The Living World

A thematic unit proposed by **Réseau Canopé**

A unit by Thérèse-Anne Geoffroy

Teaching with cinema

4 short films with a total running time of 18 minutes.

Story of Flowers

Azuma Makoto, Japan, 2017

Casse-croûte

B. Sankur & G. Godet, France, 2016

An Object at Rest

Seth Boyden, United States, 2014

Ahco on the Road

Soyeon Kim, United States, 2013

The Living World

by Thérèse-Anne Geoffroy

The world of living things — learning to respect life and the environment.
To protect our planet, we must first know it well.
Isn't exploring the living world a priority for anyone who wants to lead tomorrow's citizens to protect the Earth, their cradle, and to respect life?

Biodiversity, PxHere

Context

Place in the school curriculum

"Knowing the characteristics of the living world, its interactions and its diversity" is one of the fundamentals to be taught at school. Each of these short films, in its own way, helps pupils better grasp the world around them and acquire their first scientific knowledge.

The aim here is to understand the vital needs of living beings, their life cycle — birth, growth, reproduction and nutrition — as well as their relationship to their environment and the chain of predation. The impact of human activities on nature is also addressed, and children are made aware of environmentally responsible behaviour.

The discussions these films are bound to spark will give pupils the opportunity to "develop ways of thinking, reasoning and acting by cultivating spoken and written language".

The variety of visual and musical treatment in the selected films offers a particularly interesting situation for analysing and producing works. Throughout these sequences, and in connection with moral and civic education, pupils will be able to "confront their ideas in group discussions, develop a taste for explanation, argument and critical judgement, and gain confidence in their own intelligence and its capacity to explore the world". (2016 curriculum, ages 6-9.)

Overview

Aim of the unit

From a very young age, children are drawn to the life around them — plants, animals... But their biological knowledge is limited, and their representations of life still naive.

The aim of this unit is to lead them to question those representations through 4 poetic films firmly rooted in scientific reality.

Through an approach based on discussion and inquiry, they can begin to acquire the knowledge needed to preserve life and their environment.

A thematic unit proposed by Réseau Canopé. Author of the unit: Thérèse-Anne Geoffroy

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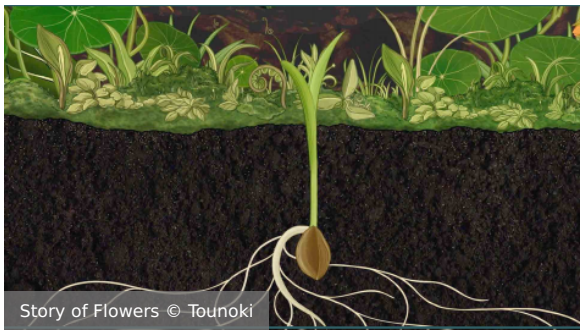
Presentation of the short films

4 short films with a total running time of 18 minutes.


Story of Flowers © Tounoki

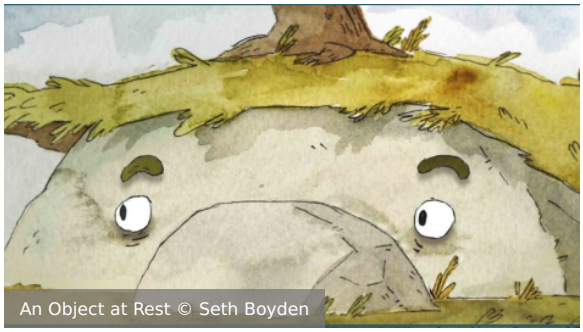
« Story of Flowers » unfolds, from an exotic, rich and varied floral bouquet, the germination cycle of plants.
We travel through a poetic universe and are given the privilege of entering the world of plants as awestruck observers. The seasons follow one another and the plants bloom, wither and develop their seeds, which fly off in various ways to sink into the earth, take root, germinate and bloom once more.

Direction: Azuma Makoto · Production: Tounoki, Japan, 2017 · 2D animation, 3 min 46 s

« Casse-croûte » is a filmic gem into which we are led by a butterfly. We cross paths with many animals in a logical sequence of predation. Who will eat whom?
The soundscape, made up of various sound effects evoking nature (birdsong, rustling leaves...), plunges us into a world that seems made of paper and modelling clay — when it is in fact a digital creation.

2D animation, 58 s · Direction: B. Sankur & G. Godet · Production: B. Sankur & G. Godet, France, 2016

Casse-croûte © B. Sankur & G. Godet


An Object at Rest © Seth Boyden

« An Object at Rest » retraces geological time up to the arrival of humankind, through the eyes of a mountain disturbed by human activity, losing some of its matter throughout the film.
The mineral world comes to life under the author's pencil and draws us into a reflection on the impact of human activities on the environment.

Direction: Seth Boyden · Production: CalArts, United States, 2014 · 2D animation, 5 min 43 s

« Ahco on the Road » tells the adventures of a reckless young elephant discovering the jungle and its inhabitants. Games and dangers follow one another, and our attention is also constantly engaged by the music.
The joyful marimba accompanies the pleasures of the journey, while the string orchestra contributes greatly to the moments of dramatic tension.

2D animation, 8 min 27 s · Direction: Soyeon Kim · Production: Yellowshed, United States, 2013

Ahco On The Road © Yellowshed

Thematic and cinematographic analysis

These four films, seemingly very different in approach and aesthetics, win us over with their poetry and their perfectly constructed storytelling. Whether it is the plant world unfolding its magic, the small animal world where each creature feeds on another, the mineral world shaken from its tranquillity by man and nature, or the linear tale of an escapade in the jungle.

Each of them leads us to feel emotions and to reflect on the world around us.

Pedagogical implementation

Watching the films should make it possible to work on different learning domains, in an approach that values interdisciplinarity and cross-curricular links — the connection between the spoken and the written word.

Comprehension and meaning-building strategies are at the heart of the approach. The aim is to start from what is seen in order to develop interpretation skills and the ability to express oneself and debate, moving towards more specific knowledge depending on the domain.

The pedagogical implementation should make it possible to explore certain essential aspects of the films in depth, working in sequences that bring several films together according to their common features and to targeted objectives.

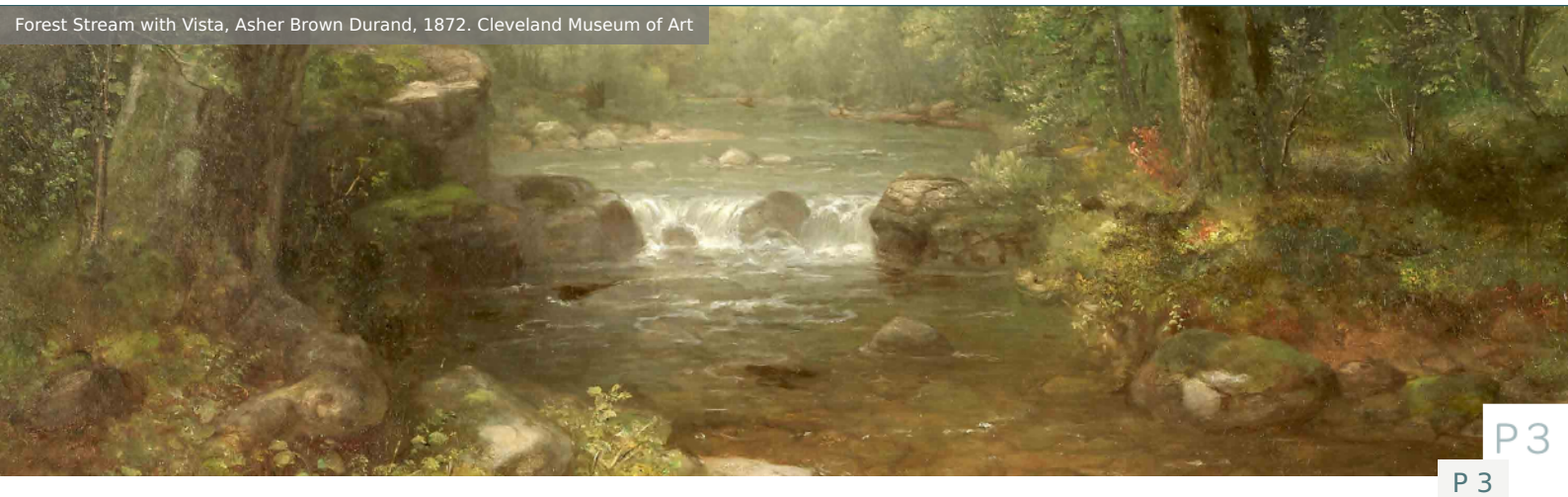
4 Sequences

Sequence 1: Exploring the world
Observe the manifestations of animal and plant life.
Discover the cycle of life.

Sequence 2: Sustainable dev.
Learning to respect life and the environment through study.

Sequence 3: French
Making a narrative one's own through writing.

Sequence 4: Visual arts
Visual and musical sensitivity.



Forest Stream with Vista, Asher Brown Durand, 1872. Cleveland Museum of Art

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Sequence 1: Discovering the cycle of life (Exploring the world)

Observe the manifestations of animal and plant life and discover the cycle of life.

This sequence draws on the film **« Story of Flowers »** for the plant world.
For animal life, we turn to **« Casse-croûte »** and **« Ahco on the Road »**.

Alps, PxHere

The sequence unfolds in 4 main stages:

1.

Watch the simplest film, **« Ahco on the Road »**, with the young elephant's walk through the jungle. Draw pupils' attention to the environment he moves through and the encounters he makes, both animal and plant. Each of these elements can be given an identity sheet (with drawings or film stills) and classified, according to criteria defined together, as a "danger" or an "ally". Keep a record of this first session by displaying a summary poster.

2.

Watch **« Casse-croûte »** to look more closely at how animals interact with their environment. The same approach can be used to bring out, this time, the notion of the food chain. The butterfly escapes the heron, the bird escapes the snake. The caterpillar, having escaped the bird by falling into the water, is not eaten by the fish either. It is finally the fish that is swallowed by the heron.
We can then ask more broadly "Who eats whom? Who is eaten by whom?" and propose new images of animals for which to build a food chain, made concrete by a network of strings representing the relationship "is eaten by...". What does not appear in the film then comes to light: the herbivores.

3.

We can then move on to exploring the plant world with **« Story of Flowers »**.
Once the moment of wonder at the poetry of this short film has passed, watch it again, this time focusing on spotting familiar elements. The vocabulary that emerges serves as a basis for building a catalogue of the flowers evoked (nasturtium, dahlia, water lily...), drawing on pupils' experience or reading, on the one hand, and of scientific terms (flower, leaf, root, seed...) on the other. The lexical field of plants can then be broadened and, above all, the concepts of the plant cycle clarified — from blooming to germination, by way of pollination, fruiting and seed dispersal.
The pollinating role of insects and the wind also emerges, as does that of the biotope and the cycle of days and seasons.

4.

It is then time to set up an inquiry- and experiment-based approach: sowing seeds in class, in containers that allow rapid observation of the transformations above and below ground, and creating a small green plot within the school that can be observed and tended through the seasons.

Sequence 2: Education for sustainable development

Learning to respect life and the environment by studying: the interactions between living beings and their environment; the impact of human activities on nature.

Kerry, Ireland, Olivier Defaye

The sequence unfolds in 4 main stages:

1.

Building on the work carried out in Sequence 1 and the records kept from watching **« Casse-croûte »** and **« Ahco on the Road »**, return to the characters' identity sheets and cross-reference them to understand how the characters interact in each film. The little lakeside world shows similarities with that of the jungle. Not all living beings are dangers to others. Predators sometimes meet their match. Then broaden out to the known living world, placing each creature in a terrestrial, aerial or aquatic environment, and in the role — by turns — of predator, scavenger or food...

2.

The film **« An Object at Rest »** makes it possible to address human interaction with the environment through the very unusual character of the mountain. Belonging to the mineral world, the mountain is not alive, but the filmmaker's pencil gives it a face and makes it terribly endearing. A "Living or non-living" debate helps re-establish the characteristics of living things: breathing, feeding, producing waste and reproducing. It then remains to retrace the chronology of its adventures.

3.

The timescale is immense, and by using freeze-frames one can quickly situate the key stages of the geological eras, which pass by without greatly affecting the mountain — apart from its size. It is with the appearance of humankind and its technology that its many transformations accelerate: successively rock, millstone, cannonball, stone, fossil, pebble, grains of sand, the optical glass of a space exploration craft... before becoming a mountain again on another planet, on another scale. The historical chronology is well worth putting to work: it makes it possible to situate the human timescale and to observe humankind's responsibility for the planet it inhabits. Pupils' drawings, or stills captured from the film, can be used to build a timeline onto which the historical events identified can be overlaid.

4.

Compare these three films using the posters or mind maps produced about them. They stage the interactions of the animal and mineral worlds through their various characters.
In groups, pupils can devise a scenario modelled on one of these patterns, proposing a new starting point. Another young animal ventures into its environment, another living being is threatened and sets off a chain of predators, another inanimate object comes to life to observe the actions of the environment upon it. To this end, preliminary documentary research can be carried out, with each pupil or group of pupils working on a different living being.

Sequence 3: Making a narrative one's own through writing (French)

Making a narrative one's own through the production of written work.
The four films share a poetic quality that relies solely on the images, the sound-effect or orchestrated soundtrack and the unfolding of the scenario — doing entirely without words. The task is therefore to build a plausible, shared interpretation of the story in order to create a text that gives substance to the narrative.

As for the working format, the approach can be repeated for each of the films, or group work can be proposed, with each group taking on one of the short films.

Casse-croûte © B. Sankur & G. Godet

An Object at Rest © Seth Boyden

Ahco On The Road © Yellowshed

The sequence unfolds in 4 main stages:

1.

Watch the films, having first set a didactic contract: identifying the characters, the setting they move through and their adventures.
Then comes an oral discussion phase in which, through each pupil's contributions and the arguments developed, an initial shared basis of understanding is built.
Note that two of the films have a clear main character (the elephant and the mountain), while in the others the actors follow one another with no hierarchy.

2.

Each group is asked to draw up a narrative outline or a mind map of its film, evoking the chronology of the story through keywords. This work is validated by the class during the pooling phase. Convergences (the cyclical aspect) and differences (the timescales, ranging from a brief moment to a day, from a season to planetary time) can already be identified.

3.

From this framework, pupils are tasked with staging the story they have built, in theatrical form or through a picture book with text or a comic strip with speech bubbles.

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Sequence 4: Arts and cultural education (visual arts)

Questioning the films to express one's visual and musical sensitivity.

The work carried out on understanding the story also draws on the visual and sound dimensions of the films.
This aspect can form the subject of a specific sequence.

The Bay of Marseille, Seen from L'Estaque, Paul Cézanne, 1886. Art Institute of Chicago

The sequence unfolds in 4 main stages:

1.

During the viewing, focus on analysing the graphic techniques used, the colours and the visual effects. Even though the short films are digitally produced, one can easily compare the coloured, pastel-like line of **« An Object at Rest »** with the acrylic feel of the colours and the precision of line in **« Story of Flowers »**. **« Casse-croûte »** resembles paper and modelling-clay animation films, while the soft colours of **« Ahco »** evoke watercolour. Define with pupils the characteristics linked to each technique and compare the atmospheres created.

2.

Each film can then become the subject of an art project, such as creating a poster that reuses these techniques (provide suitable materials). The posters can be aimed at another class or at parents, as an invitation to see the film.

3.

Likewise, the films' soundtracks contribute greatly to the storytelling, and it is fascinating to draw pupils' attention to this dimension and refine their listening. This analysis takes us from the African rhythms of **« Ahco »** to the very American refrains found in **« An Object at Rest »**. The world of **« Casse-croûte »** is composed essentially of the sounds of nature, while **« Story of Flowers »** blends plant sound effects with more contemporary music.
Pupils can then be offered short matching games between musical extracts and films — or even, within a single film, between different scenes. The Learning'app application makes it easy to create such activities.

4.

To reinvest these discoveries in creative work, pupils can produce a soundtrack based on noises, sound effects, percussion and chosen musical passages... either around a story or around another animated film whose sound treatment is initially kept from them. The "Films pour enfants" platform offers a wide choice. It will then be interesting to compare the authors' choices with the pupils' own.

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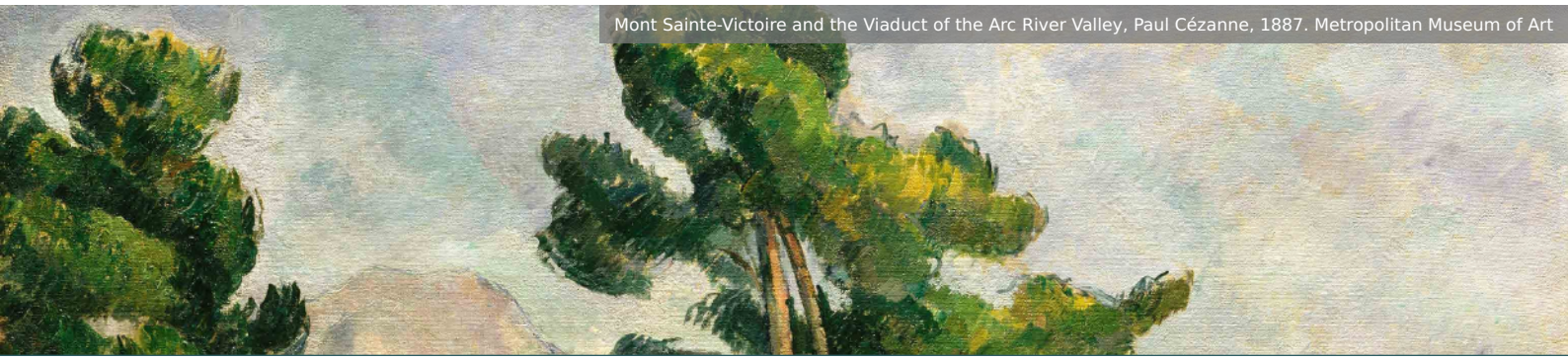
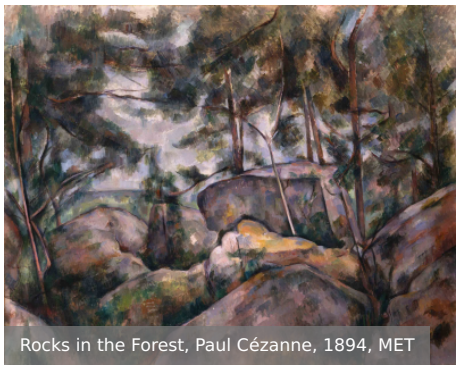
Extensions and links with the Arts

Cross-curricular resources.


Mont Sainte-Victoire and the Viaduct of the Arc River Valley, Paul Cézanne, 1887. Metropolitan Museum of Art


Rocks in the Forest, Paul Cézanne, 1894, MET

Botanical Studies, anonymous, 19th century, MET

As part of a more ambitious project around animated film, the work carried out in visual arts and music can be reinvested in the creation of a short film in class. The resources offered by Ciclic can serve as a support:
http://upopi.ciclic.fr/transmettre/parcours-pedagogiques/initiation-au-cinema-d-animation

1.

The analysis of graphic techniques opens the field of investigation onto the vast heritage of painting: links can be made with painters, but also with literature, such as the Pont des arts collection (Réseau Canopé/L'Élan vert):
- **La Charmeuse de serpents**, H. Kérillis and V. Hié, after Le Douanier Rousseau.
- **Les Couleurs de la nuit**, H. Kérillis and V. Hié, after Paul Gauguin.
- **Natura et les chevaliers des quatre saisons**, P. Coran and É. Mansot.
- **Botanicum**, Kathy J. Willis and Katie Scott, Casterman.
- **Petits riens. Grande nature**, G. Collet, Kerascoët, Albin Michel jeunesse.
- **Illuminature**, Rachel William, Milan.

2.

The subject of our relationship with nature opens up broad literary avenues:
- **Le Secret le plus fort du monde**, Gaël Aymon and Pauline Comis, Ricochet.
- A timeless novel such as **Tistou les pouces verts** (Tistou of the Green Thumbs) by Maurice Druon.
- A Canadian animated film such as **Crac** by Frédéric Back, which depicts the evolution of Canadian society from the point of view of a rocking chair...