

# Tales of Tales

YURI NORSTEIN

1979

Jerzy Petersburski's tango *The Last Sunday* was released in Poland in 1935. Shortly after, it was translated into Russian as *The Wearied Sun* and released to immediate popularity in the USSR. Yuri Norstein was born in 1941, and has stated that he does not remember the war, 'But I remember the feeling: the feeling in the corridor, in a room, the frost, the smell of frost, the smell of snow and the tango, *The Wearied Sun* that could be heard everywhere, almost as a national anthem.' The lyrics detail the final meeting of two lovers before they part ways forever. Nostalgic and brooding, it earned the nickname 'The Suicide Tango'.

The recording of *The Wearied Sun* used in this animation crackles, much as an old or over-played record would. Combined with the ephemeral, unfocused imagery, it gives the impression that one is listening through time. In a heartbreaking sequence, women dance with their partners to the tango. The song stops, jerkily and abruptly. The men holding the women vanish; leaving the women frozen in position, their arms empty. The men return, their cloaked backs and helmet clad heads visible as they march into war and past the frozen image of their lovers. As they march, the seasons change, in shorthand for the passing of time. The music changes too, to a more sinister and authoritative song. Letters fly through the sky and are caught by the women. Fragments of text, saying things like 'Your husband...', 'Faithful to military honour...' and 'Was buried...' are shown over the image of black bread and vodka. It is a Russian mourning tradition to leave these items out for the dead. This simple and imaginative sequence highlights the strange relationship between action and inaction, for the women remain entirely still whilst the men march; as well as the suddenness of conflict and its definitive consequences.

This meditation on loss, through animation's capacities and combined with Norstein's specific artistry has an entirely devastating impact on viewers. In 1984, The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences called *Tale of Tales* the best animation ever made. Mimicking human memory, Norstein's film undertakes a grand and unique task. One that has resulted in comparisons between *Tale*

of *Tales* and Andrei Tarkovsky's *Mirror* (1973). An unusual and personal goal for any filmmaker, and arguably even more rare for an animator, he succeeded in producing a film that has been pored over, to establish the meaning of the non-linear plot in the same obsessive way Tarkovsky's films are interrogated.

There are three intertwined plot lines. The sequences for these are not separated but interspersed and the perspective is switched at random. These are memory, the present and an idealised world. The one common denominator is the little wolf who watches all. These gorgeous, ephemeral sequences communicate with each other in the most tender and heartbreaking way. The derelict present showcases a nostalgia for childhood, and of family intimacy in the era of communal apartments. This romanticisation of his childhood exists knowingly alongside the cultural trauma and personal tragedy of those years. Certainly, his early memories are informed by it. This is exemplified most heartbreakingly by the images of a baby, suckling at a breast.

Norstein has explained the genesis of this image. His aunt came to live with his family, pregnant and recently widowed. Her baby died after two weeks. In the kitchen he would watch her draw the milk her body was still producing from her breast. By animating a suckling baby, all three strands collide as he immortalises an idealised moment in personal memory that ended in tragedy. Norstein has said that his film expresses the phenomenon of 'pre-memory', something he describes as existing in all of us: the sensation of intimately knowing something we have not experienced. This strange primordial sense is perhaps represented by the wolf, the spectator to the film's events. But instead of being a scary antagonist, the wolf is small, vulnerable and sweet. An ancient symbol of our preternatural senses in a loveable and childlike form. The only moment the wolf truly participates in, is when he sings to the baby he finds. The song is, ironically, a little ditty about being taken into the forest by a wolf. In this moment the self-aware irony of Norstein's film is pulled together as the sinister and the comforting collide.