

Hedgehog in the Fog

YURI NORSTEIN

1975

Hedgehog in the Fog is a landmark moment in animation. It is as loved in Russia, as it is adored by animation fans around the world. The film is one of animation studio Soyuzmultfilm's most successful titles, and a quintessential example of the art form's capacity to communicate wonder, awe, fear and humour. Hayao Miyazaki, the great Japanese animator, has described it as his favourite work. Some critics have even pointed to Norstein's imprint on Miyazaki's naturalistic aesthetic and suggested the woods in Princess Mononoke (1997) owe something to Hedgehog in the Fog.

There is an ambitious distinctness to the Soviet animation tradition that often exhibits a depth in its rendering of human nature. Whilst the Western, or more specifically, American tradition of animation has a brightly coloured and childlike quality, there is a delicate whimsy in Soviet animation, a whimsy that is often layered, capable of carrying multiple meanings and associations. Hedgehog in the Fog must be one of the tradition's greatest examples. Hedgehog is made using stop motion animation. In a stop motion film, an animator arranges an object, takes a picture, slightly adjusts positioning, and then does it all over again. When the pictures are played in succession, it looks like motion. Yuri Norstein, who must be the world's greatest proponent of this method, favours a painstaking process of painting on glass. The glass is used to produce a depth of field that is otherwise not possible in the stop motion method. Norstein and his team move the panes of glass forwards and backwards to create this effect. It is a technical feat that requires patience, fortitude and artistic vision.

Whilst Norstein's genius is not in dispute, his life and pursuits as an artist have exposed some dark ironies. Whilst Soyuzmultfilm, under the Soviet Union, had a studio culture that commended artistry it was also problematic, anti-semitic and rife with censorship. Norstein, during these years, spent his career battling these challenges. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union he was finally freed from censorship but ran directly into another brick wall: studio focus on profit. Famously, he has been making an adaptation of Gogol's *Overcoat* since 1981. Due to his perfectionism and devotion to his technique, he has struggled with funding issues through out.

He famously stated, in a 2005 interview with *The Washington Post*, that "There is no artistic freedom because artistry has been replaced by ignorance."

But Hedgehog in the Fog was made at a time that valued Norstein's style and efforts. It is a visceral and beautiful journey. We travel through the fog with the little hedgehog in a unified experience. The beautiful, the terrible, the awe inspiring and the unknown occur in the unfamiliar landscape. The aesthetic of the film is deceptively sweet. When the hedgehog leaves his beaten track behind and sets off into the fog in pursuit of the ephemeral white horse, we might expect a short and heartwarming tale. Instead, what occurs is an unsettling foray into the subconscious. The hedgehog's journey, whilst told visually and with whimsy, is evidently a parallel to the deep workings of the mind. As things shift, move and appear through the fog, the little hedgehog is helped, taunted and awed. There is a moment of total darkness, in which the hedgehog resigns himself to drowning. And then he is saved by 'someone'. Who or what that 'someone' is, rising mysteriously from the depths and then disappearing again, is one of the film's unanswered questions.

This consideration of death is an example of an aesthetic unbridled by notions of commercial concern that exist in other animation traditions, and indeed the post Soviet animation world. Aysegal Savas commented on this specificity of Soviet animation for the *Paris Review*: "Their lack of commercial concern is apparent in their unresolved narratives and wide spectrum of subtle emotions. In their innocence, wonder, and muted colors, these cartoons are at once a nostalgia for childhood and an expression of childhood itself."

As the film culminates with the little hedgehog's mind being drawn inexorably back to the white horse, we are reminded of the bittersweet notion of longing and the untouchable, ephemeral quality of our obsessions. Simply put, Hedgehog in the Fog captures the essence of melancholy. Perhaps, it is a testament to Norstein's own philosophy, that the purpose of art should be to allow people to 'experience life yet un-lived.'