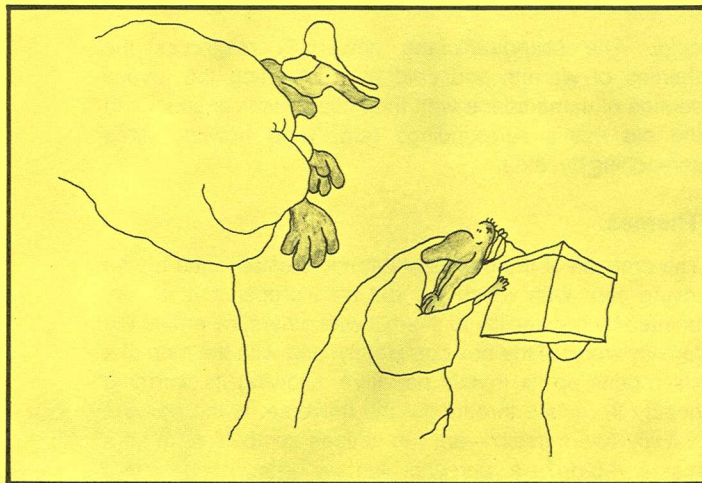




NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA

1251 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10020



AN OLD BOX

FILM GUIDE

(9:11 min. color)

Sale \$160

Rent \$20

AWARDS

Silver Hugo at the Chicago International Film Festival 1976

Outstanding Achievement Certificate (non-competitive) at the San Francisco Film Festival 1976

Selected for Screening at the International Animation Film Festival, Ottawa 1976

Subject Areas:

Language Arts, Social Studies, Film Study-Animation, Values

Film Content:

The images form before our eyes—dots converge to shape a winter street, garbage cans along the curb, and a mysterious box. Announced by a rustling shuffle, an old man appears, rummaging through the waste for something of value. His eye catching sight of the box, he just barely rescues it from the menacing jaws of the garbage truck. In his tiny shack, under a halo of light, he labors over the box, setting its interior works in order, and painting a lovely star on its side. Then, he drops a coin in the slotted top, and the box comes to life playing a tinkling, cheerful Christmas melody as it flashes "Joyeux Noel."

Meanwhile, out on the street a bizarre but cheerful group celebrates the season. There is food and laughter, lilting voices, and a medley of music-makers standing all in a row. The old man, puffing under the load of his magical box, moves as if to join the group, but stops instead on a lonely street and waits. The crowd hurries home with gifts to share, and as the sun sets, the man is left all alone. Cold and disappointed, he climbs into the box and closes the lid.

In touching fantasy, a star leaves the sky and, passing through the slot, transports the box into the cosmos, where its sides' open to frame a Nativity pageant in vivid colors. A

star streaks across the sky, kings and shepherds watch, and wise men bear gifts to an unseen Child. The box then explodes in a rainbow of colors, radiating warmth and life in all directions. Suddenly, we are back on the wintry street, and as we watch, the star leaves the box, trailing the spirit of the old man up and away into the sky. The garbage truck returns and with mechanical relish devours the old box.

Objectives:

1. To savor a moving story of an old man's loneliness and fulfillment, told in impressionistic line animation.
2. To encourage language arts by providing an experience whose nonverbal meaning and emotion invite translation into words.
3. To present a poetic study of loneliness and poverty, in the person of an old man who finds, in the fantasy of myth, a way out of his social isolation.
4. To study the innovative line animation techniques of Paul Driessen, who uses scale, perspective, color and distortion to create poetic images of subtle beauty and social impact.
5. To help us reflect on old age, loneliness and social indifference, self-image and human values.
6. To explore the mythic aspects of the Nativity and how it relates to personal salvations.

Technique:

Paul Driessen tells his story in purely visual terms. The lines of his figures and buildings seem to quiver with the cold of winter. The old man is a huge hulk of fragile lines—a touching combination of the monumental but vulnerable. Freely changing the scale of his drawing, Driessen can isolate a tiny figure under towering buildings, or make a garbage truck loom with menace. Through the use of rapidly changing perspective, the artist creates the illusion of motion and defines character. Tracing the old man's progress down the street, the surroundings are pivotal confirmations of his viewpoint. The point of it all is a sustained series of contrasts between the old man's isolated invention, and the warm celebration of the Christmas revelers, a contrast underlined by the use of

color. The soundtrack too powerfully reinforces the themes of warmth and cold by contrasting the joyous sounds of camaraderie with the hollow inimical sounds in the old man's surroundings (e.g. wind howling, tires screeching by, etc.).

Themes:

The promise of the box-as-metaphor is established by the loving care with which the old man prepares it. Disappointed by his inability to share it with others, he enters the fantasy world of the box completely, and with the help of a star opens up its mythic narrative, allowing its warming beauty to radiate throughout the universe. Is the box the Nativity Event itself?—are the scenes symbols of the old man's rebirth?—a personal fantasy?—an escape into myth? It little matters. As any or all of these, the box has done its job—the release of a human spirit from the cold and isolation of a lonely, unfulfilled life. Although it ends up a tasty morsel for the garbage truck's munching jaw, the box, like the symbolic star painted on its side, has for a time lit up and warmed the world; and saved the old man who created it.

"AN OLD BOX" is fascinating to watch, especially the development of its simple, symmetrical story. Using "Christmas" and "the box" as metaphors, the tale invites discussion and a verbalization of its ideas, which will be useful to Language Arts classes. One theme certain to rise is the isolation in society of certain individuals who are rejected as "different," because they are old, poor, sick, or of another color, style or language. Students of film can explore the economy of Paul Driessen's wavy-lined narrative; his dramatic changes in perspective and sound to generate mood and kindle emotion. Ultimately, however, the film must make impact in the area of values—the need for a fulfillment independent of the capricious favour of human society, relying more on the struggle of human spirit to make its regenerative statement. This sense of individuality and the role of religious myth is an important guideline in defining morality.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Describe the development of your own emotional response to the film. Does it lead from pathos to fulfillment, or does it merely create a passing fantasy, harshly terminated by the reality of the garbage truck?
2. Have several people tell the story of the film in a few sentences, and then as a group note the subjective interpretation involved in each version. Perform the same exercise in writing, choosing descriptive words to capture the moods of the film's simple story.

3. Comment on the contrasts between the laughing Christmas revelers and the lonely old man. Was he consciously rejected by them, or were they simply unaware of his existence? Why did he set his box on a deserted street instead of joining them? How much of his isolation is self-imposed? If so, why?
4. Was it the box, or the loving care he spent upon it which effected the old man's escape? Was his entering the box the only way he knew to share its secret with others? In what sense did he "find himself" in the box? In what sense did he find another to relate to, in the box's mythical contents?
5. Analyze the animation techniques employed by Paul Driessen. Note the scenes in which objects come into view as they are perceived by an individual. How does this relate to the theme that we are creators of our own reality, our own salvation? How does the animator introduce motion into scenes such as the old man's walk down the street? The use of color is impressionistic; describe the most and least colorful scenes and show how they shape the story and its theme. Does this animation style work best in the obvious fantasies, or in the "realistic" sequences such as the garbage truck's devouring mouth? Why?
6. Discuss the social implications of the old man's isolation. Was his poverty an economic condition or an impoverishment of the human spirit? What are some of the institutionalized forms of social indifference cultivated unthinkingly by our own society?
7. The cosmic fantasy makes the box a magical pageant of the Nativity. Is this revelation religious in the sectarian sense, or does it extend beyond traditional rituals to basic human realities? Are the two incompatible, or are they intimately related? Is "Christmas" a well chosen metaphor for the cycle of birth that occurs within the old man? Does the film comment harshly on the indifference of the religious revelers?

PAUL DRIESSEN FILMOGRAPHY

"AIR"
"LE BLEU PERDU"
"CAT'S CRADLE"
"AN OLD BOX"

Guide prepared by Dr. Peter P. Schillaci, consultant in educational media, and author of books and articles on film and society.