Hugo and Josefin

Hugo and Josefin is a classic children's film that feels as relevant and touching today as when it was first released almost 50 years ago. It is a sensual, poetic film that is visually stunning but does not paint a rose-tinted picture of childhood. On the contrary, the main character Josefin is allowed to feel angry, sad, scared and bubbling with joy. Because we see everything that happens through Josefin's eyes, the film becomes a tool for revealing the child's inner world: her fantasies, dreams and thoughts colour the narrative on the screen. Few films are as stimulating to both the heart and mind as Hugo and Josefin.

Recommended for ages 7-10 years

A study guide by Eva Westergren
with a film history introduction by Malena Janson

Film History Introduction

Kjell Grede’s debut film Hugo and Josefin has gone down in Swedish film history as a true classic, and some consider it the best Swedish children's film ever made. It has also been launched abroad and is touring the UK as part of Mark Cousin's Cinema of Childhood season, a major initiative focusing on children's films from around the world.

The film had its theatrical release in 1967 and is based on Maria Gripe's popular books, which were published between 1961 and 1966. The script was written jointly by the director and author. Maria Gripe has described how during this joyful process they tried to
avoid creating a literal adaptation and instead maintain a looser connection to the book: “Part of our job was to open up the boundaries of the book and set Hugo and Josefin free, while still maintaining the characters and atmosphere. This above all is what enabled the film to become such a strong artistic unit.”

The actors were also given a lot of freedom to improvise during filming, which can clearly be seen in the children’s acting. One often gets a sense that Marie Öhman is discovering her Josefin as she goes along. The immensely popular actor and writer Beppe Wolgers, who plays the gardener Gudmarsson who becomes something of a father figure to the two children, was also given a far more prominent role. For example he wrote the film’s famous final scene himself, where Gudmarsson teaches the children the art of saying goodbye by telling them a story about the Bombassat family.

Obviously there are many explanations as to why Hugo and Josefin has become such a milestone in Swedish children’s film history, but I venture to assert that three of them are:

1) The consistent child’s perspective. The story is seen almost exclusively through Josefin’s eyes; her feelings can be read in the depiction of her naughty schoolmates and her particularly wonderful friend Hugo. The result is an innovative film aesthetic that could be termed ‘a child’s realism’ – a realism coloured by the child’s experiences.

2) The great confidence in the young audience. The film does not follow a conventional dramatic composition with a clear beginning, middle and end, but is more a collage of events, moods and situations. This type of narrative may demand more from the younger audience, which has to actively participate to shape the narrative, but the audience also has a far stronger film experience thanks to this involvement. It could also be said that this narrative structure is actually closer to a child’s own way of perceiving time where some periods are slow, halting and drawn out, while others simply flicker by in fragments.

3) The honest depiction of childhood. Childhood in Hugo and Josefin is not, as it is so often, presented in a romantic glow. In the film, to be a child is to be human, that is to enjoy life’s wonders, but also to struggle with difficult thoughts and emotions. Josefin’s life is just as complex as any real child’s life, and without Hugo she often feels different, lonely and an outsider.

In several respects Kjell Grede’s Hugo and Josefin is a product of its time, the late 1960s, while at the same time it also heralds in a new kind of Swedish children’s film that would make its breakthrough a decade later in 1977, with films such as Mamma pappa barn (“Mum Dad Child” by Marie-Louise Ekman), Elvis! Elvis! (by Kay Pollak) and Bröderna Lejonhjärta (“The Lionheart Brothers” by Olle Hellbom).

Hugo and Josefin was released in an era when children, culture and children’s culture had become a hot topic of debate in Sweden. Many were looking for a new kind of children’s culture that presented a more honest picture of reality, that took the younger audience seriously and gave them strong experiences. One of the most diligent debaters, Gunila Ambjörnsson, wanted to “explode the idyllic myth and air things out” and she calls for “film for children at least as richly differentiated as film for adults, a film that truly illuminates life from as many aspects as possible, provides entertainment and healthy tension, as well as information and complications”.

This new orientation towards a more serious children’s culture had already happened in television, literature and drama, but children’s film was lagging behind, and it was another decade before Gunila Ambjörnsson’s vision of the Swedish children’s film became a reality.

So Kjell Grede’s Hugo and Josefin was a taste of things to come – and a particularly successful one at that. Timeless, beautiful and with an unerring solidarity with the vulnerable, sensitive child, it continues to captivate new generations.

A Summary of the Film

Josefin lives with her mother and father in a rectory in the countryside. She is about to start school but feels lonely and has no friends. Nor does she have any contact with her parents, and she seeks out their company. Her father in particular, whom we never see and only hear his voice, just gets on with his sermons and dismisses her. In the beginning we see Josefin packing her bag in protest and leaving home. When she complains about her loneliness to a woman she happens to knock off her bicycle, the woman replies: “Who isn’t lonely, do you think?”
Although her mother has banned her from bathing in Änglabäcken brook, she goes there. She walks into the water, pours water over her head and renames herself Josefin.

Her real name is Jenny Grå. When she wades out too far and starts to sink, the new gardener Gudmarsson comes over and fishes her out. Josefin is terrified and thinks he is God taking her to heaven, because he looks like God in one of the pictures at the rectory.

But Gudmarsson looks kind, and Josefin soon realises she was mistaken. Gudmarsson also knows a boy called Hugo who lives deep in the woods. One day Hugo comes to say hello and Gudmarsson becomes the link in the meeting between Hugo and Josefin.

When school starts and the teacher takes the register, Josefin doesn’t answer when her real name Jenny Grå is called out. She tells the teacher that she’s decided to call herself Josefin. But Hugo, who’s in the same class, doesn’t turn up. When Josefin tells her classmates that Hugo is her friend, she gets teased and accused of telling lies.

On the way home from school she finds Hugo. He didn’t make it to school because there were so many interesting things along the way. When he walks to school with Josefin the next day, his backpack is full of things he’s found, including a piece of juniper wood he lets everyone smell.

In Hugo, Josefin finds a true playmate and together they explore nature and the surrounding area. The old brickworks, the gravel pit, the forest. They also discover an old bike, which Hugo triumphantly learns to ride.

Then one day Hugo is gone. In sorrow Josefin turns to Gudmarsson who is also sad, and tells her that Hugo’s father is in prison for being a conscientious objector. Gudmarsson and Josefin comfort each other and Gudmarsson promises to take Hugo into his home. Josefin also grows close to Gudmarsson, who becomes a kind of surrogate father for her. When Hugo moves in with Gudmarsson, Josefin and Hugo’s friendship grows even stronger and they can now continue their journey of discovery together.

When Hugo’s father is released from prison, Gudmarsson feels superfluous and prepares to leave. He packs his furniture into a truck, but when Josefin finds out he’s planning to leave, she and Hugo desperately attempt to stop him. A couple of chairs fall off the back of the truck and Gudmarsson has to stop. Hugo and Josefin sit on the chairs and wait. Gudmarsson fetches more furniture, and the three of them have a farewell meal in the middle of the road.

Gudmarsson tells them the story of the Bombassat family, where someone’s always leaving but no one is really sad. Just like the Bombassat family, they eat hard-boiled eggs and laugh. Gudmarsson bids farewell at dusk, but once he sits in the truck the tears come. So he turns on the windscreen wipers.

**Working with the Film in School**

*Hugo and Josefin* is an unsentimental story that does not paint a rose-tinted picture of childhood, but rather depicts
a world where security exists alongside wonder and terror without explanation. In a sensual, poetic way the film shows us the child’s inner world and recreates through Josefin’s eyes what it’s really like to be a child. While us adults tend to look for meaning and context, children often have other ways of getting to grips with reality as a series of unfathomable events, where the most unexpected things can happen when you least expect them.

_Hugo and Josefin_ is a film where, through a fictitious person, the viewer has an opportunity to look at and reflect on themselves. A film that stimulates the child’s associative power with sensual awareness and a feeling of freedom. The film equips children to visualise their inner selves and think about Who am I?.

Since the film does not follow a dramatic curve but is more a series of strong scenes, it is a good idea to focus on a number of scenes that the pupils remember, and they can then talk about what they see and feel.

_Hugo and Josefin_ is a film that communicates with at all the senses, so it may also be interesting to not only work with words, but also pictures and body language. The film also deals with how we can read each other without words, and how important our personal experience is in what we see. It can lead to all kinds of exciting discussions about fantasy and reality, dreams and story-telling.

The poetic language creates many possibilities for interpretation, and it is good if everyone feels there are no wrong answers and that a film can be perceived very differently – this is often a sign of the depth and ambivalence of the film’s narrative. The film’s story may also highlight some of the viewers’ own memories of childhood, which may be worth building on.

### From Jenny to Josefin – About Identity

Josefin is a person who lives in a world of her own. She is insecure, sensitive, introvert, and scared of not being whom she thinks other people want her to be. She doesn’t really know who she is, but she longs to be somebody else. Josefin is very lonely, but she also has a strong need to be free and be seen. When she tries to express her feelings she gets no response from the adults, but she protests in her own way.

Gudmarsson is a mysterious figure whom Josefin initially mistakes for God (“Gud” meaning “God” in Swedish), but in the gardener Josefin soon finds a person who is not like others. A person who sees Josefin and is both a child and an adult at the same time.

Hugo has many opportunities open to himself, he believes in himself and lives in the present. He is a person who has largely managed to bring himself up. Hugo has many secrets and the adventure lies in the journey. A spider, a piece of bark, a beetle; these things make him stop and marvel. So he hardly ever makes it to school on time.

Hugo and Josefin build a mutual trust, and Hugo makes Josefin feel strong. Their friendship and respect for each other creates a kind of enchantment, something that makes the world bigger for them both. Hugo fulfils Josefin’s longing for company and to discover the world. A person who, in Josefin’s eyes, is there because she needs him. Her time spent with Hugo enables her to see more clearly who she is herself.

- Why doesn’t Josefin want to accept her lot in life? What does she want to achieve by running away? What makes Josefin return home after meeting the woman on the road? What does Josefin expect from the new person she will become when she renames herself?
- Why is Josefin curious about Hugo? What part of his character attracts her? What can we see in the way Hugo is with Josefin? What is he like towards the school teacher and his classmates? Describe the scene when Hugo arrives at school. How can we see that Hugo inspires wonder and respect?
- How do we perceive Hugo’s relationship with Gudmarsson? How can we see that they have a close, warm friendship? What does Josefin see in their relationship that she herself is lacking?
- Hugo and Josefin are very different in terms of character. In what way do Hugo’s and Josefin’s character traits inspire each other? Josefin strives to be like her classmates and fit in, yet she still gets teased. In what way does Hugo get Josefin to be braver? How can we see that she is happy when she is with Hugo?
- Do you have to be like other people to be accepted, or is it better to be completely different like Hugo and...
Josefin? Why does Josefin get teased, but not Hugo?

Trust and Sympathy
In the film, Josefin’s outlook and experiences shape the story; it is clear what she longs for and dreams of. Hugo has great personal courage, integrity and creativity while Josefin is sensitive, sincere, somewhat reserved and insecure. Although they are different they become inseparable through their meetings and adventures, and Hugo becomes a hero to Josefin.

As a child it is important to have adults who can support you and help you be secure and confident, and feel good enough. Josefin’s parents aren’t particularly close to her. Hugo is quite alone, but we feel he has a close relationship with his (absent) father and a strong relationship with Gudmarsson, who is his uncle on his mother’s side.

• What part do Hugo’s and Josefin’s relationships with the adults play in the people they have become? Try to imagine what Hugo’s relationship with his father has been like.

• What is it that makes Josefin always feel like she’s disturbing, in the way? Describe the scene where Josefin stands with the sunflower outside her father’s window. What are her expectations, and how is her disappointment shown in the film?

• What does she find in Gudmarsson that she hasn’t found with her parents?

Conquering One’s Environment

Hugo and Josefin is a film that gives the children a lot of leeway. It takes us on a voyage of discovery to environments where children are not usually allowed. Dangerous play environments that Hugo and Josefin explore on their own terms. Situations that generate excitement and unexpected meetings, where they shape their own world.

An alien world to children today, where games and play areas in safe, enclosed nursery and school environments are determined by set rules and regulations. Both Josefin and Hugo move freely in their surroundings. It is Hugo who introduces Josefin to all the secrets of the forest, and Josefin who takes Hugo to the old brickworks where she thinks there’s a bicycle.

The scene where Josefin takes Hugo with her to the old brickworks is both a terrifying experience and a kind of liberation. A scene that switches between fear, darkness and light. When Josefin loses contact with Hugo in the dark, she gets scared and confused. She meets strange men and hears the sounds of the death-watch, which Hugo later explains is just beetles calling to each other. When they find the bicycle, the doors are thrown open and the light pours in. To music from Handel’s Messiah, Hugo cycles off on the old bicycle that he quickly learns to ride. With a proud Josefin running after him, he cycles along the village road where he attracts the admiring gazes of the locals.

• Describe how Josefin feels when she loses contact with Hugo in the dark. How does the film create a frightening atmosphere? Why isn’t Hugo scared?

• Describe the contrast when the gates are opened, the light pours in and Hugo cycles off. What role does the music play in how we perceive the bike ride?

• How do we experience the other ‘playgrounds’ that Hugo and Josefin visit: the sand quarry, the factory with the excavator, the forest with the hunters? Do they feel exciting or dangerous? Describe the contrast with the idyllic summer landscape.

• How can we see that Josefin is getting braver and braver? Describe the scene where Josefin tries to scare off the hunters: What feelings does Hugo show when he wants to give her a kaleidoscope?

Mystery and Ambivalence

While us adults tend to look for meaning and context, children often have other ways of getting to grips with reality as a series of unfathomable events, where the most unexpected things can happen when you least expect them. In Hugo and Josefin there is no ‘true’ reality as us adults tend to expect. The film gives no explanation as to who Hugo is. He can live his own life and people don’t ask who he is. Hugo is Hugo and we are glad that he exists. Gudmarsson too is a mysterious person. Where does he come from and where is he going? In one scene we may suspect that he was once close to Josefin’s mother, perhaps like Hugo and Josefin are now.

Despite the realistic depiction of time and space and recognisable environments, Josefin’s experiences and way of seeing the world enable us to put ourselves into the mind and
feelings of a child, where dreams and reality go together and Hugo becomes her hero. The film’s ambivalence also stems from the fact that many of the questions raised in the narrative are left unanswered. The poetic imagery gives us an insight into the children’s world of perception and lets us see that they are not just children but above all people, living and associative and not yet ingrained in the norms of adult society.

- Discuss reality and unreality. Which scenes do we perceive as the most dreamlike? In which scenes do we most clearly see that it is Josefin’s perception of Hugo that’s being depicted, that we are seeing Hugo through her eyes? Consider camera positioning and gaze direction. What ideas do we ourselves pick up regarding Hugo’s and Gudmarsson’s background?

Love, Loneliness and the Art of Saying Goodbye
When Hugo disappears and no one knows where he is, Josefin becomes angry and sad. Everything is dull and boring again. Even the weather. It rains, and Josefin stamps moodily in the puddles. She complains to Gudmarsson, who is also sad. They comfort each other and Gudmarsson promises to find Hugo and take him into his home.

- Describe the scene where Josefin and Gudmarsson both jump in the puddles. “Gudmarsson is like a child,” says Josefin’s mother. Is that true?
- How can it be that, unlike many adults, Gudmarsson is still so playful? Should adults be more like Gudmarsson?
- How does Josefin feel when she’s asked to dance? Why does Gudmarsson put Josefin on the milking stool? Does Josefin feel like a child or an adult when she dances with Gudmarsson?

When Gudmarsson has to leave he loads his furniture onto a truck, but

- What has Josefin learnt from her friendship with Hugo? Is she different to the Josefin we met at the beginning of the film?
- Why does Gudmarsson have to leave?
- What feelings does the film leave us with?
- How does the quote below from Maria Gripe match your experiences?:

> It’s not hard for people to part if you dare to believe that the loss you feel in yourself is in the other person too, in the person leaving. Amid the sense of abandonment is an immense trust. This is the feeling we take with us when we leave the film about Hugo and Josefin, and it’s almost a feeling of happiness.

- What do you think happened next? Use your imagination and tell the story.

Further Reading:
- Mark Cousin’s film A Story of Children and Film (2013), which is a cinematic journey through film history in search of depictions of childhood