

# Teacher's Guide – *A Thorn in the Mind*

(A film by Mathieu Bergeron and Yves Martel, Vent d'Est Films, 2009, 52 min)

Teacher's Guide by Inês Lopes, educational consultant

## OVERVIEW OF TEACHER'S GUIDE

### Subject

- Arts (animated film)

### School Levels

- 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle of high school
- College
- University

***Warning-This film contains sequences from animated films where there is nudity and/or sexual content.***

### Pedagogical Goals

- Teach students about animated film
- Expose them to different animation techniques
- Get them to reflect then give their opinions about views expressed about the creative process or animation
- Get students to research a specific animation technique, theme, filmmaker or the history of animation
- Encourage students to create

### Material

- Film *A Thorn in the Mind*
- Television and DVD player/ Projector and Screen
- Photocopies of Annexes A and B to be given out to the students (optional, since they can also be read in class)
- Internet (optional, to be used only if you choose to get students to do research or also if you want to screen other short films online at the NFB website)

### Suggested Activities

#	Title of Activity	⌚
Activity 1	Initial questions and presentation of the documentary	20 min
Activity 2	Animation techniques	Variable
Activity 3	Discussion / Writing about the creative process	Variable
Activity 4	Discussion / Writing about animation	Variable
Activity 5	Research / Comparative analysis of animated films	Variable

## SYNOPSIS – *A THORN IN THE MIND*

A journey into the imagination of six European and North American animated film creators: Jacques Drouin and Tali in Canada, Barry Purves in the UK, Pjotr Sagepin in Russia, Georges Schwizgebel in Switzerland, and Raoul Servais in Belgium. The film takes an original, touching and incisive look at the creative process involved in making an animated film. A rare opportunity to hear animation filmmakers talk openly about the art of storytelling, the limitations of their field and their form of expression, whether they work with puppets, drawing, painting or Alexeïeff's pinscreen techniques.



## ACTIVITY 1: INITIAL QUESTIONS AND PRESENTATION OF THE DOCUMENTARY

 20 min

### 1. Initial questions

In order to begin the discussion, ask the students the following questions:

- If I say the word “animation” what first comes into your mind?
- Do you know of different animation techniques? Which ones?
- Have you already seen animated films that left an impression on you? Which ones?
- 

### 2. Presentation of the film

Explain to the students that the documentary that they are about to watch offers an insight into the way that a variety of animated filmmakers in Europe and North America view their art. You can also read them the synopsis.

### 3. Instructions about note taking

Suggest to the students that they take notes while watching the *A Thorn in the Mind*. They don't need to write down everything, but their notes may later help them with some of the other activities suggested in guide.

**Note:** It is preferable to choose the activities first and to tell the students ahead of time about the work they will be expected to produce. This way, their note taking will be pertinent to their projects (e.g. research into a particular animation technique or animator).

## ACTIVITY 2: ANIMATION TECHNIQUES

 Variable

Three different ways of focussing an exploration of varying animation techniques are suggested:

### Option 1: A discussion about the importance of animation techniques

Taking the two quotations in Annex A as your starting point, hold a discussion in the classroom group about the importance of the choice of animation techniques... What do the students think? Should the animation technique be chosen at the outset or rather at a later stage depending on what is best suited to the film that is being developed?

### Option 2: Research on a particular animation technique

In the documentary we see several different animation techniques, for example:

- drawing (Tali);
- painting (Georges Schwizgebel);
- pinscreen (screen d'Alexeïeff) (Jacques Drouin);
- puppets (Barry Purves);
- claymation/ modelling clay animation (Pjotr Sapegin).

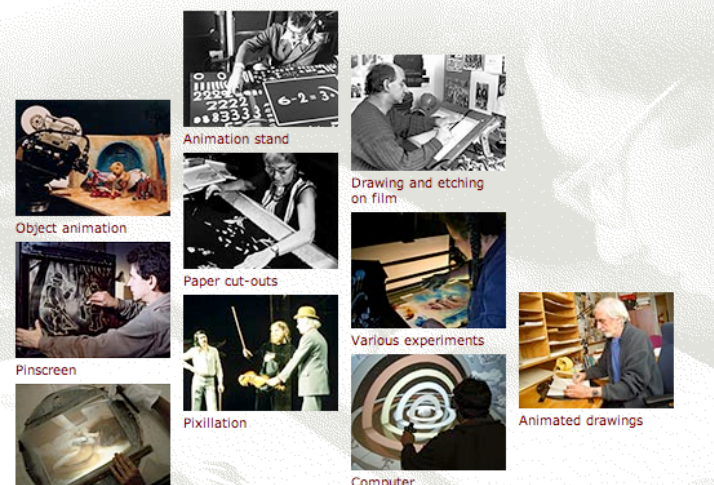
There are several other techniques that the students can discover on the NFB's website *Focus on Animation*:

<http://www3.nfb.ca/animation/objanim/en/index.php>

Suggest to students that they do research on an animation technique of their choice.

### Techniques

This section surveys the main animation techniques, briefly describing them and giving some background to explain the role they have played in the history of filmmaking at the NFB.



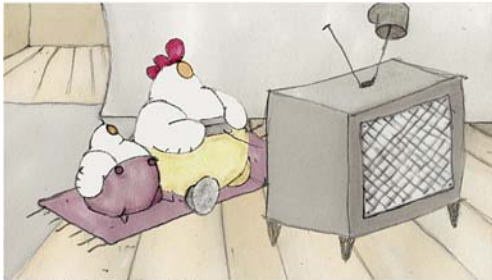
### Option 3: Comparative analysis of different films that use the same animation techniques

On the NFB site or elsewhere, the students watch animated films that have been created using the same techniques (drawing, puppets, Alexeïeff pinscreen, etc.). They then do a comparative analysis of these films. What elements do they have in common? What differences can they find?

The following NFB website is a good starting point:

<http://www3.nfb.ca/animation/objanim/en/films/index.php>.

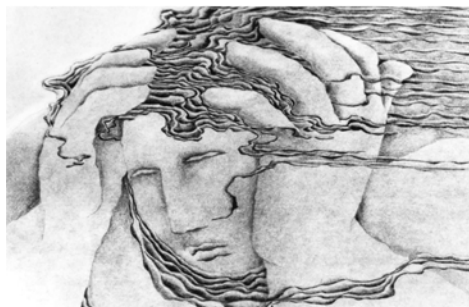
(70 animated films, including several classics, are available on this site. You can search by title, filmmaker or by year of production.)



**Chez madame Poule/At Home with Mrs. Hen**  
Directed by / Réalisé par Tali  
Produced by / Produit par Marc Bertrand  
Photo taken from the production / Photo tirée de la production  
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**Retouches**  
Directed by / Réalisé par Georges  
Schwizgebel  
Produced by / Produit par Marc Bertrand  
(ONF), Georges Schwizgebel (Studio GDS)  
Photo taken from the production / Photo tirée de la production  
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**Premiers Jours/Beginnings**  
Directed by / Réalisé par Clorinda Wamy  
Produced by / Produit par Gaston Sarault  
Photo taken from the production / Photo tirée de la production  
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## ACTIVITY 3: DISCUSSION / WRITING ABOUT THE CREATIVE PROCESS



Variable

This activity can either be tackled through a classroom-group discussion or through students writing on their own about one or several of the following questions:

- What are the stages involved in successfully completing an animated film? (original idea; storyboard; drawing, painting, puppet making, etc.; animation, music, etc.)
- To make an animated film ... can you work alone or do you have to work in a team?
- Does everything need to be planned in advance (the complete storyboard) or do you think there is room for improvisation as the film advances?
- "Everything has already been said... but not by me." What do you think of this statement? Is it possible to bring something new to a subject that has already been explored or story that's already been told? Can this also be considered creation?
- We hear Marcel Jean say in the documentary: "One of the dangers, in animated film, is that it can lose all spontaneity; that the wish for mastery over the technique overrides the emotional truth that is being conveyed." How do you react to this statement?
- What are the challenges facing animated filmmakers? (Having to start all over, having to change the script or storyboard because of unexpected problems, having to ask for help with stages in the process that aren't completely mastered, having to create movement based on the limits imposed by the puppets, having the patience to work on a project over several years, etc.)
- In the artistic work that you have already created (whether it is an animated film, a painting, a song, etc.), what was the creative process like? In other words, where did you find the idea you started with, and how did the idea evolve? What were the stages that went into creating the final work?
- Do you have ways to jumpstart the creative process? (e.g.: choosing a word and trying to develop a project with the word as the starting point; thinking of a colour, or a theme or a metaphor that can be applied to it, etc.)

## ACTIVITY 4: DISCUSSION / WRITING ABOUT ANIMATION

 Variable

Either with the whole classroom-group or in smaller teams hold a discussion about the opinions expressed in the quotations presented in Annex B. This activity can also be done in writing.

The students begin by reading the quotations taken from *A Thorn in the Mind* that are presented in Annex B, and then give their opinion of them. The quotations are grouped together under 4 separate themes:

- how animated films are perceived;
- the container and the contained;
- colour;
- the limitations.



### **Retouches**

Directed by / Réalisé par Georges Schwizgebel  
Produced by / Produit par Marc Bertrand  
(ONF), Georges Schwizgebel (Studio GDS)

Photo taken from the production / Photo  
tirée de la production

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## ACTIVITY 5: RESEARCH / COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ANIMATED FILMS

 Variable

Suggest one of the three research options listed below to students. The following websites are a good starting point for the research:

<i>Focus on animation</i> Site (NFB)	<a href="http://www3.nfb.ca/animation/objanim/en/index.php">http://www3.nfb.ca/animation/objanim/en/index.php</a>
Page on the history of animation (NFB)	<a href="http://www3.nfb.ca/animation/objanim/en/history/first-team.php">http://www3.nfb.ca/animation/objanim/en/history/first-team.php</a>
70 animated films (NFB)	<a href="http://www3.nfb.ca/animation/objanim/en/films/index.php">http://www3.nfb.ca/animation/objanim/en/films/index.php</a>
NFB website (general)	<a href="http://www.nfb.ca/">http://www.nfb.ca/</a>

### **Option 1: Research on the history of animation**

Suggest that students carry out a short research on the history of animated film. The following NFB website is a good starting point.

<http://www3.nfb.ca/animation/objanim/en/history/first-team.php>

### **Option 2: Research on the animated films of a particular filmmaker**

Students focus their research on a particular filmmaker who has made more than one animated film. They watch several of the filmmaker's works and write a short research paper about the elements that define their style. How has this filmmaker's art evolved?

### **Option 3: A comparative analysis of animated films about a single subject**

Students choose a particular theme that is explored in various animated films (it can be fairly broadly defined, for example, "relationships" or "a quest"). As they watch films on their chosen theme, students note which animation techniques have been used and how they serve the theme in question.



## ANNEX A: QUOTATIONS RELATED TO ACTIVITY 2 (ANIMATION TECHNIQUES)

A technique is only an instrument. So it's important not to invest the technique itself with too much importance. I'm always surprised when I hear things like "I don't like 3d" or "I don't like puppets"... What does that mean? It's giving too much importance to the technique.

*- Marcel Jean, expert on animated films, writer and producer*

It's about finding the right technique for the right story.

*- Barry Purves, creator of animated films*

## ANNEX B: QUOTATIONS RELATED TO ACTIVITY 4 (DISCUSSION / WRITING ABOUT ANIMATION)

### How animated films are perceived

There's a belief that animation should be funny and that it should be for children... but I don't remember reading that anywhere in a book.

- *Barry Purves*

### The container and the contained

The important thing is not so much to draw well, but that your drawings have originality and life to them.

- *Tali*

The power of a film doesn't depend on the perfection of its execution nor of its animation or illustrations, but comes rather from its dramatic content.

- *Marcel Jean*

### Colour

Colour is important and the absence of colour is equally important. I've made certain films without any colour because colour wasn't necessary. I've made other films where I worked with monochrome colours in order to allow for certain special effects. I've also sometimes limited myself to two dominant colours, like blue and red for example, where the red dominated in the dramatic scenes and the blue in the scenes that were, shall we say, more poetic.

- *Raoul Servais*

## The limitations

For me the limitations are positive in that they force us to find a solution that is internal in order to be able to do something.

- *Jacques Drouin*

I prefer working with complete freedom... Any constraints that might be imposed on me don't serve to stimulate me at all; on the contrary they make me feel blocked and I lose faith in what I want to do.

- *Raoul Servais*

There are elements that are imposed by the characters... For example, if you thought that the puppet was going to scratch its nose, but its anatomy means that its hand can't reach its nose... well, you'll have to reconsider. What you have to do is whatever the puppet wants you to do.

- *Barry Purves*