

Yuri Norshteyn

# YURI NORSHTEYN

## TO BE RESPONSIVE TO LIFE

**A LIVING LEGEND OF RUSSIAN ANIMATION, YURI NORSHTEYN HAS A CLOSE BOND TO THE CZECH REPUBLIC. SO CLOSE IN FACT THAT HIS MAJOR BOOK SNOW ON THE GRASS (SNEG NA TRAVE, MOSKVA, 2008), WAS FIRST TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN INTO CZECH RATHER THAN ENGLISH OR ANOTHER MAJOR GLOBAL LANGUAGE. NORSHTEYN HAS BEEN WRITING THIS BOOK ALL HIS LIFE AND IN IT HE REVEALS HIS ATTITUDE TOWARDS FILM, ART AND LIFE. SINCE THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF SNOW ON THE GRASS IS NOT ON THE HORIZON, WE HOPE THIS INTERVIEW WILL PRESENT NORSHTEYN'S BOOK AND HIS UNIQUE WAY OF THINKING TO A WIDER AUDIENCE.**

**Your book *Snow on the Grass* has recently been released in a foreign language for the first time, namely in Czech. Why was it not published in English or in Japanese, considering that you give lectures in Japan?**

The publication in Czech is a first step towards Europe. I would be happy if the book was published in other languages as well. So far no one has suggested it. Only recently have I received an offer to translate it into Italian. Translating this book is very hard work since it is not a scientific publication. The book isn't terribly descriptive, but it shows my inner world; my way of thinking. The translator must have some general knowledge to be able to accurately translate what I mean, and at the same time my language is poetic. The book is not about animated film, but about the cultural context that surrounds animation. It is about the manner in which animation penetrates the cultural environment. And it also reflects on the principle of story development being present in art since antiquity. Thus I write about Egyptian art, the Middle Ages, or frescoes 20 000 years old, but also about the Russian, and hence European, Avant-garde. I needed to write the book primarily for myself, as I wanted to understand how the cultural connections actually take place.

**Your book is unique in that it combines aesthetics with animation. You see the animated film as a part of a larger aesthetic whole. You even write that without understanding this context ani-**

**mation cannot go forward. According to you, that's why animators today should be aware of the context they enter with their film...**

I think that an animator can't see the depths that animation and its history might reach. Today on a trip around the Czech Republic I was admiring some of the old ruined monasteries. When I compare these with the works of Giotto, the Notre-Dame Cathedral, frescoes by Andrei Rublev or with some books that I have read, it is clear to me that all of this could not arise in the absence of some fundamental, deep idea existing underneath. As if all art was the materialization of these depths. We ourselves are often not able to understand it. It seems to me that if animation did not take into account the entire development of the arts, it could never go into depth and come up with something new. It could develop no further. Even when you create a fairy tale, you have to think of something extra, while even fairy tales have deep roots in a culture. Art simply can't exist by itself. First, there was the Word in the Bible, and then it transformed into a fresco. It always comes from the depths up to the surface. To this day, for instance, we have not tried to understand the merit of the Avant-garde. For me, the Avant-garde is as much of a groundbreaking phenomenon as the Renaissance was in its time. There suddenly emerged some hidden reserves in the arts. It is no coincidence that the Avant-garde artists were inclined to Egyptian art, African art or the art of the Middle Ages. Modigliani or Picasso



Francheska Yarbusova: **CRADLE IN THE FOREST**, 1992 – 1993. Design of the film **TALE OF TALES (SKAZKA SKAZOK, 1979)**

serves as examples. At that time new energy began flowing into art. It seems to me that at present animation withdraws into itself. And it has given up trying to perceive all the overlaps.

**And without them it can develop no further...**

No, it can't. And it's not able to uncover new depths. If it wasn't for the Bible, there would be no literature. There would be no Don Quixote, no Dostoyevsky. That doesn't mean that animation should deal with religious themes. Profundity can often be found in the ordinary.

**You talked about the Avant-garde. According to you, animation originated from the energy of 1920s.**

Yes. Then the energy gushed out and the movement and storytelling through images came into existence.

**In your case, was it the Avant-garde that guided your poetics? I am referring especially to your very first film, 25<sup>th</sup> – the First Day (25-e – pervyy den, 1968).**

Yes. At that time I had not yet directed a film and a friend of mine suggested that I worked with him on a film. I would have started from Avant-garde art and combined it with the first days of the revolution in 1918. Unfortunately, it was 1967 and when the fateful year of 1968 arrived, with it came the hardening of Soviet censorship. Because of this the film turned out not to be what I had originally intended. But that is not important. I list it in my filmography because for me it was a great experience. Thanks to which I came to understand the dramaturgy of form:

the fact that form itself can create drama, in a way similar to music. The Avant-garde was important in that it began to deal with the dimension of time. Until then, time as a physical quantity had not been associated with images. The Avant-garde, however, came up with the idea that painting should embrace the dimension of time.

**You talk about painting with love. When you worked at Soyuzmultfilm at the beginning of your career, you didn't want to become an animator but a painter.**

Yes. I longed to be a painter.

**When did the turning point come?**

For me it is hard to understand today. Then I got into a hopeless situation: I had already been tainted by that poison.

**It is said that you were strongly influenced by reading Eisenstein's texts.**

It was his collected writings. In those days no detective story could have caught my imagination like Eisenstein's books did. I was sitting, analysing his texts and drawing mise-en-scène, about which he wrote. I did not understand why he needed so much material for the analysis of a single mise-en-scène. Then I experienced it myself when I embarked on making animated films.

**The name of your book is Snow on the Grass. What does the image mean to you? At the beginning of the book you recall your childhood when you used to love the first snow, which barely covered the grass...**

It's a kind of introspection. I used to be impatient, putting on my skis and walking

around on them in the courtyard at the first sight of snow. For me, that was a crucial poetic moment, which I did not realize but just felt. I loved that smell.

**Why did you choose this particular image as the central theme of the whole book?**

It is the connection of a moment and time. Like a shot in a film. Let me quote a passage from the book: "Snow on the grass – as if we removed the time period by combining two different scenes through a sudden cut, as if nature itself showed the metaphorical power of montage. Snow on the grass. As a form of poetry. The association of grass with snow at one moment accentuated the elusiveness of perception. It emerged and disappeared, as if distracted nature put space warmed up by the Indian summer right into the arms of winter, and then woke up and said: What am I, old cow, doing? And went back."

**Does that mean that it is a metaphor of a film as such for you?**

Yes. It is a little bitter. In fact everything includes contrast and at the same time harmony. This connection gives the most powerful impulse for action.

**While reading your book and in the context of your films such as Tale of Tales (Skazka skazok, 1979). I perceived the image differently. I thought that you chose it because you associate it with your childhood as the key inspiration for your work.**

That's not entirely true. Of course, it is an image from my childhood, a memory.



Sketch and shot from **HEDGEHOG IN THE FOG (YOZHİK V TUMANE, 1975)** by Yuri Norshteyn

In childhood we approach the world much more sharply and categorically. Only in hindsight some of my images combine – such as my mother combing her hair. I see a relation to Japanese engravings. In that image everything is hidden: childhood as well as the experience of a mature man.

**In the book you write that children are your greatest teachers. This seems to be crucial for animation – a child's point of view. You write that children impart spirit to objects.**

That is the most powerful feature of childhood – that children animate the world. They find their own name for everything. And if they do not know anything, they substitute for their ignorance the power of metaphor. Let me give you an example. When I was little, I thought that the snow came from street lamps in the evening. Towards evening, in winter, while taking a walk, it looked like it was snowing only from those street lamps. Then by daylight I wondered how it was that there was the same amount of snow everywhere. We are surprised by children's vision, metaphors spring to children's minds all of a sudden like a bolt from the blue.

**I have the impression that your films attempt to bring back a child's perspective, that perspective from which we perceive the world as if for the first time... Hedgehog in the Fog (Yozhik v tumane, 1975), Tale of Tales...**

Also *The Overcoat (Shinyel)*. If I did not sense the Gogolian world as a contrast of darkness and light, I would not have started working on *The Overcoat*.

**I like the passage in your book where you write that obstacles in the arts cultivate style...**

An obstacle, however, should emerge under one condition. It is necessary to gradually increase the standard of questions or tasks that we lay on ourselves. The standard must exceed our capabilities. Only then can we overcome the obstacles and achieve our goal.

**Is this not the pitfall of your film The Overcoat? Haven't you set too high of a standard and that's why the film has not been finished yet?**

That may be so. When I started making the film, I did not know that the key fifteen-minute scene would be a medium shot. That is not typical for animation, in which the close shot and medium close-up are most common. I realized this first while working on *The Overcoat*. We had to alter the sets. Originally I had thought that the episode would be short, but it had expanded into a quarter of an hour.

**How is it going with The Overcoat now? Do you have any idea when you are going to finish it?**

That's in the dark.

**Are the reasons financial or creative?**

Not creative, but physical. I can't always have everything the way I plan. The question of funding has been solved for the next two years.

**Does not the problem lie also in the fact that your cameraman Aleksandr Zhukovskiy and composer Mikhail Meerovich have died?**

This is of course a great loss for me. But such is life. Today I have just learned that another cameraman, Vadim Yusov, who worked with Andrei Tarkovsky, has died. In the case of *The Overcoat* the point is above all a problem of the world view, when a man finds himself in a vacuum.

**Let us go back to the obstacles. Sometimes they can be to our benefit – for instance, when you were making Hedgehog in the Fog, you and your cameraman did not get a table in the studio, so you had to make it yourself. And because of that you discovered the principle of multiple glass planes.**

In fact, obstacles are always a good thing. However, I did not invent the multiple glass planes, Disney had already used it. Technically he was at a higher level, but from the creative perspective he lagged behind.

**It is interesting. At least in Czech, the term for multiple glass planes has come to be known as "Norshteyn's table..."**

Well, in a sense it's true. However, when Disney was filming *Bambi* (1942), he worked with this "table." The difference between his and our table is that we can get the camera to any point and so we can capture complex layers in one shot, whereas Disney moved the camera only along an axis. Moreover, we can also shoot frames. Thus, in the film *Hedgehog in the Fog* we could let the hedgehog enter and then get out of the fog again. It made it possible to go into depth.

**How have you come to realize that flat-figure animation suits you the best? It has given me the opportunity to express**



Characters from the film **25TH – THE FIRST DAY (25E – PERVY DEN, 1968)** by Yuri Norshteyn

myself artistically. And it delimits creative possibilities, putting a system in them. To express action you must stick to the conditions that a cut-out allows. That's why I recall in my book the statues of Michelangelo or Giotto's paintings, since they created simple mise-en-scènes, if you can call it that. Recently I have seen the original of Giotto's *The Last Supper*; I have it here in the book. And look, it looks like a film scene. If you read the picture step by step, it becomes a story, a sequence. For example, these eyes, they are like a close shot in a film. Because at that moment Jesus says that one of his disciples will betray him. Therefore, the eyes prick up.

**Your book is very valuable in that you show the gradual perception or "reading" of images. I haven't yet encountered**

**such a cinematographic approach to the history of art. It is interesting that in the book you reveal your love first and foremost for live action films, such as *L'Atalante* (1934) by Jean Vigo or the works of Otar Iosseliani. I missed any mention of animated films that you like.** I prefer live action films and documentary films to animated ones. I am very picky when it comes to films. In my book I did not mention Iosseliani's *Falling Leaves* (*Gor-gobistve*, 1966) by accident – it is a film that hardly anyone knows, but for me it is one of the most profound works of world cinematography. A deep thought is expressed through a simple plot.

**Still, which animated films do you like?** They are few and I keep going back to them: *Night on Bald Mountain* (*Une nuit sur le*

*mont chauve*, 1933) by Alexandre Alexeieff and Claire Parker, Jiří Trnka's *The Hand* (*Ruka*, 1965), Frédéric Back's *Crac* (1981), *De Facto* (*De Fakto*, 1973) by Bulgarian animator Donyo Donev and of course films by Fyodor Khitruk who was my teacher. And I will never forget Eduard Nazarov's *There Once Was a Dog* (*Zhil-byt pyos*, 1982). But that does not mean I do not like other films. More likely, these ones cross my mind at this moment because they have something in common.

**And what do they have in common?** My choice is governed by the simplicity of the plot and the depth of what is hidden underneath. A film should be revealing. I am fascinated by Lotte Reiniger, who in the thirties shot *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (*Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed*, 1926), which was based on

Photo: Yuri Norshteyn © Jakub Hora



Shots from **THE OVERCOAT (SHINYEL)** by Yuri Norshteyn



Francheska Yarusova: **SMALL HEADS OF AKAKY AKAKIEVICH**, 1981 – 1982. Design of **THE OVERCOAT (SHINYEL)** by Yuri Norshteyn

KAMILA BOHÁČKOVÁ YURI NORSHTEYN: TO BE RESPONSIVE TO LIFE



Sketches from **THE OVERCOAT (SHINYEL)** by Yuri Norshteyn



Francheska Yarbusova: **CLERKS LOOKING TO DARK.** Design of **THE OVERCOAT (SHINYEL)** by Yuri Norshteyn



Francheska Yarbusova: **OUTSKIRTS IN FRONT OF THE CEMETERY.** Design of **THE OVERCOAT (SHINYEL)** by Yuri Norshteyn



Shots from **THE OVERCOAT (SHINYEL)** by Yuri Norshteyn

silhouettes. I was thrilled about the manner in which the film was made, how subtle nuances were depicted in the psychology of the characters. I was also impressed by Caroline Leaf's *The Street* (1976) – she achieved fine psychological expression using coarse contours. Aleksandr Petrov is following in her footsteps using the same technique of painting on glass. He masters the spontaneity of motion, but it is

becoming a hindrance to his films. He is a master of the craft, but I most like his film *The Cow* (*Korova*, 1990), in which he was to discover this method. You know, there must be a certain degree of disorderliness in the depiction. A bit of chaos. If an artist has the feeling that he or she has mastered everything perfectly, the work becomes a bore. The need to overcome obstacles doesn't arise. Take, for instance,

Velázquez or Rembrandt – what their earliest works had been and where their work had got by the end of their lives. They had completely changed their style.

**You are known to dislike computer animation. Have you really not seen any computer animated films that were interesting to you?**

Long ago I saw *Luxo Jr.* (1986) by John Lasseter from Pixar. That film was simple. Then he started making much more complicated films, discovering the possibilities of the computer, and that ceased to interest me. I watched *Avatar* (2009) by James Cameron for no more than a few minutes and had to leave. Likewise, I do not take interest in the work of Tim Burton. I have the impression that aesthetics devours everything else.

**Is the problem that a computer creates fewer obstacles, that it takes less effort?**

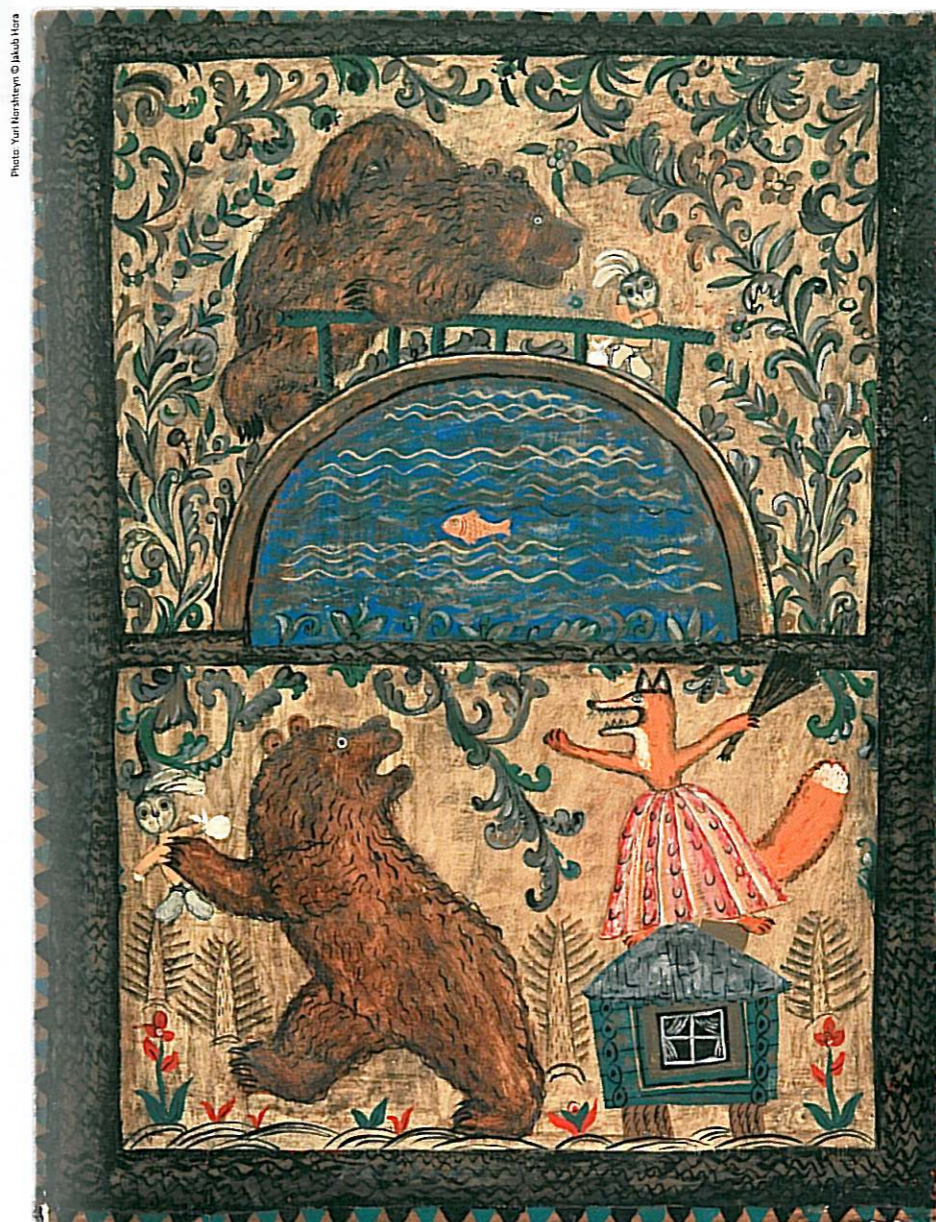
I don't think it is easier. You must have greater imagination. Maybe it's my narrow-mindedness, but when I look into the camera, I see what is happening in the shot. Things that do not depend on me are played out there. The element of chance enters into it. That is missing when using a computer.

**In one interview you say that to be world-class means to be national. That's a very relevant opinion especially for nascent artists. Why do you think it's true?**

Man makes film primarily for himself, and thus in his own manner. If he tries to fit somebody's taste, be world-class or original at all costs, then it is wrong. Above all, he must be curious, like a child that asks why an ant builds an anthill. Curiosity is much more important than ideas. A creator actually becomes a child.

**How do you explain the fact that nowadays animated films (especially the computerized ones) attempt to be as realistic as possible, to approach the realism of live action films, rather than to develop imagination and create their own world?**

In a realistic depiction many dangers can lurk. Realistic art is the most common but at the same time the most difficult. It's more difficult than creating abstractions. You must have a very powerful imagination.



Francheska Yarbusova: **FOX MEETS HARE.** Design of **FOX AND HARE (LISA I ZAYATS, 1973)** by Yuri Norshteyn

For the art to be good, the exterior must be only a shell of something internal. The work must be a part of something greater and deeper. Take, for instance, realistic painting – in the greatest works there is an intense experience hidden behind a realistic facade. Not for nothing did I mention in my book Repin's famous portrait of Musorgsky made a few days before his death. His whole drama is expressed in the painting – the expression of the lips, the lines of the eyes. I have heard how nurses in hospitals are chosen. They let them feed the patient and watch whether they repeat his or her gestures and movements in order to

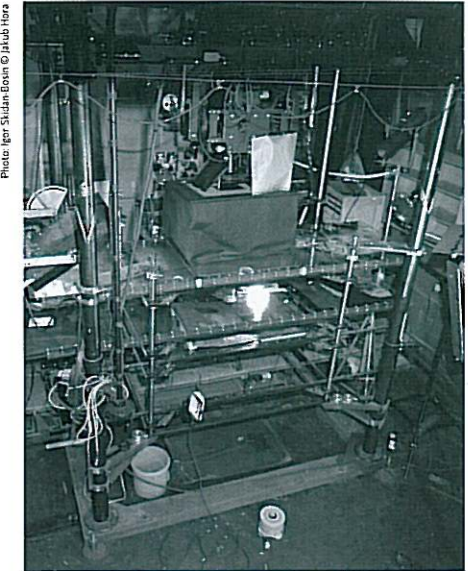
unwittingly establish a cordial relationship. I mean that each situation has its depth and to merely capture what is seen is not enough. That's the whole problem of current, mainly computer animated movies: they show the exterior, not the inner experience and depth. That's why realistic art should not be confused with simple photographic imaging.

**What advice would you give to animators just starting out in the field?**  
One thing only: to be responsive to life.

THANKS TO VĚRA AND JIŘÍ KUBIČEK



Yuri Norshteyn at work



Norshteyn's multiple glass planes

The interview with Yuri Norshteyn took place over a glass of wine in a village called Malešov, in a house owned by Mr. and Mrs. Kubiček who participated in the translation of Norshteyn's book. During the evening Yuri Norshteyn often quoted Russian classics, off-the-cuff and casually. After all, he himself is one of them. The village Malešov is the unofficial center of Czech animation, not only does Prof. Jiří Kubiček, who is the teacher at Prague FAMU, live there but also two prominent Czech animators and directors: Pavel Koutský and Aurel Klimt.

The Czech translation of Yuri Norshteyn's book *Snow on the Grass* was published in two volumes in October 2013 by the Publishing House of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (NAMU) translated by Jiří Kubiček and richly illustrated. More at [www.namu.cz](http://www.namu.cz)

Yuri Norshteyn (1941) is an award-winning Russian animator best known for his animated shorts, *Hedgehog in the Fog* (*Yozhik v tumane*, 1975) and *Tale of Tales* (*Skazka skazok*, 1979). Since 1981 he has been working on a feature film called *The Overcoat* (*Shinyel*), based on the short story by Nikolai Gogol of the same name.