

A film by
Kamil Polak

the lost town of
Switez

**Educator's
Guide**

A NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA PRODUCTION





EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

About the film

Visually arresting and exquisitely scored, this animation without words celebrates creative genius in two areas of artistic practice: filmmaking and poetry. **Kamil Polak**, director of *The Lost Town of Switez*, takes his lead from the epic, impressionistic poem "Świtez" by Adam Mickiewicz, giving his imagination free rein as he pays homage to a classic work of Polish literature. Taking viewers on a lovingly crafted, dreamlike journey to a forgotten "lost city," Polak draws on the poem's evocative power to encourage an imaginative response in viewers. His main character, the Traveller, is swept along by sumptuous imagery and stirring music, passing through the fiery exhilaration, colour and thunderous strains of an apocryphal battle to the calm, cool serenity of the earthly domain. *The Lost Town of Switez* is an ode to flights of fancy, a visual poem that elicits strong feelings through its inventive animation and otherworldly setting. As viewers, we wander through the film as if accompanying the protagonist through his dreams.

Guide written by

Karolina Sulkowska, CSDM Teacher

Target audience

11 and up

Recommended subject areas

- History of civilization
- Moral values
- Religious and cultural heritage
- Fine art (especially the visual arts)
- Music
- Media literacy
- Animation





BEFORE VIEWING

About the filmmaker

Kamil Polak studied classical music, ballet and painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw before turning his talents to filmmaking, focusing in particular on animation. He earned a degree in directing from the prestigious National Film, Television and Theatre School in Łódź, where he made *Inside* (2003), a film that is today featured on the school's reel of all-time great student films. An earlier work, *Birth of a Nation* (2001), won second prize at the International Film Festival in Wiesbaden and has been widely sold to international television broadcasters. Polak developed ***The Lost Town of Switez*** during his graduation year at the Fine Arts Academy. He was the visual effects supervisor on *Peter & the Wolf* (2006), an animated film made for Channel 4 and the big screen, accompanied by live orchestra. It won an Oscar in 2008. ***The Lost Town of Switez*** was in official competition at the 2011 Berlin International Film Festival.

About the animation technique

The technique used to animate ***The Lost Town of Switez*** is particularly innovative and striking, combining traditional oil painting with 3D digital animation. To compose the shots, handmade paintings were digitized and then composited to create the illusion of depth. Overlaid with animation, each tableau springs vividly to life. Faithful to the film's historical context, the rendering style is based on religious iconography and Polish Romantic painting.

Preparatory activities

Preparing for viewing — defining the educational goals

Looking at the film poster:

- What do you see in this image?
- What does it suggest to you?
- Where and when do you think the film takes place?
- What do you think the film will be about?

Presenting the film's title, *The Lost Town of Switez*:

- What additional information does the title supply?

After reading the film synopsis:

- What additional information has been provided?
- Would you like to revise your expectations about the film?
- Would you like to add any new ideas?

Defining educational goals:

- Why do you think you should watch this film?
- What do you hope to discover?



FOCUS FOR VIEWING

Note to teachers...

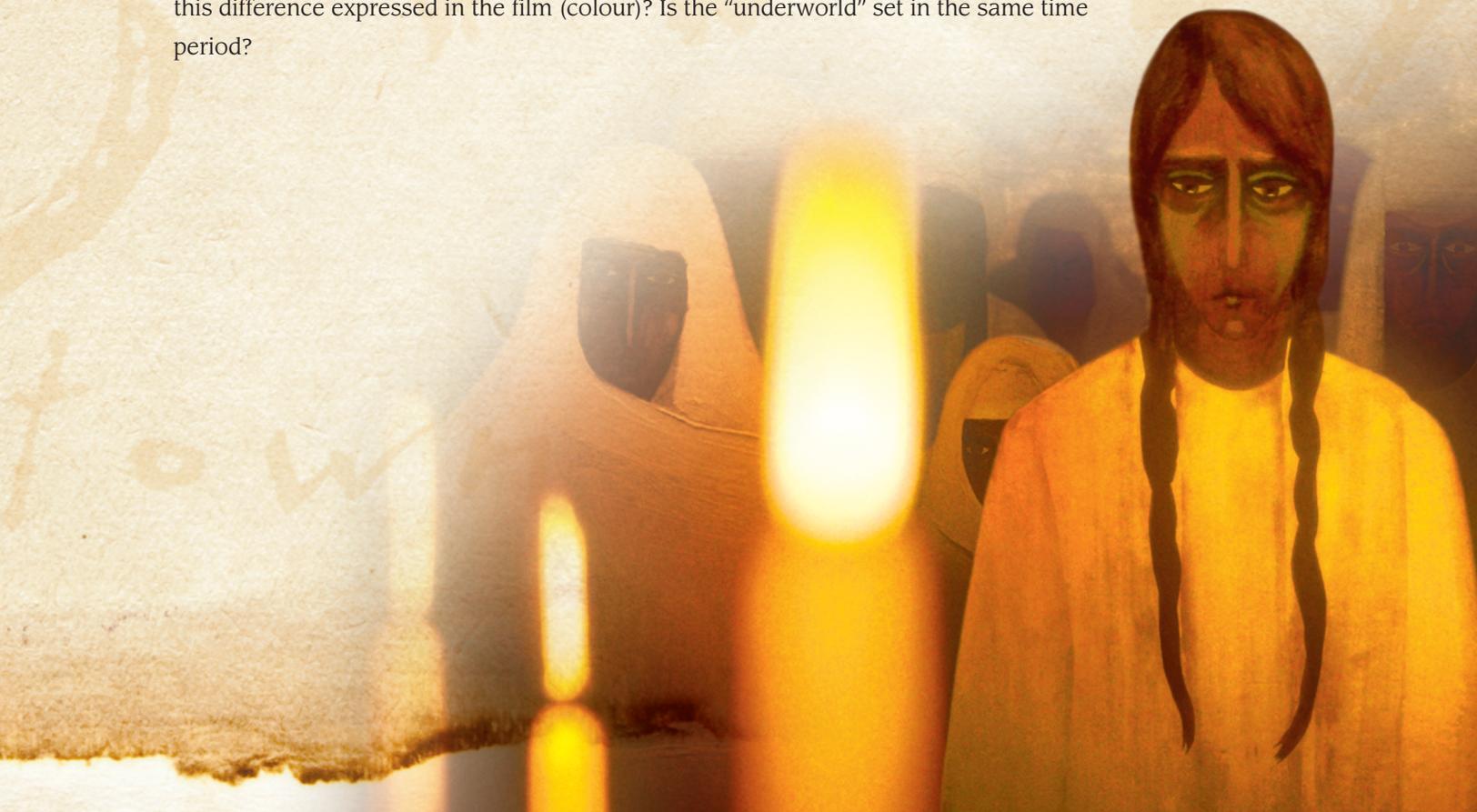
Based on a poem, the film's narrative line can be somewhat difficult to follow. Offering guidance during the viewing will help students gain an understanding of the action. It would be interesting to pause the film from time to time and ask students to share their impressions so far. We suggest two such pauses, one at 2 min 38 s, the other at 7 min 40 s.

The lost town of
2 min 38 s

- Prompt students to consider the narrative's historical era by observing the objects represented in the film.
- Ensure that students have seen the cause of the accident.

7 min 40 s

- Ask students to describe what they think has happened so far and share their ideas as to what will happen next.
- Make sure they notice the disparity between dream and reality for the protagonist. How is this difference expressed in the film (colour)? Is the "underworld" set in the same time period?





AFTER VIEWING

Understanding and interpreting

- Students can complete the following sentence to see how their expectations prior to viewing match up with what they now know:
 - We thought that [...]; now we know that [...].
- It is important to discuss the various possible interpretations of the film. By expressing their ideas and listening to those of others, students will develop or deepen their understanding of the work. You can prompt their reflection by asking such questions as:
 - Who is the man?
 - What is he doing in the forest?
 - What does he discover?
 - Who are the other characters?
 - What monument is portrayed in the film?
 - What parts of the film are, respectively, imagination and reality?
 - What role does religion play in the film?
 - What do the water lilies symbolize?
- To enhance their understanding further still, ask students to think about the message the filmmaker wanted to convey. Of course, there are as many possible “messages” as there are students. Another way to encourage reflection (and foster synthesis) would be to have them try to summarize the story aloud in one sentence. This will help bring the narrative line and its essential elements into focus.
- It would also be interesting to draw connections between the film and its title. What does the word *Switez* refer to? What do we mean by the term “lost” city?

Reacting and reinvesting

- It is very important that students be given a chance to react. The following questions can help:
 - What feelings does this film evoke?
 - How did you feel while watching the movie?
 - What do you think is the most important point in the story? Explain your answer by referring to the film.
 - Does this story remind you of any other stories you know? If so, how are the stories similar, in terms of their themes, characters and events? How do they differ?
 - In your opinion, what are the main qualities of this short film?



OTHER ACTIVITIES AND RESOURCES

Other suggested activities

Since this film in particular lends itself well to a writing exercise, you could ask students to retell the story in their own words based on the film's imagery. This works just as well as a group or an individual exercise.

Students can also be asked to study the written poem based on the film.

In a social sciences class, students can be asked to research other lost or legendary cities — for example, Machu Picchu, Angkor, Atlantis, and so on. Their findings can be presented before the rest of the class, thus contributing to their classmates' general knowledge.

Online resources

Writers History Literature Portal, Adam Mickiewicz

writershistory.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=339&Itemid=45

Switezianka - The Nymph of Lake Switez

tumblr.com/tagged/switezianka

