Fantasy and Transformation in Shadow Puppetry

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The dynamic principle of fantasy is play, a characteristic also of the child, and as such it appears inconsistent with the principle of serious work. But without this playing with fantasy no creative work has ever yet come to birth. The debt we owe to the play of imagination is incalculable.[1] *(Carl Jung)*

As a picture book artist, I am interested in the creation of imaginative imagery. By "imaginative imagery" I mean images that present a fantasy or experience in a dreamlike or unrealistic or perhaps abstract manner. It might be useful to understand what psychologists have to say about imagery. Contemporary psychologists distinguish between different types of images – memory images (which are formed from our past or recent present) and imagination images (which may contain past perceptions but are arranged differently than when they were first perceived). Writers, artists, scientists, and architects use imagination images to create their new work. Fantasy and daydream imagery is a combination of memory and imagination images.[2]

How can we get in touch with images? There are a number of ways of activating the imagination. Carl Jung has suggested a technique by which we can keep in touch with the unconscious: by activating images from our own creative depths or dreams.[3] Similarly, Jean Houston, an American psychologist, writes about exercises that will activate four levels of imagery: the sensory, the psychological, the symbolic-mythic and the integral-religious.[4] In her work Houston describes ways of getting in touch with these levels and shows us the meaning they can have in our lives.

Artistic visual expression of fantasy has found its best expression in book illustration and the shadow theatre. Shadow puppetry, a two-dimensional art form like picture book illustrations, includes scenes between two or more figures, and the action shown in a shadow play comes close to the action shown in cut-out picture book illustration. Because of its symbolic nature, shadow theatre does not copy reality but instead stimulates the imagination.

Since my childhood, I have been interested in hand shadows and have enjoyed playing with my fingers to project shadow images of rabbits, birds

and dogs on a wall. After designing shadow puppets (based on Eskimo fables) for the Centaur Theatre in Montreal, I realized that shadow puppetry was an extension of my picture books. Since pictorial form in books cannot move, I was searching for devices to show me ways in which my cut-out collaged figures would come alive. I found movement could be created through the shadow figures. Later shadow puppetry would lead me to partial animation.[5]

Through a Canada Council Theatre Arts Bursary (1970-1971) and travel grants to Europe, Turkey, Iran and the Canadian Arctic (Baker Lake), I was able to research and study shadow puppetry and to integrate many ideas that I was to draw upon in the coming years.

After returning from Europe, I planned to carry out a shadow puppet project with the children of Baker Lake.[6] Baker Lake is a small Keewatin settlement west of Hudson Bay, populated by the Caribou Eskimo people. I was attracted to Baker Lake because of the excellent work found in prints, appliqué wall hangings, and sculpture, and I thought it would be exciting to conduct my shadow puppet project with the children at Kamanituak School. There was also an unknown mysterious factor which I understood later: the fact that the people are *Caribou* Eskimo. The deer features in different origin myths of the Asian people as well as the Celtic and Arctic civilizations. In my own mythology and work, too, there is a close affinity for the hind, stag, deer, reindeer, elk and caribou. For me as for them, the deer seems to be a psychopomp, "a guide into the unconscious." Its function is as a bridge to the deeper regions of the psyche, leading to new knowledge and new discoveries.[7]

The unique quality of the shadow theatre is its ability to express any conceivable character. Animals can become people and people can become animals. Transformations can take place as described in the following Inuit poem:

Magic Words

In the very earliest time,
When both people and animals
lived on earth,
a person could become an
animal if he wanted to
and an animal could become a
human being.

Sometimes they were people
and sometimes animals
and there was no difference.
All spoke the same language.
That was the time when words
were like magic.
The human mind had mysterious
powers.

A word spoken by chance
might have strange consequences.
It would suddenly come alive
and what people wanted to happen
all you had to do was say it.
Nobody could explain this:
That's the way it was.[8]

Through songs and fables, magic words had a particular mission, as long as the spirits knew what one wanted: a caribou, a seal, or maybe a cure for a sickness, a cure for the soul, atonement for crimes or guilt, or just entertainment. The traditions of a culture are passed on to us through myths, fables, legends, songs and dance rituals. Through the Eskimo songs and fables the children were able to learn and respect their folklore and customs. The Inuit regard their folktales as actual events which once took place: "It is said that it is so, and therefore it is so," said Nalunmgiaq.[9]

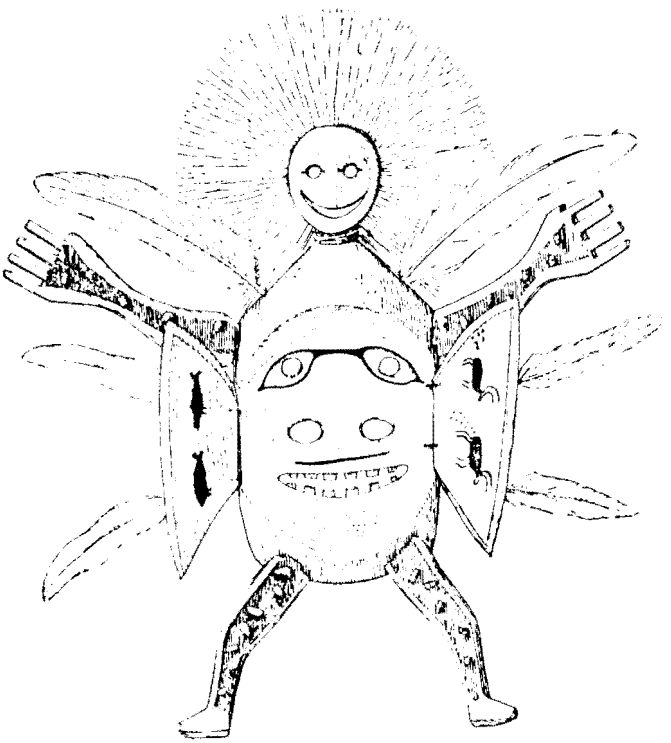
The Inuit people have no known tradition of puppetry the way we think of it. However, they do use masks and finger masks, dance and songs, and these can be related to mime and puppetry just as original skin appliqués, appliqué wall hangings, and stone-cut prints can be related to shadow figures. Oto Bihalji-Merin, in his study on ritual and drama, says "Puppets and shadow plays belong to the world of masks. By the very essence of fantasy and the magic of reality they are related to pantomime, and have always existed for children for all ages.[10]

Masks had their own story and dance. Margaret Lantis[11] describes the pantomimic Inuit dances that portrayed hunting scenes, where face masks, forehead masks, and finger masks were worn; carved masks represented animal faces. The drum was an essential part of the ceremony wherein acting and dancing were performed.

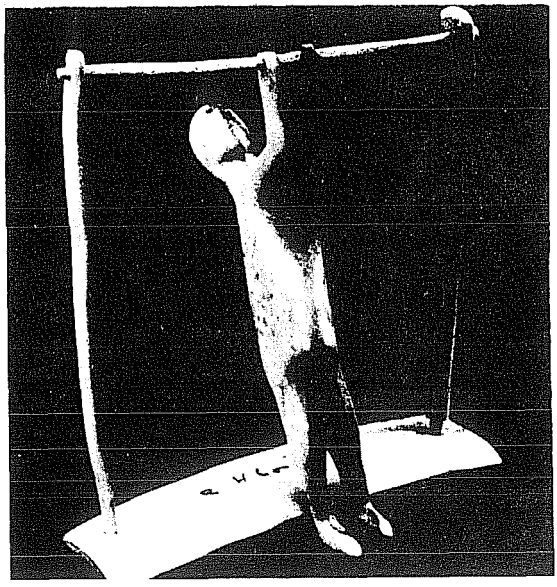
The so-called finger masks has elaborate trimmings of feathers and caribou hair and were worn by women who moved their hands and arms, usually while dancing in pairs.[12] When in dancing movement finger masks appear to come alive like puppets.

They are not really masks because a real mask always covers the face to transform a human being into a spirit, an animal, or another human being. But masks with moveable portions can be related to puppetry. The progression of masks to marionette puppets was a gradual one which took place in most primitive societies through the centuries. When masks were taken off the head and held in the hands, manipulated by strings, they became marionette-like puppets.

In West Coast Indian and Alaskan Eskimo masks, the moveable portions of the mask (doors that open and close) represent an ordinary form of the being changed to its "inua" (spirit) form. Masks were not made to be realistic but were made to interpret an idea, and the interpretation was usually non-representational or completely abstract. One mask might represent a bubble in the water, another a star. They could not be identified from appearance alone.



The moveable toy-like sculptures of Luke Anowtalik from Eskimo Point and Moses Nagyougalik of Baker Lake (below), which were made from caribou antler, can also be easily related to marionette-like puppets.



George Swinton states that, in contemporary Eskimo art, foreign materials and techniques are taken from one culture and reworked and adapted so that they are no longer foreign. This can be seen in the prints and drawings by Kenojuak, Oonark, Parr, and Pitseolak which, according to Prof. Swinton, are thoroughly Eskimoan and are now part of the new Inuit tradition.[13] This can also be seen in the Baker Lake children's drawings, shadow puppets and relief prints.

My project began by trying to recreate the ceremonies that would have occurred during the long polar nights when people gathered into snow huts and soft flickering lights from a stone lamp would create dancing shadows on the wall. I tried to make the project enjoyable through play. To create interest, I explained shadow puppetry verbally and visually – with a demonstration.

Play is important in childhood. The value of puppetry lies in the fact that it is one aspect of play which provides emotional outlets, social growth and development of individual expression. According to Johan Huizinga, civilization unfolds in play, and according to Friedrich von Schiller, man is only alive when he plays. There is also a Chinese saying that if you want to paint a tree you must first become a tree.

It was important to create an atmosphere, to inspire, to give enthusiasm. Children were given space and time to create their drawings, shadow figures, stories and relief prints. Later, perhaps, a shadow performance would evolve, but this was secondary. The aim of the project was to

integrate experiences gained through drawings, shadow figures, stories and relief prints.

Three groups of children participated: primary children from grades one and two; mentally handicapped children, and a randomly selected group of children ages seven to fourteen.

The essential elements for a shadow performance are light, shadow puppets and a white sheet for a screen. It can be the most poetic form of puppetry since it is ideal for presenting dreams, visions and transformation scenes. As soon as children can use scissors they can easily make simple puppets from bristol board, creating an opaque shadow, as the Baker Lake children did. (Other materials to explore might include paper, card, acetate, aluminium, wood and fabric.) More elaborate shadow figures were made from translucent acetate; when painted they created beautiful textures and patterns in colour which were projected onto the screen. Horizontal, vertical and string manipulation constructions were explained to the children.

A shadow performance differs from other forms of theatre in that the screen separates the audience from the actors (child puppeteers). The audience seated in front of the screen sees the shadow cast on the screen by a light which appears magical. Shadows are mysteries. Children working behind a screen feel protected by it. When holding a shadow figure directly to the screen a clear black shadow will appear. By holding it further away various tonalities will appear until it completely disappears. In a shadow play the scenery and puppets resemble images in a painting, graphics or film; they appear or disappear in front of our eyes.

After the children learned the simple construction methods of shadow puppetry, three approaches emerged in their activity: (1) playing with shadow puppets to create a story, (2) writing a story and then creating shadow puppets, and (3) adapting stories and then creating shadow puppets. An extension of this was the exploration of printmaking from the shadow figures.

(1) Playing with shadow puppets to create a story:

With primary children, the activity of making simple shapes, drawing birds, animals and masks; cutting them out, and exploring them on the shadow screen was a satisfaction in itself. Even the youngest child was able to operate a shadow figure. Once the child was helped to thumbtack a simple cut-out to a rod or to tie it to a string, he could produce movement with the figure. Children had a spontaneous dialogue with their shadow figures. They talked *to* the shadow puppet as well as *for* the puppet. Meaning was found in the playing and in the joy of creating shadows.

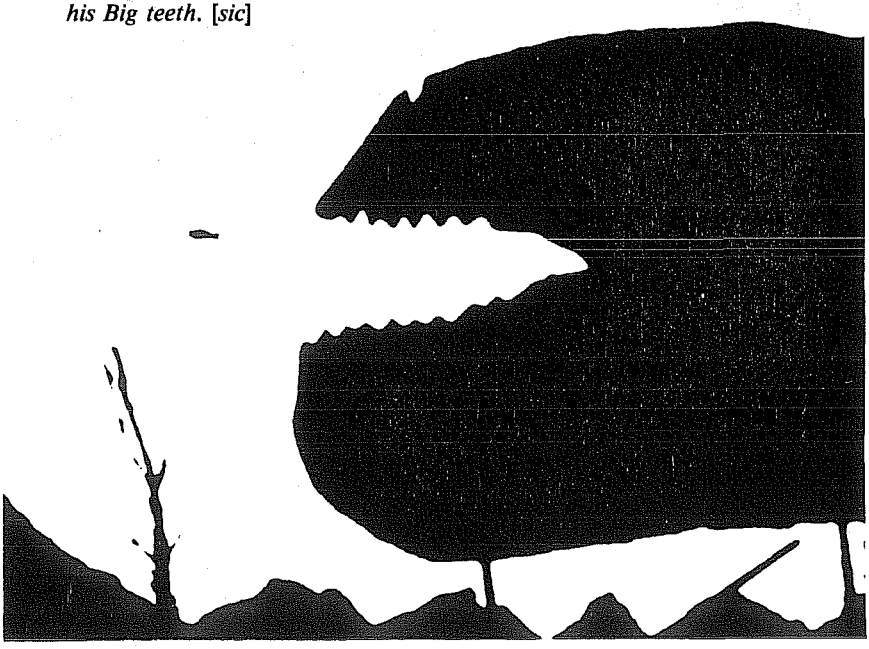
Working with a few mentally handicapped children was most rewarding. Simple masks were drawn very quickly, cut out of paper, and tried out behind the shadow screen. The children's span of concentration was

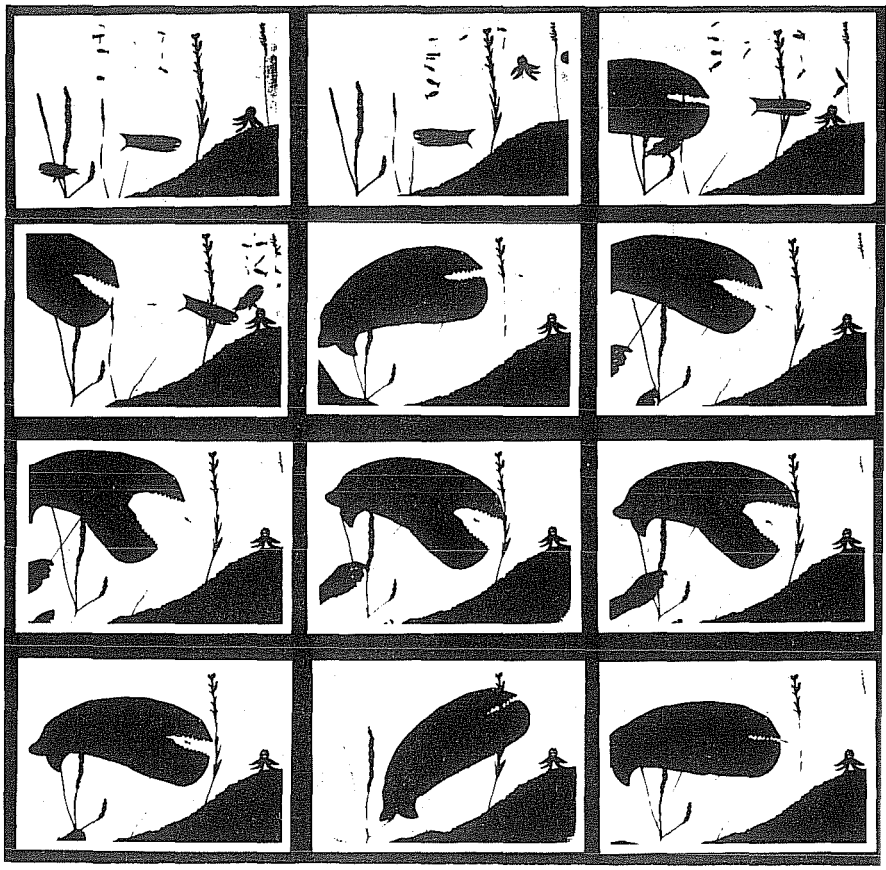
shorter, but a great sense of satisfaction was achieved from the ability to control the size of the shadow, making it appear larger or smaller. A child who showed no emotional expression suddenly smiled and tried to gain everyone's attention when he realized that he controlled the size of the mask on the shadow screen. It was a magical experience.

Jane, one of the randomly selected group of seven to fourteen year olds, created "The Whale and the Little Fish" by playing with the shadow puppets behind the screen. The underwater scenes were based on seaweeds and marine growths found in the area. They were pinned to the shadow screen, creating a harmony between the shadow puppets and the scenery. The whale was made with a hinged jaw, moveable in accordance with the different stages of the story.

The Whale and the little fish

One day the whale was out hunting on the lake when he saw lots of fish, the fish that were playing around saw the whale and started to run away, then a few seconds later all of the fish were gone except for one little fish. The little fish didn't know that the whale came and he just kept playing but then he noticed that he was all alone he didn't see the other fish anywhere around and than the whale came and said "HAH You ARE ALL ALone with me" than the little fish said "OH where are my frends" and he tried to run away but he couldnt Because he was so small and Slow and the whale was so big and fast. The whale had caught up with the little fish and tried to eat him but he couldn't because his big teeth were wide apart and the little fish was small enough to go through his Big teeth. [*sic*]





"The Whale and the Little Fish" was also created on an overhead projector with smaller shadow figures created from paper cut-outs that were easily manipulated by string. When projected they created extremely large shadows on the wall. (Almost every school has an overhead projector which can be used for experimentation in the early development of shadow puppetry with children.)

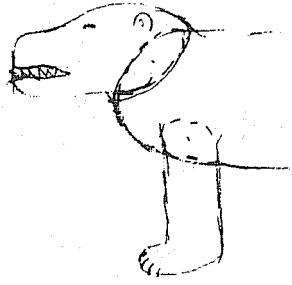
(2) Writing a story and then creating shadow puppets:

Victor, in the same group, wrote "The Caribou and the Polar Bear" first and then created drawings (on lined foolscap paper) for the shadow puppets.

The caribou and the polar bear

Once there lived a caribou who lived by himself. When he went

hunting for food. He found some food to eat. Then suddenly he heard a big groan. He was so frighten that he could not move. When he looked a little he saw a white fur. Then a polar bear came out. The polar bear saw a caribou standing by his side. So the caribou ran fast as he could and forgot to bring his food. Then the polar bear laughed and went back to his hole. [*sic*].



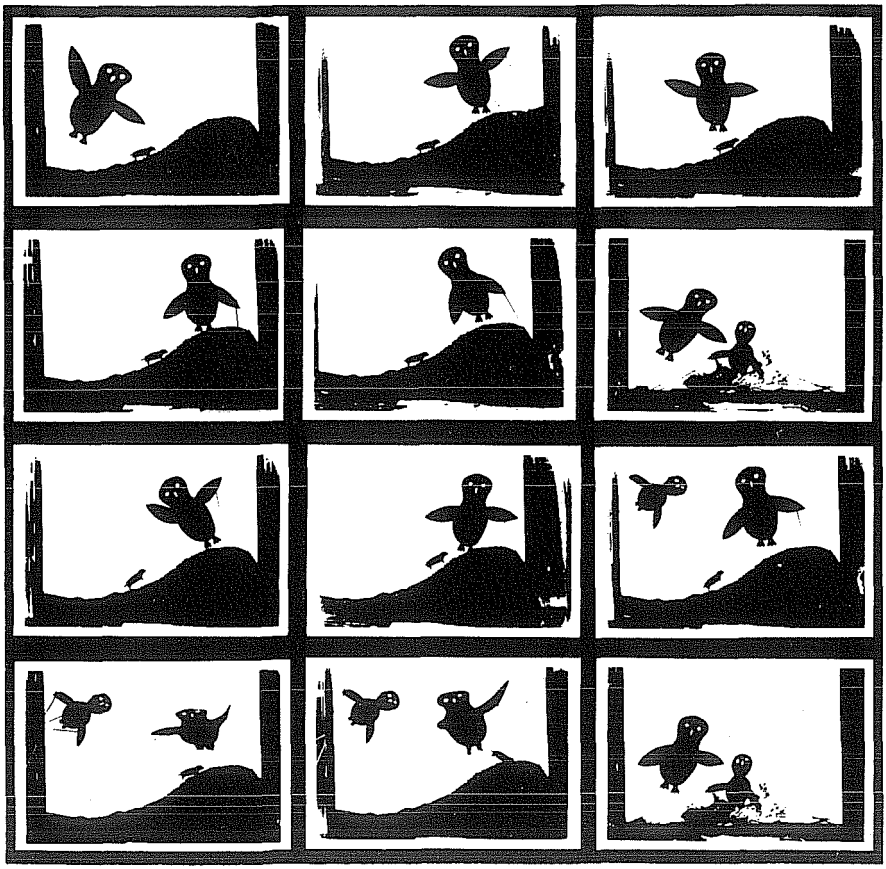
(3) Adapting stories and then creating shadow puppets:

Not all material is suitable for a shadow play, but good material can be adapted from folklore, which includes nursery rhymes, ballads, folk tales, songs, fables, myths, legends and epics. Fables are especially ideal material because they are short and straightforward and can be shortened or lengthened. Picture books can also originate many visual ideas. For example, children have adapted *How Summer Came to Canada, The Loon's Necklace, The Miraculous Hind* and *The Mountain Goats of Temlaham.*

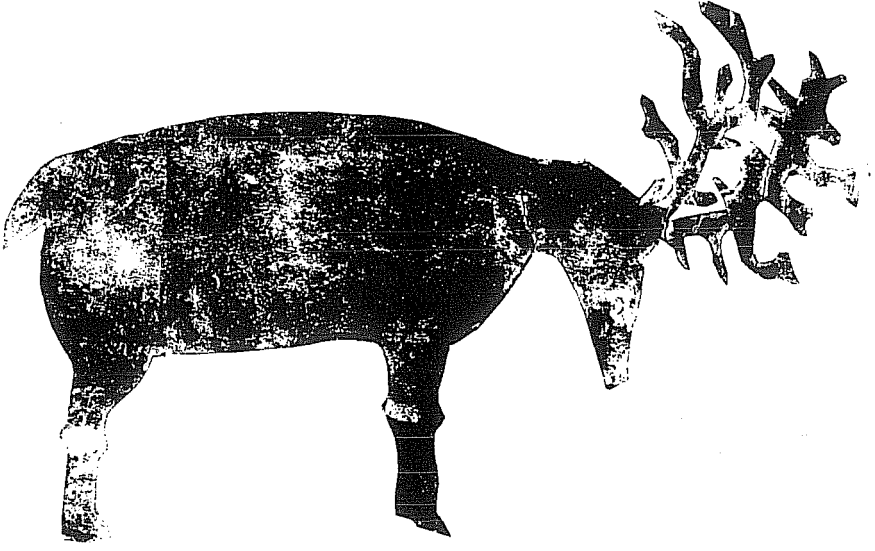
"The Owl and the Lemming" was a group project. The discussion included developing the shadow play by listing the characters, and by deciding the important incidents, number of scenes, background sound (music), dialogue and narration. Drawings were made, transferred to bristol board, and then cut out and the shadow figure constructed. The following is an outline for "The Owl and the Lemming":

Owl went out to hunt for a lemming since he had a wife and children to feed. He hunted all day. Finally, when he was about to give up, he saw a small lemming. Quickly, he landed on the lemming's hole and called for

his wife. "Come and bring the komatik [sled] and the dogs," said the owl. The lemming was very frightened and decided to use his head. He told owl to show his family how happy he was. "Spread your wings and dance and fly," said the lemming. And the owl, who was proud and foolish, believed him. In the meantime, the lemming ran into his hole.



In addition to making shadow puppets for theatre purposes, the children were encouraged to make duplicate shadow figures so that they could experience an object transformed through relief printing. They used black water-soluble printing ink to create textured images. Several parents were printmakers, and the children identified their experiments with their parent's work. An example of a print especially appropriate to Caribou Eskimo children is the one by Mary (age eight), made out of bristol board:



The shadow plays that emerged from the children's work dealt with the struggle between animals: the strong and the weak, the wise and the foolish. The children also related the shadow images to a "movie." They found shadow puppetry and relief printing enjoyable because these were projects that were not memorized but rather experienced. They made new discoveries about images: a drawing could be transformed into a shadow figure, then this shadow figure could create a mysterious shadow. Finally, by making a relief print from the shadow figure, they discovered its textural quality, allowing them to participate in the "life" of an object.

Shadow puppetry can be interpreted on many levels because it can present man's spiritual world. A strange incident occurred at Baker Lake while I was explaining my project to parents. Since the Inuit language has no word for shadow puppetry, my translator had a problem to find a correct expression. Finally, she used the word "spirit" instead of "shadow," which caused great concern among the parents. Explaining questions about spirits to their children concerned them, and they did not think it was a good idea to call forth the spirits of animals. I explained that I had no intention of calling up spirits and then I realized that, to the Inuit, shadows projected on a screen still possessed a magical quality: a modern expression of Sir James Frazer's findings that a man's soul is thought to be embodied in his shadow and reflection.[14]

Further, one can find an interesting parallel between the shadow theatre and the shadow that Jung writes about. In the shadow theatre, through illumination, the shadow figure appears as a transformed object. In analytical psychology, the first stage in the individuation process leads to the encounter with the shadow, where the term "shadow" refers to the

unconscious, repressed part of the personality – the dark side. Shadows present us with fleeting images whether they are projected from the mind or onto a screen: they define the border between light and dark. Thus, both the shadow theatre and the Jungian shadow attempt to lead man to self-realization and transformation. "Life is an affair of light and shadows."[15]

NOTES

This article has evolved from Part III of my MFA thesis entitled: "Words and Pictures – On the Literal and Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text," Concordia University (in progress).

[1]C.G. Jung, *Psychological Reflections*, ed. Jolande Jacobi and R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 200.

[2]Mike Samuels, M.D. and Nancy Samuels, *Seeing with the Mind's Eye* (New York: Random House, 1975), pp. 39-55.

[3]For a good source on active imagination see: Rix Weaver, *The Old Wise Woman: A Study in Active Imagination* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, for the C.G. Jung Foundation for Analytical Psychology, 1973); and Mary M. Watkins, *Waking Dreams* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), pp. 42-51.

[4]Jean Houston: "Through the Looking-Glass: The World of Imagery," *Dromenon: A Journal of New Ways of Being*, II: 3-4 (Winter 1979), pp. 24-25.

[5]During 1977-1978 I prepared artwork for thirteen legends for partial animation: "Boucaniers d'eau Douce," Ontario Educational Communications Authority, Toronto. (Written by Henriette Major, directed by Gary Plaxton and produced by Pierre Brassard).

[6]The Baker Lake project was carried out during August and the early part of September, 1972.

[7]Marie Louise von Franz, *Interpretation of Fairy Tales: An Introduction to the Psychology of Fairy Tales* (Zurich: Spring Publications, 1973), p. 87.

[8]Adapted by J. Rothenberg from a poem by Nalungiaq, in *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americans*, edited with commentaries by Jerome Rothenberg (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972), p. 45.

[9]Knud Rasmussen, *The Netsilik Eskimo: Social Life and Spiritual Culture*. Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition 1921-24, Vol. VIII, Nos. 1 and 2. Copenhagen, 1931), p. 207.

[10]Oto Bihalji-Merin, *Masks of the World* (London: Thames, 1970), p. 76.

[11]Margaret Lantis, *Alaskan Eskimo Ceremonialism*. Monograph of the American Ethological Society, ed. M.W. Smith (New York: J.J. Augustin, 1947), pp. 85-93.

[12]Dorothy Jean Ray, *Eskimo Masks, Art and Ceremony* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, and Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1967), plates 33-38. Figures 1 and 2 are taken from plates 34 and 61.

[13]George Swinton, *Sculpture of the Eskimo* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1972), p. 136.

[14]Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, Abridged edition (London: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 250-254. For further readings on the shadow see: C.G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1964), pp. 168-176; Edward C. Whitmont, *The Symbolic Quest: Basic Concepts of Analytical Psychology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 160-169; and Marie Louise von Franz, *Individuation & Social Contact*, ed. Malcolm Spicer (Notre Dame de la Merci, Quebec, 1975), pp. 26-27.

[15]Miguel Serrano, *C.G. Jung and Hermann Hesse: A Record of Two Friendships*, trans. Frank MacShane (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), p. 5.

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