

BERGAMO FILM MEETING

International Film Festival

44th edition, March 7 - 15, 2026

Animation Cinema: *pinscreen*

A focus on pinscreen animation, a handcrafted technique offering dreamlike visuals

«You don't draw on a pinscreen, you paint using pressure».

Alexandre Alexeïeff in *Pinscreen* by Norman McLaren, 1973, 38', doc.

In a world increasingly shaped by the new possibilities opened up by artificial intelligence, the craftsmanship involved in certain animation techniques keeps us anchored to the idea that human creativity cannot be replaced, as it manifests itself in its ingenuity and uniqueness. Thus, the Animation section of BFM 44 focuses on a technique that is as fascinating as it is complex to execute, straddling the boundaries between cinema, printmaking, photography and sculpture, and sharing its name with the tool used to create it: the pinscreen.

Invented in the early decades of the 20th century, this technique is based on the use of a mechanical device, the pin screen (écran d'épingles), consisting of a frame overlaid with a flat white surface and containing a uniform array of black metal pins arranged in a quincunx pattern. The grazing and oblique lighting on the surface allows the tips of the pins to cast shadows of varying intensity and length, determined by the degree of protrusion of each one: through the use of objects of any kind (rollers, spoons, coins, rings, ...) the animator manually moves the pins backwards or forwards in order to modify the shadows cast and create the images through shades of grey rather than lines. The animation process is carried out by shooting frame by frame: the camera is positioned perpendicular to the pinscreen, which is set up vertically, and after each shot, the arrangement of the pins is slightly shifted, generating a progressive transformation of the image. The sequences thus obtained yield an extremely sophisticated animation, in which movement arises from minimal variations in texture and light, giving the images an evanescent, dreamlike quality.

The pinscreen was patented in the 1930s by Alexandre Alexeïeff and Claire Parker, who would later explore its potential in animation. They worked with a screen made up of 240,000 holes and pins, which they used in 1933 to create *Une nuit sur le Mont Chauve*, inspired by Modest Petrovič Musorgskij symphonic poem of the same name. Through the transformation of figures in a sequence unconstrained by any narrative logic, the film achieves a poetic effect that effectively mirrors the musical essence of Musorgskij's work. The refinement of both the medium and technique would later allow the artist duo to compose the prologue and epilogue of Orson Welles' *The Trial* (1963). Despite being a simple montage of static scenes, the unsettling atmosphere conveyed in Franz Kafka's unfinished novel, on which the film is based, is made tangible here through the use of the pinscreen. The duo then returned to animation proper with *Le nez* (1963), a film in which Nikolaj Vasil'evič Gogol's grotesque tale serves as a starting point for evoking the cultural climate of nineteenth-century Russia.

When Alexandre Alexeïeff and Claire Parker held a workshop at the National Film Board of Canada in 1973, among those present was a young Jacques Drouin (1943–2021), who saw the infinite possibilities of this slowly crafted and highly experimental technique, fell in love with it, and officially became the duo's heir apparent. *Le paysagiste* (1976) marks his first attempt with this medium: 10,800 "drawings" to create a 7-minute film, an extraordinary feat of artistry that leaves an everlasting impression on the viewer.

Only two pinscreen models are still in operating condition worldwide: one in Canada, in use at the NFB, and the other in France, housed at the CNC. The latter, called Épinette, is made up of approximately 270,000 pins and has been restored to working condition thanks to the work of Michèle Lamieus, an exceptional artist who, in *Le Grand ailleurs et le Petit ici* (2012), has staged a philosophical and semi-abstract tale in four acts, where the particles that make up the universe are the main characters. Later, in 2024, she created *Le tableau*, built entirely around the tragic figure of Marie-Anne of Habsburg and based on Diego Velázquez's 1652 painting 'Portrait of Mariana of Austria': through the pinscreen, the painting comes to life and is transformed, revealing its magnificent details.

Over the years, the material nature of this technique has attracted the attention of artists from diverse fields: illustrators, graphic designers, avant-garde filmmakers, and visual artists. But it is even more interesting to observe how, at a global level, animators who are often associated with a particular drawing style or animation technique have experimented with pinscreen throughout their careers. Florence Mialhe, for example, who has always been associated with animated oil painting on glass or fabric (she is nominated for an Oscar in 2026 for her latest short film *Papillon*, created using this technique), in *25, Passage des oiseaux* (2016), explored the interplay of light and shadow created by the pins, alternating between daytime and night-time scenes, altering the elements and thus achieving an almost fairy-tale-like result. Likewise, Pierre-Luc Granjon, who usually favours traditional animation, cut-out and puppet animation, uses the pinscreen technique in a totally unexpected way: he ignores the lines and focuses on the masses instead, on the contrasts and the impact of light. This is evident in his latest film, *Les Bottes de la Nuit* (2025), where the meticulously crafted images are so sophisticated that they earned him the Cristal Award for Best Short Film, the André-Martin Award for Best French Animated Film and the Audience Award at the Annecy Festival in 2025. In the last few decades, the pinscreen technique has been rediscovered by younger generations of animators, who see this device as a means of reflecting on gestural expression, time and the physicality of animated images. Some outstanding examples are Justine Vuylstekers, in her delicate and poignant *Étreintes* (2018); Clémence Bouchereau, in her thoughtful *La saison pourpre* (2023), winner of the SACD Award at the Clermont-Ferrand International Film Festival; and Irina Rubina, in her abstract and political *Contradiction of Emptiness* (2024).

In an increasingly digital age, this analogue technique continues to fascinate artists and scholars because of its resistance to dematerialisation, reaffirming the value of trial-and-error, slow work and manual skills. Today, the pinscreen is a living device, capable of interacting with contemporary practices that span cinema, visual art and installative art: thanks to Alexandre Noyer, who developed two pinscreens based on those designed by Alexeïeff and Parker (albeit with fewer pins), animation using this medium has become slightly less exclusive, allowing more artists to experiment with its incredible possibilities and achieve results that are as unpredictable as they are fascinating.

Pierre-Luc Granjon and Irina Rubina will be attending the Festival.

Alexandre Noyer will also be at the Festival, leading a pinscreen workshop on Sunday morning, March 8th. In collaboration with Politecnico delle Arti di Bergamo - Accademia di Belle Arti G. Carrara.

In collaboration with National Film Board of Canada, CNC, Czech Centre Milan, Politecnico delle Arti di Bergamo – Accademia di Belle Arti G. Carrara

TITLES FEATURED

Une nuit sur le mont chauve/Night on Bald Mountain [tl] by Alexander Alexeïeff, Claire Parker (France, 1933, 8'20") (35mm)

Le nez/The Nose [t.l.] by Alexander Alexeïeff, Claire Parker (France, 1963, 11'30") (35mm)

Le paysagiste/Mindscape [tl] by Jacques Drouin (Canada, 1976, 7'35")

L'Heure des anges/Nightangel [t.l.] by Jacques Drouin, Bretislav Pojar, Czech Republic (Canada, 1986, 18'45'')

Le Grand ailleurs et le Petit ici/Here and The Great Elsewhere [tl] by Michèle Lemieux (Canada, 2012, 14'28'')

25, Passage des oiseaux by Florence Mialhe (France, 2016, 3'45'')

Pensée sauvages [t.l.] by Cerise Lopez (France, 2016, 2')

Étreintes/Embrace [t.l.] by Justine Vuylstekker (France, Canada, 2018, 5'26'')

Le Chien/The Dog [t.l.] by Pierre-Luc Granjon (France, 2018, 2'12'')

La saison pourpre/The Purple Season [t.l.] by Clémence Bouchereau (France, 2023, 9'18'')

Contradiction of Emptiness [tl] by Irina Rubina (Germany, 2024, 3'25'')

Le tableau/The Painting [tl] by Michèle Lemieux (Canada, 2024, 11'58'')

Les Bottes de la nuit/The Night Boots [tl] by Pierre-Luc Granjon (France, 2025, 12'22'')

The Trial by Orson Welles (France, Italy, West Germany, 1963, 119')

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