain for the velocity the following scaling behavior:

\[
v = l^{-\beta_{3d}/\nu_{3d}} f(\eta l^{1/\nu_{3d}})
\]

with \( f(x \to \infty) \sim x^{\beta_{3d}} \). In this limit the value of \( H_{c} \) coincides with that of the bulk system. For any finite \( l \), however, \( H_{c} \) becomes \( l \) dependent and is shifted according to \( H_{c}(l) - H_{c}^{3d} \approx x^{*} l^{-1/\nu_{3d}} \) (see \( \Delta = 3 \) and references therein). Inserting this relation into Eq. (4) one finds that \( f(x) \) does not vanish at \( x = 0 \) but at a finite value \( x^{*} \).

In Fig. 2 we plot \( v(H) \) for different film thicknesses. For a comparison, we also plot velocities obtained in a three dimensional system. From the data it is evident that the curves \( v(H) \) for different film thicknesses deviate more and more from the bulk behavior with decreasing \( H \). In the corresponding region of \( H \)-values the crossover from 2 to 3-dimensional behavior occurs which thus is numerically accessible. In the crossover region the interface velocity in a film turns out to be smaller than in the bulk meaning that the threshold field \( H_{c} \) is shifted towards larger values of the driving field. Rescaling the velocities according to Eq. (4) yields the data collapse shown in Fig. 3. From the collapse it may be concluded that the scaling function \( f(x) \) [see Eq. (4)] vanishes at a value \( x^{*} > 0 \), again meaning that the threshold field is shifted towards larger values with decreasing film thickness. We obtain \( \beta_{3d} = 0.677 \pm 0.07 \) and \( H_{c}^{3d} = 1.491 \pm 0.02 \). These values coincide within the error-bars with those found in bulk systems. In this case (inset of Fig. 3) we find \( \beta_{3d} = 0.64 \pm 0.05 \) and \( H_{c}^{3d} = 1.5 \pm 0.015 \) confirming the results of the crossover scaling. From the data collapse in Fig. 3 we also obtain \( \nu_{3d} = 0.763 \pm 0.03 \). Both \( \beta_{3d} \) and \( \nu_{3d} \) coincide within the error-bars with values found on other lattices and different values of \( \Delta \) \( \Delta = 2 \). Also, they agree with the exponents of the Edwards-Wilkinson equation with quenched disorder (see e.g. \( \Delta = 2 \) and references therein). For this equation \( \beta_{QEW} \approx 0.62 \) and \( \nu_{QEW} \approx 0.77 \) was obtained by an \( \epsilon \)-expansion valid to order \( \epsilon^{2} \).

Since the interface velocity satisfies the ansatz Eq. (4)
collapse we obtain $\beta_{3d} = 0.677 \pm 0.07$, $\nu_{3d} = 0.763 \pm 0.03$ and $H^{\nu_{3d}} = 1.491 \pm 0.02$. The inset shows the interface velocities of the bulk system. We obtain $\beta_{\text{bulk}} = 0.64 \pm 0.05$ and $H^{\nu_{\text{bulk}}} = 1.5 \pm 0.015$. For small values of $\eta$ all curves join the data collapse. For sufficient large $\eta$, i.e., well above the crossover region, the scaling ansatz Eq. (1) does not hold as can be seen from the deviations of single curves from the scaling behavior.

In conclusion, we have investigated the depinning transition of a driven interface in thin films. We have found that the critical behavior is governed by the two dimensional fix-point and the corresponding exponents for any finite film thickness. The exponents obtained by the crossover scaling are in agreement with those of the Edwards-Wilkinson universality class. The scaling ansatz used to analyse our data could also be used to determine critical exponents of the depinning transition of three dimensional systems experimentally, in particular since present experimental techniques use thin films as samples [3,4]. In [3], for instance, Co$_{28}$Pt$_{72}$ alloy films were investigated with grain sizes of typically 20 nm and film thicknesses of 5...50 nm. If one naively assumes that by a variation of temperature and/or driving field it is possible to increase the correlation length from the size of the grain to the film thickness we expect the crossover scaling [Eq. (3)] to work and to yield the exponents of a three dimensional sample. Note that due to dipolar interactions these exponents need not to coincide with those of the RFIM.

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