PRIMAL
ABOUT THIS STUDY GUIDE

OVERALL OBJECTIVE

To have students explore different ways of translating ideas into images with a view to creating a work of media art. To have them report on their experience of creating something. To develop their skills in the following areas: analysis, synthesis, critical thinking and aesthetic judgment. To develop their openness to diversity, their listening skills and respect for different personalities among their peers.

TARGET AUDIENCE

Secondary 4 and 5

SUBJECT AREAS

The Arts
Personal Development
English, Language of Instruction

GUIDE SUMMARY

This activity proposes rethinking the scream (also known as a yell, shriek, hoot, holler, outcry or bellow), a form of expression that’s often undervalued and restrained, despite being intrinsic to human nature. Just what is a scream? Students will be invited to reflect on this question and develop their own interpretations. They will also expand their definitions through classroom discussion and will be introduced to the concept of the primal scream. We have suggested ways to stimulate reflection and feedback. The works listed in this guide link the scream to the visual arts, showing how the scream—even when sublimated—can be expressed through different symbolic forms. Students will also be guided through the interactive website Primal; the aim here is to have them make their own video creation inspired by their discussion and the artworks explored in the classroom. Lastly, a closing activity will invite them to write and perform a slam poem in an open, accepting atmosphere conducive to expression.
INTRODUCTION

Have students explore the idea of the scream, its meaning and its role in human social relations. Introduce the concept of the primal scream and have them consider its therapeutic purposes.

WHAT IS A SCREAM?

What, for you, does it mean to scream? Kick off the activity by putting this question to your students, getting them to share their thoughts and pool their ideas. Using the following questions as springboards, launch a discussion and encourage them to expand their definitions.

△ What is the very first instinct of a baby the moment it is born? What are the different reasons for a baby’s cries?

△ What role does screaming take on once a child masters speech?

△ In what contexts or situations would children, teens and adults scream?

△ From a social point of view, what is screaming associated with? Is it acceptable to scream, and if so, in what context? Where and when would it be frowned upon or forbidden?

△ In your opinion, why do we tend to want to control or even stifle screaming?

△ Can you think of any sports where players cry out? Why is shouting integral to certain martial arts?

△ Is there a difference between the cries made by humans and those of animals?

PRIMUS: THE PRIMAL SCREAM

The word *primal* comes from the Latin *primus*, meaning “first.” In the 1960s, American psychologist Arthur Janov (born in 1924) came up with the concept of the “primal scream,” a form of therapy that uses screaming to take the patient back to the original source of the pain. According to Janov, each of us harbours repressed feelings, a burden we carry for a long time—sometimes from infancy—and sublimate. Janov thought it possible to shed this burden through screaming. The energy of the scream, he believed, would release some of the stagnant suffering, much like stirring up the bottom of a lake and causing the mud at the bottom to rise. In his therapeutic approach, Janov invited his patients to temporarily set aside the power of speech in order to get back in touch with their animal side—their primal scream.

In his 1970 book *The Primal Scream*, Janov wrote that the scream defined the unbridgeable gap between man and beast. Only by extension can an animal’s cries, determined by instinct and uttered to express pain or fear, be called “screams.” Janov does not differentiate between the cries of different species (for example, giraffes and cormorants), but says that in the jungle, the Tarzan yell distinguishes man from the howling animals, whose cries are “mechanical.” When we scream, we give voice to the animal in us. In extreme situations, the scream signals the collapse of our humanity and a regression to a state of development that precedes symbolic language. The human scream expresses an instinct that touches the very root of human emotion. In this sense, the scream does not come from our throats: rather, it is released from our very bowels.

Stimulating reflection and feedback

Probe students for their initial reactions, reviewing certain excerpts from the text.

△ What does “mechanical” mean to you with reference to animal sounds?

△ What does this mean?: “The scream signals the collapse of our humanity and a regression to a state of development that precedes symbolic language.” Why would language and screaming be opposed?

△ What is the difference between a scream that comes out of the throat and one that is released from the bowels?

△ What emotions can a scream represent?

Keeping in mind the notion of the primal scream, invite students to share personal and/or day-to-day experiences involving a scream.
△ What feelings do you express with the greatest intensity? Do you ever need to scream to express them?

△ How do you feel when you are around someone who screams?

△ What do you do to let off steam and feel better? Would a scream have the same effect?

△ Does violence in sports bother you? Can you think of sports where players shout or yell?

△ Can you think of something you saw on the Internet (YouTube, social networks, etc.) that really shocked you? How did you react? Did it make you want to scream?

△ Can you think of a news event that made you want to scream with joy? Pain? Indignation?

△ Do you ever feel that people around you are repressing screams? Do you think it would be beneficial for them to give into these urges?

△ What creative gesture could you make to express the strong feelings inside of you? Could this creative act be used to express a scream?
PREPARATORY ACTIVITIES

Inform students that they are going to discover a range of artworks that are connected in some way to the scream. Explain that, in some works, the scream has been sublimated. Begin by inviting them to explore the notion of sublimation to make it easier to identify and analyze the “scream” in each piece.

SUBLIMIS AND SUBLIMARE

Over time, countless artists have wanted to sublimate strong feelings through art. First, though, let’s examine the difference between “sublimate” and “sublime.” The Latin root of “sublime” is sublimis, which means “high, elevated.” When we say that a work is sublime, we’re referring to a quality that transcends aesthetics. A work is sublime when it makes us think, fascinates us or surpasses our understanding. “Sublime” denotes high achievement and, by extension, something approaching perfection.

The word “sublimate,” from the Latin sublimare, “to raise up,” was coined by medieval alchemists, whose practice was a mixture of chemistry and mysticism. For the alchemist, sublimation was synonymous with transformation. Alchemists were very keen to discover the secret of transforming base metals into gold. And, while no one has yet come up with a way to do so (nor found the fabled Philosopher’s Stone, another great alchemical quest!), the concept of sublimation has endured. Psychology has borrowed it to refer to basic impulses that are transposed or transformed. For example, you could say that someone consciously or unconsciously sublimates their aggressive impulses through gestures, sports or the arts.

In the arts, sublimation refers to the ability to give concrete form (painting, sculpture, performance, choreography, etc.) to emotions, ideas or states of mind. Each viewer is free to discover and interpret the work of art, whose meaning can be shocking, is often amazing and is never the same. French philosopher Alain wrote: “It is only the sublime that can get us through the humdrum of day-to-day life.”

What does Alain’s quote mean to you?
Should a work of art necessarily be “beautiful”? Can you give examples of works that you consider ugly or disturbing but that carry a strong message?
Have you ever felt that a work “helped you” (e.g., by inspiring you or helping you to understand a situation or gain insights into yourself)?
How can the scream be sublimated through the arts? Can you sublimate a scream without making direct reference to it?
Do you know of any works whose subject is the scream?

1 “Il n’y a guère que le sublime qui puisse nous aider dans l’ordinaire de la vie.” Alain (Émile-Auguste Chartier), Préliminaires à l’esthétique, Gallimard, taken from the Dictionnaire Larousse des citations françaises.
THE SCREAM IN ART: AN INTRODUCTION

Invite students to explore the artworks listed below. Have them first experience the work, then find out about its history and significance. Finally, using the feedback-stimulating questions included after the description of each work, ask them to assess the work’s relevance and identify how the scream is manifested.

THE SCREAM (1893), EDVARD MUNCH

Edvard Munch was a Norwegian expressionist painter. At a very young age, he was forced to cope with harsh realities: the illness and death of loved ones. Witness to the agony of his sister, the death of his mother and, later, that of his father, Munch began to use painting to express the suffering he experienced due to his grief and loneliness. While his earlier works were rendered in a highly realistic style, he gradually became more expressive and evocative. In 1893, he began a cycle of works known as The Frieze of Life, which he summarized as “a poem about life, love and death.”

The Scream (1893) is his best-known work. Frozen in terror, a figure stares out beyond the viewer, hands held up to his face. Separated by the diagonal of a railing, the work’s right half depicts a tumultuous landscape. To the left, two distant characters accentuate the isolation of the foreground figure. Why does he scream? The source of this scream remains an enigma. And what if the work were to be seen as a kind of mirror-like projection of the viewer’s image? This notion raises the question: who are you and why are you afraid?

△ If this work were emitting a sound, what would it be?
△ In your opinion, what feelings does it sublimate?
△ Can you describe the nature represented in this painting? What do you feel when you look at it?
△ If this character were transposed to another setting (e.g., a city, a room), would the scream have the same meaning? Give examples of how different environments could give other meanings to the scream.
△ In your opinion, why is this painting so famous?

KNIGI (1924), ALEXANDER RODCHENKO

Alexander Rodchenko was one of the founders of Constructivism, a Russian avant-garde art movement. Wishing to break with classical and traditional forms of art and inspired by the rise of industrialization and urban development, constructivists emphasized geometric forms and harmonious composition. Multidisciplinary artist Alexander Rodchenko expressed himself through various disciplines, including sculpture, painting, photography and graphic design.

Rodchenko’s poster Knigi (1924) had a considerable influence on the development of modern graphic design. It was one of the first times that a poster had merged a number of separate artistic techniques (photography, geometric forms and typography). The result is so striking in part because the voice of the woman—Lily Brik, Rodchenko’s companion—seems to take shape in the letters, forming a rallying cry that resounds through the city. Knigi means “books.” The poster sets out to fight obscurantism (opposition to the spread of knowledge) by encouraging citizens to become informed and to inform others.

△ If this work were to emit a sound, what would it be?
△ What are the differences between the “screams” of Rodchenko and Munch?
△ How is a shouted message different from a scream?
△ What kind of message could be conveyed today by a similar poster? Would the poster have the same impact as in 1924? What would it say?


**STUDY GUIDE**

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**VOICE PIECE FOR SOPRANO (1961), YOKO ONO**

Instructions:

homepage1.nifty.com/iberia/score_gallery_ono.htm

Performance:

moma.org/explore/multimedia/videos/114/653

Yoko Ono [1933–]

Yoko Ono is a Japanese-born American multidisciplinary artist who was part of the Fluxus conceptual art movement. Like Constructivism, Fluxus was a vanguard movement that set out to break with the past, rejecting the idea of an inaccessible, elitist “high art” that was mummified in museums. Fluxus artists, who wanted to bring art into everyday life, encouraged the public to interact with and take part in their works. It was in this context in the early 1960s that Ono created her famous “instructions.” These playful directions, though sometimes impossible to follow in concrete terms, invite the participant to rethink (sublimate) various everyday tasks.

Ono’s work *Voice Piece for Soprano* (1961) offers three different ways to scream: 1) facing into the wind; 2) facing a wall; and 3) looking skyward. These simple instructions evoke rich and distinctive images. Wouldn’t you say there was a significant difference between screaming with your face to a wall and screaming as you look up into the sky? This is the strength of her piece, which, through its simple suggestions, awakens different sensory capabilities. The manual also offers very simple solutions to some of life’s impasses, inviting the spectator to join in.

△ If this work were to emit a sound, what would it be?
△ Based on what you know of the primal scream, how do you read these works?
△ What is the mood of these works? What do they make you think of?
△ What non-human elements can you see in these works? What about animal elements?

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**HEADS (1948–1949), FRANCIS BACON**

mediation.centrepompidou.fr/education/ressources/ENS-tracesdusacre/popup11.html

Francis Bacon [1909–1992]

The works of painter Francis Bacon are said to reveal the brutality, violence and convulsive beauty of life. Bacon painted anthropomorphic figures verging on abstraction that evoke the instinctive, irrational human unconscious. Bacon lived in London during the Blitz, when the city was bombed day and night by the Nazis. He later commented on what it meant to live with the constant sound of isolated explosions, each of which signalled that a number of people had been killed. His characters with their sinuous contours are reminiscent of the figure in Munch’s *The Scream*.

Bacon painted his *Heads* series in 1948 and 1949. The “heads” are somewhat amorphous and indistinct, as if someone had begun to erase them. This is perhaps the source of their terrifying power: their features keep dissolving into matter and shade. Inspired by Surrealism, Bacon sought to illustrate our animal instincts. In so doing, he provides an eloquent representation of the primal scream. It is as if we were witnessing an embodiment of the darkest human feelings, a vision straight out of a nightmare.

△ How would you feel if you screamed into the wind? Facing a wall? Looking up toward the sky?
△ Which of these options do you think you would find the most satisfying? Most therapeutic?
△ Can you think of other instructions you could use to get people to scream or shout?
△ If the figure in the Munch painting were facing a wall or the sky, would the cry have the same significance?

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2 Cited by Francis Bacon in *Bacon*, Rudy Chiappini, Skira, 2008.
AAA-AAA (1978), MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ

youtube.com/watch?v=iAlfLnQ26JY

Marina Abramović [1946–]

Through performance and body art, Marina Abramović explores endurance and the physical limitations of the body, employing techniques, contexts and images that point up the relationship between the artist, his or her body, and the viewer. One of her recent performances, The Artist Is Present (2010), lasted 736 hours! Sitting at a table in a room at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Abramović shared a moment of silence with each visitor who sat across from her during the piece’s two-month run.

Conversely, the performance piece AAA-AAA (1978) explores the scream with intensity and brilliance. In a kind of face-to-face duel, this collaborative work with fellow artist Ulay consists of a performance piece whose aim is to produce a sustained sound. The exercise gradually intensifies to the point where both artists are shouting at the top of their lungs, inches from each other’s face. The performance stops when one or the other becomes exhausted or runs out of vocal power, though it’s not a contest. AAA-AAA is a refined work, since it uses only two materials: the human being and the human voice. Yet despite its apparent simplicity of means, the work communicates complex feelings. It might at first seem amusing, but a deep unease develops as the performers give free rein to their impulses. Moreover, the symbolism of two shouting humans standing face to face invites us to reflect on our relationships with others—our communication difficulties as well as the animal instincts inside of us that seek to come out in some way.

△ How did you feel while viewing the archival document?

△ What does this collaborative work express about each performer’s identity?

△ Can you describe situations or contexts where conflicts could be solved like this?

△ In your opinion, if these two people had spoken instead of yelled, what would they be saying?

ISRAEL WEST BANK BARRIER (2005), BANKSY

theguardian.com/arts/pictures/0,1543331,00.html

Banksy [1974–]

Cloaked in anonymity, Banksy is a multidisciplinary artist known for his street art. He has executed numerous graffiti in cities worldwide. His use of stencilling allows him to work quickly and avoid getting caught by the authorities. His themes are varied: the reappropriation of space; architectural puns; criticism of consumer society, fashions and the media; questioning the art market; and so on. His main strength is being able to address these issues with intelligence and finesse, through clear and powerful messages.

Banksy’s untitled works made in 2005 on Israel’s West Bank barrier are powerfully symbolic. The works constitute an act of resistance and an appeal to hope, while implicitly pointing up injustice and the political impasse. Ask students to relate the notion of the scream with the artist’s works on the Israeli separation wall.

△ Based on the discussions you’ve had about the scream, how do you think Banksy sublimates the scream’s strength through these images?

△ If you choose to interpret each work as a heartfelt cry, what types of screams do you see?

△ How does Banksy integrate his works into the architecture? What would their impact be if they were replicated elsewhere?

△ Do they have a market value? How do they constitute an act of resistance?
HENRI MICHAUX: MOUVEMENTS (2011), MARIE CHOINARD

youtube.com/watch?v=sklSa1mXnCo

Marie Chouinard [1955-]
Quebec dancer and choreographer Marie Chouinard has become an icon of new dance in both the province and internationally. Among other topics, her work explores the animal body. Over the years she has incorporated various wild figures into her choreography, from dog to man-goat and lizard to butterfly. Breath is also integral to her approach, with the rattle, roar and cry intensifying the visceral impact of her works. “Get into the studio, not knowing, only being. Breath, body, spatial organization: everything starts from there,” she wrote.

Henri Michaux: Mouvements (2011) is a choreography inspired by Mouvements (1951), a book by poet and painter Henri Michaux consisting of poems and abstract ink drawings. Chouinard chose to interpret the work as a score, literally transposing the anthropomorphic drawings into dance moves. Projected on a backdrop, the drawings echo the movements of the dancers who, garbed in black, appear to be drawn on the white page themselves. Their gestures are interspersed with silent screams synchronized with the soundtrack. For this work, Michaud’s quote “On crie pour taire ce qui crie” ("We scream to silence that which screams") could no doubt be rephrased to say, “We dance to silence that which screams.”

△ In your opinion, what does Michaux’s quote mean? How does it resonate when put in perspective by Chouinard’s choreography?
△ What does the video of Chouinard’s choreography say to you?
△ When the scream is associated with music and dance, does that extend its reach?
△ What feelings are sublimated in this excerpt?
△ Can you create links between the choreography and other works in this list?


4 Henri Michaux, quoted in the Dictionnaire Larousse des citations françaises.
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

△ Which work had the most impact on you?
△ Does everyone interpret works of art differently?
△ Can we understand the nature of the artist’s feelings when he or she created the work, simply by taking a quick look?
△ Can you think of other works of art that express the scream?
△ Does the scream feature in film? Music? Popular culture? What does it mean in these contexts?

REVIEW

Invite students to search for other works that sublimate the scream. Students can present a work of their choice and prepare a few questions to get the class to respond and identify the scream.
PRIMAL

AT-HOME ACTIVITY

Invite students to contribute to a collective work by participating in the interactive experience Primal. Then ask them to think about how they would design their own video creation and formulate their ideas.

PROCEDURE

Go to nfb.ca/primal to start the experience. Enter the site and let other participants’ screams inspire you to add your own. You might want to turn down the volume on your speakers, though — the screams can be a little startling!

After watching a few contributions to the music of Ghislain Poirier, you’ll have a chance to add your own. When prompted with the question “Want to scream too?” click on “Add my scream.” This takes you to the contributors’ section, where the full procedure will be explained on-screen.

At the end of the section, a short legal text outlines the standards for NFB.ca. Click “Submit” to add your scream to the experience. Following this, you’ll be prompted to share your scream via social networks and/or email. This step is very important! Click on the “Share” link and send your scream to the address given to you by your teacher. He or she can then collect the contributions submitted by all the students.

After that, you can listen to more screams, watch video portraits of young Argentineans and Quebecers and continue exploring the site.

INTRODUCTION

Invite each participant to present their video creation and contextualize its artistic and symbolic aspects. The presentation can take place in class or take the form of a journal that students submit at the end of the activity.

△ What emotion did you want to express through this scream?
△ Why did you choose these creative filters?
△ Does your completed work reflect your original intentions? If not, why not?
△ Would your scream take on a new meaning if the background had been different?
△ Were you inspired by a work of art in particular?

CLASSROOM REVIEW

Once students have explored Primal and viewed the video works, launch a classroom discussion to elicit their views and take stock.

△ What were the challenges of the exercise and what accounts for these challenges? What did you enjoy? What did you find challenging?
△ What sensations has the experience given you? Did you feel powerful? Vulnerable?
△ How did those around you (family and friends) react?
△ Do you fear being seen or judged by others?
△ How does your creation fit into the collective work?
△ Would these video creations have had a different meaning if they had been presented in a context different from Primal?
△ Would they have a different meaning if they had been presented in a different country?
△ Do you think you could know who someone was based only on hearing them scream?
△ Do you think the meaning of a scream can be understood without any further explanation?
△ Do you see screaming differently, based on this experience?
△ Should everyone have to do this exercise?
RECAP

WRITING A SLAM POEM

Have students write and recite a slam poem in class. Invite them first to share their knowledge on this oral tradition and obtain information on its origins. Then ask them to work in pairs to compose a spoken-word piece that should last about two minutes.

In the same way that poetry slams sometimes prescribe a theme, invite your aspiring slammers to be inspired by the quote by Henri Michaux: “We scream to silence that which screams.” Slamming is a freeform poetry that advocates openness and flow. Emphasize that the theme is just a starting point.

The following list of emotions may help students get started: anger, rebellion, pleasure, fear, anxiety, shame, rejection, despair, loneliness, sadness, joy, frustration. Remind them that slam poems work to a rhythm that is sometimes based on repeating key phrases—a technique that can strengthen the structure of the text while leaving the verses less structured, more free.

Lastly, invite each team to recite their work in class, in an atmosphere of openness and listening. Then start a discussion, using the following questions to stimulate reflection:

△ Why do you think the slam is recited to a live audience instead of being published? What role does the voice play? The audience?

△ Have you ever been moved by poetry readings, lyrics or spoken-word performances? Why?

△ In your view, does any one text express “a heartfelt cry?” Which one?

You can also have students keep a journal to document their process, inspirations and drafts. This will be submitted and evaluated at the end of the activity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(to find out more about the primal scream)


AUTHORS AND CONTRIBUTORS

This guide was produced by NFB Education under the supervision of Sophie Quevillon, NFB Coordinator of Educational Materials. It was written by Marie-Douce St-Jacques, interdisciplinary artist and visual arts specialist, in collaboration with Sophie Quevillon.