

Imagining the Sacred: Spiritual themes in Children's Media¹

or "How Picture books Saved my Soul"

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1. Introduction

*We have all forgotten what we really are. All that we call common sense and rationality. . . only means that for certain levels of our life we forget that we have forgotten. All that we call spirit and art and ecstasy only means that for one awful instant we remember that we forget.*²

-G. K. Chesterton

*We write not only for children but also for their parents. They, too, are serious children.*³

-Isaac Bashevis Singer



Figure 1.
Yuri Norstein, *Hedgehog in the Fog* 1975
Soyuzmultfilm Studio

As a filmmaker I create visual stories. The films that I make draw heavily from my fascination with children's literature and religious faith. As an animator my greatest challenge is to capture the essence of children's picture books in my films. As a storyteller the themes that emerge in my work revolve around questions of self-discovery, creativity and belief. A recurring character in my films is *a maker at play*, usually a small boy, or boyish character, seriously engaged in some act of imaginative self-discovery. Whatever the activity there is always the presence of a benevolent witness watching from a distance. For me, this presence invests the boy's activities with added or even sacred meaning.

My animation is generally thought of as children's films, not because it lacks the content to engage adults, but because one encounters themes of mystery and wonder, differently by taking on the stature of a child. A significant change in perspective happens when stooping low enough to enter a hobbit's living space, or by becoming small enough to climb into a rabbit hole. Children have this natural advantage of looking up at the world, they ask many questions, and are open to wonder. Working on children's films is an exercise in holding on to such curiosity and perspective. The strange world of imagination, often relegated to the children's library, preserves clues and mysteries that ask me to look closer and to think differently about my beliefs. I have found that imaginative works from folk literature, art history and children's picture-books, often cause me to reconsider the role of mystery in my daily life.

Much of what I know about my own faith I have come to understand through the language of story. Christianity had no particular interest for me until I encountered it through the stories of C. S. Lewis and George MacDonald⁴. My fascination with children's literature and imaginative stories as a way to consider the sacred has led me to other cultures and their faith traditions. I have found that the storytellers who draw specifically from faith and folk traditions resonate with me most deeply and remind me that my own faith is part of a much larger story.

2. Literary Influences

In this paper I will address a variety of storytellers from literature, the visual arts and animated film who have helped shape my thoughts and aspirations as an animator. To begin with, I have found the stories that grow out of the Jewish tradition hold a particular fascination for me.

The Child as Theologian and Philosopher

Isaac Bashevis Singer (1902-1991) was a Nobel prize-winning Yiddish author who wrote stories both for children and adults. His work is highly imaginative and grounded deeply in the Hassidic Judaism.



Figure 2.
Maurice Sendak, *Fools Paradise* 1966⁵

At the close of his essay *Are Children the Ultimate Literary Critics* Singer explained his connection to children's literature and how it, even more than adult literature, plays an important role in helping us come to terms with the sacred.⁶ By drawing heavily from his Jewish heritage, grounded in folklore and religion, Singer crafted stories that have universal insights and appeal. Singer wrote;

I knew that [my] stories would be read not only by Jewish children but by Gentile ones as well. I described Jewish children, Jewish sages, Jewish fools, Jewish bridegrooms, Jewish brides. The events I related did not happen in no-man's-land but in the little towns and villages I knew well and where I was brought up. My saints were Jewish saints and the demons Jewish demons.⁷

Singer wrote of the young readers' demand for, as he put it "real stories, with a beginning, a middle, and end"⁸. He believed that "Books for children will constitute the last vestige of storytelling, logic, faith in family and God, and in real humanism."⁹ Singer saw his young readers as discriminating critics who demanded that timeless questions be addressed in the telling of a story.

"No matter how young they are, children are deeply concerned with so-called eternal questions: Who created the world? Who made the earth, the sky, people, animals? ...Children think about and ponder such matters as justice, the purpose of life, the why of suffering. . . They are bewildered and frightened by death. They cannot accept the fact that the strong should rule the weak.

Many grownups have made up their minds that ...one should accept the facts as they are. But the child is often a philosopher and a seeker of God."¹⁰

As a filmmaker, I am fascinated with these statements by Singer. What is it that guides a child in placing such demands on a story? How is it that the child-like reader recognizes deeper needs to be met by a story far beyond that of mere entertainment? Bruno Bettelheim addresses this question through his research on childhood development.¹¹

Enchantment, Wonder, and What I learned in the Nursery¹²

Bettelheim was a child psychologist and well known author who conducted many studies concerning the effect of fairytales on development of young children.



Figure 3.
Maurice Sendak, *The Goblins* 1973
The Juniper Tree Farrar Straus Giroux

His book *Uses of Enchantment* looks deep into the emotional and psychological needs of the developing child. Bettelheim found that children responded to stories, particularly fairy stories, in very personal ways, and took from each telling what was needed at a given moment in their development. In his words:

All good fairy tales have meaning on many levels; only the child can know which meanings are of significance to him at the moment. As he grows up, the child discovers new aspects of these well-known tales, and this gives him the conviction that he has indeed matured in understanding, since the same story now reveals so much more to him.¹³

According to Bettelheim the fairytale affirms the child's experience that growing up can be frightening; it challenges children to move forward in spite of their fears, and it assures them that if they persevere they will not fail. These reassurances are necessary if the child is to navigate the deep psychological waters of coming of age.



Figure 4.
Maurice Sendak, *Snow White* 1973
The Juniper Tree Farrar Straus Giroux

Though some would criticize the “happily ever after” ending common to fairytales, Bettelheim concluded that the happy ending is not simply a wish fulfillment fantasy, but a deep seated belief that though life is hard, in the end we are not left alone. While outwardly fairy stories may not be *factually true*, inwardly the child knows them to be *psychologically*, or even *spiritually true*.

Bettelheim claimed that as adults we eventually outgrow the need for the imaginative world of fairytales. This is where I, along with I. B. Singer, part ways with Bettelheim. As the child becomes an adult and the circumstances around her become more complex, I believe the psychological truth of the fairytale holds. At this point it is worth referring to Bettelheim's quote of G.K. Chesterton from his book *Orthodoxy*:

“My first and last philosophy, that which I believe in with unbroken certainty, I learnt in the nursery...The things I believed most in then, the things I believe most in now, are things called fairy tales...That life is not only a pleasure but a kind of eccentric privilege.”¹⁴

Chesterton was a British novelist, playwright and popular essayist active between 1900 and 1936. His essay *Ethics of Elfland* continued to develop his ideas about fairytales within the context of his own Catholic faith. Chesterton claimed that without fairytales in his childhood, he would never have recognized his encounter with the sacred as an adult. The stories of his youth cultivated in him the capacity to embrace mystery and wonder as part of his daily existence, truths that he would later rediscover as an adult.

I deal here with what ethic and philosophy come from being fed on fairy tales. . . There is the lesson of "Cinderella," which is the same as that of The Magnificat-- *exaltavit humiles*.¹⁵ There is the great lesson of "Beauty and the Beast"; that a thing must be loved before it is loveable. There is the terrible allegory of the "Sleeping Beauty," which tells how the human creature was blessed with all birthday gifts, yet cursed with death; and how death also may perhaps be softened to a sleep.

But I am not concerned with any of the separate statutes of elfland, but with the whole spirit of its law...I am concerned with a certain way of looking at life, which was created in me by the fairy tales, but has since been meekly ratified by the mere facts.¹⁶

The "*statutes of elfland*" or the law that Chesterton writes about is an allusion to the sacred: an openness to the possibility of wonder, a sensitivity to spiritual longings and desires that are not to be satisfied by the material world. Somehow story and image, as they are presented in the fairytale, have the power to address this longing in ways that even a child can recognize her need for sacred. It has been suggested that approaching the sacred as a child is essential to actually making a connection.¹⁷

3. Visual Arts

Not surprisingly the visual artists who have most influenced my animation are also storytellers. What they have in common is a strong sense of narrative, a playful use of their media, and an intentional pursuit of imaginative content. These images are natural complements to the fairytale or folklore traditions of both Singer and Chesterton.



Figure 5.
Master Bertram of Minden,
Creation of the Animals c.1379-1383
Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle

Picture Books and the Gothic Painters

The primitive and often child-like compositions of Gothic paintings provide me with a wealth of influences. The sacred icons, altar pieces, and illuminated manuscripts of the late Middle-Ages remind me of children's picture books at their best with their vibrant colors, stylized characters and flatness of compositional space. *The Creation of the Animals* (Figure 5) covers three panels of an elaborate twenty-four panel alter piece created for St. Peter's church in Hamburg, Germany. God is depicted in the midst of his creations. The birds and animals are laid out on either side like cut-out decorations while the gold leaf background offers no contextual details whatsoever. Much like a medieval illuminated manuscript, or a contemporary picture-book, realistic use of the space gives way to decoration. In *The Nativity* (Figure 6), again the picture-book qualities show through in this depiction of the birth of the Holy Child. Mary's proportions are extremely child-like. The red sky studded with a pattern of gold stars, and God the father's appears like a puppeteer through an opening in the clouds at a distance.



Figure 6.
Master Francke, *The Nativity* c.1424-1436
99 x 89 cm Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle

Without a working knowledge of one-point perspective the Gothic artists layered picture elements on separate planes in an effort to create the illusion of three-dimensional space. By clearly establishing delineations between foreground, midground and background planes the painter enables the viewer to experience depth in the painting through a series of openings, or windows, from one layer to the next¹⁸. Without continual space connected by converging lines these compositions create room for an arbitrary or imaginative space. Without a vanishing point grounded in realistic three-dimensional space, like the altarpieces themselves, they serve as a reference point to a reality that exists beyond the physical space that we can touch and feel.

That monumental events of the Christian calendar, like *Creation* and *the Nativity*, are commemorated with such child-like simplicity seems a fitting tribute. The paintings are exquisite and easily accessible without compromising their spiritual quality. Clearly and vibrantly they tell the Biblical narrative and, like any good picture-book, they have the ability to both charm the viewer and communicate truth.

Jewish Folklore and the Avant-Garde

Over six centuries after the Gothic painters created their masterful altarpieces, the Russian painter Marc Chagall revisited primitive characters, bold colors and imaginative compositions to affect his viewers with a different kind of space.



Figure 7.
Marc Chagall, *Calvary* 1912
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

At a time when the art world was distancing itself from the use of both religious and narrative images, Chagall completely reinvented both for his own purposes. His images, which are deeply rooted in his Jewish faith and folk heritage, take on a dream-like quality that reflects the richness of his Judaic culture. Though personal faith and cultural traditions permeate his work Chagall also engaged different movements in the art world as they emerged. One early painting by Chagall, *Calvary* (Figure 7), exhibited the influences of Cubism and at the same time successfully incorporated Christian themes from art history and his own cultural traditions.¹⁹ The subject of the Christian Crucifixion however put Chagall at odds with both his Jewish heritage and the aesthetic concerns of the Avant-Garde. In 1937-47 Chagall returned to the Crucifixion (Figure 8) using Jesus as a sacrificed Jew and a symbol for human suffering.²⁰ This triptych, originally composed as a single painting entitled *Revolution*, expressed the artist's compassion and concern for the plight of the Jewish people during World War II.

Chagall consistently made use of the Avant-Garde's visual language to explore personal ideas and the richness of his own cultural history. Yet he was unwilling to abandon narrative painting on the grounds that abstraction was, in his words: "the product of a world without God".²¹



Figure 8.
Marc Chagall, *Resistance* 1937-48; *Resurrection* 1937-48; *Liberation* 1937-53
Musée National Message Biblique Marc Chagall

The tragic and sometimes comedic elements of visual story, combined with the imaginative richness of his compositions are what I find most compelling about Chagall's paintings. Each canvas is alive with primitive characters, multiple story lines, and animated motion as if they were in fact animated films. Very different from the Gothic painters, yet with similar results, Chagall's paintings introduce us to a world that is beyond the surface of his canvas.

The Golden Age of Children's Illustration

Prior to Chagall revisiting the primitive or the child-like in his approach to painting there was a highly refined movement within the arts that many scholars refer to as The Golden Age of Children's Illustration. Though opinions vary this movement spans roughly the years between the 1880's to 1920's. Advances in color printing and engraving techniques accompanied a revived interest in nursery rhymes, folklore and fairytales. The result was some of the most exquisite children's books ever printed.

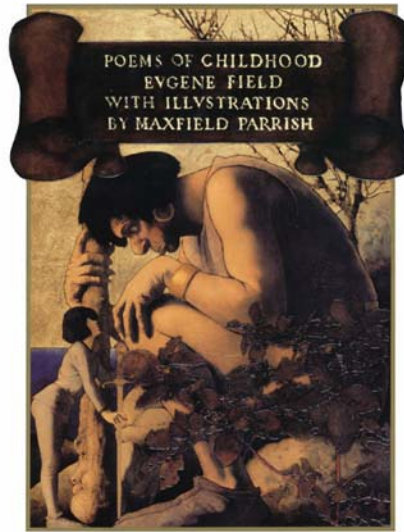


Figure 9.
Maxfield Parrish, *Poems of Childhood* 1904

Some of the most prominent illustrators of the Golden Age include N.C. Wyeth, Maxfield Parrish, Sir John Tenniel, and Arthur Rackham. In America, led by Howard Pyle, many of these illustrators helped to transform children's picture books. In Europe the pen and ink scribbles of E. H. Shepherd for A. A. Milne's *Christopher Robin* poems and the exquisite caricatures of Sir John Tenniel for Lewis Carol's *Alice in Wonderland* capture Great Britain's new-found fascination with the young child. ²²

Of the many painters contributing to the Golden Age Maxfield Parrish stands out in his attempt to create transcendent worlds believable enough to touch. Typically Parrish worked from photographs of a live model. Rather than use photography as an aid toward realism, Parrish used it to heighten the sense of fantasy. By incorporating his characters into vibrant landscapes and employing the same flatness of space used in the 15th century religious paintings, Parrish transformed his models into gods and goddesses. (Figures 10 and 11) Not unlike Chesterton's observations of the fairy story, Parrish's paintings grounded in mythology, fairytales, and fantastic dreams, serve to broaden the imagination and sharpen the awareness of worlds that lie beyond the painted canvas.



Figures 10 & 11.
Maxfield Parrish *Djer Kiss* (detail), 1916²³

The Art of Maurice Sendak

Maurice Sendak (b.1928) is a contemporary author/illustrator who continues in the tradition of creating imaginative worlds for young readers to engage, weaving delightful fantasy and psychological depth into his stories and picture books. Sendak



Figure 12.
Maurice Sendak *Dear Millie* (1988)
Farrar Straus Giroux

is probably best known for his book *Where the Wild Things Are* about a young boy named Max and his fantastic journey “through night and day and in and out of weeks and almost over a year”²⁴. Max sails away because his mother has sent him to his bedroom without supper. He sails to an island where he is confronted by Sendak’s

richly imagined monsters, which he subdues with his horrible stare and sends *them* to bed without any supper.

Sendak displays a profound sensitivity to his young readers which has gained both critical praise and popular success. Many of Sendak's stories confront childhood fears, and evoke curiosity and wonder. Bettelheim's psychological truths are present at many levels in the work which engages, empowers and completely entertains the young reader at every turn of the page.

In 1970 Sendak joined with author/translator Lore Segal to create an illustrated edition of their favorite Grimm fairy tales. The result is a masterful collection titled after one of the Grimm Brothers' darkest and most textured stories, *The Juniper Tree*. Sendak accompanies each of the twenty-eight tales with a single pen and ink illustration. True to Sendak's form each illustration goes beyond merely documenting the tales by capturing spiritual, and even autobiographical aspects of the stories²⁵. After visiting Germany, the homeland of the Brothers Grimm, and conducting extensive research Sendak chose Albrecht Durer's *Engraved*



Figure 13.
Betrayal of Christ Albrecht Durer 1508
Engraved Passion Series



Figure 14.
Hansel and Gretel Maurice Sendak 1973
The Juniper Tree Farrar Straus Giroux

Passion as a model for his illustrations (figures 13 and 14)²⁶. By borrowing compositions and even characters from Durer's *Passion* Sendak's pictures take on a

similar quality to these works, bringing the added weight of Christ's passion and new layers of interpretation to the fairytales.

Many of Sendak's stylistic choices are finding their way into the design of my film *Moonboy and Shadow*. Sendak's flatness of space, his pen and ink textures, as well as his limited color palette create a seamless world in which his characters interact. I am fascinated by the visual depth Sendak achieves with relatively simple means. To create an equivalent world for my animated characters is a challenge that I aspire to in every frame of my animated films.

4. Contemporary Animators

It is not merely coincidence then that my most direct influences are animators who also strive to recreate the richness and depth of picture-books in their films. Mostly these artists are thought of as independent animators far removed from the mainstream productions of Walt Disney and DreamWorks²⁷. They work with small budgets and limited production crews. Three filmmakers whose works stand out, both stylistically and thematically, as highly influential in my growth as an animator are Wendy Tilby, Co Hoedeman, and Yuri Norstein, all animators who have achieved international critical acclaim. Their films function on a level that engage children, yet at the same time address issues of aesthetic, social and spiritual significance.

Wendy Tilby; Picture Books in Motion

Wendy Tilby (b.1960) is native of Canada, trained at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and long time animator for the National Film Board of Canada. Her three films *Table of Contents* 1986, *Strings* 1991, and most recently, *When Day Breaks* 1999, all share a common theme of the connectedness we all share living in communal spaces.

Table of contents is a simple film, executed in the Paint on Glass technique, is about an older gentleman sitting in a café listening to the conversations around him.²⁸ In

Strings (figure 15) Tilby expands on the technique by placing it in the context of a bittersweet story of two elderly neighbors, a man and a woman, living above one



Figure 15.
Wendy Tilby, *Strings* (1991)
National Film Board of Canada

another in an apartment complex. By keeping the space entirely flat and presenting the apartment interior to us as a cut-away schematic, Tilby is free to move her characters through space without grappling with issues of perspective and reframing, as she would with a more conventional layout. The schematic invites us to witness the lives of her characters as connected via the walls, floors, and even the elevator they share. Ultimately it is a leak in the plumbing of the upstairs apartment that draws our two heroes together for a tender, if not awkward, moment in her bathroom. Finally it is the picture-book quality of Tilby's animation style that lends a richness to the world in which her characters interact giving them complete charm, depth, and credibility.

Co Hoedeman: a Legacy of Children's Films²⁹

Co Hoedeman (b.1940) is a Dutch animator who immigrated to Canada in 1965 to work as a visual effects artist for the National Film Board of Canada³⁰. With over twenty children's films to his credit, Hoedeman is known for his magical imagination, his sensitivity to his young audience, and his radically innovative stop-motion techniques³¹.

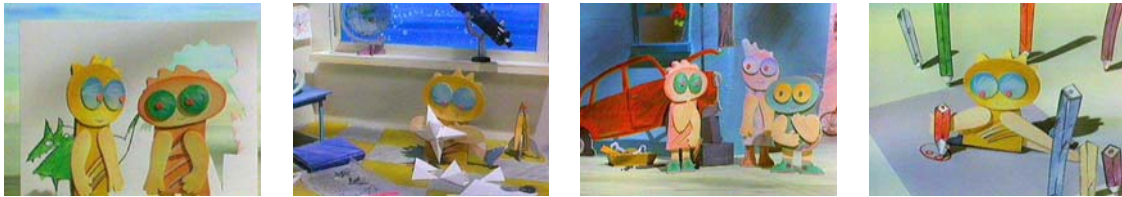


Figure 16.
Co Hoedeman, *La Box* (1989)
National Film Board of Canada

After many years of admiring his work from a distance, this semester I had the privilege of having Co as my Artist Mentor and have benefited greatly from the time we have spent together and the insights he has offered concerning my films.

Though Hoedeman's skills as an effects artist are apparent in all of his films, what drives his work thematically is often a childlike view of the world. Many of the ideas that are woven into Hoedeman's films are themes of play, creativity, innovation, and overcoming adversity. Hoedeman's film *Charles and François* 1988, concerns the relationship between an older man and a young boy. The film tells of their often



Figures 17 & 18.
Co Hoedeman *Charles and François*, 1988
National Film Board of Canada

rocky relationship as Charles grows into adulthood and then of their closeness as, in an interesting twist of the narrative, together they become centenarians. Co and I spoke at length concerning this particular film: "I was fascinated with the idea that we grow closer together as we grow older. In the span of my film the old man ages only forty years while the boy ages over ninety."³²

Hoedeman's technique of two-dimensional cut-out characters on a three-dimensional stage engages the viewer beyond simply following the narrative. As Hoedeman moves us effortlessly through dimensional spaces and into flat landscapes often the cut-out characters will become razor-thin as they turn toward the camera. Sets strike themselves and new environments gently rotate into place with each scene change.



Figure 19.
Co Hoedeman, *The Sand Castle* 1977
National Film Board of Canada

In 1977 Co Hoedeman won the Academy Award for his film *le Chateau de sable* or *The Sand Castle*. A playful, yet wistful film in which a community of wonderfully diverse characters work and play together under the direction of their creator as they build a castle made of sand. They celebrate their accomplishments but in the end the work of their hands is taken by the wind and we find ourselves, as the film began, in a landscape of blowing sand. Hoedeman engages both his child and adult viewers alike as he takes on timeless themes of origin, community, and the fleeting nature of our existence.

In many of Hoedeman's films the "*maker at play*" has a predominant presence. This theme is common to my own films so I am especially interested in how Hoedeman

keeps it alive in multiple levels of his work. Sometimes, as in *The Sand Castle*, the “maker” is cast as a central character in the plot. But often the “maker” shows up in the sub plot, just beneath the surface, as an extension of the artist himself³³. The materials are incorporated into the film’s content in such innovative ways that, for me, their presence bears witness to an additional character just beyond the boundaries of the screen³⁴. This celebration of technique, while never upstaging the human elements, brings a visual and thematic richness to the Hoedeman’s films that engage the viewer on many levels. For me they suggest a layer of meaning beyond the gentle humanism that is present in all of Hoedeman’s films.

Yuri Norstein; Paper Puppets and Infinite Space



Figure 20.
Francesca Yarbusova, *Tale of Tales* 1979
Soyuzmultfilm Studio³⁵

For twenty six years the animation world has been waiting for the next contribution of its most acclaimed animation master. In 1979 Yuri Norstein’s animated masterpiece *Tale of Tales* took the festival circuit by storm, winning the top awards from the most prestigious festivals around the world.³⁶ Soon after it appeared *Tale of Tales* was dubbed the “greatest animated film of all time”³⁷. Since 1986, with the advent of Glasnost and Perestroika, the situation for artists who were previously funded by the Soviet government has altered radically. As a result Yuri Norstein and countless other artists have had to seek private funding for their animated projects.

Many Soviet animators have immigrated to Canada, France and the US, but Norstein, after declining many offers to produce his films abroad, has decided to remain in his Russian homeland. Norstein has set up a small studio on the Russian soil which has been the inspiration for so many of his animated films, and has personally taken on the funding for his latest and longest production; a feature length adaptation of Nicoli Gogol's *The Overcoat*.

Yuri Norstein's films are rooted deeply in the Russian folk tradition. *Tale of Tales* draws heavily from the folktales, nursery rhymes and history of the Russian people. At the same time these elements are interwoven with Norstein's most personal childhood memories. The house in the Tale of Tale is directly inspired by Norstein's childhood communal flat (*Figure 21*), the baby at the breast of its mother (*Figure 22*), which opens the film, is drawn from the memory of his pregnant aunt sent home from the war, and even the lullaby that winds its way through the *Tale of Tales* is the same lullaby that was sung to Norstein as a small child.³⁸ What Norstein refers to as the "*Eternity Sequence*" has by far the most sense of the sacred, or metaphysical, in the film (*Figure 20*). In the artist's own words "it is the world ...imagined at the end of the corridor as a child, where 'eternal happiness, light, a talking cat, and bread sprinkled with sugar' awaited him and where memories remain eternal."³⁹



Figures 21 & 22.
Francesca Yarusova, *Tale of Tales* 1979
Soyuzmultfilm Studio⁴⁰

Norstein utilizes a myriad of techniques to achieve the visual richness and atmospheric quality of his films: cut paper puppets, live-action effects, and multiplane environments which provide a technical and visual framework for his tales.⁴¹ The result of these combined techniques is a world that perfectly reflects Norstein's unique vision. The images in his films are reminiscent of finest children's picture books while achieving mystical qualities in ways similar to Gothic painting. Norstein's visual influences however, lean towards Eastern art for its organization of spatial elements. In classical Chinese landscapes, depth is constructed by the juxtaposition of foreground and background elements. The elements are not related in terms of perspective, but are linked by the capricious interplay of lines and colors. Spatial depth is hypothetical and is organized as a hierarchy of tiers, or painted stage sets, laid out at an almost arbitrary distance. Because the viewer is



Figure 23.
Yuri Norstein, *Hedgehog in the Fog* 1975
Soyuzmultfilm Studio

not in a position to evaluate real distance within the frame, the scale of measurement is completely imaginary. The distance between the nearest and farthest elements becomes both minimal and infinite at the same time.⁴² Norstein also uses expressive natural elements such as water, fire and smoke, to provide formless fillers of space which are constantly in the state of change. He weaves these expressive elements into his films in ways that are so palpable that they can take on the presence of another character (*Figures 23 & 25*).



Figure 24.
Yuri Norstein, *Hedgehog in the Fog* 1975
Soyuzmultfilm Studio

A clear example of this is in his film *Hedgehog in the Fog*. The endearing character of the hedgehog, the atmospheric effects of the fog, and the underlying visual structure of the film creates a richness that draws even the youngest viewers back again and again. The plot is simple: a reflective young hedgehog is on his way to visit his friend the bear to sit by the fire and count the stars. On the way the hedgehog sees a horse in the fog and wonders how it can breathe in such a heavy atmosphere (*Figure 25*). The hedgehog plunges into the fog to find the answer and instead finds a startling world of mystery, wonder, and unbidden help along the way. In the end we find the hedgehog sitting beside his friend reflecting on his adventures, still wondering about the horse in the fog.

Yuri Norstein has been a tremendous inspiration to me in my own journey as an animator. As an undergraduate, my love for children's media and my spiritual interests were often met with confusion or resistance. Yet here was a revered and respected animator exploring themes that were important to me and using children's



Figure 25.
Yuri Norstein, *Hedgehog in the Fog* 1975
Soyuzmultfilm Studio

films as his medium of choice. Though *Tale of Tales* is the most complex, and most acclaimed of Norstein's animated films, I am most taken with the simplicity and charm of Norstein's earlier films. Most notably, *Hedgehog in the Fog*, has become a major source of inspiration for my current production *Moonboy and Shadow*.

5. Personal Stories

Perspective, imagination, and mystery: these are all themes that emerge in my films through the lens of childhood or child-like experiences. All of the artists I have mentioned approach these themes in different ways and have been a great inspiration to me as an animator. In closing I would like to look at my own films in light of the subjects I have been discussing.

Please Don't Feed the Animals 1988

From my first student film *Please Don't Feed the Animals* 1988, I was already taken with the idea of child-like perspective by literally viewing the world through the eyes of a small boy. The camera alternates between that of an objective viewer to that of

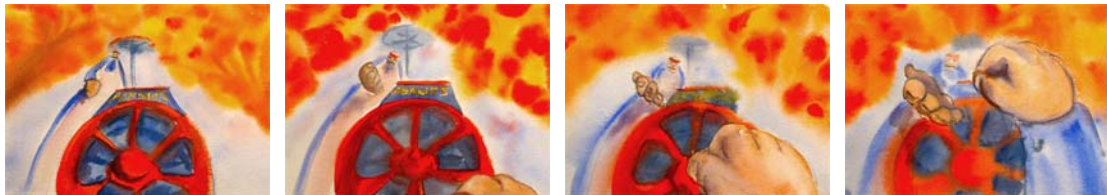


Figure 26
Stephan Leeper, *Please Don't Feed the Animals* 1988
School of the Museum of Fine Arts/ Boston

an eight-year-old boy, seeing everything in the adult world as if through the wrong end of a telescope. The boy looks up to ask his father for a coin and we see the man as a towering mountain of color, large at the hips with his face barely visible. A tossed coin shimmers in the air like a treasure quite capable of funding any adventure the boy has in mind. Though he is only steps away from his father, each new encounter is accompanied with the dream-like wonder of a boy's first adventure. From the intimidating thrust as the peanut vendor's hand reaches for the coin, to the

sheer terror of finding the large wet face of a giraffe directly in front of him (Figure 26).

Seen through the eyes of a small boy the world takes on significance beyond what is immediately available to adults. By choosing the child or the child-like as central characters in my films they take on a different dimension than if they were populated by adults, allowing my stories to be engaged through the lens of innocence, imagination, and a sensitivity to wonder.

***The Temptation of Brother Thomas* 2003** (in development)

The Temptation of Brother Thomas is the premise for a short film that has yet to get beyond visual development stages. Consistent with the rest of my stories, and somewhat autobiographical, *The Temptation of Brother Thomas* is about a boyish monk and his child-like fascination with the world around him. Brother Thomas is a



Figures 27 & 28
Stephan Leeper, *The Temptation of Brother Thomas* 2003

monk whose day job is to illuminate the sacred texts of scripture, but his passion is for painting landscapes. Each morning as he makes his way to the abbey, Thomas finds the world filled with distractions. His tempter, in the form of a brilliant blue dragonfly, keeps Thomas' head spinning long enough to coax him off the path to the abbey and into a world rich with wonder, subtle mystery, and breathtaking beauty. (Figures 27 & 28)

Like my other films *Brother Thomas's* story takes on themes of wonder, an artist's journey towards self-discovery, and questions of what is truly sacred. *The Temptation of Brother Thomas* has been in development since late in 2003 and is waiting for the opportune time (and resources) to be produced into an eight to twelve minute short film. In the meantime I have been focusing on stories within the resources that are currently available to me.

***Line Drawing* (2004)**

Entering a graduate program required that I break from the more elaborate designs of studio productions (like *Brother Thomas*) and return to simpler, more direct forms of storytelling. My first animation completed for the AIB program was *Line Drawing*. After fifteen years of working commercially I am still toying with themes of perspectives and child-like self discovery⁴³. *Line Drawing* recreates a child's outlook by following the imagination of a young boy as it flows from the single line he makes with his crayon. A simple change in perspective changes the line drawn on the floor of his room into an ocean teeming with fish. The fish crowd into an elevator and,



Figure 29
Stephan Leeper, *Line Drawing* 2004
Art Institute of Boston/Lesley University

joined by the boy, the crowded elevator is transformed into a rocket and launched into orbit around the moon(Figure 29). The title itself offers a shift in perspective through its double meaning. *Line Drawing*, as a verb, describes the boy's actions in the film. As a noun *Line Drawing* describes the process of animation used to create the film. The film itself consists of a single charcoal line drawing. The drawing is recorded with a digital camera, erased or altered, and then recorded again. Viewed

in sequence, the multiple recordings of this single drawing transport the viewer from one world into the next with surprising ease.

***Moonboy and Shadow* (Work in Progress 2007)**

After completing *Line Drawing* and spending a semester experimenting with other media I found that I was restless to begin production on a film with a more conventional storyline. The film that I have currently in production is called *Moonboy and Shadow*, a short film (approximately six minutes) about a small boy so enamored with the moon that he stays up late, night after night, to capture its likeness in a grand portrait. Unknown to the boy (but suspected by his cat, *Shadow*) the Moon is watching with great interest.⁴⁴ (Figures 29 & 30)



Figure 29 & 30
Stephan Leeper, *Please Moonboy and Shadow* 2006 (In Progress)
Art Institute of Boston/Lesley University

The ideas guiding this film are bound up in my own reflections on creativity, wonder, and self-discovery. I am concerned with how the act of creativity can both affirm and reveal mystery in our lives, and how making art is a natural and appropriate response to wonder. Like Co Hoedeman's films, the "*maker at play*" is a theme that emerges very clearly from this film, as does Yuri Norstein's palpable sense of wonder. I am also reminded of the imaginative world of a small boy as displayed in the work of Maurice Sendak's book *Where the Wild Things Are*.

My greatest challenge for this film has been to create a visual style reminiscent of the children's picture book, and yet compatible with animation techniques that are available to me. For a visual style I am looking at Sendak's classic *Where the Wild*

Things Are (Figure 31). The hand-drawn pen and ink textures and limited color palette seem to suit the world of *Moonboy and Shadow*. For technique I am looking



Figure 31
Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are* 1963
Harper Collins

closely at the cut-out films of Yuri Norstein and the two/three-dimensional films of Co Hoedeman. Influenced by *Hedgehog in the Fog* my characters are based on cut-out puppets moving in environments made up of a series of planes positioned perpendicular to the camera. Like *Charles and François*, the drawings on the puppets will need to change from frame to frame. Though the artwork is hand-made, fashioned after paper cut-out and traditional drawn animation, I will execute the majority of the film in the computer utilizing a software called Toon Boom Solo. Though I am well on my way with the production of this film, many technical and aesthetic hurdles remain before the completion of *Moonboy and Shadow*.

For the immediate future I plan to continue working on *Moonboy and Shadow* with the projected completion date of January 2008, in time to apply to the 2008 animation festivals. In the meantime I am continuing to develop ideas for other stories and short films. I am also reconsidering my prospects for developing my illustration skills. Illustrating picture books was a desire that sent me to art school over twenty years ago. While working commercially in the animation and advertising fields I have let this goal, and my abilities, go untested. Recently, the experience of

developing images for my personal films has rekindled that desire. The images I have been making and the visual tools I am acquiring in my work on *Moonboy and Shadow* lend themselves toward creating picture-books as well. Working in the field of children's book illustration is certainly a more cost-effective (and possibly lucrative) way to get my stories to a larger audience. In the meantime my immediate goals are to continue teaching and to take a more aggressive approach to making sure that my stories find the broadest audience possible through festivals, websites, and even picture-books.



Figure 32
Stephan Leeper, *The Temptation of Brother Thomas* 2003

¹ Children's media for the purposes of this paper refers mainly literature, picture books, and films.

² Orthodoxy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press. Reprinted 1995), p. 51

³ Isaac Bashevis Singer: Stories for Children (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux 1986) p.338

⁴ C. S. Lewis The Chronicles of Narnia ; George MacDonald Phantasties and The Fairy Tales of George MacDonald. These books (and many other fictional writings Lewis, MacDonald, Sayers, etc.) to this day are instrumental for me as a way of understanding aspects of Christian doctrine and personal faith.

⁵ Zlateh the Goat and Other Stories (New York: Harper and Row 1966)

⁶ Stories for Children p.332

⁷ Ibid p.334

⁸ Ibid p.332

⁹ Ibid p.333

¹⁰ Ibid p.337

¹¹ Bruno Bettelheim (1903-1991) an Austrian born child psychologist and author widely know for his Freudian casting of fairytales.

¹² A phrase loosely borrowed from G. K. Chesterton's chapter *Ethics of Elfland* in his book Orthodoxy.

¹³ Uses of Enchantment (New York, Alfred P Knopf 1975)p.169

¹⁴ Orthodoxy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press. Reprinted 1995), Uses of Enchantment p. 64

¹⁵ The Magnificat or *Song of Mary* is traditionally sung as part of the Christian liturgy. The song is Mary's response to the archangel Gabriel's announcement that she would bear the Christ child as recorded in the Gospel of Luke (1:46-55); *exaltavit humiles* "He hath exalted the humble".

¹⁶ Orthodoxy <http://www.cse.dmu.ac.uk/~mward/gkc/books/orthodoxy/ch4.html>

¹⁷ *Jesus said;... The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. Matthew 19:14*

¹⁸ In traditional animation this technique was pioneered by Disney animators with the invention of the Multi-plane camera stand for the animated short *The Old Mill* 1936. A camera was mounted about multiple layers of glass allowing a scene to be composed of foreground, midground, and background elements. Once motion is introduced to the frame it allows the animator to move elements on the foreground plane at a greater speed than those on the background plane thus heightening the illusion of three-dimensional depth.

¹⁹ Jean-Michel Foray Marc Chagall (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in association with Abrams 2003) p.66

²⁰ In 1943 the Nazi occupation Chagall was forced to leave Europe. The image of the suffering Jesus enabled Chagall to address the persecutions that faced the European Jews during World War II. p.172

²¹ Ibid p.65

²² Richard Dalby The Golden Age of Children's Book Illustration Michael O'Mara Books Limited, 1991

²³ Model Sue Lewin posing for *Djer Kiss*. An advertisement for Djer-Kiss Cosmetics 1916

Alma Gilbert: The Make Believe World of Maxfield Parrish and Sue Lewin, Pomegranate Art Books 1990

²⁴ 1964 Caldecott Medal Winner for most Distinguished Picture Book of the Year.

Maurice Sendak: Where the Wild Things Are (New York: Harper Collins 1963)

²⁵ Sendak's dogs often appear in the illustrations regardless of the content of the stories.

²⁶ Durer's *Engraved Passion* consists of fifteen engraved panels depicting the Stations of the Cross (1507-1513)

²⁷ Though all three of the animators I cite are referred to as "independent animators", each of them at some point in their careers enjoyed the full support of a government institution. Wendy Tilby and Co Hoedeman from The National Film Board of Canada and Yuri Norstein from the Soviet studio Soyuzmultfilm.

²⁸ Paint on Glass technique was pioneered by Caroline Leaf in 1976 in her film *The Street*. National Film Board of Canada. Paint on Glass is the process of making small paintings with non-drying pigments on a glass surface, recording the image to film, altering the pigments, recording to film, and repeat. The results can be varied but is usually a highly fluid motion with varying degrees of abstract color. Wendy Tilby's films manage to keep the abstract elements to a minimum.

²⁹ I have had the privilege of having Co Hoedeman as my mentor this semester. Co has been an inspiration of mine since he visited the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in 1988 when I was a student there. This last semester Co has been extremely generous with his time. We met together in his home in Montreal and at his office at the Film Board of Canada. This Fall Co came to Huntington Indiana where he gave a lecture on his films and then stayed to do workshops with my students and discuss the development of my own film *Moonboy and Shadow*.

³⁰ A Visual Effects Artist is charged with all of the "tricks" that make the magic in films believable to the audience. Frame by frame animation in a live action film would be considered as visual effects.

³¹ Stop-motion animation is the process of moving objects in front of a camera in small increments one frame at a time. One popular form of stop-motion would be clay puppet animation. Co Hoedeman uses this approach to animation employing a wide range of materials such as hand made papers or children's building blocks.

³² This is a quote from one of the many conversations Co and I had discussing the themes in his work. (October 2006)

³³ In Co Hoedeman's film *La Box* (1990) both are true when Co shows up as a live-action character making objects in his own film. *La Box* National Film Board of Canada 1990

³⁴ I mentioned at the beginning of this paper how the presence of a remote witness in my own work brings added meaning to the films.

³⁵ Original concept sketch by for Yuri Norstein's animated film Tale of Tales. 1979

³⁶ '[*Tale of Tales*] conquered festival after festival, starting with the Grand Prix at Zagreb-which was the major international animation festival of that year [1980] and going on to win prizes at many others.' Clare Kitson, Yuri Norstein and The Tale of Tales: An Animator's Journey, p.112 (Bloomington, Indiana University Press 2005) p.112

³⁷ In 1984 [*Tale of Tales*] headed the poll organized for Los Angeles Olympiad. p.112

³⁸ Ibid p.12

³⁹ Ibid p.83

⁴⁰ Original concept sketch by for Yuri Norstein's animated film Tale of Tales. 1979

⁴¹ See note #23 for more on Multiplane Cameras.

⁴² 'Palitra I obyektiv', *Iskusstvo 2* (1980), p.9; Clare Kitson Yuri Norstein and the Tale of Tales (Bloomington, Indiana University Press 2005) p.44

⁴³ The Art Institute of Boston Masters of Visual Arts

⁴⁴ Appendix A: For a full plot synopsis of *Moonboy and Shadow* please refer to appendix A.