The Birthday

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A Thesis Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Applied Art
in
Media Arts

EMILY CARR UNIVERSITY

2009

Abstract

This MAA paper examines the relationship between my animation and character design artwork and the autobiographic elements that inform these works. I will document my evolving creative process as I worked on a semi-autobiographic fairy tale called *The Birthday*, a fictionalized self portrait that depicts my mental state in dealing with an identity crisis I experienced as a new Canadian immigrant in the mid 1980s. This paper will draw parallels between the fairy tale I created and my personal experience by touching on cultural and social issues that have shaped my philosophy. I will reference authors whose analytical works on fairy tales and myths have informed my storytelling process, in particular Bruno Bettelheim and Joseph Campbell. I will also examine the role of the subconscious and the Jungian archetypes in my fairy tale and at the same time explore possible connections between my own character and the characters that I have designed. The scope of this paper does not allow for an in-depth analysis of my book project, but by introducing some psychological concepts used by Jung, Bettelheim and Campbell in their discussion of myths and fairy tales into my work, I hope to gain a better understanding of my creative process, which will help build the foundation for my future projects. Finally, I also want to reach out to my audience by highlighting universal themes that the project addresses.

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1 Artistic Approach/Methodology

It has been ten years since my switch from dentistry to animation, and I have come to realize that life as a professional artist is not as idyllic as I dreamt it would be. Studio animation, due to its competitive commercial nature, is no less stressful than other fast-paced jobs in the market. However, animators, despite all this, have a reputation for being an eccentric but relatively happy group of artists. Perhaps this is related to the heart of the animator's craft—storytelling. Storytelling can be a cathartic experience, and there is evidence that points to the psychological benefits of creating and telling stories[1]. Animators may in fact be benefiting from a form of self-therapy as they are animating. Working with stories does keep a mind happy, and animators tell stories through the life they breathe into their characters.

Many animators are character-driven storytellers; that is, they create stories that are inspired by the characters' personalities and physical qualities. Character-driven storytellers are usually more concerned with feelings, aesthetics, and character development, as opposed to action and plot complexity.

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[1]In traditional Hindu medicine, for example, a patient suffering from neurosis may be prescribed a specially formulated story to meditate on (Bettelheim, 1991, p. 25). In the West, the value of stories in psychotherapy has been stressed by Carl Jung and his followers (Heuscher, 1974).

And animators in this category—called character animators—such as myself, tend to focus on subtle and lyric forms of animation, using the characters' gestures, movement, and emotions to tell the story[2].

Outside of commercial studios, my art practice is informed by character-driven stories as well. In my portrait work, for example, I design fictional characters that are based on historical biographies and embellish them with autobiographic details. These characters are fantastical extensions of myself (figure 1); they are like the masks in which I hide and reveal aspects of my personality (Edson, 2005, p. 47). My challenge with character design for stories is to create effective visualizations with a careful balance of plot revelation, suspense, and mystery. Great character art reveals just enough of the story to generate interest while leaving gaps for the viewer to complete. Furthermore, like the works of character designers for animation[3] my portrait work is dependent on the fiction that it is based on, and is seldom presented without an accompanying story. My MAA art project, an illustrated book, is an extension of my work in fictional portraiture and uses the same character design methodologies. This thesis will reveal the story underlying the creation of these characters and designs, and show how my own experience served as the basis for the fictional narrative.

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[2]In some studio settings, character animators are often specialized. My background in Biology and animal locomotion, for example, gives me an advantage in animating fictional non-human characters, and for one of the productions I worked for, I was assigned as the main key frame animator for a dragon character.

[3]It is common for large commercial studios to have a separate department for character design. These artists are responsible for the initial conceptual designs, signature pose creations, and the final colored character sheet that dictates and maintains the consistent look of the characters throughout the shots. Many great character designers are also skilled animators who combine their knowledge of movement and gestural acting to the characters they create. Well known character artists in the animation industry include the late Disney artist Bill Tytla, the late Warner Brothers artist Robert McKimson, and Pixar's Jason Deamer.

Figure 1: Portrait: An early fictional work that explores the idea of disguise through masking and the exaggerated idealism of royal court portraiture.

2 Screen to Pages

In my animation projects, I present my characters and their stories through moving pictures, while in this MAA project I worked on an illustrated story book (figure 2) to present my character art. For me, telling a story through still images and printed words in this way is like the storyboarding process in animation, where one also works with a series of visuals with descriptions, except that an illustrated story is more refined.

I invented a fictional language to be used as part of the main text of the book which, I feel, contributes greatly the illusion of a fictional world and also plays with the use of language in contextualizing my work. As someone who has had to struggle with English as a new immigrant, I am strongly aware of the limits of language as a means of self expression. In addition, my culturally-mixed upbringing also necessitates the use of language subtitles and translations as a way to navigate between different cultural groups, which has shaped my personal aesthetics. I want to recreate this experience for my
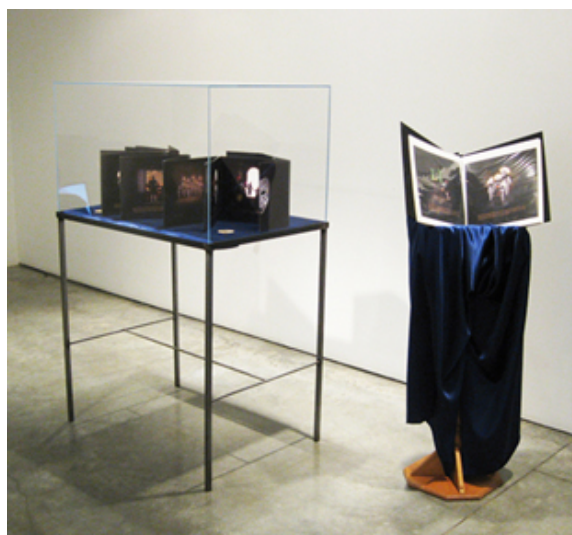
Figure 2: The Exhibit: *The Birthday*—A storybook project.

readers by using a fictional language accompanied by English translations

I wanted to explore a more personal mode of expression for this book project, and I have made the book resemble a mid-sized photo album that may have come from this fictional world that I portray. This may help frame the story more candidly and gives the reader the impression of looking through my characters' family album. Furthermore, the one-on-one relationship between the author and reader that happens during the act of reading a book by oneself differs from the more communal storytelling experience that occurs when animations are screened. Thus, I hope to engage in a more intimate dialogue with my readers in order to express the personal nature of my work.

The book has an accordion layout, similar to Sino-Buddhist prayer books, which hints at the spiritual themes that are addressed in the story. This accordion setup also allows the book to be read in two directions (figure 3), with the story on one side (corresponding to the Western left to right reading direction) and the supplementary details about my fictional world on the other side (corresponding to the traditional Chinese right to left reading

direction); hence, the book's layout shows a blending of both Eastern and Western influences.

Figure 3: The Exhibit: *The Birthday*—A storybook project.

This story book, an independent work in its own right, is also a precursor to an animated film that I will be working on after finishing my MAA. The creative process that I engaged in while working on this book will, therefore, serve as an important pre-production component for the future animation project.

3   Creating a Story

The Birthday is based on a fictionalized account of my first year as a struggling Canadian immigrant; it contains self-portraits that depict the internal process of change that I went through in adjusting to this new life. The process of creating *The Birthday* became a mirror through which I could reflect my own situation. At the same time I anticipated that the finished work would provide my readers with an opportunity to recognize aspects

of themselves within the framework of loss and gain, discord and harmony, and the convergence of past and present. According to Walter Benjamin, all experience is potentially the basis for stories; he also mentions that our "ability to exchange experience" is something that is "inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions" (Benjamin, 1968, p. 1). Through sharing my own experience I also hope to gain counsel from my audience through their feedback and response. Benjamin further adds that:

> After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding. To seek this counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story. (Quite apart from the fact that a man is receptive to counsel only to the extent that he allows situation to speak.)—Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller* (Benjamin, 1968, p. 3).

The Birthday is inspired by classic fairy tales and contemporary children's fiction. The mask and the concept of masking are often associated with the concept of identity, and as such, are central themes in *The Birthday*. In addition, as a fictionalized account of my personal experience, the story itself acts like a mask. In this paper, I will explore the connections between my own immigrant experience and the characters.

A condensed version of the story is included here as a reference to the discussions that will follow:

The Birthday

> A thousand years from now, in a land previously unknown, there live a large group of people in an illustrious city named Zhattvia. Zhattvia is a city of masks where everyone wears masks in public. The good thing about masking is that the Zhattvians never have to use mirrors, as the masks are always perfect, always beautiful, and always pleasant. The masks are an old and honoured part of the Zhattvian culture, and it is not unusual for masks to have names. No one can see sadness through the masks, and thus, everyone appears cheerful and ever polite. Zhattvia is sometimes

referred to as "The Smiling City" for this reason.

In the northern part of the city, live two orphans, eighteen year old Schuza Muhandiss and his six year old brother Iztanu. A mysterious epidemic took the lives of their parents five years ago and the rest of their family as well. The two boys are the only ones left of the once prominent Muhandians.

Right now, the family is suffering a temporary crisis, and for the last few years, Schuza has had to sell the family's large mask collection to support the household. He sold the entire collection, with the exception of Houdinne, the oldest and the most precious of the family's masks.

Today is Iztanu's birthday and Schuza bought two tickets to the planetarium as a present for the boy. However, with only Houdinne left to share between them, the brothers will have to take turns going out. Schuza decides to stay home and arranges for a neighbor to take the boy to the planetarium instead. Little Iztanu, who is very close to his brother, refuses the arrangement. The peculiar boy has never liked the masks and prefers to go out without them. He then tries to convince his older brother to do the same, but to no avail. Schuza refuses to leave the house unmasked. No one in Zhattvia has ever gone out without a mask and Schuza is too afraid to try it. As this may be the last time the brothers can afford to go out together, Iztanu pleads for his brother to join him. Schuza, normally very tolerant of Iztanu's strange mask-aversion, is quite strict about it this time; he may be fine with Iztanu playing in the gardens unmasked but public places are a different matter. Schuza will not make exceptions, not even for birthdays. In tears, Iztanu finally chooses to stay home as well and tells Schuza to return the tickets.

Despite their misfortunes, the boys are still attended by a group of loyal guardians, androgynous immortal beings called the Tytonids. Closely attached to the family, the Tytonids refused to leave after the family tragedy, and stayed behind to act as foster parents to the orphans.

Ivo, the senior Tytonid, approaches the crying little boy with a possible solution. Ivo reminds Iztanu of the large bronze mirror in one of the great rooms upstairs. This mirror, a precious antique, belonged to one of the boys' ancestral aunts, and is probably the

only one left in Zhattvia. Ivo urges the little boy to bring his older sibling to the mirror, and in it, adds Ivo, the boys will find a pair of special masks that they can wear to go out. Iztanu has occasionally played with this mirror before without knowing what it is. Schuza, however, has never seen it. With Ivo's encouragement, little Iztanu finally confides his secret to his older brother. Suspicious at first, Schuza refuses to believe the boy. Iztanu has been behaving oddly in the last few years since their parents' death; he has an aversion to masks and spends an excessive amount of time in the gardens talking to plants. However, fearing that his little brother may be on the brink of a mental illness, Schuza decides to play along to avoid aggravating the poor boy. Considering that today is Iztanu's birthday, Schuza, always the good brother, decides to humor the boy in order to make up for it. Feigning interest in his little brother's find, Schuza—thinking himself clever—allows himself be led to the mirror. However, Schuza's little masquerade ends when he finally sees his own reflection for the first time. The brothers are indeed looking at a pair of special masks in the mirror, masks that they can wear to go out. These special masks are unusual; they are not rigid, nor do they need special fitting. These masks fit comfortably, and they feel alive in a different way. Like his little brother, Schuza recognizes this new mask as himself, and for a fleeting moment, he even thinks he sees Houdinne in his reflection. After a long moment of contemplation, Schuza goes back down to the main hall where the family's mask collection used to be. The ancient Houdinne waits on one of the shelves, alone. Schuza picks up the mask from its gold gilded box. He affectionately holds up Houdinne to the window, and watches the sun light play on its worn out surface. Schuza takes a long look at this beloved mask before giving it to Ivo for safekeeping. Meanwhile, Little Iztanu stands close by, watching in anticipation. After a moment of silence, the brothers exchange a smile. Schuza then picks up little Iztanu's hand and takes the boy with him to the planetarium. **The End**.

The autobiographic associations that I have drawn from *The Birthday* were not apparent at first. I did not set out to write an account of my early

immigrant experiences, nor had I intended to reference them in any explicit way. The writing of the story, however, may have evoked repressed memories of these events that were subconsciously integrated into the plot. Initially, *The Birthday* was an opportunity for me to penetrate the larger themes of change due to serial colonialism[4], diaspora, familial loss of status, loss of language and culture and ultimately, loss of identity and culture shock. It was not until later in the story development that I became more conscious of the connection to my personal experiences, and indeed, of even wider symbolic implications of the characters' experiences beyond my own, as the finished tale plays out larger issues of loss and possible redemption through self recognition.

In the story of *The Birthday*, I have created what Julius Heuscher, in his book *A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales*, calls an art-fairy tale. Art-fairy tales, according to Heuscher, "frequently amalgamate the joys, sorrows, and vicissitudes common to all men with those peculiar to the narrator" (Heuscher, 1974, p34). Similarly, in *The Birthday*, I deal with broader life issues in combination with my own personal experience as an immigrant.

The Birthday addresses conflicts that are subtle and internal in nature; there is the absence of an obvious outside threat and all confrontations take place within the domestic realm. For example, there is no angry sorceress like the evil fairy in *Little Briar-Rose*[5], and no one wanders into uncharted territory as Hansel and Gretel did. Furthermore, the characters are from the same family and no outsiders are involved. For instance, there is no hunter from *Little Red Cap*[6] to come to the rescue, nor a curious prince from

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[4] "Serial colonialism" refers to a cultural condition wherein a group of people are subjected to colonization efforts by different foreign invaders in succession. (Medina, 2000; Keirnan, 2008)

[5] This popular tale by the Grimm Brothers is also known as *The Sleeping Beauty*. (The National Geographic Society, 1999)

[6] *Little Red Cap* is one of the original names for *The Little Red Riding Hood*. (The National Geographic Society, 1999)

Rapunzel to cause trouble. All the problems start at home and within the characters themselves, just as it all started within me. Finally, *The Birthday* differs from most classic fairy tales by being situated in the future, and yet, there are strong references to the past. This seemingly antipodal aspect of the story is used to illustrate a particular state of mind, perhaps to describe a regressive response to trauma or a universal experience that transcends time.

I have kept *The Birthday* relatively short, as compared to other art-fairy tales like Hans Christian Anderson's *Thumbelina* or Lorenizini's *Pinocchio*. In fact, my story bears greater resemblance to many classic fairy tales. Classic fairy tales have often been dismissed as simplistic shallow entertainment for children[7], and I admit that I had this bias when I initially approached the subject.

However, as I discovered, the "simplification" of a fairy tale should not be a dilution of content for easy consumption, but rather a complex distillation process that isolates its essence (Bettelheim, 1991; Heuscher, 1974). Fairy tales evolve from folk tales and share their origins in the ancient oral narrative traditions. Some popular fairy tales acquire many different variants, from being continuously modified across generations and even across cultures. In the process of telling and retelling by different groups of people, stories get modified but their universally recognized themes are retained (Heuscher, 1974). Furthermore, Joseph Campbell, in his book *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*, states that in the "innumerable retellings of a traditional story, accidental or intentional dislocations are inevitable" (2004, p. 228). Indeed, different cultures in the world have their own versions of popular fairy tales like *Cinderella, Snow White, or Sleeping Beauty*; however, despite their aesthetic and ethnic differences, these fairy tale variants share common

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[7]Fairy tales also make popular fodder for commercial animated films aimed for children. Unfortunately the more popular versions of these fairy tales, like Disney's *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, are also the only ones that most people will ever be exposed to, thus contributing to the misunderstanding of fairy tales as hollow children's fiction.

meta-themes. The Filipino story of *Mariang Alimango*[8], for example, contained a similar theme of stepmother-daughter relationship to its Western counterpart, *Cinderella*. My story, *The Birthday*, went through a similar process of retelling, albeit a more accelerated one. As I go through different revisions, the common elements that are of significance get distilled into the mixture. The result is a condensed tale that is reminiscent of childhood stories: a simple story that is both deeply personal and accessible enough for my audience to understand.

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[8]Translated as *Maria and the Crab*, this classic Philippine *Cinderella* variant by Tomas Lacson (2006) has a crab playing the part of orphan Maria's fairy godmother.

The Birthday Mask

1 In the Beginning

The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there.—Leslie Hartley, *The Go-Between* (Hartley, 1999).

This famous opening line for Leslie Hartley's book *The Go-Between* holds a special meaning for me because I can literally claim to have spent most of my early years in a "foreign" country. I was born in the Philippines, one of the only two Catholic-majority countries in Asia[1]. The Philippines, or *Pilipinas* in native tongue, was named after Philip II of Spain. From its Austronesian origins, it became a Spanish colony in 1565 and remained so for more than three centuries. At end of the Spanish-American War, Spain ceded the Philippines (together with Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Guam) to the United States in the 1898 Treaty of Paris. The Japanese occupied the country briefly in WWII. The Philippines gained independence and became a republic at the end of WWII. Thus, Filipino culture is a unique blend of foreign and indigenous influences which can be traced back to the country's successive foreign occupations. During the mid-1980s the Philippines was in a time of great turmoil and civil wars ravaged the capital,

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[1]East Timor is the other Catholic country.

Manila. On June 29, 1986, for our safety, my family left the country for North America.

As an immigrant from a country emerging from post serial-colonialism, I have been conditioned to adapt to the evolving manifestations of my country's colonial past. New traditions arise and are constantly absorbed, distilled, and modified to suit the existing "regent" culture. I grew up in a society that is a hybrid of different cultural and religious traditions, nurturing an identity that is in a perpetual state of transition. Thus, I experience my present status as a Canadian as part of a shifting and cumulative process of awareness, although this experience is far more blatant and accelerated. This conscious acceptance of an identity in constant flux is a recent change for me, and one which contrasts sharply with my idea of identity prior to my arrival in North America. Events in *The Birthday* trace this initial period of identity crisis as I adjusted to life in a new country.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss each of the main story elements in *The Birthday*. As I progress, I will relate them to actual events in my life, drawing connections between fiction and memory. I will match these experiences with my visual interpretations of the characters and their environment as illustrated in my book. Throughout the discussion, I will show how the concept of masking is realized in the story elements. Lastly, in the chapter Masks and Multiplicity, I will link universal aspects of my experience with allegorical themes contained in the story.

2   The Zhattvian Smile

Masks and masking are common thematic elements in fiction. The diversity of mask types reflects their functional heterogeneity in different societies; masking in all its different forms and practices holds a special place in almost every culture. The mask plays a central role in *The Birthday*, and the concept of masking works on different levels throughout the story.

One of the main uses of the mask is to hide. Comic book superheroes, for example, often have masked alter egos to hide their true identity. Similarly, the Zhattvians wear masks (figure 4) to hide their true emotions, a practice equivalent to putting on a public face—the masked smile.

The mask also protects. Science fiction and fantasy literature and film often feature characters with protective masks, like the helmets worn in the 1980's series *Buck Rogers* and that worn by Lord Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*. Comparably, the ornately designed Zhattvian masks divert attention away from the private, and in a way, also protects their wearers by acting as a second skin.

Figure 4: The Zhattvians

The masking practice in Zhattvia is reminiscent of a historical period in Venice when masking was a daily norm. This was born out of practical roots. Venice grew to become a wealthy capitalist state and the anonymity made it more convenient for Venetians to do business in such a small area[2]. However, the Zhattvian mask is not used to provide anonymity but to enhance one's identity, like jewelry. This relates to David Napier's identification of one

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[2]This practice was soon outlawed by the Church. The Carnival in Venice is a remnant of this historical period (Italia, 1998; Ginks, 2006).

function of the mask as an object of power with the ability to transform the wearer (Napier, 1986). For example, Jim Carrey's character in *The Mask*, attains superhuman abilities when he puts on a mystical ritual mask; when Schuza wears his masks in public he can magically be recognized for who he is. The masks' value and rare workmanship reinforce Schuza's social status and attract attention. In this sense, the Zhattvian society is not really an anonymous masquerade ball, but more like a costume competition in which the participants' identities are known. Masking, in this case, is a form of self expression (Crumrine, 1983, p. 63).

People sometimes engage in social masking, or public display of status, to steal the limelight. In the capitalist society that I grew up in, engaging in some form of social masking, or public display of status, is a tactic to entice more family business; it is a means of identification, and it is sometimes even used as a way to intimidate the opposition, like war masks. It is a common commercial practice to use recognizable business emblems or other visible signs of the establishment's history, for example, to give the impression of greater stability, refinement, and endurance, over other competitors. Similarly, the Zhattvians by using their mask to flaunt their status and power, are in a sense engaging in a form of social masking.

The masking tradition is the stimulus that drives the boys' evolving relationship in the story. The physical form of the mask, an heirloom antique named Houdinne (figure 5), appears in the beginning when Schuza wears it to the pawn shop. The design of Houdinne is influenced by Chinese opera masks, which are often used to portray mythological beings; this gives Houdinne a mystical Asiatic quality, symbolic of the Muhandian bloodline's Asian origins, as well as the importance of spirituality in Chinese culture. Houdinne has a dual role in the story; it is both a symbol of the Muhadian's high social position and a connection to their ancient family traditions. Houdinne is also the source of the initial conflict between Schuza and Iztanu, and their opposing views on masking create discord between them (figure 6).

Figure 5: Houdinne.

The Muhandiss' family heirloom masks are equivalent to the different identities that I have inherited based on my family's socio-political connections and accomplishments; they are, in Jungian terms, the persona or the mask I present to the world (Holcombe, 2007). What I knew of myself when I was living in the Philippines was through my connection to my family, and not based on who I was or what I could accomplish as an individual. Although I embraced these identities as a valuable part of myself, the strong attachment to them became problematic later on. My move to Canada had cut me off from this collective identity, and I had no perception of who I was as an individual. This was a very disconcerting experience. Similarly, Schuza's strong dependence on the heirloom masks makes him insecure. In order to avoid suffering possible social ridicule or discrimination, Schuza arranges for a neighbor, instead of himself, to take Iztanu to the planetarium, much to the little boy's dismay.

Towards the end of the story, Houdinne gets replaced by a non-physical type of mask that brings the brothers back together. Amid Iztanu's tears and disappointment, Ivo, the boys' senior Tytonid and guardian, reminds him of the mirror in the great room, in which a different kind of mask can be found. The mirror (figure 7) is made of bronze, one of the earliest materials for

Figure 6: Sad Iztanu

mirrors, like those in ancient China. Like the heirloom mask Houdinne, the antique mirror also represents a connection to family history and tradition. The brief appearance of Houdinne on Schuza's reflection is perhaps symbolic of the of ancient traditions and culture. Houdinne in the reflection is no longer an external mask to be worn but becomes part of Schuza's being, as if magically joined in the mirror's reflection. Similarly, certain aspects of our traditions and culture are always within us and do not need to be explicitly expressed.

The face in the mirror serves as a metaphor for the "mask of the self", as described by Terry Landau: it reveals to the outside world what is internal and normally unseen (Landau, 1989). The face is one of the means through which the self can make its intentions known, just like the way a theatre mask is worn by an actor to make his emotions readable to the audience. It may not always be perfect like a molded rigid mask, but it is more comfortable. Unlike Houdinne, the face is also unpredictable due to its closer link to the deeper areas of our psyche—the "uncontrollable" unconscious. This point in the story addresses the process of identity recognition, similar to that described by Jacques Lacan in Mirror Stage (Sharpe, 2006; Pollock, 2006,

Figure 7: The Mirror

p. 173). The Mirror Stage, according to Lacan, is when an infant begins to form its concept of the self as a separate being from the external world. For Schuza, who seems to have bypassed this stage (metaphorically), this is initially a frightening experience. Like Schuza, my upbringing, amidst family and social pressures, resulted in me relying on external opinion to cultivate my sense of self. I was not able to separate myself from the others in my social circle, as if I were trapped in an "adult version" of the pre-Mirror-Stage[3].

In a way, my immigrant experience was the "mirror" that revealed to me previously unknown aspects of myself. This awareness of a separate self, accompanied by a sense of disorientation and alienation, ironically supported me in conquering my insecurities. I realized that I can be responsible for myself and that I have autonomy in the creation of my own world. Similarly, seeing himself in the mirror brings a change in Schuza (figure 8), who not only recognizes his own face in the reflection, but that his face is also one of the most intricate and beautiful "masks" he has ever seen. In addition,

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[3]Lacan eventually did modify his theory to include the possibility of this self-recognition stage as a re-occurring moment throughout life. (Felluga, 2002)

the quick glimpse of the mask Houdinne in his reflection tells him that the ancient mask, and the ancient family tradition that it stands for, is in him all along. This makes Schuza less afraid, and after some thought, he decides to accompany Iztanu after all. Like looking into a mirror, the act of self-reflection can instill a sense of order in the midst of chaos and an awareness of one's own strengths and weaknesses; and it is only by being aware of these aspects of ourselves that we can begin acts of sorting, reconciliation and integration.

Figure 8: Schuza's Reflection

The idea of a futuristic masked society in part reflects my views on the increasingly superficial and cautious nature of human interaction, brought about by over-emphasis on political correctness and socio-cultural hypersensitivity. One potential disadvantage of a rapidly growing global society is the overwhelming (and seemingly premature) exposure to new cultures, sometimes at such an accelerated rate as to lead to subconscious culture shock. This creates a state of perpetual self-surveillance[4] where people wear public masks during unmediated intercultural interactions as a guard against

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[4]This is related to English philosopher Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon*, wherein the "apparent omnipresence" of an inspector leads to a state of constant self-surveillance, since there is no way of knowing if one is being watched or not. (Bentham, 1787)

the negative consequences of potential confrontation. The segregated nature of Canadian "multiculturalism", for example, is more of an exercise on mutual tolerance (or perhaps cautious respect) than genuine cross-cultural exchange. Similarly, the Zhattvians, by masking their true feelings, are able to feign politeness and maintain an illusionary harmony amongst themselves, which ultimately contributes to Zhattvia's reputation as a "Smiling City".

3   Remembering the Future

The use of opening phrases such as "Once upon a time" contributes to the perceived timelessness associated with fairy tales. The late Bruno Bettelheim, in his book *The Uses of Enchantment* states that, "a fairy tale may begin with a particular psychological state of mind, but it never starts with physical reality" (Bettelheim, 1991, p. 62), specifying that this would not allow the audience to experience the work from a comfortable distance. Masks can also create distance, and in Mexican Mayo Indian rituals (Crumrine, 1983, p. 99), masks are worn by the participants to achieve, what the British philosopher Edward Bullough coined, "psychical distance"[5]. This allows the wearer to engage in certain ritual acts, like symbolic executions for example, which may provoke anxiety in the observer if performed without the mask. Through the displacement of time, a fairy tale functions like a "ritual mask" which allows the child to experience the sometimes frightening events in a story that is removed from his present reality. A fairy tale can achieve this by situating itself in a magical past; however, a similar effect may also be

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[5]According to Edward Bullough, "Distance does not imply an impersonal, purely intellectually interested relation of such a kind. On the contrary, it describes a personal relation, often highly emotionally coloured, but of a peculiar character. Its peculiarity lies in that the personal character of the relation has been, so to speak, filtered. It has been cleared of the practical, concrete nature of its appeal, without, however, thereby losing its original constitution." Proper psychical (aesthetic) distance then is a result of a balance to prevent a work from being too subjective (personal) or too general (impersonal) in scope. (Bullough, 1912)

achieved by projection into a fantastical future.

The story of *The Birthday* takes place a thousand years[6] from now, and yet the world portrayed contains many visual and ideological references to the past. The orphans' mansion, for example, was a mixture of classic European and Chinese architectural styles. Various technologically advanced household objects in the mansion also resemble their "old-fashioned" precursors for no apparent functional reasons, similar to various 50's style electronic equipment we have now. The boys' costumes are reminiscent of historic clothing styles such as French Baroque and Manchurian Chinese. In a way, my treatment of these elements is conceptually related to the nostalgia-inspired props and costumes in Hanna-Barbera's *The Jetsons*.

In addition, the Muhandian family way of life is replete with age-old customs[7]: its structure is based on hierarchies (master and servants), and traditional hereditary practice, and strict behavioral etiquette are followed. The inclusion of these references to the past in my depiction of the future reflects my disposition to my new environment at that time; they are according to Bettelheim, "coordinates which place the story not in time and place of external reality, but in a state of mind..." (Bettelheim, 1991, p. 62)

The notion of future in *The Birthday* denotes a relative time construct, more like a symbolic reference than a specific time frame. This construct acts as a metaphorical mask of a hyper-retrospective mentality[8]. In comparison to the Philippines (and many other areas of the world), North America is a much newer place, with its greater emphasis on automated technological

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[6]In Chinese folklore, the phrases "A Thousand Years" or "Ten Thousand Years" are often used to describe a long span of time (usually in the past), and *The Birthday*, emulating the Asian folklore tradition, uses this phrase in a similar fashion to describe the distant future.

[7]This is in reference to remnants of the Philippines' colonial past. In order to suppress and control the native population, colonizers often impose strict rules of conduct, hierarchical structures, and segregational practices. Over time, such discriminatory practices get embedded into a culture where they continue to influence native customs, even years after the foreigners' departure.

[8]That is to say, it is a mind obsessed with the past.

conveniences and less orthodox world views. It is understandable, then, that for many new immigrants, Canada seems like a futuristic advanced alien country. For some, myself included, this view is further complicated by severe culture shock and nostalgia for the life back home. I was brought up in a traditional family where attempts at progressive change were hampered by age-old superstitions, rigid customs, and distrust[9]. Therefore, the move to Canada felt like a violent uprooting that brought a sense of loss and a shattered self image. Sometimes, the shock of the new may bring life to a standstill, and my world was in temporary suspension, as if trapped in a virtual time buffer. This parallels how my characters behave, in that they maintain their old ways of doing things out of tradition, fear, or habit. The characters' stagnant (and potentially regressive) behavior is made more apparent by its juxtaposition with the story's symbolic future time.

4   The Zhattvini Tongue

Language, in both its written and spoken form, is sometimes used in literature, dramatic arts, and in visual arts, for example, to differentiate one group of people from another; thus it can be an important cultural identifier. In *The Birthday*, I enhance the illusion of a distinct Zhattvian society[10] by writing the story in a fictional Zhattvini language, and then presenting it with subtitles. The addition of the subtitles is a non-intrusive method of making the story accessible to my audience without breaking this illusion, insofar as Zhattvini is still perceived as the "original" language. This will also elicit a mild voyeuristic state in the audience; it will increase their sense of looking into a foreign culture from the fringe. I wanted to incorporate

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[9]There were instances when family traditions and beliefs infringed on normal daily activities, and in some cases, even interfered with potentially positive changes. The refusal to eat dark or black colored foods because of their "evil colours" is one example.

[10]An approach in 3D animation that I am attracted to is the creation of my own world from scratch, and language is an efficient way to add a cultural component to this fictional world.

this effect into the work because it parallels how my family and other people around me percieve my situation at that time, and further reinforces the personal nature of my experience.

Moreover, this use of subtitles calls attention to the paradoxical effect language has as a "screened window" on a culture: when translated, language contributes to cultural knowledge, because it opens up what was previously inaccessible; however, the lossy nature of translations[11] also means that certain nuances of a culture, associated with language, will be filtered out. Thus the subtitles function to draw the reader in by making the story more accessible, while at the same time also excluding them from the more subtle aspects of the work, and frustrating their attempts to understand it. This parallels one's attempts at foreign language comprehension without being able to read (or listen) between the lines, an experience familiar to many. This dual role of language, in facilitating and inhibiting communication, recalls the double function of the mask to both hide and reveal aspects of the wearer (Edson, 2005).

The use of Zhattvini in *The Birthday* also touches on another important aspect of language that I wanted to explore, and that is the role of language in the "cultural framing" of a work. This is related to the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis[12], which claims that "the speakers of quite different languages think about the world in quite different ways" (Swoyer, 2003); thus, the language used in a work will frame it in a particular ethnographic context. In

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[11]In the Philippines, English is used mainly in written form, and therefore I have limited comprehension of spoken English. Hence, watching American movies with subtitles has become for me both a necessity and an acquired aesthetic preference. The reading of subtitles completes my experience of film and is much preferable to having the original dialogues dubbed. Similarly, for literature, I have a tendency to compare the translated text to the original, even if the original language is not familiar to me. This is more of a visual-aural than a cognitive process, as the idea of having the original language, be it written or spoken, draws me closer to the work, and provides me with a psychological buffer to counter what was lost in the translation.

[12]The Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis (LRH) is sometimes called the SapirWhorf Hypothesis, as it is based on the work and theories of German anthropologies Edward Sapir and his American colleague Benjamin Whorf.

other words, the use of a particular language will create corresponding cultural associations in the audience, and these associations can take the form of related imageries, or even extra-diegetic narratives. This role of language can be related to the function of masks as mnemonic tools in rituals, when they are used with music or dance to stimulate recollection of words or stories (Edson, 2005, p. 41). Using English in *The Birthday*, for example, may highlight to the reader the Western influences in the work (e.g. French Baroque, Art Nouveau, and Hollywood CGI), while causing him to overlook the Asian elements (e.g. Manchurian, Buddhism, and Japanese anime). When the audience extracts specific cultural elements from the work at the expense of others, they also separate it from the whole. I was concerned that this could fragment my work in unintended ways, and detract from the more culturally blended visuals I hoped to achieve. Therefore, I introduced Zhattvini, so that it could "mask over" the "cultural fissures" (like a transparent gelatin layer). My intention was to minimize this mosaic (or jigsaw puzzle) effect, and project a multifaceted work that transcends the sum of its culturally-inspired parts—a hybrid. The Zhattvini language, in this case, acts like a mask in my work that "conceal[es] and redefine[s]" (Edson, 2005, p. 47) in order to simulate Zhattvian cultural unity.

5   Red Blood and Bluish Minds

The Muhandians' patrician status does not lessen the gravity of their dilemma. While it's true that Schuza could have easily sold many other household items, aside from the masks, to support the family, the masks, as highly prized objects in Zhattvia, provide an efficient means to get the much needed money. But, more importantly, the selling of the masks also alludes to the fact that the Muhandian crisis is more than just financial; it is also about loss of social status and identity. In the same way, the neurotic episodes that I experienced in my first year as an immigrant were not caused

by the lack of basic necessities, for, compared to many other immigrants that I knew then, I was relatively well-off. Rather, my misery could have been caused by low self-esteem and perceived worthlessness from a lifestyle "downgrade". This relates to the use of masks to "present a 'face' to the viewer and to save 'face' for the wearer" (Edson, 2005, p. 47). Because I had to leave my "family masks" back home, I had nothing to cover up my sense of shame (to save face) for being a lowly immigrant, and nor could I count on the family's prestige to back me up (present a "face").

In addition, being part of an ethnic minority in Canada heightened my self-awareness of being Asian; generations' worth of repressed nationalism and Asia's humiliating history of colonialism were being uncovered[13]. As a new immigrant I felt torn between embracing my own culture and the shame of identifying with the "weak" and the "conquered". I am not the only immigrant to have felt vulnerable in a foreign country that is inhabited by one's former "conquerors"[14], unmasked and unprotected. Similarly, the Muhandian masks are the family's connection to their family traditions and history[15], and by selling them, the family is losing a lot more than just objects of value. Houdinne is the only remaining connection left to the family's former glory, and Schuza, in his anxiety over the situation, tightens his grip

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[13]While an extensive sociological discussion of colonization is not possible here, it is of worth to mention the effect of post-colonization on national mentality, which no doubt, plays a role in how I perceive non-Asian cultures then (and probably even now). Although the Philippines was no longer a colony by the time I was born, colonization has left its mark on the people's collective consciousness (Simpson, 1947). The feelings of degradation and humiliation in being treated as inferior subjects (to "white" foreign invaders), are ingrained in the people's minds, both consciously and subconsciously.

[14]Unlike the Philippines, Canada still retains strong ties to England, a country that has colonized parts of China. In fact, Canada itself is not exempt from a history of suppression and conquest, as the First Nations people can attest.

[15]This aspect of the mask closely parallels that of the sacred and enigmatic First Nations ceremonial masks; they are not objects of disguise but powerful emblems that carry with them the history and tradition of an entire culture. The masks in this case "borrowed from the sacred beliefs of the past where they were used to help the group to think and act and, as culturally amplified objects, they empowered people through historic associations." (Edson, 2005, p38)

on this mask.

During the time of transition, of feeling caught between departure and arrival, I nurtured the idea of being "rescued" and returned to my old life. After all, even Hansel and Gretel think to find their way back home with a trail of bread. Likewise, Schuza's denial of his family's situation spurs him to find temporary solutions, like pawning off the masks and getting a neighbor as a substitute companion for his brother. At the other extreme, little Iztanu insists on a more permanent solution by refusing to wear masks altogether. Like Iztanu, I also considered letting go of the past completely and starting over from scratch. However, major life decisions are seldom made in one clean sweep, for there are always conflicts and contradictions. And so, eventually the brothers reach a compromise: the heirloom mask gets stored safely for the time being so that both brothers can enjoy a moment of harmony together. Houdinne is powerless in this situation, so for now, the ancient one rests.

Charles Taylor, in his essay *The Politics of Recognition*, mentions that "discovering ones own identity doesn't mean that one works it out in isolation, but that one negotiates it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others." He continues by saying that "identity crucially depends on dialogical relations with others"[16] (C. Taylor, 1992, p. 34). It seems though, that I have been engaged in a constant monologue in this new country; I felt coerced into accommodating the main stream perspectives at the expense of my own family traditions and complex history. The ties to my past and traditions, at the core of my being, that I have always cherished and relied

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[16]This is further elaborated by Pierre Dessureault, in his commentary of visual artist Sandra Semchuk's work, when he says "identity becomes a person's way of establishing intimate contact with their innermost being and of declaring their uniqueness through language, both the language of conventional communication and 'other modes of expression whereby we define ourselves, including languages of art, of gestures, of love, and the like' (C. Taylor, 1992, p. 32). The very term 'language' presumes dialogue with those who understand us, which in turn leads to a fundamental and essential aspect of identity— recognition." (Dessureault, 1995, p. 23)

on, have briefly lost their significance in this cultural context; that is, they do not carry any weight in a society that cannot comprehend them. Vulnerability has been the result. Therefore, like Schuza placing the mask in storage, suspending my attachment to my "family masks", even if transitory, will not only protect what remains of this conflicting and precious part of me, but is also the first step to acknowledging and adapting to the present. Adapting does not mean burying our origins, but rather, it allows us to sort through and bring forward those which we recognize to be the real ancestral values. And indeed, the consequence of failing to do so may be suffering the torment of discontinuity.

Masks and Multiplicity

Schuza is alone in the first few drafts of *The Birthday*, where he is featured as a lonely bachelor dealing with his identity crisis. As more facets of myself were written into the story, however, other characters emerged to accommodate these facets. It is common, in fairy tales, to project disparate and sometimes conflicting aspects of the personality into different characters, as I have done in *The Birthday*. These externalizations are, according to Bettelheim, tools for sorting out and understanding unconscious mental processes (Bettelheim, 1991, p. 75). It is not surprising, then, that psychoanalytic theories, due to their emphasis on the unconscious, are often used in the analysis of fairy tales. As an animator, character artist and story teller, I work with archetypes and personalities; therefore, including Jung's personality theory in this discussion provides me with an opportunity to go deeper into the story. I also refer to Joseph Campbell's analysis of the mythic hero, as it provides a good complement to the Jungian perspective. These concepts, even if only briefly introduced in this paper, give more insight into my characters' personalities and their relationships with each other, and reveal *The Birthday*'s universal significance as I uncover the archetypal qualities that my characters represent.

In the course of the story development process, I came to realize that there

were some aspects of my persona[1] that would necessarily remain separate in the story, although I could make them work together, like complementary colours on a hand-painted mask. Instead of my usual single character depiction, I integrated an extra dimension by portraying the dynamics between multiple characters in this work. This not only provided a more accurate picture of my internal struggles, but also allowed *The Birthday* to become an evolving portrait.

1   The Muhandian Orphans

> Maybe if more of our adolescents had been brought up on fairy tales, they would (unconsciously) remain aware of the fact that their conflict is not with the adult world, or society, but really only with their parents.—Bruno Bettelheim (1991, p. 98).

At the story's start, it is told that the boys' parents died from an unknown epidemic, and nothing more is mentioned of them for the rest of the story. The only other members of the family are the loyal Tytonids[2], a group of immortal beings that act as caretakers to the boys. The parents' death is not the cause of the family problems but their absence in the story adds a tinge of desolation to the boys' plight. The incomprehensible nature of most personal problems often creates a sense of loneliness in the sufferer. It seems possible to me now that my traumatic episode, brought about by the family's exodus, was partly an internal struggle heightened by my own insecurities, even though I was unaware of it at the time. My parents, though, were not

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[1]According to the Encyclopædia Britannica,"persona is a term, coined by Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, is derived from the Latin persona, referring to the masks worn by Etruscan mimes. One of the Jungian archetypes, the persona enables an individual to interrelate with the surrounding environment by reflecting the role in life that the individual is playing. In this way one can arrive at a compromise between ones innate psychological constitution and society. Thus the persona enables the individual to adapt to societys demands" (Carr, 2009).

[2]Please see the section on Tytonids.

as supportive as they could have been and I was left to fend for myself[3]. The little child in me still holds them accountable for what happened. Bettelheim states that a child's anger at his parents may create a desire in him "to destroy those on whom he depends for his existence" (1991, p. 30), which also causes a lot of guilt. However, the child can subconsciously act out this narrative by performing a "masked symbolic killing" through reading fairy tales that deal with this theme[4]. For example, in *Snow White* and *Cinderella* the real parents are replaced by evil substitutes who suffer horrible consequences for their misdeeds. Parents never feature prominently in my fiction work, and in *The Birthday*, my boys are orphaned.

1.1 Schuza Muhandiss - The One Who Refused the Call

> Refusal of the summons converts the adventure into negative. Walled in by boredom, hard work, or "culture", the subject loses the power of significant affirmative action and becomes a victim to be saved. His flowering world becomes a wasteland...a labyrinth of cyclopean walls to hide from him his Minotaur...—Joseph Campbell (2004, p. 54)

After his parents' death, Schuza (figure 9), as the eldest Muhandiss, becomes the de facto head of the family. The young adult is timid and reserved by nature. He was brought up with a sense of duty to continue the

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[3]I developed severe OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) several weeks after my arrival in Canada. The practice back home for dealing with psychiatric disorders was to keep them secret if possible, and segregate the patient from outside stimuli. My parents, instead of providing comfort, advocated this segregational practice and even encouraged my siblings to do the same. There are still remnants of this OCD in the form of my anal retentive obsession with order and control. This could be part of the reason why I was drawn to animation as an art form, where I get the "illusion" of control in manipulating time and other creative details.

[4]Many fairy tales address issues and conflicts within the child's psyche (internal) (Bettelheim, 1991; Heuscher, 1974) and the parents are often relegated to secondary roles, like Rapunzel's biological parents, or even featured as antagonists, like Hansel and Gretel's mother.

Figure 9: Schuza

family legacy. Paranoia over the pressure of his family obligations makes Schuza a mild hypochondriac; he suffers from unexplained coughing fits and sleeplessness. Occasionally he limps on his left leg, claiming weakness of the knee. To escape from his social burdens, Schuza becomes a recluse and is introverted. He is also a master of his emotions, and, like the rigid masks that he wears, Schuza at times appears aloof and inexpressive. Schuza has a strong attachment to the family's heirloom masks, and he becomes increasingly insecure with each mask that gets pawned off. This is a reflection of my own feelings at the perceived loss of my culture and inherited identities.

Schuza's restrained manner is accentuated by his seemingly rigid formfitting clothes. He is dressed like a 17th century European nobleman, but the high collar on his coat is Chinese in origin. There is also evidence of body shaping[5] in Schuza's build, for his neck has been purposely elongated to fit

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[5] Body shaping is a common practice in many different cultures, particularly for the elite class. One example is China's infamous foot-binding practice for noblewomen.

his coat's unusually high collar, a custom amongst the Zhattvian elites. Additionally, the emphasis on rituals and repetitive activities, common in many traditional cultural practices, is evident in the large number of fasteners, fancy button work, and other accessories on Schuza's garments: it takes at least a couple of hours for Schuza to get ready in the morning. The absence of mirrors means that he also needs assistance for this activity. In a sense, Schuza represents the Westernized aspect of my mentality, brought about by the Philippine culture's strong Spanish influence. The Spanish emphasis on strict etiquette and social formalities led to a more restrictive lifestyle that included wearing tight garments.

According to Carl Jung (Boeree, 2006), the goal of life is to realize the *self*—a transcendence of all opposites—which includes the conscious and the unconscious aspects of the personality. An incomplete development of the *self* will result in the emergence of "complexes" wherein repressed or ignored aspects of the personality have been externalized into another form. In a sense, Schuza's predicament represents the "complex" that emerged from the incomplete *self* that I inherited from my past, as it does not include my own individuality. This lopsided *self* is symptomatic of an imbalanced ego, represented by Schuza, which seems to be excessively preoccupied with the persona (mask) and outer reality, while ignoring the unconscious and its archetypes (Boeree, 2006). Increasingly insecure, Schuza builds himself a protective wall to cover up his fears (his "Minotaur") and thus, according to Campbell, he becomes "the victim to be saved" .

1.2   Iztanu Muhandiss - The Hero as a Child

> ...the child of destiny has to face a long period of obscurity. This is a time of extreme danger, impediment, or disgrace. He is thrown inward to his own depths or outward to the unknown; either way, what he touches is a darkness unexplored...a zone of unsuspected presences, benign as well as malignant...—Joseph Campbell (2004, p. 298)

Figure 10: Iztanu

Iztanu (figure 10), the little jewel of the family, is Schuza's antithesis; he represents the Jungian "Shadow" archetype, the opposite of the ego or what Campbell refers to as "a darkness unexplored". The "Shadow" is not necessarily the negative aspect of a personality, for it is considered amoral. Little Iztanu embodies the individualistic side of me that slowly surfaced in the midst of my struggles. This more "rebellious" part of me, an important aspect of the "Shadow" archetype, is relatively young and undeveloped— child-like. Away from the repressive environment back home, the emergence of this aspect of my personality caused a stir both within myself and with my family, just as Iztanu's "unnatural" behavior plays havoc with Schuza's sanity. The boy is left on his own most of the time, and has indeed spent most of his life so far in relative obscurity, like Campbell's child of destiny. He has also taken to playing outside unmasked, much to his brother's horror. Iztanu has developed an aversion to wearing masks, and he cannot comprehend his older brother's reliance on these "antiques". Therefore, the selling of the heirloom masks has no effect on the boy; on the contrary, Iztanu considers the masks a terrible burden and embraces the freedom he experiences at their

loss.

In contrast to Schuza, Iztanu is a carefree little being, and his long flowing clothes complement his free spirit. While Schuza's outfit exhibits a severely modified Asian style, Iztanu wears a distinctively Chinese costume. The boy's proportions are also more normal than those of his older sibling, having gotten away without the neck-shaping that his elder brother went through. Iztanu's overall lively behavior and slightly plump physical appearance attests to his less restrictive upbringing, although he is not by any means spoilt. Furthermore, unlike his older brother, Iztanu prefers to wear more comfortable clothes that he can put on himself.

Iztanu represents the facet of my personality that remains intact and unaltered by foreign ideological bombardment—for, in spite of all the exposure to Western thoughts, there is a part of me that remains firmly grounded in my Chinese roots. This relatively stable aspect of myself does not feel the need to refer to the past, since it is already deeply connected to tradition. Conversely, the more Westernized aspect of myself, as represented by Schuza, seems dependent on the external expression of tradition (i.e. the mask), as if to reinforce its legitimacy.

Iztanu has an affinity with plants, and his closeness to nature is another manifestation of the "Shadow". He also has a greater awareness of being connected to what Jung called the collective unconscious[6], which is much more fluid and less inhibiting than the egocentric realm of antique masquerades that Schuza participates in. In addition, because of his young age and his role in bringing Schuza to the mirror, Iztanu manifests the "Child" archetype, which is a representation of hope, rebirth, and the future.

> . . . the return or recognition of the hero, when, after the long period of obscurity, his true character is revealed. This event may precipitate a considerable

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[6] "The collective unconscious, defined by Carl Jung, refers to a segment of the deepest unconscious mind. As opposed to the personal unconscious, which is composed of long-forgotten memories and experiences, the collective unconscious consists of archetypes that represent an inherited set of beliefs and understandings. These archetypes exist to varying degrees in all humans." (Fritscher, 2009)

> crisis...yet after a moment of apparent havoc, the creative value of the new factor comes to view, and the world takes shape again in unsuspected glory.
> —Joseph Campbell (2004, p. 304)

By acknowledging the unconscious, the ego can achieve the proper balance needed to find its way to a more integrated self. While I proudly embraced my Chinese cultural heritage, a part me of also felt restricted by the dogmatic aspects of tradition and longed to break free. So instead of trying to repress the more independent aspect of myself, I eventually accepted it as a part of a dichotomy that works jointly to inform my self image. Similarly, after ignoring the little boy for so long, Schuza finally accepts Iztanu and "recognizes" his little brother for who he is, a move that eventually makes their lives richer—as Campbell describes.

2   The Tytonids - Supernatural Aid

> ...though omnipotence may seem endangered...protective power is always and ever present within the sanctuary of the heart and even immanent within, or just behind, the unfamiliar features of the world. One has only to know and trust and the ageless guardians will appear... —Joseph Campbell (2004, p63)

The early drafts of *The Birthday* feature an owl-shaped computer called Ivo, which initially had a minor role as a novelty item on Schuza's office desk. Ivo evolved to become a more complex character (figure 11) as the story developed, shedding most of its robotic qualities and acquiring god-like characteristics. Eventually, Ivo also gained seventeen followers just like it. All together, these eighteen beings, inspired by the Buddhist *Louhan Monks*[7], collectively form the character group called the Tytonids.

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[7]The Eighteen Louhan Monks, known for their wisdom, courage, and powers, are Chinese temple guardians. There were originally sixteen but two more were added during the Tang Dynasty. (BuddhaNet, 2008; Net, 2008)

Figure 11: Ivo and two assistants

Back when the household was populated by human servants, the Tytonids were part of the graveyard shift, finishing off domestic jobs late into the evenings and acting as night sentries for the sleeping humans. The Tytonids' strong resemblance to owls alludes to their original nocturnal functions[8]. Owls are often used as symbols of wisdom, and the immortal Tytonids possess centuries of accumulated knowledge and experience; they are wise counselors to the family, although they seldom offer advice unless consulted by their masters. At the time of this story, with the once large household reduced to two orphans, the loyal Tytonids have taken over as senior guardians to the boys.

The association of owls with the occult[9] also hints at a spiritual role that accompanies the Tytonids' nurturing presence. As their various roles in the

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[8]In fact, the word "Tytonid" came from *Tytonidae* the scientific name for the barn owl family. Note that some members of the *Tytonidae* family are called masked owls, a name that suited the theme of the story.

[9]The owls' nocturnal habits and masked-like forms have associated them with occult and the metaphysical realms. The Kwakiutl tribe, for example, believed that "every human being is thought to have somewhere in the world a particular owl that is the manifestation of his own soul, the mask of his own inner self—owl masks or owl souls"(Stanley Walens, *Analogic Causality and the Power of Masks* (Crumrine, 1983, p74))

story imply, the Tytonids exhibit a multitude of archetypal qualities. They act as "Mother" to the boys, and as "Wise Old Men" in the family councils. With their mask-like faces, they evoke the "Trickster", and they express hermaphrodism through their apparent asexual nature. But sometimes they also alternate between the "Animus" (male) and the "Anima" (female) as they see fit. In addition, through their immortality, the Tytonids attain a transcendent quality suggestive of Jung's collective unconscious, and in fact, may be considered a quasi-incarnate of it.

The Tytonids' supernatural qualities link them to the spiritual realm, and their uncharacteristic look is a reflection of my mixed spiritual upbringing, the most complex aspect of my hybrid identity. Visually, they are inspired by Catholicism, Taoism, Wicca, and Buddhism-religions that I still practice now. It is not uncommon for fairy tales to deal with religion and *The Birthday*, being inspired by fairy tales, also contains religious motifs. Bettelheim mentions that "most fairy tales originated in periods when religion was a most important part of life, thus, they deal, directly or by inference, with religious themes. (Bettelheim, 1991, p13)" Away from home, and segregated from the family, I turned to my spiritual beliefs[10] for my main source of psychological comfort, and this aspect of my experience was incorporated into *The Birthday*, as embodied by the Tytonids.

When seen as a group, the Tytonids resemble a congregation of holy beings, with their pale (almost ghostly) colors and glowing nimbus-shaped headdresses. In particular, their most senior member, Ivo, invariably appears with two assistants at its side, evoking the image of a religious trinity. Furthermore, the Tytonids' hovering movements and their resemblance to birds link them with the element of air, often associated with truth and heavenly bodies. My mixed religious upbringing created a robust and resilient spiritual buffer that helped me adjust to the new environment. Similarly, the

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[10]It was also a coincidence perhaps that one of the manifestations of my OCD complex was by praying and chanting mantras every several minutes.

Tytonids' hybrid nature makes them versatile; they are neither animals nor machines, but form a separate, hybrid, group of beings. Their robotic capabilities allow them to perform the most physically demanding tasks, while their humanistic qualities endow them with emotions and will. The Tytonids, the "ageless guardians", have been with the family since the beginning and have access to history and other archaic knowledge, just like my religious practice was embedded in my family's history and tradition. While religion was not the direct solution to my psychological problems and identity crisis, it strengthened my endurance to ride out the situation. Likewise, the Tytonids' attentive care is an extra support system that sustains the boys through the family crisis.

3   The Multi-coloured Mask

. . . one by one the resistances are broken. He must put aside his pride, his virtue, beauty, and life, and bow or submit to the absolutely intolerable. Then he finds that he and his opposite are not of differing species, but one flesh. . . —Joseph Campbell (2004, p. 99)
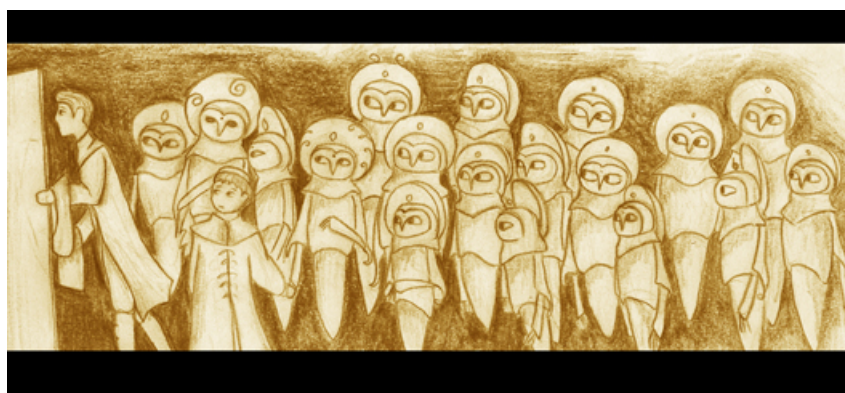

Figure 12: Revelation

The climax of *The Birthday* (figure 12) features the entire household waiting in anticipation, as Schuza contemplates his reflection in the mirror.

In this tense moment, the main elements of the story come together for the first time: the mirror, the mask, and all the characters. This is the summit where all the different aspects of the self intersect; it is the point when my persona finally reveals its multi-faceted nature, like a multi-coloured mask. For this short instant, the spiritual (the Tytonids and the mirror) and the physical (the boys and the mask) symbolically converge; my self-portrait is in its most complete form, and I, as their "maker", get a glimpse of my multi-facetted *self*. Likewise, the moment of self-awareness can be experienced as a harmonious blend of the physical and the metaphysical aspects of ourselves; that is, according to Campbell, they have become of "one flesh". This is often also a moment when we get a sense of feeling at one with the world.

Schuza has to make the choice of whether to trust his reflection in the mirror, or go back to wearing a mask, a decision that will, no doubt, affect everyone in the family (and perhaps even others in the city). This scene represents the brief pause between moments of loss and regain, a point when life is at its most simple, as there is nothing left to lose. When Schuza decides to set aside the mask he is giving up, for a time, wealth and stature as well as the traditions that the mask represents—in Campbell's words, "to submit to the absolutely intolerable" (2004, p. 99). However this moment of loss is also accompanied by a liberating experience. In choosing to take off the mask for all public appearances, Schuza recovers a forgotten part of himself, and through this, the brothers can enrich their own relationship as well as their relationship to the world outside their home.

The public mask one wears often obscures the path to self-awareness and it is only through an unmasking, an opening to vulnerability and humility, that one can more clearly see oneself. At the same time, by having the ancient mask safely stored, the eldest Muhandian may have done the best possible thing to prevent his family from losing everything—for the mask also represents the strengths of the past: culture, family and continuity of values. The Muhandian orphans have learned that it is a part of life to

suffer setbacks as long as hope and tradition stay alive to keep one moving forward. In a sense, the brothers are already wearing Houdinne—in their hearts. Schuza chooses to have his family start over from their ancestors' humble beginnings; thus, the Muhandians brave another round on the rota fortunae, as despair and loss get eclipsed by hope and metamorphosis. Life is indeed a path made of spirals, and an excerpt from T. S. Elliot's Little Gidding describes it beautifully:

> "We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time...
> Quick now, here, now, always
> A condition of complete simplicity
> (Costing not less than everything)
> And all shall be well and
> All manner of thing shall be well...."
> —T.S. Elliot, *Quartet No. 4: Little Gidding* (Fecit, 2000)

4   East and West of Ever and After

A statement such as "happily ever after" in a fairy tale is like a protective glaze that sets an implicit finality to the piece. This conforms to the conventional storytelling structure, which normally includes a beginning, a climax, and a resolution (ending). Stories that follow this structure appear to form a complete, self-sufficient world, as if life is made up of a series of separate episodes. However, some stories are not as structured and are more like a network of interconnected worlds; that is, the stories may represent arbitrary segments of a continuum. According to Trin Minh-Ha, many non-Western stories follow this more fluid narrative structure:

> Life is not a (Western) drama of four or five acts. Sometimes it just drifts along; it may go on year after year without development, without climax,

Figure 13: The West Door

> without definite beginnings or endings. Or it may accumulate climax upon
> climax, and if one chooses to mark it with beginnings and endings, then
> everything has a beginning and ending. There are, in a sense, no good or
> bad stories. —Trin Minh-Ha, *Grandma's Story* (Mcquillan, 2000)

As a reflection of my mixed cultural influences, *The Birthday* borrows
from both Western and non-Western storytelling perspectives. While there
is no explicit "happily ever after" ending for the story, the characters still
develop along a positive story arc. There is a sense of optimism in that
the Muhandians, after resolving their problem, are now more empowered to
tackle other obstacles that come their way. Schuza finally sees the complex
and contradictory roles Houdinne plays in his life, and he also realizes the
need to sometimes conceal specificities of the self in order to protect conti-
nuity and traditions. Houdinne, although still with the family, is honorably
put away until the boys develop a greater understanding of how to harness
its strength. The brothers do not know what will happen when they go out
unmasked, but they have gained strength and trust in each other; they are
now well prepared to face the consequences. The cultural change that I have
dealt with in coming to North America is but one of the many obstacles I will

have to face in my lifetime, and as *The Birthday*'s relatively vague ending suggests[11], it is simply a part of the continuum of my life experiences. However, I like to think that I have emerged from this ordeal a much stronger individual and that, like the Muhandians, I have reached a new stage in my personal growth. *The Birthday* proposes that "ever after" is not always a pleasant walk in the park, for the world is still full of uncertainties. Nevertheless, all is not lost, for the sun shines bright. *The Birthday* concludes with the two brothers, wearing their new "masks", walking out to face the unknown with hope.

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[11]The book version of *The Birthday* contains back stories and family histories of the Muhandiss clan, as well as quirks and details about the Zhattvian society. These back stories suggest that *The Birthday* is but one segment of a much longer narrative.

Inner Child and Outside World

> . . . one had better not challenge the watcher of the established bounds. And yet-it is only by advancing beyond those bounds...that the individual passes, either alive or in death, into a new zone of experience. . . —Joseph Campbell (2004, p. 75)

Most of my portrait work features idealized characters, reflecting qualities that I aspire to have; they can be seen as masks that hide the negative and accentuate the positive. This is in contrast to the multifaceted self-portrait of The Birthday, which reveals the darker aspects of my personality that are normally not translated into my visuals. This self-portrait is not a mask that hides, but rather an expressive tool. The process of self-reflection, an unmasking, that I have engaged in while working on this project has given me an opportunity to acknowledge these aspects of myself through art.

There were occasions while working on The Birthday when I found myself in the dark: the journey of self-discovery can sometimes take one to a most unpleasant place. I initially approached this project with a lot of fear, not only of what I would discover about myself, but also of what others would see in me. I started out as Joseph Campbell's reluctant hero when I "refused to hear the call" to adventure (Campbell, 2004, p. 54). At the beginning this fear of exposure led me to unconsciously mask my work with extraneous

elements, hoping to disguise my own insecurities with feeble attempts at complexity. Eventually, my exposure to different narrative forms and the research I engaged in while working through this project made me realize that complexity does not always mean visual or metaphoric overload; that is, "complex" does not necessarily mean "complicated". The deep symbolic meanings hidden in the most basic of fairy tales made me realize that highly complex work can sometimes be delicately simple. After all, an unmasked naked face is far more sophisticated than the rigid masks, despite the absence of paint and ornaments. So in a way, for this book project I went through a process of unmasking, as I removed the surface layers of my work and distilled the main elements into a simple story structure. Thus, by not giving in to my fears, I avoided my usual tendency to convolute the tale with plot excesses. In achieving this, I put into practice Charles Taylor's philosophy of negotiating one's identity through dialogue. Indeed, by making my work more accessible, I am engaging in a "dialogue of self recognition" with my audience through simplicity, openness, and honesty.

In letting my insecurities surface in the work at different levels, I also arrived at a more complete picture of myself. I do not have to restrict my fictional self-portraits to fantastic ideals anymore, for I can also portray neurotic introverts, eccentric plant lovers, and even robotic clones. In the process of storytelling, I have come to accept that this multi-faceted depiction of myself can be a hybrid of the good, the bad, and the unconventional. I do not have to be perfect. I am not a robot or a marionette, nor am I an eccentric or a neurotic. I am all of these. . . because I am human.

Appendix: Notes on the Artwork

This MAA project represents the early stages of a work in progress; thus, the works of art featured, including those found in the graduate exhibit, are not in their final format. A higher resolution version of the figures are provided in the accompanying CD. The following is a more detailed description of the artwork presented in this paper:

- Figure 1: Portrait
  This is a 3D rendered work done in Maya. It was inspired by the work of 16th Century European court portraits, using lighting and color schemes reminiscent of that period.

- Figures 2 and 3: The Exhibition
  The ECI Master's of Applied Arts graduate exhibition, *Always Almost*, took place at the Charles H. Scott Gallery on May 2009. My exhibition piece *The Birthday: A Storybook Project* is the recipient of Winsor Gallery Student Award's Honourable Mention. This is my story project in book format. These photos show the book's accordion layout (also called the "Concertina" layout). In order to allow the audience to read the book, I provided a viewable binder version of the book beside the

exhibit.

- Figures 4, 6–13: Scenes from the Book
  These pencil drawings are extracted from the project's storyboard. The plot of *The Birthday* went through various revisions and the scenes featured in this paper are from the latest version of the storyboard. These drawings are also used as part of the back story in the book.

- Figure 5: Houdinne
  This is the texture file for Houdinne, the Muhandian hierloom mask. The name Houdinne is derived from Harry Houdini, the famous magician and stunt-performer, who eventually became a formidable skeptic, known for his debunking of self-proclaimed psychics and mediums. Houdini's training in magic and illusions gives him an edge in exposing frauds. Likewise, playing on this idea, the mask Houdinne, has the dual ability to create illusions and enforce the Muhandian's aristocratic legitimacy in Zhattvian society. The designs for Houdinne (as mentioned in the paper) are influenced by Chinese opera face painting patterns.

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