

[Creating for the eternal child]

Géza M. Tóth's creative processes: a case study¹

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Abstract (Creating for the eternal child - Géza M. Tóth's creative processes)

Géza M. Tóth is a multi-award-winning filmmaker (including an Oscar nomination and a Berlinale Golden Bear nomination), university professor and founder of KEDD ("Tuesday" in Hungarian), Hungary's most innovative animation film studio for children and young audiences.

This article based on research, reviews, and a series of personal interviews with the writer-director will go through the creation process of his most prominent shorts, Maestro (2005), Ergo (2008), Mama (2009), and Matches (2019), as well as two series which he wrote and developed, Miezmiaz and Mitch-match.

Keywords animation; children; Géza M. Tóth; Maestro; Matches; screenplay; storyboard

Rezumat (Creând pentru copilul etern – procesele creative ale lui Géza M. Tóth)

Géza M. Tóth nu este doar un regizor de filme cu multe premii (între care și câte o nominalizare la Premiile Oscar și Ursul de Aur), dar și profesor universitar, și fondatorul Kedd (Marți), cel mai inovativ studio de animație din Ungaria.

Acest articol bazat pe cercetare, critici de film și un șir de interviuri personale, realizate cu M. Tóth, investighează procesele creative din spatele celor mai importante scurtmetraje ale lui, precum Maestro (2005), Ergo (2008), Mama (2009) și Matches (2019), dar și a două seriale scrise de el: Miezmiaz and Mitch-match.

Cuvinte cheie animație, copii, Géza M. Tóth, Maestro, Matches, scenario, storyboard

“To look at the world through the eyes of a child is so simple, and such a universal experience.” So does Vassilis Kroustallis quote the filmmaker, Géza M. Tóth, in the first sentence of his film review² of *Matches* (2019).³ When starting my second video-interview with M. Tóth, I heard considerable clamour in the background. M. Tóth explained, “I have lived for twenty-two years near an elementary school. I love it so much. It is so inspiring, so many good ideas come to me here on the terrace, while I listen to them.”⁴

Géza M. Tóth is a university professor with a DLA degree in cinema and a PhD in pedagogy. He is a member of the International Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. He is also an Oscar and Golden Bear nominated filmmaker and his half a dozen short films and series have received more than one hundred

awards. In addition, he is the founder of KEDD (the Hungarian word for Tuesday), a Budapest-based animation studio, where he produces animated series for the global market with some of his former students.

This article focuses on him as a screenwriter-filmmaker. I am interested in his creative process and the philosophy behind it, especially when making films for children, or involving children in the writing-creating of them. Most of his multi-awarded short films and series are animations and are targeting children or a category more difficult to define: the eternal children in all of us. The article is based on research, reviews, and a series of personal interviews with the writer-director.

In the following pages I will go through the creation process of his most prominent shorts, *Maestro* (2005),⁵ *Ergo* (2008),⁶ *Mama* (2009),⁷ and *Matches* (2019), as well as two series which he wrote and developed, *Miezmiaz* and *Mitch-match*.⁸

Maestro – or, how to design a story which causes mental rerouting

A theatrical spotlight illuminates the title, *Maestro* (2005), while unseen spectators murmur softly. The set seems to be a locker room with wooden walls, where a vintage robotic arm pours gin and tonic into a glass and serves it to the protagonist. Then the arm arranges the latter's hair, while the "Maestro" starts warming up his voice. The music is playful, with strings rhythmically answering each other. The camera circles slowly around the protagonist, without missing the rhythm. While our Maestro continues his vocal exercises, the arm does his makeup in front of a lighted mirror.



Figure 1: Géza M. Tóth, *Maestro*, 2005. © KEDD Animation Studios

The strings in the musical score are replaced with drums and the tension grows: something is about to happen. The Maestro's bow tie is arranged perfectly, everything is put tidily away, the light is turned off, the doors suddenly open, and the arm grabs the Maestro from behind and pushes him out into the blinding

light to sing his song. *Cuck-oo! Cuck-oo!* Then he is retracted in the dark. End of movie.

Yes, he was a cuckoo, and the whole film was set inside a cuckoo clock.

This is the *szujet* of *Maestro*, shortlisted for the Academy Awards in 2007. The movie can be interpreted in several ways, from an illustration of the Warholian 15 minutes of fame, to a more ironic stance on art and artists. But it can be watched as a witty, one-trick film for kids and adults as well.

Asked about the genesis of this story, the filmmaker stated that his starting point was to imagine a movie which takes place entirely inside a cuckoo clock. The main challenge, thus, was how to distract the attention of the audience from the fact that for almost five minutes, they are staring at the two most common accessories of a cuckoo clock: the painted wooden bird and the arm which would push him out. The whole success of the movie depends on this.

The audience should think they understand, but they should also have a degree of uncertainty, the feeling that they might miss an important detail. So, their curiosity is aroused. And at the climax, suddenly everything has to make sense retroactively: the rhythmical music, the circling camera, the wooden walls, the robotic arm. There must be a complete mental rerouting, which causes laughter. So, what was the solution? If I show the bird, in two minutes everyone will know it's a cuckoo in a cuckoo clock. But if I show a bottle and then, without editing, in the same take, I show a character, then the mind, which is our laziest organ, will make the hypothesis that if the bottle is proportionate to the character as a real bottle to a real person, then the character should be human or anthropomorphic as well. So, the bottle, the glass, and all the other objects in the locker room are scaled to the cuckoo as they would be scaled to a human being. There is no hint that these are actually tiny objects, and since the audience's reference system has been built from the bottle onwards, in one continuous take, they will see no reason to change this (Géza M. Tóth).

Ergo – writing a story “which isn’t about anything”

Ergo (2008), the next short film M. Tóth wrote and directed, proves to be harder to decipher. While in the case of *Maestro*, the trick becomes obvious at the end of the movie, in the case of *Ergo*, there is no trick at all. “After *Maestro*’s punchline-focused dramaturgy, the two elf-like characters of *Ergo* seem to float in philosophical heights,” writes Ádám Dávid in his review.⁹

This is not a surprise, if we take into consideration the confession of the author, who for a long time wanted to write a story “which isn’t about anything, but still becomes very personal for everyone. The plan was to remain perfectly logical, with complex and clear relations, without depicting a real-life situation.” *Ergo*’s strange story-world – involving special laws of physics – is not an allegory, and does not cry for a correct interpretation.

Ergo's two "elves", or animated gender-neutral protagonists, represent two different ways of thinking and living: one character has a primordial trust that when they take a step, a column, something like an organ pipe, will gush up from the vast depth surrounding them to meet their feet. They walk, jump, and even run like this, having only two columns under their feet at any given moment, and an infinite depth below. The columns will not begin to grow until a new step is initiated, and once the character raises their foot, the column underneath it will collapse back into the ground. But the character knows only about movement. Their freedom, however, is associated with a monotony in the soundtrack: each one of their steps produces the same C/Do sound.

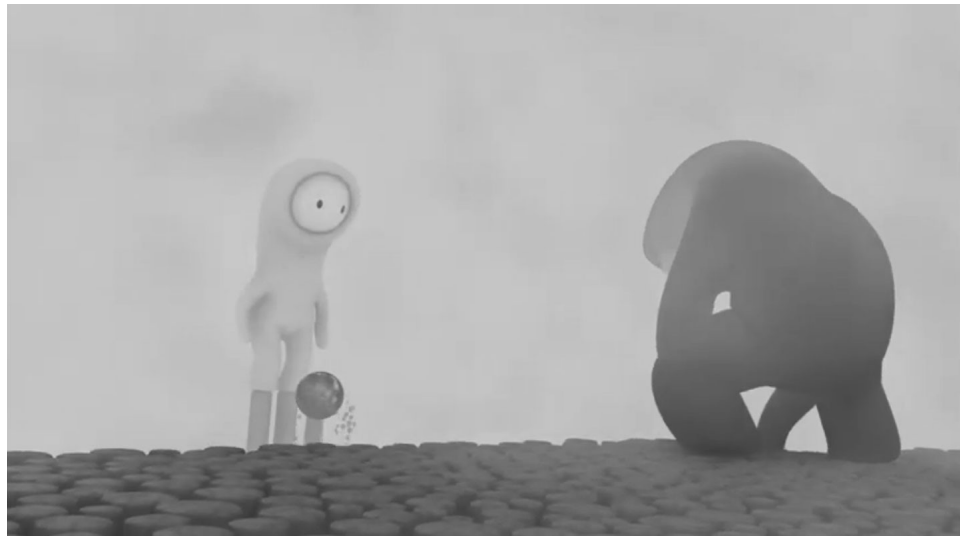


Figure 2: Géza M. Tóth, *Ergo*, 2008. © KEDD Animation Studios

The other character knows that a vast depth surrounds them and that columns collapse and so does not dare to walk or jump into the unknown. (Does their knowledge prevent the columns from appearing under their feet?) Instead, this character is bound to the place where they live and is building a strange musical instrument by growing columns (which appear somewhat wondrously when they place their hands over the empty depth, and remain) that making different sounds next to each other.

When they meet, the second character presents their one-person audience with an unrepeatably piece of music: by dancing and jumping, they make beautiful chords, a polyphonic concert on their self-destructible instrument – every column they touch, collapses – at the end, provoking their own disappearance/death as well. The first character, in exchange, learns about the existence of depth, and can't or won't go further. Instead, they start to build their own instrument, the base of their future music.

The filmmaker does not give us a handrail, but constructs this quaint universe with no reference to our real world, and within this universe these very dif-

ferent, but somehow familiar characters. All sounds in the film are diegetic, but not realistic; no one can tell, for instance, what the sound of the collapsing columns resembles in the real world.

Mama – only girls know it

Mama is the only hybrid technique film made by M. Tóth. The story is a simple one: a woman – presumably a wife – goes up on the roof and sets up a clothesline to hang out her washed laundry. But there is a small problem with the geometry of this roof, which we notice immediately. After tying one end of the clothesline to a metal pole, the woman walks along, uncoiling and untangling the line until she reaches the original pole, where she ties off the clothesline. So, the two poles supporting the line are the same. And as she starts to hang up the underclothes of a very large man, advancing the clothesline with a tug of her hand, we realize it's not only the geography that is problematic, but the physics as well. The surrounding landscape, all the houses and office buildings, tremor and move together with the hung-up clothes. It seems not only is she spreading the clothes around the whole world, but ultimately, she becomes the centre of this universe: by pulling the line again and again, she literally makes the world go around.

M. Tóth says that living with three women – his wife and two daughters –, the secrets of womanhood, and also motherhood, preoccupy him more than anything. “While boys firmly believe that the world can be described with rules, girls know from a very early age that the universe cannot be defined with formulas, and that, actually, they are the centre of the universe.” He also admits that he personally likes household chores such as dishwashing or hanging up laundry. “The meditative monotony of these tasks gives me plenty of time to think.”



Figure 3: Géza M. Tóth, *Mama*, 2009. © KEDD Animation Studios

But how are these ponderings on womanhood reflected in *Mama*? She is still defined by the clothes of this huge man, one can argue. Yes, but when she reaches the end of the line, and apparently there is not enough space for one more pair of

immense underwear, she pulls out a tiny coloured romper and with one move, she breaks the rules and brings colour and life to the grey monotony.

Matches – a child’s thought flow, a base for narrative structure

While *Maestro*, *Ergo*, and *Mama* have no dialog or narration at all, M. Tóth’s most recent project, *Matches*, dedicated to his now adult children, is narrated from the beginning to the end by the seven year old LS, a bilingual (English-Hungarian) boy, whose figure can be seen at the beginning of the film, only for a few seconds and out of focus, but who, as Vassilis Kroustallis says, “has an irresistible voice-over intonation.”¹⁰

The starting point of the creative process in this case was a scene seen by the author on a street in Hungary: a child playing with matches. But what is he playing? What is in his mind? M. Tóth realized that if he were to try to imagine this as an adult, it wouldn’t be good enough. So, he interviewed several children and picked the response he considered to be the most revealing. He then recorded a series of conversations with LS from which he edited the eleven-minute-long soundtrack which became the narrative track for the film. Finally, he himself “transformed” into a child, getting into the mind of how a child might play with the matches, based on LS’ “music sheets”.

“When I was small, I used to dream a lot that I was a grown-up”, says LS on the first beat. And these dreams were about a “wardrobe full of colourful clothes decorated with writing and cartoon figures, and trousers with no buttons, and the kind of shoes you don’t have to tie.” And a convertible coupe, like in action movies. But these dreams which LS remembers from when “he was small” also incorporated a girlfriend, “who is at home all day long in a big bathroom, making herself pretty with soap. That smells like green apple. And she’s always thinking about him. The guy. What he is doing. If he is in trouble or if he’s okay.”

Though the description resembles a movie from the 007 series – a hypothesis strengthened by the musical choice of the filmmaker – which LS must have seen with or without the consent of his parents, the narration quickly becomes a strong critique of adulthood. “Grown-ups like it when they are the best at something. Lots of them, who can’t win, always plays against kids”, is the honest and harsh, but not necessarily bitter verdict.

From this point onwards, light topics (a princess falling in love with a frog) and heavy topics (punishments, nightmares, death) alternate and form a narrative and psychological rollercoaster.

This eleven-minute interview, although edited, gives not only a rare insight into a child’s vision of the surrounding world, but also uses his thought flow and mental associative processes as a vehicle to build a narrative structure, which ultimately will be doubled by the visual narrative of the film. As LS’ mind connects seemingly distant thoughts and stories, so do the matches transform from a billiard cue into a lightsabre, then a fish and a blade of grass, and so can a laptop

become a water tap, or a bathtub a convertible coupe. (The most stunning of all is the transformations of a flute player who make the flowers dance, into Snow White with her seven dwarfs.)

With ten prizes and more than two dozen selections already to its credit, *Matches* was automatically qualified for an Oscar when it was selected for the Foyle Film Festival in 2020.

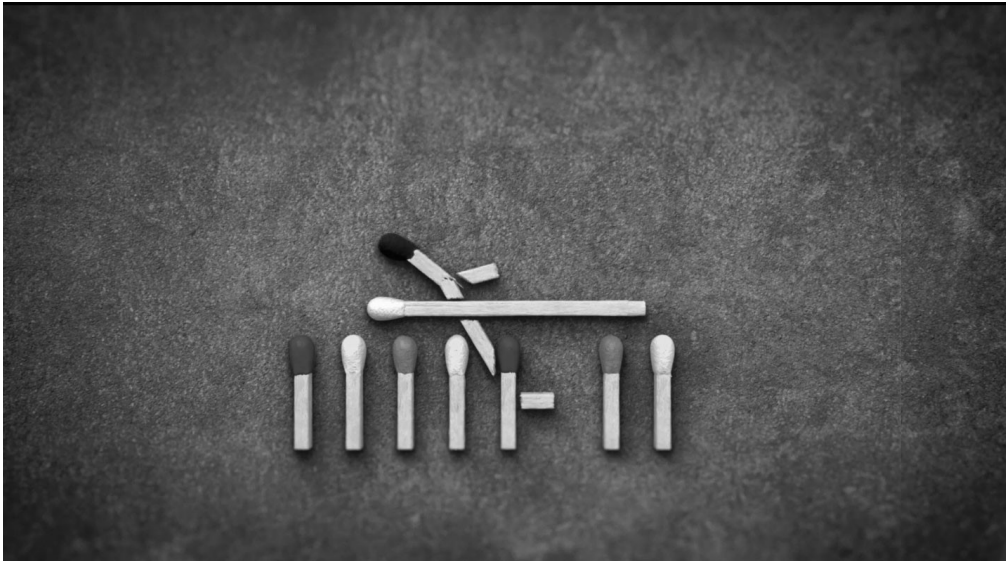


Figure 4: Géza M. Tóth, *Matches*, 2005. © KEDD Animation Studios

Mitch-mach – or how to serialize unique content?

The story of *Matches* does not stop here. Continuing a long tradition of ironical series based on the life of the eternal little man, represented in the history of animated film by series such as the Hungarian *Gustav*,¹¹ the Italian *La Linea*,¹² the Croatian *Professor Balthasar*,¹³ or the English *Mr. Bean*¹⁴ among others, the blue-headed match who lives alone in a matchbox became the protagonist of a series entitled *Mitch-mach*¹⁵ (2020) and 50 episodes have been produced already. Being the only match in the box reminds us of the motif of the last match, the last hope present in many narratives from *Robinson Crusoe* to *Two Year's Vacation*, says M. Tóth.

These burlesque-like stories, sometimes resembling Charlie Chaplin's and Busters Keaton's slapstick comedies, have no dialog or narration at all, and are all created on M. Tóth's storyboard sheets. However, in the case of these shorts, the soundtrack has a much stronger narrative role. While in the films of the silent comedians, mimics and body language had a crucial contribution in creating humour and supporting punch-lines, one doesn't have this option when the protagonist is a blue-headed match. (Blue, in order not to be associated with any race.)

In some of the episodes, the animation itself can carry the whole story visually, but in many other cases the soundtrack comes to the rescue, interpreting the intentionally self-limiting stop-motion animation. This is even more true, because M. Tóth resists the temptation of breaking the matches into small, almost pixel-size bits, to have handier building blocks. No, he keeps them as intact as possible. So, a match head can become a ball, an ice cream, a balloon, a human head, or a goldfish (if yellow), according to sophisticated stop-motion and sound design.

This explains the time and effort that is put into creating the audio-versions of these three-minute episodes, until the most expressive sound-animation “marriage” can be achieved. The author of this article had the chance to see and listen to the thirteenth sound-version of an episode still in post-production.

This way of developing a story, though it requires tremendous creativity, also shrinks the number of feasible topics. Football, for instance, is a grateful topic: you only have to cut the head of a white match, and you have the ball. But horse polo, on the other hand, is not exactly the kind of game you can recreate in this way.

But watching episode after episode, the possibilities on the level of visual representation seem unlimited: a whole day visit to the adventure park with ice cream, balloons and a ghost train-ride with an ironical twist at the end can be told solely with matches. M. Tóth compares this kind of creating process to the case of a child who lies on the lawn on their back and stares at the clouds, trying to “see” all kind of shapes, forms, and stories in those clouds. This way of inventing a narrative usually leads first to the birth of an image, such as a character milking a cow. Then all you have to do is to build a story around a protagonist milking a cow.

When asked about the age group targeted with this series, the writer-director stated that it’s intended for elementary school aged children and up, but it addresses especially an audience who is keen on a particular kind of humour, and on specific kinds of auxiliary mental activities such as quizzes, puzzles, etc. Most of the stories have common elements with fables or even parables, like that of a fisherman who catches a goldfish, and makes a wish to have even more goldfish. (Then, his wish being fulfilled, the pile of goldfish hurry back into the water, leaving the lucky man empty-handed.) But some episodes are three-minute-long parodies of classical movies, such as *Jaws* by Steven Spielberg. In this case, knowledge of the original is a premise for full enjoyment of the short, which can’t be expected from a six-year-old, especially considering that *Jaws* is R-rated. But it’s true for both the fable, and the parody kind that it can only visually work if the life situation of the original work is part of our audio-visual culture, and known to the wider audience.

The storyboards of these episodes are the brainchildren of M. Tóth, but the animation process is a collective effort of the young animator team at KEDD, of whom three are M. Tóth’s former students.

MiEzMiAz¹⁶ – or how to write an animated online children’s encyclopaedia

While *Matches* is based entirely on seven-year-old LS’ narration, the *Mitch-match* series does not have any kind of narration or dialog. M. Tóth created another series targeting kindergarten and elementary school pupils with a narration and dialog constructed of interviews made solely with this specific age group. This is a non-fiction series, entitled *MiEzMiAz* – in Hungarian: What Is This, What Is That? – explaining simple words, such as apple, tram, raincoat, or more sophisticated concepts, such as summer or school, at the intellectual level of 3–7-year-olds.

The structure of these three-minute-long episodes was developed after M. Tóth, his writing and directing partner, Miklós Gerdelics, and their team carried out extensive research in the field of pedagogical epistemology and definition theory, identifying five methods to create definitions. Most of the episodes follow the method of gradual narrowing, in which a bigger category is narrowed down until the description fits perfectly the word in question. In other cases, this method was replaced by another one, namely the enlisting of as many valid examples as possible. The decision as to which method to use, is ultimately taken with consideration of which better gives the filmmakers the possibility of creating the visual story in a more playful, humorous, and child-friendly way.

But in all cases, the moderator helped children to structure the definition. She tried to dig deeper, ask more questions for more specific answers, and tried to delimitate what isn’t part of the concept. (“Do we wear the same raincoat in winter?” “No.” “Why?” “Because it’s too cold.”) The abundance of answers, sometimes contradictory, but more often, complementary, usually led to a debate and then to a consensus among the children, as they actually defined, for the sake of this film, the meaning of the word.

“The role of these shorts is not so much to disseminate knowledge, but to produce valid, precise definitions at the level of pre-scholars and elementary pupils in a captivating way,” declares M. Tóth.

Thus, the audio part of these episodes consists of a clever montage of the quick questions of the moderator and the answers of the children, combined with simple but dynamic and vivid animation. Needless to say, the children’s answers do not follow the logic an adult would use. But this was respected deeply by the creators. To the question, “what can one learn in school?”, the answer “about dinosaurs” is as valid as is “to read”, “to write”, or “to count”, and gets the same representation at the level of the visual.

The last thirty seconds of each episode is reserved for Smart Egg, a small scholarly character who shares a few pieces of additional information which the children would not know by themselves. M. Tóth intends to develop the sixteen already produced pilot episodes into an interconnected animated online children-encyclopaedia with 700-800 cross referencing entries.

Kuflik – from children to students

Animation is the equivalent of acting in live actor films. A spectacular, rewarding, but time-consuming part of the creative process. That is why a decade ago, M. Tóth ceased to be a practicing animator and began focusing instead more on the screenwriting, directing, and producing roles.

For the last ten years, he has not taught animation at MOME (Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, Budapest), but his approach to role allocation in the creative team does not fall short of the best teacher-mentor attitude. A good example of this is the case of *Egy kupac kufli*¹⁷ – this is a wordplay in Hungarian based on the words, “crescent” and “worm” – a series based on a book series for the 3–6 age group with a similar title by András Dániel. While the first two seasons were co-directed by M. Tóth and Kristóf Jurik, from the third season, M. Tóth gave complete directorial control to Jurik. In doing so, he was not only offering him the chance to prove himself, without being overshadowed by his multi-awarded teacher, but also a chance to make his first feature film. This was possible because the narrative of the *Egy kupac kufli* series is designed in such a way that the episodes of a season can be connected to form a feature animation movie, and all three seasons have had their theatrical releases as well.

Maintaining the role of creative producer, M. Tóth still helped in the adaptation and screenplay-development.

I’m glad to help this process, but I promised to myself that after fifty, I will take one step back and support the talented young filmmakers whom I can. [...] First of all, I consider myself a teacher, so it gives me maximal joy and satisfaction to see the success of my students, not only as crew-members in my films, but as main creators, in their own right.

How is platform changing content?

There are obvious differences if one develops serialized content for classic television, or for VOD platforms. The most conspicuous is related to length: episodes for TV must have precisely the same length, not only in minutes, but in frames. This is the way to be accepted in the programming grid. When making content for the internet, there is more freedom. An episode can be ten to fifteen percent longer or shorter, so one can respect the story’s own breathing. But what happens when one must fit exactly in a given time limit? In films with live actors, this is done usually in the editing phase, but with animation that would be too costly.

In the case of his short films, *Maestro* and *Ergo*, M. Tóth did not write a literary screenplay. From the basic idea, the moment of inception, he went straight to the drawing of the storyboard, then to animatic platform, then to final animation. But in the case of these series, when the storyboard is done, next comes the animatic stage where you can “rehearse” the film, and test the length of every scene and still play about with the seconds and frames. The actual production will not start before the animatic has reached exactly the required length. If needed, one has to squeeze or pull the narrative a bit to fit the standard, and “if none of this

works, you can still use the good old music and dance insert”, says M. Tóth half-jokingly.

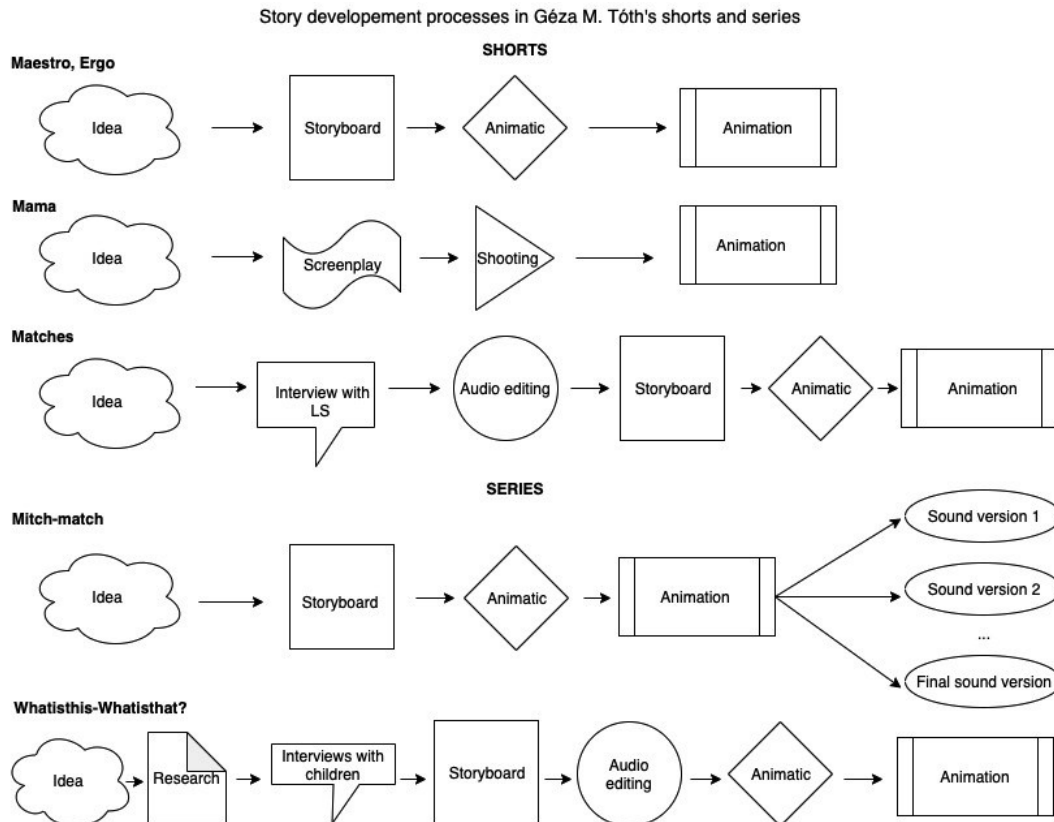


Figure 5: Story development processes in Géza M. Tóth’s films, 2020. © the author

Talent and the other “secrets”

Trying to summarize what could be the other “secrets” beside talent which facilitate M. Tóth’s writing and directing such creative and successful shorts and series, there are at least three premises worth mentioning:

1. curiosity combined with humility – a continuous openness to learning, even from children and his own students, keeps the creator “fresh” for new impulses;
2. music – M. Tóth’s opera directions and creative documentaries on Hungary’s musical history exceed the limit of this article, but even from the aforementioned films, it is obvious that he is literate in music: sound and rhythm are essential for him;
3. and finally, the writer/director himself is an eternal child who imagines living in a cuckoo clock, jumping on growing and collapsing columns in an alternate universe, admiring a creator-mother, or just playing with matches, forming new and new images endlessly.

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Endnotes

1 The research on which this article is based was realized during a Domus Scholarship granted to the author by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (Magyar Tudományos Akadémia).

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