

The Battle of Kherzenets

YURI NORSTEIN

1971

Battle of Kherzenets is a short animation film made by the legendary directors Yuri Norstein and Ivan Ivanov-Vano. The animation follows a legend about the Invisible City of Kitezh which was reputed to have disappeared under the waters of Lake Svetloyar to escape an attack by the Mongols. The film combines the 3rd act of the opera by Rimsky-Korsakov with stop motion animation of precious Russian frescoes and paintings from the 14th–16th centuries. The music, in unmistakably Rimsky Korsakov fashion, is stirring, tense and affecting in equal measure, merging beautifully with the animation. The somewhat expressionistic style gives a haunting edge as the characters move with great fluidity while simultaneously remaining still.

Legend has it that Georgy II, Grand Prince of Vladimir in the early 13th century, first built the town of Kitezh on the Volga River. After having conquered some of the Russian lands, Batu Khan heard of Kitezh and ordered his army to advance towards it. As the Golden Horde reached the walls of the town, they found no fortifications and the citizens praying fervently instead of trying to defend themselves. As the Mongols rushed to attack, countless fountains of water burst from under the ground all around them. The attackers fell back and watched the town submerge into the lake. This legend of the 'Russian Atlantis' gave birth to numerous incredible claims about the lost city. It is said that only those who are pure in their heart and soul will find their way to Kitezh. It is also said that one can see the outline of the city in the fog above the lake at sunrise. Sometimes one can hear the sound of chiming bells and people singing from under the waters.

The 1904 opera 'The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh and the Maiden Fevroniya' is a unique piece by the composer and is based on a combination of two Russian legends: that of Saint Fevroniya of Murom, and the city of Kitezh. The music reflects the world of folk beliefs, traditions and religious themes. Rimsky-Korsakov considered the work to be his final artistic statement.

The film was shot using the cutout animation method with flat characters, props and backgrounds. This method flourished in Soviet animation at that time. Norstein recalled that Ivanov-Vano invited him to work on the film to evoke the main idea of combining plasticity and sound: "I wanted to make not just colour conjugations in accordance with the musical sound, but still achieve that the image had an emotional and sensory effect on the viewer". The art objects used for the film included many Russian Orthodox icons and paintings as well as more modern paintings. Norstein considers the most successful episode to be the battle, where the fine art of the 1920s served as a model for the design of the space, in particular, Kazimir Malevich's 'Red Cavalry Riding'.

Kazimir Malevich's 'Red Cavalry Riding' presents the small red silhouettes of the revolutionary horsemen racing across the land and almost melting away between the Suprematist bands of pure colour. The painting is known to be one of the only works of the artist to be permitted into the pantheon of Soviet art due to its title, which appears to eulogize the Russian Revolution and the Red Army. On the back it is written: "From the capital of the October Revolution, the Red Cavalry rides to defend the Soviet frontier". Despite these grand words, this painting is in fact one of the most desolate and tragic works of the artist. Disillusioned with Stalin's regime, Malevich draws the Red Army's movements are frantic and absurd. Almost as if the 'Promise Land' they are moving towards will never exist.

Going back to the original folk legend, it originated in people's attempts to mystically reflect on the frightful experience of the Mongol invasion: the Lord saved the city of Kitezh, which became a place of ideal life. Norstein deliberately uses Malevich's painting at the point where ideal life is fleeting and unreachable. One can only wonder if this is a commentary on the generations of Russians dealing with trauma through creating a myth of 'Promised Land' which always remains unreachable, only visible through the fog at dawn.