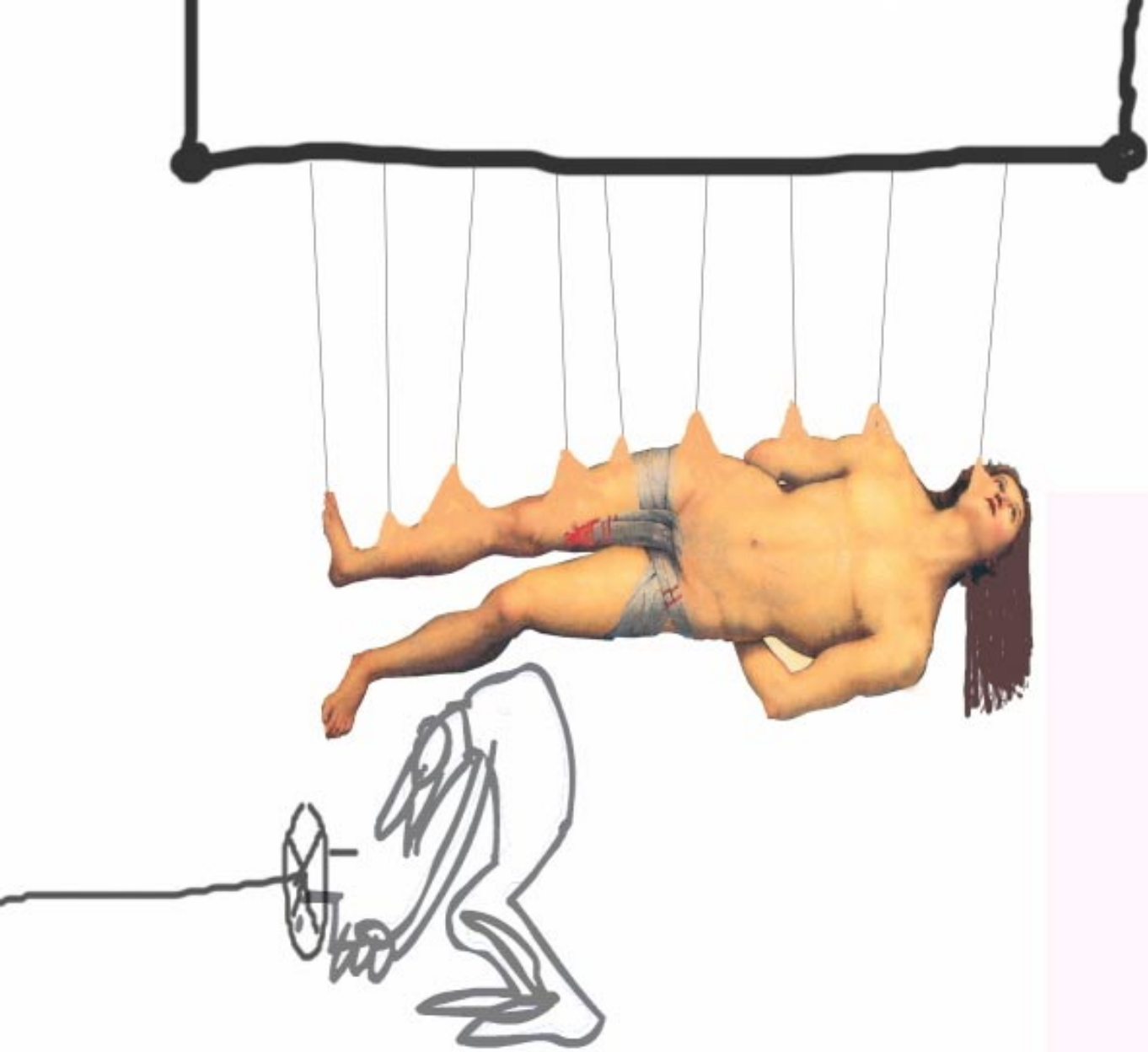


# Human Contraptions



LIBBY TUDBALL

**STUDYGUIDE**



## Synopsis

Academy Award-winning animator, Bruce Petty, takes us on an anarchic journey that is a satirical look at the inner mechanics of the 'contraptions' that shape our lives. Education, sex, finance, globalism, art, media, medicine, law, government and even the brain are all transformed into evolving machines.

Each of the ten five-minute episodes begins with the basic concept at the nucleus of the machine. Then, by combining high-energy, free-form illustrations with photographs, paintings and other snippets from the 'real' world, Petty takes us on a journey through history, as each apparatus builds to its complex contemporary form. We see how these contraptions are not immutable but are shaped by society; by our changing ideas and our actions. We are encouraged to question and laugh at the haphazard and often faulty mechanisms that drive these machines that, in turn, run our lives.

The series is witty, provocative and entertaining. It reveals these contraptions to be constructions of a very human kind—imperfect, sometimes unpredictable, and always subject to change.

## Curriculum links

*Human Contraptions* will have relevance to students of Cultural Studies, Australian Studies, Studies of Society and Environment, Politics, History, English, Music, Drama and Media Studies. The films can be explored by middle to senior secondary school students, and students at the tertiary education level.

Many of the activities are based on

an integrated curriculum approach, drawing on English skills, as well as an understanding of the content that is drawn from other disciplines.

## Before watching the films

Students could develop an understanding of the genres Petty uses in *Human Contraptions* before watching the films.

- In a class discussion, talk about your views on these questions: What do you see as the purpose of political cartoons? Do you think that political cartoons influence people? To test your theory, construct some questions and survey friends and family from various age groups. Discuss your findings.
- Collect and explore a range of different cartoonists' works from the print media. Look at their different drawing styles and approaches. Attempt to uncover meanings in the various works, either as an individual, small group or as a class.
- In a class discussion, develop working definitions of the words 'caricature', 'irony' and 'satire'. First, jot down your views and then share them with other class members.
- Visit the National Museum of Australia online and download the resource 'Laughing With Knives: Exploring Political Cartoons'. Work through the activities for students on cartoons at: [http://www.nma.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0016/19141/laughing\\_with\\_knives\\_colour.pdf](http://www.nma.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/19141/laughing_with_knives_colour.pdf)
- Visit <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma96/puck/part1.html> to read an American view of the origins of political cartooning.

- Teachers and students could explore some of the references on cartoons listed at the end of this guide.
- To find out more about Bruce Petty's career as a cartoonist, visit [www.smh.com.au/photogallery/federal-politics/cartoons/bruce-petty-20090907-fdvy.html](http://www.smh.com.au/photogallery/federal-politics/cartoons/bruce-petty-20090907-fdvy.html)

Try to draw a political cartoon yourself, and then compare and discuss other classmates' cartoons.

*The political cartoon can certainly be a devastating weapon—it can make you laugh if it suits your point of view, or it could fill you with anger if it does not. It has been said that one picture is worth a thousand words; what is certainly beyond doubt is that political cartoons have been a powerful method of cutting those in authority down to size. They are also invaluable in exposing the machinations of companies and governments.*

Chelmsford Trades Union Council,  
<http://www.chelmsford-tuc.org.uk/article53.html>

- With your class, discuss the views expressed by the Chelmsford Trades Union Council about political cartoons.

## After watching the films

Having watched the films, either as a whole class, in small groups, or as written exercises, discuss your answers to these questions:

- What are the main techniques used in the films?
- Write down a few of your own thoughts about *Human Contraptions* and then discuss your views.

- Present short oral descriptions of your reactions to the film, and then discuss your ideas with other class members.
- What do you think are the key themes in each film?
- How would you describe the genre of the films?
- How would you describe Petty's cartoon style?
- Look at the cartoon images from the films reproduced in this study guide. Discuss how the contraption is depicted in the image. How does the image represent each theme?

### Thinking, talking and writing about Petty's 'spin' on his creation

Petty says, 'Caricature is a device by which we hope to make complex ideas (at least) accessible, (occasionally) witty and (sometimes) informative. The *Human Contraptions* series is a playful exercise in caricature—specifically, political cartooning—for television'.

- In discussing each short film, talk about the extent to which you find the ideas 'accessible'. One strategy to use is to ask all class members to complete the sentence, 'The film is about ...' Use the results of this exercise to note down the different thoughts about the themes and ideas in the film. Then share and compare your ideas, and talk about how varied your understandings of each segment are.
- Do you agree that *Human Contraptions* can be described as a 'playful exercise in caricature'? Explain your answer.

Petty comments:

*TV is good at Jane Austen and the life of the otter. We can do them forever, and they will be beautiful, but it is very hard to do bank rates and derivatives, things which determine how a country works, and who gets a job. So we keep watching Jane Austen and the otter. There seems to be a gap. My professional life has always been about finding those gaps and niches and trying to fill them in.*

- In your own words write or present an explanation of what you think Petty means by these comments.

Petty says that a key challenge with *Human Contraptions* was: *[to] imagine what could be said about such massive subjects as Law, Globalism, Government, Art, Medicine, Education, Sex, Finance, The Brain and Media in five minutes of animation. I wanted Human Contraptions to be a cheerful reminder that as our cars, videos and toasters get smarter and cheaper, the institutions we really need are getting more expensive and unreliable, and are starting to rattle. I hope viewers recognize some of our more bizarre organizational devices and enjoy the general irreverence.*

- In the films, what instances did you notice of representations of our organizations as 'bizarre'?
- List, and then talk about, moments of 'irreverence' in the films.

Petty goes on to say: *There is a critical thread to the series, but the main aim was to take an impressionistic, shorthand, comic look at over-worked, serious subjects. The series is based on general suspicions people have about the institutions we live with. These bodies are old or biased, often politically disfigured and under-funded—they are familiar tar-*

*gets. Representing them as machines at least suggests they are man-made, they wear out and can be fixed even as they do determine how we live.*

*The series offered a chance to check the workings of these 'contraptions'. Institutions such as the legal, medical and finance systems carry our 'trust'—we are expected to believe in them. We are persuaded that they are self-correcting and that the corrections are properly and democratically monitored.*

Many people are now beginning to suspect that this is not so.

- Do you agree with Petty's views? Explain your answers.
- Do you think people are suspicious about the institutions we live with?
- In your opinion, which of the contraptions that are explored by Petty do need 'correcting'?

### Positive themes in the films

Petty claims that the films are: *not just a cynical take on society's major organizations. There is also an acknowledgment of the human ingenuity, brilliance and good intentions behind their construction. Mechanics may not in the end be a perfect metaphor for human organizations: their tendency to develop viruses, attract bacteria-like elements, reproduce and reinvent makes them to a large extent, more like organisms ... but that is perhaps another series.*

- Divide your class into groups. Consider the aspects of 'human ingenuity, brilliance and good intentions' in the institutions and organizations that are depicted in the films.























## Media Studies

### How was the series made?

Petty says, 'Distilling such complex and lofty subject matter had a significant impact on how we made this series. Constant revision of the script and image interaction was necessary to refine the ideas and condense the timing'.

- Suggest what you think may have been some of the media challenges in creating *Human Contraptions*.
- How could you describe Andrew Denton's role in the narration in the series?
- What is the role of irony in his narration?
- In what ways are sound effects and music also important ironic components?

### Music in the series

The award-winning composer, Alan John, created 'musical signatures' for each of the contraptions in the series. His challenge was to devise a musical reference for imagined constructions of abstract notions.

- How would you describe Alan's music for the *Education* film?
- Discuss the suitability of the music selected for *Globalism*.
- In what ways are the 'musical signatures' developed by elaborations on each theme?
- What connections are there between the growing historical complexity of the apparatus and changes in the music?

### Visual decisions in the making of the films

Before reading the following notes on the visual processes in the making of the films, suggest what processes you think Petty may have used. Petty states:

Visually, I needed to give each of the ten contraptions an individual

style. The character of the image was mainly determined by a drawing style that could begin simply and then increase in complexity. I drew the production entirely in 'Flash', an extremely flexible software program. It allows animation to be produced to a rough sync soundtrack without having to use high-end hardware. Certain movements require twenty-four frames per second treatment, but there are times when twelve frames per second is quite acceptable.

- How would you describe the animation style?
- How is an overall two-dimensional result avoided?
- How is colour used in the production?
- Why do you think the decision was made to include historical archives?

The editor, Sam Petty, edited and manipulated the animation and archival images using a Media 100 computer package.

- Find out more about the characteristics of this media package.
- Suggest why this product was used in the production.

## Biographies

*Human Contraptions* has been developed by a team that incorporates a high level of talent and experience in the media. Biographical notes have been included here for the interest of students who may be pursuing a career in various aspects of media studies. These notes provide a snapshot into the professional lives of people working in this field, and recognize their experience and career pathways.

### BRUCE PETTY – Writer, Director, Animator

Bruce Petty is Australia's only Academy Award winner for animation. He is a critically acclaimed cartoonist and inspired social commentator, and is best known as one of Australia's most influential political cartoonists. Petty has been an eyewitness to the

politics, turmoil and change of the twentieth century, much of which he has documented through his cartooning.

Petty was born on an orchard in Doncaster, east of Melbourne, in 1929. His grandfather was an orchardist, as were his father and his uncles. In fact, there were fourteen Pettys in Doncaster, and they were all orchardists—growing peaches, pears, apricots and figs.

Petty first found work in an animation studio in Box Hill. He then pursued commercial art, later finding expression as a satirical cartoonist with prestigious newspapers and magazines, such as *Esquire*, *Punch* and *The New Yorker*. He honed his skills and reinforced his fame for social commentary in the pages of *The Mirror*, *The Australian* and *The Age*, and in publications like *The Petty Age*, *The Penguin Petty* and *The Absurd Machine*.

Petty's work as an illustrative journalist has taken him to many of the world's trouble spots, such as Vietnam, Timor and Pakistan, as well as to the United States for regular first-hand coverage of the elections.

Throughout his illustrious career, Bruce Petty has combined his talents for writing, cartooning, observation and animation to produce a prolific body of work over a range of subjects and media. He has successfully translated his humour, anti-conformist political views and fascination with the way things work, from newspaper to the screen. He has created animated classics such as *Australian History* (1970), *Marx* (1981), the Academy Award-winning *Leisure* (1976) which was produced at Film Australia, *Money* (1998), *This Mad Century* (1999) and *Human Contraptions* (2003).

### DEBORAH SZAPIRO – Producer

Deborah Szapiro is a founding partner and producer for Freerange

Animation. Szapiro has over twelve years' experience designing and producing a wide range of award-winning animated productions for both film and television, using a variety of animation techniques. Szapiro's productions have an excellent track record, having won over thirty awards in the last six years and receiving nominations for many others.

Szapiro is a creative producer who has carved a niche working on quality productions that differ from the standard animated fare. Recent work includes the documentary *The Animated Leunig*, as well as fifty award-winning animations based on Michael Leunig's much-loved cartoons. Deborah is a vocal supporter of the Australian independent animation sector and has curated and coordinated a number of animation screen culture events, including the Japanime Film Festival (the main film event for the Sydney 2000 Olympics) which has since become a biennial event. She is currently researching a book on animation directors in the Pacific, Asian and sub-continental regions.

### **SAM PETTY – Editor and Sound Design**

Sam Petty studied at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School from 1990 to 1993, completing courses in both Editing and Sound. He worked on feature films, including *Dead Heart* and *Oscar and Lucinda*, before setting up his own studio—Big Ears Productions. Sam's sound designer credits include the feature films *The Boys*, *Soft Fruit*, *City Loop*, *Rain* and *The Bank*, as well numerous short films and documentaries, including *Tosca* for Film Australia. He has collaborated with his father, Bruce Petty, for over ten years on a number of documentaries and animations. Sam's recent credits include sound designer on the Australian feature film, *Travelling Light*.

### **ANDREW DENTON - Narrator**

Andrew Denton started out in *Theatresports* and went on to become head writer for Sydney radio comedian, Doug Mulray. Denton first came to national attention in a Saturday morning television show, *Beatbox*, in the 1980s, on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, which quickly gave way to the more ambitious *Blah Blah Blah*.

It wasn't until the much-anticipated sequel to *Blah Blah Blah* that Denton found his niche. Ditching everyday clothes for a tuxedo, he hosted *The Money or the Gun*, a big-budget talk show with 'James Bond' credits and linked sketches throughout, based on a particular topic each week.

His next show, *Live and Sweaty*, focused on that national obsession, sport. He interviewed the less well-known sports men and women, as well as the better known. Denton has moved to the world of commercial radio with the *Andrew Denton Breakfast Show*, where his comic wit and timing continues to make him one of the most distinctive voices on the air. His latest television program is the interview-based *Enough Rope*.

### **ALAN JOHN – Composer**

Best known as the composer of the opera *The Eighth Wonder* (produced by Opera Australia in 1995 and revived in 2000) Alan has also worked as an actor, dramaturg, musician and musical director.

Over the last fifteen years Alan has developed close working associations with director Jim Sharman (Light-house Company 1982-88, David Malouf's *Blood Relations*, orchestrations and arrangements for *Chess*), singer Robyn Archer (musical director 1984-88, *The Last Decade—A Cabaret Song Cycle*), writers John Romeril (the musical *Jonah* [1985]) and David Holman (*Frankie—An Opera of Young People*). He has worked closely with

Neil Armfield and the Belvoir Street Theatre, including on *Twelfth Night*, *The Tempest*, *Diary of a Madman*, *Diving for Pearls*, *The Government Inspector*, *Death and the Maiden*, *The Governor's Family*, *Judas Kiss*, *Small Poppies*, *Emma's Nose* and *My Zinc Bed*.

Alan's projects for the Bell Shakespeare Company include *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Henry V*, *Henry IV* and *The Winter's Tale*. For the Sydney Theatre Company Alan composed the original music for *Hanging Man*, *A Man with Five Children* and *A Doll's House*. Alan also composed the music for Tyler Coppin's one-man show, *Tales of Helpmann*.

His film and TV credits include *The Bank* (Robert Connolly), *Looking for Alibrandi* (Kate Woods), *Travelling North* (Carl Schultz), the ABC mini-series *The Farm* (Kate Woods), *Edens Lost* (Neil Armfield) and *Coral Island* (part 1 of Jan Chapman's *Naked* series).

Alan was awarded the Screen Composers Award for Best Music in a Feature Film and best soundtrack for *The Bank* at the Australian Music Awards.

### **Further references**

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**Human Contraptions**

A Film Australia National Interest Program. Produced with the assistance of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

WRITER/DIRECTOR: Bruce Petty

PRODUCER: Deborah Szapiro

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: Stefan

Moore, Anna Grieve

DURATION: 10 x 5 minutes

YEAR: 2003

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