

Encounters with the Insect World: Care and Human – Insect Relationships in Wildlife Documentaries

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1 Introduction

The narratives about insects have traditionally been situated within the realm of the “insect world,” a concept referring to entomological “world-making.” This notion encompasses the scales, perspectives, and cognitive frameworks associated with insects.¹ The notion of the insect world functions as a spatial metaphor for our understanding of insects, highlighting that it differs from “our world” in terms of temporal and spatial parameters, rendering humans incongruous within it; as Adam Dodd has argued “[w]ithin the insect world, humans enjoy no ontological propriety.”² To bridge this scalar gap and make the insect world perceptible within human epistemologies, technology is essential. In wildlife documentaries about insects, the significance of technology is underscored in the visualization of the insect world, while micro and macro cinematography are widely used to visualize minute creatures and their habitats. Wildlife documentaries serve as illustrations of scientific facts and popularizing natural history, balancing science and storytelling. Broadcaster and naturalist David Attenborough³ has noted that, when they started making *Life in the Undergrowth* (2005) in the early 2000s, invertebrates were “largely unexposed” in wildlife documentaries, while bigger animals tended to receive more visual presence in films. Insects seem to be marginalized when it comes to other animals we find more approachable, animals that we can look in the eye and have “the encounter value”⁴ with. Jamie Lorimer⁵ notes that insects are

1 Adam Dodd, “Minding Insects: Scale, Value, World,” in *The Management of Insects in Recreation and Tourism*, ed. Raynald Harvey Lemelin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 31, 33.

2 Dodd, “Minding Insects,” 33.

3 David Attenborough, *Life on Air. Memoirs of the Broadcaster* (London: BBC Books, 2010), 386.

4 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 46.

5 Jamie Lorimer, “Nonhuman Charisma,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25, no. 5 (2007): 920.

“radically different to anthropocentric norms,” and their charisma differs from anthropomorphic cuddly charisma, which is that of mammals and other vertebrates. However, as Lorimer argues, insects have charisma, and they attract human attention, whether natural historical curiosity or aesthetics on film. In this chapter, I examine three cases of insect documentaries: *Life in the Undergrowth* (2005), *Alien Empire. A Journey to the World of Insects* (1996), and *Microcosmos* (1996). The first two documentaries are BBC television series: *Life in the Undergrowth* is a five-part, presenter-led documentary series, and *Alien Empire* has six episodes with voice-over narration. *Microcosmos* is a French full-length documentary made for a bigger screen, released in film theaters, and has no voice-over narration, except in the very beginning and end of the film. Even if the two latter ones are from the 1990s, their visuality and approach to insects and their environment are still very relevant today. I have chosen these documentaries because they solely focus on insects and invertebrates, and each takes a different approach in representing insects, varying from one another in terms of narrative and visuality while offering different kinds of entry points to the insect world. These documentaries offer insights into the portrayal of insects, human – insect interactions, and the depiction of insects within the context of the documentary moving images and the wildlife mode.

I approach these documentaries through viewing, understanding it as a form of encounter.⁶ I understand moving images not only as representations, but also as affective assemblages that involve the agencies of insects, humans, technology, aesthetics, and the viewer. I question what kind of relations are brought forth while encountering the insect world in these documentaries. I explore this by employing two different but also intertwined analytical frameworks within documentary films. On the one hand, I delve into the visuality and aesthetics of the films, while on the other hand, I examine their narrative and scientific approach to insects. Both frameworks bring forth engagement and knowledge that encourage the viewer to engage with the insect world. I explore this in the context of wildlife mode and documentary films, which bring forth the relations between visuality, knowledge, and technology. Donna Haraway⁷ notes that technologies are not just mediators but rather organic partners in world-making encounters. As Belinda Smaill⁸ argues, the documentary generates an anticipation that the viewer will be “a subject of knowledge, offered access to a world that is knowable and testable, fulfilling a

6 Belinda Smaill, “Encountering Animals: Re-Viewing the Cinema of Jean Painlevé,” *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture* 42 (2017).

7 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 249.

8 Smaill, “Encountering Animals,” 97.

desire for knowledge and an epistephilic pleasure.” This brings up the question of anthropocentrism and how to undo it within the perceptual paradigm of documentary knowledge. I contest this anthropocentrism by the concept of care. Bellacasa⁹ argues that “relations of thinking and knowing require care,” and this resonates within the documentary mode, which is closely intertwined with viewers’ desire for expanded understanding. In the context of documentary knowledge, especially in wildlife mode and its take on natural history knowledge, this can offer a different approach to insect – human relations in the film. Bellacasa emphasizes the concept of “naturecultural” visions as a means to contest the divisions between knowledge systems regarding nature and align with sociotechnical imaginaries, hence redirecting the focus toward nonhuman life and acknowledging the interconnectedness of multiple entities and agencies. By shifting the attention to the vitality and agency of nonhuman worlds and by considering humans as one ontological agency among many, these visions contest the objectification of nonhuman and subjectification of the human. In this way, they encourage an attentive approach that avoids automatic adherence to a strictly anthropocentric perspective.¹⁰

Care, as understood by Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher,¹¹ is “everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair ‘our world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life sustaining web.” Bellacasa also emphasizes the material world and interdependencies between humans and nonhumans as a “matter of care.” She understands “care as a concrete work of maintenance, with ethical and affective implications, and as a vital politics in interdependent worlds.”¹² The notion of “matters of care” serves as a concept to think with, as Bellacasa argues. Instead of merely revealing facts, it proposes that we engage with them and foster more caring relationships. Therefore, it is not primarily about explaining how things are constructed; rather, it focuses on our involvement in their potential becomings.¹³

I examine care and the insect worlds in the context of wildlife mode, which is more diverse than the tradition of “blue chip,” which is known to exclude the animal world from any human or cultural influence. These traditional wildlife modes of “blue chip” documentaries are characterized by their high production

9 Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 69.

10 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 141.

11 Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto, “Towards a Feminist Theory of Caring,” in *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women’s Lives*, ed. E.K. Abel and M.K. Nelson (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 40.

12 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 5.

13 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 66, 69.

value, exclusion of human presence and surroundings from the visuals, and a tendency to avoid environmental issues. Typically, these documentaries adopt dramatic narratives, which are often presented through voice-over narration, centered around large animals, especially megafauna, without delving into the historical context.¹⁴ However, documentaries that focus on insects are often excluded from the broader conceptualization of wildlife documentaries, as pointed out by MacDonald.¹⁵

Nevertheless, this traditional wildlife mode potentially oversimplifies the intricate and nuanced relationship between humans and nonhumans. It overlooks the fact that these two entities share a continuum while acknowledging that the worlds of animals are intertwined with an ecological context that also encompasses human worlds.¹⁶

In the first section, I examine natural historical knowledge, the figure of David Attenborough in the narrative of the insect world, and nonhuman charisma. In the following section, I explore macro cinematography and insects as mediators between caring ecological connections, knowledge, and the viewer. In the final section, I examine care in narratives and visuality of *Alien Empire*, along with how the human and insect worlds merge in the documentary series.

2 *Life in the Undergrowth* and the Figure of Natural History

BBC's series *Life in the Undergrowth* starts with David Attenborough's voice-over introducing the insect world for viewers: "An eye from a different world. We don't often see a snail that way. And that's because we've only recently had the tiny lenses and electronic cameras that we need to explore this miniature world. But when we meet its inhabitants face to face, we suddenly realize that their behavior can be just as meaningful to us as the behavior of many animals more our own size." Here, the insect world is depicted as a "different world," one in which we gain perceptual access through technology that enables us to have meaningful encounters with miniature creatures. *Life in the Undergrowth* is a presenter-led series narrated by David Attenborough. He is not only an authoritative voice-over, taking the viewer into the insect world with him, but he is very much involved in the images as a presenter while depicting scales next to insects. *Life in the Undergrowth* has a strong natural history and evolutionist

14 Derek Bousé, *Wildlife Films* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 14–15.

15 Scott MacDonald, "Up Close and Political: Three Short Ruminations on Ideology on the Nature Film," *Film Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2006): 19.

16 Smaill, "Encountering Animals," 93.

discourse seeking to explain insects' anatomy and behavior to viewers. However, this evolutionary mode involves the authority to classify other life forms, but it also places humans within the same continuum as other species. *Life in the Undergrowth* brings forth different visual registers for the viewer to engage with. The first is the documentary's micro and macro cinematography, which alters perceptions by enabling the observation of creatures that are too tiny to engage with without technological aids. This is not just an observation in the sense that the viewer would not be involved in the movement of images and bodies of insects, but rather, it is an encounter that allows to stay with the proximity of insects. The other visual register is that of Attenborough's presence on the screen and his encounters with insects as sort of a messenger between the human and insect worlds. These scenes bring together human and insect bodies, as well as the question of scale. Natural history and evolutionist discourse can be seen in both visual registers; however, there are sequences that are more poetic in their depictions and where the voice-over narration is silent. Here, I focus on sequences involving Attenborough's presence and where he is in contact with specific insects. Unlike animals that show reciprocity, insects are generally perceived as more autonomous, displaying minimal reactions to human presence,¹⁷ which is embodied by the sometimes awkward presence of Attenborough while he tries to fit into the same framing with insects by crouching and lying on the ground.

In the scene with a springtail, Attenborough lies on the ground, pointing at soil with a needle. In the next shot, there is a springtail next to a point of a needle appearing bigger than the minute insect. Attenborough's voice tells that there are numerous species living on land, but they are so tiny – a half a millimeter long – that we seldom see them. In the framing, the springtail seems to wash itself, while Attenborough describes its body as “the size of a full stop,” and that “drying out is a very real problem for them.” The springtail jumps while the pin of the needle is next to it, and again, the voice-over describes that “it is like human jumping over the Eiffel tower.” This kind of macro cinematography takes the viewer's perception to a creature that is magnified that enables observation, making it visible, while the voice-over is giving familiar analogy to human “world” like a full stop or jumping over the Eiffel tower to give scales. With these analogies, the insect's abilities are compared with those of the bigger animals, here humans, to not only make observations but also new understandings between familiar and difference, while the ecological problem “drying out” is brought up. However, this kind of descriptive and observational

17 Lorimer, “Nonhuman Charisma,” 920.

encounter embodies a specific type of science that deals only with established and unquestionable knowledge – the natural history paradigm.¹⁸ In the context of nature documentaries compared with other scientific television documentaries, Michael Jeffries has argued that the natural history paradigm portrays the natural world by blending the traditional principles of ecological balance and adaptation with a sense of romantic awe and wonder that avoids representing scientific topics that are “changeable, challenging, contingent.”¹⁹ However, Lorimer combines the practices of natural history and nonhuman charisma. He understands practices of natural history – that Attenborough and the viewer engages here – as “one of tuning in, or ‘learning to be affected’ by the target organism.” Practices of natural history are here understood not only as observation and collecting, but also as negotiations to achieve “ecological proximity and corporeal understanding by a host of technological apparatuses.”²⁰ In this way, natural history knowledge is seen as an affective force between insects and Attenborough and the viewers, while insects are not just objects of study: they have agency that lures the viewer’s attentiveness.

The material environment and animals adjust and affect the technology used, as Attenborough has noted in his memoirs. While filming *Life in the Undergrowth*, the film crew had to use technical refinement and slow-motion to shoot, for example, ants’ movements that would otherwise be too fast to perceive. Attenborough explains that, because of technology, they began to see ants as individuals with their own personalities and behaviors.²¹ He was affected by ants and their charisma. It seems like something changed in the way he perceived them, and he formed a caring relationship with the ants. In this context, perceiving ants as individuals is against natural history specimen logic that depicts individuals as specimens of the species. As Bellacasa argues, caring is fundamentally relational, involving an engagement that assumes responsibility for our interactions and their impact on others. Caring approaches encompass the process of establishing relationships that exhibit attentiveness to the needs of others.²² If we pay attention to the *practice* of how Attenborough is present in frames with insects, we get a kind of encounter other than observational natural history as argued by Jeffries. In these sequences where Attenborough is visible, the human body serves as a sort of reference point

18 Morgan Richards, “Greening Wildlife Documentary,” in *Environmental Conflict and the Media*, ed. Libby Lester and Brett Hutchins (New York: Peter Lang, 2013).

19 Michael Jeffries, “BBC Natural History versus Science Paradigms,” *Science as Culture* 12, no. 4 (2003): 543.

20 Lorimer, “Nonhuman Charisma,” 917.

21 Attenborough, *Life on Air*, 392.

22 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*.

for scales, but the scales are not predetermined in an anthropocentric way. In some scenes, Attenborough is standing and providing explanations about insects, but a challenge arises when he needs to be next to an insect that is being shown in a close-up as he squeezes into the shot, resulting in a distortion of the scale between the insects and Attenborough's body. For example, there is a sequence where an ant is examining another insect's egg and the ant is captured in front of the camera while Attenborough is in the background, placed in a perspective where the ant and Attenborough appear almost the same size. The human body appears disproportionately small, but at the same time, it is too large for the frame that is adjusted to portions of the ant. The human body no longer fits into the image. Zachary Horton has argued that the production of human knowledge has consistently revolved around the process of taming of scale. It involves confining scalar difference within established domains and structuring those domains into a spatially and conceptually interconnected framework, with the unmarked scale of the human serving as a pivotal reference point, as a "scale-stable human subject."²³ However, in the sequences where Attenborough is next to insects, trying to squeeze in the framing that is adjusted for minute creatures, he becomes like Alice in Wonderland, a character without stable scales. This aligns with Dodd's²⁴ argument about insect worlds that are not accustomed to accommodating humans. When an image is attuned to the scales of insects, it is the human who appears too large. This awkward scale and perspective that is framed in terms of the insect makes the viewer question the pre-given relationship between the human presenter, the ant, and the traditional anthropocentric visual framing.

Although in the beginning of *Life in the Undergrowth*, the world of insects is portrayed as "a different world," throughout the series, the difference lies in the scales depicted between Attenborough and the insects present in the same scenes. Attenborough's role as a naturalist figure can be perceived as too large in relation to the scales of the insects, which themselves are understood within the context of natural history knowledge and observation. The voice-over reminds the viewers that if insects would disappear, "[t]he land's ecosystems would collapse. The soil would lose its fertility. Many of the plants would no longer be pollinated. Lots of animals, amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals would have nothing to eat. [...] These small creatures are within a few inches of our feet, wherever we go on land – but often, they're disregarded. We would do very well to remember them." However, even though focusing on the "safe

23 Zachary Horton, *The Cosmic Zoom: Scale, Knowledge, and Mediation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 7.

24 Dodd, "Minding Insects".

science” of natural history and the “awe and wonder” of the insect world, *Life in the Undergrowth* does not address interdependencies between human and insect worlds, except briefly in a few sequences, primarily through voice-over narration. Nonetheless, the documentary manages to acquaint the viewer with insect life and behavior, positioning insects as matters of care, one fueled by the curiosity of natural history. According to Lorimer, such practices of natural history, as exemplified by the viewer’s intimate engagement with insect imagery, serve the process of “learning to be affected” by the documentary’s subjects.

3 *Microcosmos* and Aesthetics of the Microscopic World

Microcosmos is a full-length French documentary made for a big screen and screened at the Cannes Film Festivals. It does not have a voice-over narration, except just at the beginning and end of the film, which is atypical for a wildlife documentary, and the film does not have the same kind of natural historical discourse as *Life in the Undergrowth*. The only voice-over narration in the beginning and very end of the documentary takes the viewer into an insect world: “A meadow in early morning somewhere on earth. Hidden here is the world as vast as our own where weeds are like impenetrable jungles, stones are mountains, and even the smallest pond becomes an ocean. Time passes differently here, an hour is like a day, a day is like a season, and the passing of a season is a lifetime. But to observe this world we must fall silent now and listen its murmurs.” This emphasizes the abundant diversity and complexity of life that exists within this hidden realm, one only accessible to the viewer by being quiet. After the introduction, there is no voice-over narration, and the viewer engages with the insect world through images and sounds on and off screen.

Claude Nuridsany and Marie Pérennou, the directors of *Microcosmos*, express their dissatisfaction with the conventional portrayal of the animal world in wildlife films, believing that such portrayals often exhibit a bias toward natural science.²⁵ In their interview, the directors explained that the emotional connection they felt when observing animals in real life was lacking in many wildlife documentaries. Their intention was to introduce viewers to an “unknown world.” To achieve this, they had to develop new filming techniques and sought the assistance of robot engineers to create specialized equipment

25 Scott MacDonald, “Interview with Claude Nuridsany and Marie Pérennou,” in *Adventures of Perception: Cinema as Exploration: Essays/Interviews* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 188–189.

capable of capturing images on such a small scale.²⁶ The relationship with insects is intimately connected with technology and visual perception in Western culture.²⁷ This relationship that involves technology as an essential part of perception, as Nuridsany and Pérennou also note, has its history in the invention of the microscope that brought about a significant shift in the way insects were observed. However, the early microscopic illustrations, as well as early cinematography about insects, which were shot in studios or laboratories, isolated their subjects from their natural habitat, following specimen logic by representing insects against blank backgrounds as isolated objects.²⁸ Giraud and Hollin²⁹ have studied relationships of care in laboratory animals, but their theorization of relations of care can be applied to the technology used in filming insects, as well as the viewer's engagement with the images shaped by insects. Caring involves the space to be affected, and Giraud and Hollin argue that, through this caring relationship and affective engagement, where animals are seen as agents, not just under observation, animals are enabled to "speak back" in ways that reshape their environment.³⁰

Unlike a traditional laboratory setting for filming that isolates insects, *Microcosmos* presents insects in relation to their habitats, highlighting their agency and the interconnectedness of their life worlds. *Microcosmos* brings forth affective engagement with specific insects through macro cinematography and close-ups, as well as with an ecological connection in which the insects intertwine as agents in their habitat. The moving image has the capacity to affect through its tactile nature, promoting a sense of closeness between viewers and nonhuman life, rather than reaffirming a hierarchical relation.³¹ For example, in a scene of a snail drinking from a puddle, we see the snail and its movement across soil covered in moss. When the snail's mouth touches water, surface tension expands the water, which appears like a different substance while the snail touches it. This depiction of water defies our usual perception of it on a human scale. The snail is not portrayed as a separate or isolated object as a specimen, but rather, the framing emphasizes the snail's

26 MacDonal, "Interview," 190.

27 Dodd, "Minding Insects"; Oliver Gaycken, *Devices of Curiosity: Early Cinema and Popular Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Janice Neri, *The Insect and the Image: Visualizing Nature in Early Modern Europe, 1500–1700* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

28 Neri, *The Insect and the Image*, XII–XIII.

29 Eva Giraud and Gregory Hollin, "Care, Laboratory Beagles and Affective Utopia," *Theory, Culture & Society* 33, no. 4 (2016).

30 Giraud and Hollin, "Laboratory Beagles," 30.

31 Small, "Encountering Animals," 84.

connection to it and the tactile nature of the environment, moss, and soil. According to film scholar Janet Harbord³², the technologies used to observe insects and capture their rapid movements, both in the laboratory and on film, need to be designed with the capabilities and capacities of insects in mind. This resonates with caring, keeping insects' needs in mind and their capacity of "speaking back." Harbord views the insect as a messenger or translator in the laboratory of cinema, bridging the human world, the world of machines, and the world of insects.³³ The medium of the moving image functions as a laboratory, allowing for adjustments to human perception. Here, the snail can be seen as a messenger or translator for creating understandings of different aesthetics and ecologies.

In *Microcosmos*, the use of macro cinematography takes the viewer's perception of the world of insects and small creatures. The technique bridges the distance between human perception and the minute details of insects, allowing viewers to engage with their behaviors and interactions that would otherwise go unnoticed. The camera brings the viewer into a sense of proximity to the microcosmic realm, fostering an observational intimacy with insects. Gaycken argues that in the micro- and macroscopic images in cinema, the camera, through its observational capabilities, provides viewers with a feeling of being intimately connected to the world on film. This closeness goes beyond magnification: it encompasses observational proximity that promises deeper comprehension.³⁴ In a scene about a mosquito's metamorphose, an insect emerges from a still surface of water. The visuals do not rely on scientific bias, but the focus is on the poetic connection between the insect's body and its environment, while the water takes on a tactile quality. Human perception is decentered, while the insect rising from water is not recognizable at first, and without voice-over explanation, the viewer is left without a pre-given relationship, although at the end of the scene, when the mosquito spreads its wings, it takes a shape that is familiar, giving the viewer the pleasure of recognition. Haraway emphasizes curiosity and knowing more as part of caring about: "[c]aring means becoming subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing more at the end of the day than at the beginning".³⁵ The scene brings forth an event that often goes unnoted, and the film builds an encounter that does not carry previous preconceptions of the viewer

32 Janet Harbord, *Ex-Centric Cinema: Giorgio Agamben and Film Archaeology* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 138.

33 Harbord, *Ex-Centric Cinema*, 145.

34 Gaycken, *Devices of Curiosity*, 39–40.

35 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 36.

toward mosquitos but rather emphasizes the importance of attentiveness and the viewer's engagement with the image. This visual proximity, which does not get objectified by voice-over narration but leaves space for the viewers to make their own connections, brings forth insects as subjects that blur the boundaries between familiarity and difference; that of anthropomorphism, sensibilities of insects and the possibilities to examine different encounters that are not necessarily pre-given by natural history bias. Even if *Microcosmos* does not bring forth extinction or ecological problems *per se*, it engages the viewer in different kinds of ecological aesthetics that emphasize the caring relationship with the small and fragile, adjusting and sensitizing the viewer's perception to different kinds of relations to familiar environments.

4 *Alien Empire* and Staying with the Trouble on the Shared Planet

Alien Empire differs from *Microcosmos* and *Life in the Undergrowth* in its depictions of human – insect relations. The two later documentaries introduced an “insect world” that is based on scalar difference, like Dodd³⁶ has noted, using it as a metaphor to understand insects and highlighting its distinction from “human world,” rendering humans incongruous within it. However, *Alien Empire* does not visually differentiate insects and human worlds but instead focuses on the interaction and conflicts that invertebrates and human primates may cause to each other. *Alien Empire* is a wildlife documentary produced by BBC natural history unit, and it has voice-over narration given by actor John Shrapnel. Here, I focus on insect – human relationships depicted in *Alien Empire*. Even though there are traditional entomological and anatomical descriptions of insects and micro and macro cinematography, there are also sequences that have a broader approach to insect – human relationships like the use of pesticides, health and economic issues, and cultural approaches like eating insects, focusing on insects' ambiguous relationship with humans.

In the beginning of the series, the narration introduces the “insect world” quite differently than in the other two series discussed earlier: “Somewhere on the outer reaches of the galaxy. There's a small planet dominated by an alien life form, creatures too numerous to count, they can survive conditions no other creature can tolerate. Other life forms try to destroy them, but their resilience has been their strength for hundreds of millions of years. They lurk in

36 Dodd, “Minding Insects,” 33.

the darkest of corners or control entire landscape. They seem to come from the world of science fiction, but they belong to the world of science fact. Welcome to the world of insects." Here, the insect world is not a place of awe and wonder of minute creatures, or traditional principles of ecological balance as argued by Jeffries,³⁷ but conflicted with other lifeforms that are humans. Although the series' name *Alien Empire* is a metaphor for the insect world and the voice-over compares insects to aliens and machines, echoing Cartesian biases, the visuals of the series can be viewed as contesting the visual tradition between human and insect worlds. The voice-over has a god-like position to describe insects, but humans are also seen as species while their doings are described as that of any other animals.

Conflict between humans and insects is demonstrated in a montage sequence about cockroaches and people trying to get rid of them. The scene begins with a voice-over narration: "One of the longest running feuds has been with cockroaches. They contaminate food, carry diseases and generally offend the human sensibilities." The camera then zooms in on a close-up shot of a cockroach's head. A montage follows, showing an exterminator walking into a hotel basement, a cockroach scurrying through pipes, and a young boy riding a tricycle in a hallway. These shots reference various film genres, such as horror, thrillers of the 1990s, and film noir. The narration continues, mentioning that humans spend millions of pounds each year trying to combat the cockroach problem with chemicals, and in the pursuit of an insect-free life, humans saturate their homes, fields, rivers, and the world with toxins. However, the narration suggests that chemical engineering may never be the final solution. The scene concludes with the statement that there is still only one guaranteed method of killing a cockroach as the young boy on the tricycle runs over the cockroach in the hallway. The camera captures this moment from a low angle, with a shaky camera following the cockroach. Visually, the sequence connects insects in Western popular culture and broadens the typical visualization of insects in wildlife mode. In its visual suspense, the cockroach sequence makes the viewer take the insect's side in its escape from the terminator that represents destructive toxins. However, this is a kind of situated caring that is not necessarily applied in encounters outside the filmic event. Lorimer³⁸ emphasizes that different organisms "can be both awe-some and awe-full." It is easy to care about insects, even in their strangeness and awkwardness, when they are in "insect world," "out" in nature like usually visually depicted in wildlife documentaries. However, when they come into

37 Jeffries, "BBC Natural History," 543.

38 Lorimer, "Nonhuman Charisma," 918.

our homes, eat people's crops, or carry diseases, it is harder to care about them. However, it is this uneasy and diverse relationship between humans and insects that is brought up in the series. Care is providing a way of "staying with the trouble."³⁹ As Bellacasa reminds us, care in "naturecultures" is not innocent activity. The obligations tied to caring in "naturecultures" extend beyond mere "stewardship" or a pastoral form of care where humans exert control over the natural world.⁴⁰

John Berger⁴¹ argues that animals are constantly being watched and observed by humans to the point where their ability to observe humans has become insignificant. However, Burt critiques this stand and emphasizes that the act of looking involves not only the act of being observed, but also the reciprocal nature of being looked at. Burt suggests that this dynamic goes beyond straightforward objectification and instead plays an active role in establishing relationships between humans and animals.⁴² This is connected to Giraud and Hollin's concept of "speaking back,"⁴³ in which the caring relationship includes animal agency, and they are not just ones observed – or objects to be cared for. In documentary film, witnessing is one of the key concepts.⁴⁴ In *Alien Empire*, this mode of witnessing is given to insects, and they have agency while humans are depicted as one species among any other. It is not only that people observe insects but insects observe people as well, witnessing evolution, like one of the scene's voice-over narrates: "[o]nly a few million years ago, they [insects] witnessed a large brained ape climb down from the tree, stand up and invent technology." Also, the composition and framing in some of the scenes emphasize this shared observation: while insects are in the front of the camera, in the background, there are people out of focus, like children playing or street view from the city. Insects are not depicted as isolated to an "insect world" that does not habituate humans, but instead, both species share habitats and environments. This kind of depiction is very much against the tradition where insects are represented against a blank background where their only purpose is to become observed; indeed, Neri⁴⁵ argues that this "[s]pecimen logic turns nature into object by decontextualizing select creatures and items – that is,

39 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

40 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 164.

41 John Berger, *Why Look at Animals?* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 27.

42 Jonathan Burt, "John Berger's 'Why Look at Animals?' A Close Reading," *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 9, no. 2 (2005): 207.

43 Giraud and Hollin, "Laboratory Beagles".

44 Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001).

45 Neri, *The Insect*, XIII.

by removing them from their habitats, environments, and settings.” This same logic can be traced to traditional wildlife documentary mode as well because it had a tradition of depicting nature as separated from culture and human influences. Beside the voice-over of John Shrapnel, another kind of narrator can be found on the screen: a computer animated, real-looking fly whose point of view takes the viewer to different scenes of human – insect encounters. Although voice-over explains how humans classify insects, the camera follows a fly that enters a door “Entomology” written on it. The fly flies past folders on a bookshelf with insect etymological names written on their covers. Later, the fly takes the viewer to a natural history museum and laboratory where scientists conduct research about mosquitos and dengue fever. The fly is witnessing and observing the conduction of scientific research while the camera takes the fly’s point of view, like the first-person perspective in a video game. Natural history and scientific knowledge become objects of insect’s – and the viewer’s – observation, but also a matter of care. The visuals of the point-of-view shots blur the object – subject boundaries while the fly becomes an inadvertent observer and participant in the scientific process, acting as an unexpected mediator between humans and the insect world.

The last episode, “War of the Worlds,” introduces conflicts and codependences between insects and people from different cultures, like short sequences about the African tradition of eating insects and organized beetle battles in Thailand. Insects are connected to cultural traditions but also with economic systems, such as silk factories and farming. In a sequence about the US alfalfa industry that heavily relies on leafcutter bees for pollination, the narration stresses that “[l]eafcutter bees are recent partners, humans have destroyed so many wild populations of insects with their chemical sprays, they are now having to forge new relationships.” Once the bees complete their tasks in one field, they are transported to the next. These scenes highlight the intricate and mutually beneficial relationships between humans and various insect species while stressing the troubles of human – insect relationships. Besides the economic benefits insects produce, the sequences shed light on how human – insect care is reciprocity: insects can perform care for us and with us. Bellacasa argues that even if human – nonhuman relationships inherently involve care, our caring actions can also lead to disconnections. It is impossible to care for everything because not everything holds the same importance in the world. Just as life and death are inseparable, caring and disconnecting are intertwined.⁴⁶ Here, the use of pesticides to take care of crops has led to the death of pollinators and disconnection in caring about them; however, this has

46 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 78–79.

led to a new kind of relationship with leafcutter bees that benefits humans and these particular bees as well.

The ways in which *Alien Empire* makes cultural and economic factors related to care visible are noteworthy. In the documentary, insects are not solely depicted within the confines of a natural history bias or as inhabitants of a world detached from human culture and environmental issues. Although the way the traditional wildlife mode depicts natural history is criticized as “safe science” or “old ecology” of awe and wonder, *Alien Empire* takes a different paradigm characterized by change, crisis, and challenge while bringing forth caring about insects and ecologies. *Alien Empire* “stays with the trouble” and engages the viewer with a world shared with insects and humans and not always in a pleasant way.

5 Pollination

The exploration of insect – human relationships within the realm of wildlife documentaries has provided understandings of caring aesthetics and meaningful encounters. The analysis of *Life in the Undergrowth*, *Microcosmos*, and *Alien Empire* has brought forth the diverse strategies employed by these documentaries to engage viewers with the insect world. The documentary mode generates anticipation for a comprehensible, verifiable world of knowledge,⁴⁷ while this pursuit of knowledge can be hindered by anthropocentrism. However, Bellacasa’s notion that “thinking and knowing require care” deeply resonates in documentary knowledge. Care involves maintenance, ethics, and recognition of the connections between humans and nonhumans.

The documentaries serve as more than just representations of insects: they can bring forth a speculative and caring mode of engagement. The importance of technology in mediating these encounters is evident because it enables us to traverse the scale differences between human and insect worlds. Although some narratives and visuality of the documentaries I have explored can contest anthropocentrism between the human and insect worlds and encourage thinking with insects, they also remind us that caring is not a one-sided endeavor, but a reciprocal relationship that calls for attentiveness, curiosity, and understanding. Moreover, this analysis has demonstrated that caring about the insect world extends beyond a mere discourse – it manifests as ecological connection. The documentaries compel us to consider the complex interplay

47 Smaill, “Encountering Animals,” 97.

between humans and insects, acknowledging that caring is not always straightforward. Although we may emphasize the importance of individual insects on screen, the challenges of caring for creatures like cockroaches or mosquitos in our daily lives reveal the nuances of situated caring.

In a world characterized by environmental challenges and biodiversity loss, no longer can we view insects as mere background characters in the narrative of our planet; instead, they emerge as essential cohabitants with whom we forge interwoven destinies. Framing insects and humans within separate worlds is unsustainable. Although there might be a discourse aimed at discussing and visualizing insects within distinct “worlds,” it is important to recognize that these worlds are inherently interconnected at the material level and cannot be examined in isolation: insects, humans, and technologies make worlds together.

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