

# Antennae

Issue 3 Autumn 2007 – Volume 1



## Insect Poetics

Volume 1

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# EDITORIAL

ANTENNAE ISSUE 3 - Volume 1

The third issue of Antennae is greatly different from its summer predecessor. As you remember, our previous issue took a marked environmentalist turn focusing on the problem of plastic bags. As explained at the time, Antennae did not want to abandon its animal-focus but aimed at broadening its scope in the belief that environmental issues will soon become common denominator to a number of disciplines involved in the study of human-animal studies.

Our third issue maintains this premise and is completely dedicated to insects. The inspiration for the theme came from 'Insect Poetics', the book edited by Eric Brown which in eighteen original essays, wonderfully presents a range of ways in which our human, intellectual, and cultural models have been influenced by the presence of insects.

Back in May, Antennae contacted Eric Brown asking for an interview. The idea of a themed issue of Antennae titled after the book came from a consistent exchange of emails that took place over summer. We selected the work of a number of writers featured in the book and proposed them to write extensions to their essays. Each was asked to develop a thread of their choice.

The result is not one issue of Antennae but two. Our fall issue is divided into two volumes: the one you are now reading and a second one that will be available on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November.

This does not necessary mean that we will increase the frequency of our publication just yet, but we thought that this experiment could be particularly interesting, and yes, we do have a serious soft spot for insects.

In our best 'tradition' we are still bringing to the surface challenging and thought provoking works by artists engaging with the natural field. Take a look at the work of Tessa Farmer, our cover story, and let us know what you think. She is one of the most original contemporary artists around and her work is gaining popularity in Europe – you literally won't believe your eyes.

In a slightly more political turn we question the contemporary exhibiting trend that sees the old-fashioned entomology cabinets disappearing from Natural History Museums around the world and asked a number of leading entomologists to express their views on the subject.

The second volume of issue 3 will include among others an interview with Catherine Chalmers; the macro photography of beetles by Poul Beckmann (author of the photographic books Jewels 1 and 2) and some insect recipes inspired by 'Why Not Eat Insects?' -Vincent M. Holt.

Antennae wishes to thank its hardworking contributors for making this vast issue come to life. Special thanks to Eric Brown for believing in this project and to Minnesota Press, publishers of 'Insect Poetics'.

Giovanni Aloï  
Editor of Antennae Project

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*It started, for me, with the butterflies that flit their way through Virginia Woolf's writing, but that was only the start. Once you look, you see them everywhere: how about this novel, that film, those canvases covered with dead butterflies, done by that artist who pickles sharks? All shimmering at the edge of my vision, all fluttering for attention.*

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# TALKING INSECTS- ERIC BROWN

*At Antennae we were so captivated by the book 'Insect Poetics' that we decided to contact its editor, Eric Brown with a proposal for an Insect Poetics themed issue of our journal. Here Eric Brown explains where the inspiration for the book comes from and talks about his passion in insects. Questions by Giovanni Aloï*



**E**ric C. Brown is assistant professor of English at the University of Maine at Farmington (USA) and is currently teaching at the University of Bergen in Norway. In 2006, he edited 'Insect Poetics', a volume containing eighteen original essays illuminating the ways in which our human intellectual and cultural models have been influenced by the natural history of insects. The book strongly inspired

Antennae's excursion in the field of entomology, it seemed therefore appropriate to start with an interview with Eric Brown.

***Insect Poetics* presents 18 original essays that explore how human intellectual and cultural models have been influenced by the natural history of insects. Where does**

## **the inspiration from the books come from?**

The inspiration for the book probably began in elementary school. My fifth-grade class spent what seemed like an entire spring collecting and cataloguing insects from the woods, ponds, and fields around central Maine—I remember very fondly my mother helping me build a net out of a broomstick handle, a sheer curtain, and a wire hanger. That was my first exposure to any kind of vaguely systematic study of insects, and I think that, growing up in a remote location like Dover-Foxcroft, Maine, I was captivated by all this exotic looking fauna that my classmates were bringing into their collections and that I'd never really paid attention to before, even though it was all practically in my backyard—water scorpions, praying mantises, rosy maple moths. My family took a trip to Florida later that summer and, still in the throes of collecting, I was running around after dragonflies and cicadas and sent a postcard to my teacher telling him how dazzling the colors were down south. At that point I was hooked.

I ended up with two undergraduate degrees—one in English and another in zoology—and since finishing my Ph.D. in literature I have been drawn to finding ways of incorporating my interest in animals into my work. I had published a couple of essays on insects and literature in graduate school—one on Edmund Spenser's "Fate of the Butterflie" poem and another on the treatment of insects in New World discovery narratives—but I wanted to put together a collection that would cover a range of textual and cultural examples. Perhaps it was in the collective spirit of that elementary class that I wanted to bring other writers into the project, too, and develop a book that could offer more than just my own perspective.

## **How has the book been received?**

We have been positively reviewed in *The Chronicle of Higher Education's* "Nota Bene" section, among other venues, and I think the diversity of the collection has drawn a lot of positive attention. Also, no doubt because insects are so ultra-familiar, a lot of readers have sent along various anecdotes about them. A doctor in Mississippi e-mailed me that he found (by inadvertently chewing it) a "four inch long, grey-colored, petrified grasshopper" in his pre-packaged salad the same evening he was reading Sarah Gordon's essay on entomophagy. And the book definitely brings the punsters out of the woodwork, so to speak. I've been asked not a few times whether the idea "had legs," or whether it was receiving any good buzz.

## **If you had to single out the most**

## **fascinating aspect of insects, what would that be?**

That's a difficult question, not least because, as I argue in the book, insects really make the whole idea of singularity an uncomfortable one. There is certainly a kind of Burkean beauty about them, a very democratic beauty too—you could hardly have more open access. Anyone can turn over a log and get to admire the hard turquoise of a tiger beetle shell, or spot a Luna Moth under a midsummer porch light. The kaleidoscope of forms is pretty dazzling. I also think the fact that they're really the only creature (at least the only one big enough to see coming at you) that predates upon human beings is quite striking. They coexist with us in a way no other animals do—occupying our same space, eating our same food, even feeding upon our own bodies. I think I'd have to say this uncomfortable sharing of space and materials might be the most fascinating aspect.

## **The selection of works included in *Insect Poetics* presents the reader with a number of surprising perspectives on insects and human relations. What were the criteria behind the choice of topics for this books?**

My vision for the collection, broadly speaking, was as an academic treatment of cultural entomology, a subject that had yet to be treated very rigorously in either literary or animal studies. The topics in many cases originated with the contributors and there were others I solicited—the eating of insects, insects on film. I also wanted to unpack "insect" as a signifier—the term itself arguably totalizes even more disparate organisms than does "animal"—by featuring an array of popular and slightly more marginal insects. So I tried to balance attention on ants and bees and butterflies with at least some consideration of ulterior insects: that's what drew me to Nicky Coutts's essay on mantids, Marion Copeland's on cockroaches, Yves Cambefort's on beetles, and so forth. Ideally there would have been even greater diversity in this approach, but it speaks to the lack of attention insects tend to draw that I never received any submissions on really obvious but under-theorized examples, like damselflies or water striders (the so-called "Jesus bug"). I did try to keep other arthropods out of the discussion—a few spiders and mites and I think one crustacean crept in.

The book also went through a number of different conceptual shapes—at one point I had imagined a slightly more informal series of reflections, written by entomologists and others outside the traditional humanities or cultural studies

fields, that would have supplemented the essays. I asked a few scientists to write about their aesthetic investment in their work. Chris O'Toole, for instance, who until recently was curator for the Hope Entomological Collections at Oxford University and is a renowned writer on natural history in his own right, had a really interesting essay lined up, memorializing some of the events that led him to pursue insects as a career, that in the end I just couldn't fit. If the exigencies of publishing and page limits weren't in play, I'd have liked another handful of pieces—insects and video games (the oft-parodied “bug in the system” angle), insects and commodification, insects as pets, that sort of thing. But the final group of essays are better for the leanness of the volume as a whole.

### **What readership do you think the book attracts?**

I think there's something in the book for just about everyone, and just about everyone I know who has read the book has offered up a close encounter with insects that affected them significantly—enchantingly, phobically, whatever. From using jars of lightning bugs to illuminate a child's tent to remembering June bugs banging on window screens on summer nights (or finding cockroaches nesting in new apartments), everyone seems to have an insect story up their sleeve. I think the relationship between insects and humans is just vastly more familiar than that between humans and any other animal. But the book's intended audience is primarily an academic one—those interested in animal or literary studies foremost, as well as those interested in the individual artists the book discusses—Thoreau, Kafka, Plath, and so on.

### **Sarah Gordon's essay 'Entomology: Representations of Insect Eating in Literature and Mass Media' draws interesting considerations on Entomophagy in our media driven society. What is your take on the spectacularization of insect-eating in reality TV and other media productions?**

Sarah's essay, which is really wonderful, stemmed from a conference presentation I saw her give on subversive feasting in the Middle Ages, so I think the gross-out factor goes back pretty far. You certainly see it in Renaissance works like Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, where Epicure Mammon imagines dining on the “tongues of carps, dormice, and camels' heels.” (The line between gross and gourmet is of course often crossed, and the construction of insects as “gross” in the first place is largely a Western conceptualization.) I recently saw an

episode of *The Simple Life* in which Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie consume (apparently) earthworms and crickets as preparation for a “survival” camp. One element the episode played up, and something Sarah doesn't focus on particularly, was the erotics of insect-eating—that transgressive consumption is a transference of other deviant desires and fetishes. Richie makes the interpretive link plain in *The Simple Life* when she coaxes a male participant: “pretend like [the worm's] a wiener.” Along with all the other sexism in reality TV, I don't think it's a coincidence that the “Fear Factor” contestants are typically almost naked, fitting uncomfortable objects in their mouth, trying to “keep it down” while avoiding the gag reflex. The mastication displays at least as many anxieties about oral sex as about the insects themselves, who are also typically phallicized in some way (with hissing cockroaches, along with worms, a standard favorite, as well as anything bearing spindly appendages or bulbous body parts). It's a kind of insect pornography that is meant to titillate either despite or because of its potential for disgust.

### **Are insects forever condemned to occupy a dichotomous space existing between pest and marvel?**

One of the problems in situating “insect” is again the versatility of its signification. Any term that adumbrates both the mosquito and the monarch butterfly, the tsetse fly and the ladybug, the disease and its cure, is bound to deal in contradictions—not to mention the internal contradictions of all representational systems. In my home state of Maine, for instance, the “black fly” is often condemned for its bites and annoyances while simultaneously praised for keeping tourists away. The bee really sums it all with its painful stinging and pleasurable sweets.

But I suppose what might be interesting about the “pest” and “marvel” dichotomy is how much those terms in fact overlap. I would argue that the very things that annoy us about insects—their multiplicity, their voracity, their predation upon humans, the fact they always show up at picnics—are also most marvellous. Since I tend to the romantic in my worldview, I'd say they remove us (sometimes harshly) from a quotidian existence and, like other innumerable—the stars, the sands on the beach—help us see the sublime in the everyday.

### **Insects still seem to occupy a relatively marginal place in the current developments of Cultural and Animal Studies. Could the radical 'alien essence' of insects be seen as 'alternative way' or will it persist as a boundary?**

I think Animal Studies as a discipline is still finding its corners, and there has yet to be full integration of the scope of zoological organisms into the conversation. (Conservation groups make the same arguments, of course—that protection efforts tend to be disproportionately mammal-centered: whales and pandas and manatees; meanwhile all these other less telegenic species which may well be more ecologically important are left to wither on the vine.) A microbiologist might certainly argue that insects are far from the beings least accounted for—and I would have to agree that their low profile is still relatively higher than paramecia or water hydras or green algae. But insects may indeed represent some important *terminus ad quem*. Perhaps if we go beyond them to less complex organisms we lose some essential resemblance to ourselves that, as alien as insects can appear, changes the register of what we talk about when we talk about “animal.” Their alien appearance is really an uncanny resemblance—arms and legs, but six instead of four; a properly oriented head, but with disproportionate eyes and mouth and “ears”; a skeleton, but on the outside instead of the inside; and a prominent abdomen but no apparent sex organs. They embody both excess and loss. And I do think the anxieties produced in humans by these extremes unfortunately make insects less likely to be invited to the table than, say, cats and dogs.

**Natural History Museums around the world are exchanging their traditional entomology exhibit of display cases for interactive exhibits aimed at children. Do you believe display cases still have something to say about insects in the age we live in?**

The age of the *Wunderkammer* has most definitely been replaced by the digital cabinetry of a computer screen, and I suppose display cases have begun to disappear along with them. I have a personal fondness for displays—one of the treats at Harvard’s Museum of Comparative Zoology is getting a look at Vladimir Nabokov’s lepidoptera cases—but in general I’m happy to see the interactive model replacing the static. Working honey bee hives and leaf-cutter ant colonies and butterfly gardens have a mesmerizing and I would say instructive quality that’s hard to reproduce in the (maybe) stuffier versions of display cases. (Captive animals are a problematic issue all their own, of course. Another essay I had in mind for the book would have taken up this very issue—the ways insects are represented in zoos and other live exhibits. Stephen Bostock and Randy Malamud have both done interesting work in this direction.) But if there’s value in the somewhat Victorian display case, it’s probably on the one hand

for the amateur collector and on the other for the serious scholar of primary type-species. Those of us in between have likely been conditioned to need a more vibrant spectacle. Personally I’ve always preferred live animals—even if they’re enclosed—to the taxidermic variety. Of course, *reading* the display case (and the collection process in general) may yield some rich results, as Rachel Sarsfield insightfully demonstrated in her essay for *Insect Poetics* on the works of Virginia Woolf.

**The next academic year will see you teaching at the University of Bergen in Norway (Eric Brown was among 800 U.S. faculty and professionals selected from a pool of approximately 2,000 applicants for the prestigious Fulbright Scholarship awarded this year) are you going to continue your work on insects there too?**

I do have an essay on the commodification of Maine’s black fly (it shows up as a brand of beer and coffee, as well as an ice-cream flavor, to name but a few) that I plan to complete while in Norway, but otherwise I’ll be working on a new book project on John Milton. To offset the literary endeavors I’m planning a musk-ox safari, but a long-term invertebrate project I have in mind will likely have to wait until I’m back in Maine

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# THE REAL MILLENNIUM BUG: GIANT ARTHROPOD FILMS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

*From 'Them!' to 'A Bug's Life', Richard Leskosky takes us through a fascinating cinematic journey populated by oversized praying mantis and brave ants.*

*Text by Richard J. Leskosky*



'Them!'

Original 1954 cinema poster courtesy of Warner Bros.

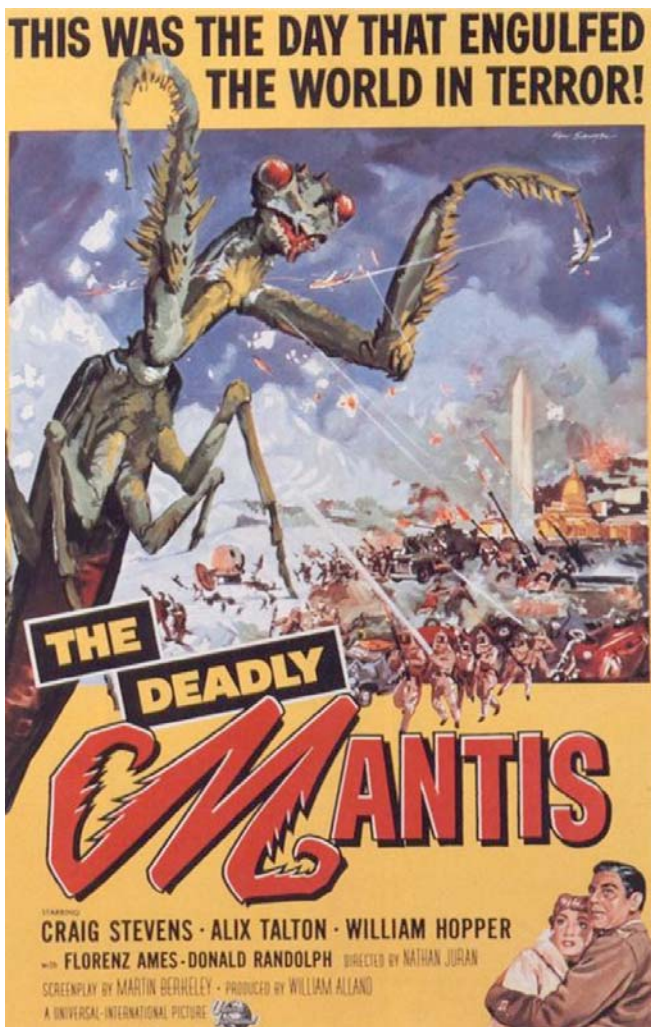
General familiarity with insects and related arthropods and their pervasive influence on human life make it unsurprising that they should appear in motion pictures, the most popular and populist art form of this and the previous century.<sup>1</sup> What is unexpected, though, is that they should appear as frequently as they do in highly magnified, unnatural forms in the so-called

"Big Bug Films."<sup>2</sup> This particular sub-genre of science fiction film (and horror film) blossomed in the USA in the 1950's when radiation-induced monstrosities stalked the cinematic landscape and flying saucers whirled across movie screens.<sup>3</sup> After some relatively fallow decades, it is now enjoying a recrudescence both on the big screen and in direct-to-video release in this first decade of the new



century.

The term “Big Bug Films” derives from the popular perception of the creatures involved and not from entomological classifications, and this group constitutes the most recognized subcategory of Insect Fear Films (which also include, most notably, films about normal-sized swarming insects and about the ill-advised and ill-fated scientific use of various aspects of insect biology). The designation “big bug” refers not only to genuine insects (class Insecta) but also to creatures which the uneducated observer (a group to which many filmmakers seem to belong) might include in that category – most frequently, members of the class Arachnida such as spiders and scorpions.



'The Deadly Mantis'

Original 1957 cinema poster courtesy of Universal Pictures.

It should also be noted that “big” is a relative term in at least two ways. First, the bug must be some orders of magnitude larger than it occurs in nature and second, it must be big in relation to a human being in the same film. A bee louse (*Braula coeca*) one centimeter long would

be a behemoth among bee lice, for example, but would escape notice from (non-beekeeping) human observers.<sup>4</sup>

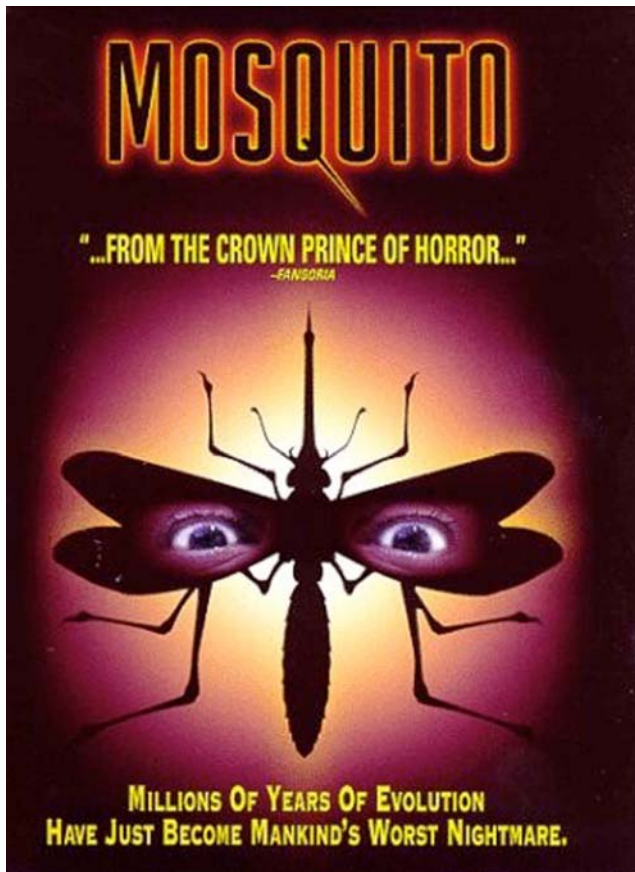
The largest insects or arachnids can easily (for the daring, non-entomophobic person) be held in the hand. For reasons well documented elsewhere, they cannot get larger than that and certainly not large enough to pick up Volkswagens.<sup>5</sup> But the laws of physics and biology have never been impediments for filmmakers with even the crudest special effects capabilities.

As noted earlier, the 1950's marked a great flowering of Big Bug Films, with more than a dozen movies featuring arthropods at least as large as humans and usually significantly larger as the main story device or as the menace in a significant episode.

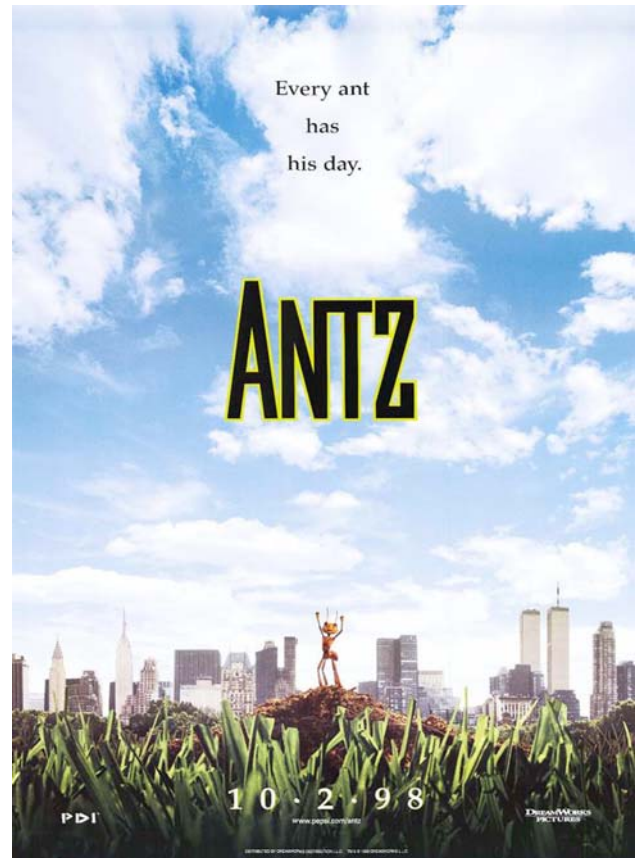
Many of these films –and certainly those with the highest budgets -- reflected the anxieties of observers the period concerning the dangers of atomic radiation in general and nuclear war in particular. In *Them!* (1954) the ants grow to their immense size as a result of residual radiation from the first atom bomb tests. In *Beginning of the End* (1957) the grasshoppers feed on produce the growth of which had been accelerated and increased by radiation. A nutrient activated by a radioactive isotope is the culprit in *Tarantula* (1955). And although radiation has nothing to do with the size of the creature (a survivor from prehistoric times) in *The Deadly Mantis*, its ability to penetrate America's defenses carries with it the implication that the country is vulnerable to nuclear attack.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, radiation seems to have gone well past its half-life in the popular imagination – at least as reflected in Big Bug Films. Of the Big Bug Films produced since 2000, only *Monster Island* (2002), a deliberately nostalgic homage to its 1950s ancestors, has its giant ants, mantids, and spiders caused by radiation (residual from A-bomb tests on the island decades earlier). More films depend on genetic engineering of one sort or another for their monsters: *Spiders* (2000), *Tail Sting* (2001), *Mimic 2* (2001), *Spiders 2: Breeding Ground* (2001), *Mimic Sentinel* (2003), *Bite Me!* (2004). *Stinger* (2005), however, tries to cover all bets by claiming that its giant scorpions resulted from the military using genetic engineering to enhance mutations caused years earlier by atomic testing.

Worry over unintended consequences of genetic engineering found its first Big Bug expression in *Mimic* (1997). To combat a virus spread by cockroaches, scientists engineer a new insect with DNA from termites and mantids, among others, to spread an equally engineered plague that targets roaches. Unfortunately, the so-called “Judas breed”



'Mosquito'  
Original 1995 cinema poster courtesy of AcmeFilms Ltd.



'Antz'  
Original 1998 cinema poster courtesy of DreamWorks.

does not die off as planned once its work is done but mutates over a few years into a human-sized form with external markings which make it look vaguely human in the dark. Then it colonizes abandoned New York City subway tunnels and starts eating people. The only way to combat this menace is for the scientist who developed the Judas breed to go into the subway tunnels herself and engage the creatures in hand-to-tarsus combat, as it were, while her husband, a CDC official, tries to blow them up en masse.

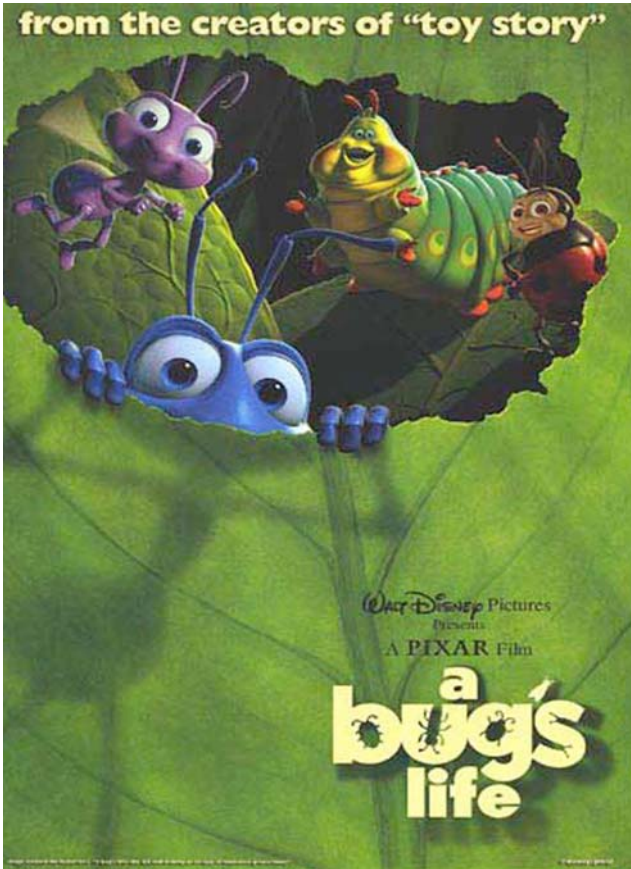
The relative popularity and critical cachet of *Mimic* certainly guaranteed imitators, and the film has even itself generated two sequels of increasingly inferior quality and decreasing numbers of insects (in proportion to progressively decreasing budgets).

This trend might seem to suggest that DNA research and genetic engineering are of greater popular concern than nuclear war in the new century – or at least of more concern to filmmakers. But a more plausible hypothesis is that entomophobia is the prime fear being actively played upon in contemporary Big Bug Films and that whatever makes the bugs big is largely irrelevant.

But a more plausible hypothesis is that entomophobia is the prime fear being actively played upon in contemporary Big Bug Films and that

whatever makes the bugs big is largely irrelevant (as evidenced in *Mosquito*, in which mosquitoes grow to the size of standard poodles as a consequence of feeding on the blood of aliens or Ticks (1993), in which ticks grow to the size of beagles as a consequence of encountering herbal steroid run off from an illegal marijuana farm and then feeding on the blood of a teenager hopped up on steroids?). Genetic engineering is merely the most recent hook on which to hang an implausible plot – the latest shorthand for “those darned know-it-all scientists are tampering with Nature again and who knows what the results will be (though a big profit at the box office would be nice).” Genetic engineering has the combined attractions for filmmakers of being something everyone has heard of but few know much about in detail and of being loudly suspect in some quarters. Also, it can be relatively cheap to represent (with a couple of test tubes, say, as opposed to a cyclotron or old A-bomb footage).

Other causes of implausible growth still appear in the Big Bug films as well, however. In the latter decades of the twentieth century, toxic waste and the profligate use of biochemical compounds became primary agents of arthropod enlargement, and even in the twenty-first century, toxic waste causes the giant spiders in the relatively big budget



'A Bug's Life'  
Original 1998 cinema poster courtesy of Walt Disney Pictures.



'Eight Legged Freaks'  
Original 2002 cinema poster courtesy of Warner Brothers Pictures.

*Eight-Legged Freaks* (2002). Prehistoric survival accounts for the title creatures in *Centipede* (2004) and the rhinoceros beetles in *Caved In* -- though even in previous geological periods the laws of physics would not have allowed such creatures to survive. Apart from different topical fears (radiation, toxic waste, genetic engineering gone wrong) varying over the decades, other psychological factors at work in Big Bug films have remained fairly constant over the years.

Insects and arachnids are as foreign to human experience as any familiar creature could possibly be. We encounter them every day, often in our own homes, sometimes on our own bodies, yet they are inalienably different from us. They have a multiplicity of legs and possibly even wings; they are orders of magnitude smaller than we are; they have external skeletons. Their faces are not like any mammal's: lacking a nose and ears and possessing too many and/or differently structured eyes, antennae, and radically different sorts of mouths. Add to that the fact that they ignore us totally except when they feed upon us. Emotional connections between the human world and the insect world are rare even though our existence arguably depends on theirs. They are the ultimate alien creatures and become only more so when they

prey upon us – the mosquitoes, lice, and fleas that suck our blood when we are alive and the flies and beetles that consume us when we are dead. Filmmakers thus have an immediately recognizable source of unease in confronting the Other, the Alien, when they make a Big Bug Film. The marked increase in production of such films in the first years of this century indicates that filmmakers working in a wide range of budgets and formats have recognized this, and that for low-budget filmmakers in particular this is a comfortable shorthand method for generating horror and fear in audiences (Big Bugs require no psychological motivation or even much of a back story).

When arthropods tower over humans or even just equal them in size (though still, of course, far exceeding them in physical abilities), the whole natural order has been overturned. Humans are no longer at the top of the food chain, the dominant form of life on the planet. Instead, they are relegated to the bottom, at the mercy of what formerly had been held to be the lowest of creatures. This is more than a denial of identity, it is a denial of worth, a denial of a place within the natural order, a denial of a future ("the beginning of the end").

For this reason, Big Bug films (indeed, all Insect Fear Films) can lay a valid claim to the horror

genre as well as to the science fiction genre. In fact, the makers of contemporary Big Bug films seem more inclined to lean toward horror than toward science fiction conventions.

In the 1950s films, if radiation was responsible for giant mutations, that theme would continue throughout much of the film in one form or another, usually with some authority figure explaining how such a mutation could come about and how the Big Bug might be expected to act based on the behavior of its normal-sized analogs. In contemporary films, the scientific cause gets little more than a nod, and then the running and the screaming start. The filmmakers play on fairly basic fears that go beyond topical anxieties.

Significantly and almost paradoxically, contemporary Big Bug Films usually take place in confined spaces, and these spaces are, as often as not, dark. What could be worse than confronting a Big Bug that wants to eat you? That's easy: confronting a Big Bug that wants to eat you in a tight space in the dark with little chance of you getting away. Both *Centipede* and *Caved In: Prehistoric Terror* take place in caves. Both *Monster Island* and *Eight-Legged Freaks* start their human cast evading giant predators outdoors but eventually herd them into caverns for showdowns. *Tail Sting* sets giant scorpions loose on a plane (five years before *Snakes on a Plane* it should be noted), and *Stinger* has similar (but visibly cheaper) horrors rampaging through a nuclear submarine (which looks suspiciously like someone's basement) with the lights off. The Mimic hybrids infest subway tunnels and tenement basements.

Of course, there are also practical considerations behind the choice of confined, dark settings which in some cases may even outweigh the fright factor. Such limited visual contexts make it possible, for instance, to save on the special effects budget by not always showing the creatures clearly or in their entirety. Even with current computerized special effects, it is sometimes prudent to keep the monster in shadows, not only to heighten tension but also to save money or conceal less than perfect renderings of the creature.

For some years in the development of computer-generated imagery (CGI) during the latter part of the twentieth century, programmers had been working on specific problems such as mapping curved surfaces, tracing reflections from point light sources, and joining narrow cylinders to shapes with larger volumes. As these challenges were met, the solutions were demonstrated in short animated films, often with little or no plot, and subsequently found their way into feature-length animated films and into otherwise live-action films as special effects.

The specific challenges just noted were by no means the only ones CGI programmers grappled

with, but they are especially relevant in the depiction of insects. The solution of these problems in the mid-1990's goes a long way toward explaining the coincidence of the only two CGI animated features of 1998 focusing on insects -- Dreamworks' *Antz* and Pixar and Disney's *A Bug's Life*.

As the cost of CGI has come down and as computers have permeated the film industry even at the amateur level, making convincing arthropod monsters (and not so convincing ones, too) has become very cost-efficient, and this may well explain the burst of Big Bug films in the twenty-first century. Creative choices (or necessities) may still lead filmmakers to employ older methods of representing such creatures (stop motion animation of models was chosen for *Monster Island* for a nostalgic effect, for instance, and the largest scorpion -- inevitably identified as the "queen" -- in *Tail Sting* is really an actor in a scorpion suit), but CGI has come to dominate the field. And this development holds the promise (or threat?) of many more Big Bug films to come.

*Richard J. Leskosky is the associate director of the Unit for Cinema Studies at the university of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He is a former president of the society of Animation Studies and conducts research on pre-cinematic illusory movement devices. He has collaborated with May Berenbaum on a number of projects relating insects and cinema.*

*'The Real Millennium Bug' is a 'departure' from 'Size Matters: Big Bugs on the Big Screen' by the same author, as featured in 'Insect Poetics', published by Minnesota Press.*

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of insects in the cinema, see Berenbaum, May R., and Leskosky, Richard J. (2003), "Insects in Movies" in Resh, Vincent H., and Carde, Ring T. (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Insects* (Academic Press, San Diego, CA).

<sup>2</sup> Giant mammals appear much less frequently and are generally King Kong and his simian relatives or else rodents of various species. Dinosaurs have enjoyed some popularity on the big screen at various times, but, though large, they are presumed to be normal sized, for dinosaurs. For a more extensive discussion of the history of Big Bug films, see Leskosky Richard J. (2006) "Size Matters: Big Bugs on the Big Screen" in Brown, Eric C. (ed.) *Insect Poetics* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN).

<sup>3</sup> For an extensive discussion of alien invasion films of the 1950's, see Luciano, Patrick (1987), *Them or Us: Archetypal Interpretations of Fifties Alien Invasion Films* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN). For a broader discussion of 1950's horror and science fiction films, see Jancovich, Mark (1996), *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s* (Manchester University Press, New York, NY).

<sup>4</sup> The crucial sci-fi/horror relationship may arise not from the bug being any greater than its normal size in the real world, however. Instead, the human may have been shrunk to sub-insect size -- as in *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957), *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids!* (1989), and *Antibody* (2002). In each of these cases, though, the "Big Bug" aspect of the film is restricted to one or two episodes rather than serving as the main story element.

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed discussion of why truly large insects are not physically possible, see Berenbaum, May R. (1995), *Bugs in the System: Insects and Their Impact on Human Affairs* (Addison Wesley, Reading, MA).

# ENTIRELY PLAUSIBLE HYBRIDS OF HUMANS AND INSECTS

*The work of Tessa Farmer challenges mythologies attached to both super-natural beings and those associated with 'natural selection' and narratives of evolution.*

*Text by Alistair Robinson & Marie Irving*



Frances and Elise Wright

Cottingley Fairies, 1917-20. Courtesy of National Museum of Photography Film and Television.

“As the chemist in his experiments is sometimes astonished to find unknown, unexpected elements in the crucible of the receiver, as the world of material things is considered by some a thin veil of the immaterial universe, so he who reads wonderful prose or verse is conscious of suggestions that cannot be put into words, which do not rise from the logical sense, which are rather parallel to than connected with sensuous delight. The world so disclosed is rather the world of dreams.”  
Arthur Machen,  
‘The Hill of Dreams’, 1907

Tessa Farmer creates microscopically detailed sculptures – collectively named ‘hell’s angels’ and ‘fairies’. Their intricate skeletal forms are crafted from organic material including tree roots and insectile remains. Like the Wright sisters, she presents objects not as the result of exceptional ingenuity but as ‘found objects’. The artist describes herself as an intermediary, like a Victorian naturalist bringing a newly discovered species to public attention. These fairies are presented as being simply parts of the natural world that have yet to be



Tessa Farmer

Swarm (Detail, Hornet Versus Fairy), 2003-2004, plant roots and insects, dimensions variable-insect scale

classified. As the artist remarks, “the first fairy emerged, foetal life, from deep inside a vibrant red tulip... the first swarm invaded Oxford during June 2000, and were to return three years later, having evolved and shrunk to the size of small insects...”

The artist’s extraordinary creations appear as phantasms or apparitions in our immediate field of vision, inspiring both genuine wonder and amazement, as the Wright sisters’ fairies did a century earlier. They’re ordinarily too small to view properly without a magnifying glass, forcing us to inspect them at an extreme and unnervingly close range. Her battalions of warring angels are each some ten millimeters tall, and often seen in intense combat swarming around ‘real’, found insects. Presenting her own ‘new’ species alongside ‘real’ flies and wasps blurs the boundaries between the fantastical and the natural. Seen at an uncomfortable proximity, our eye accepts the continuity between the two, and reads the fairies as sensate, animate beings. The artist’s ability to endow raw materials with a life-force brings to mind Emile Zola’s dictum that “the artist’s struggle with reality... is in trying to make something that ‘lives’”. It is almost impossible to distinguish between the organic ‘raw materials’ in

front of our eyes and the fantasies that we want to believe in.

Farmer’s work confuses the mythologies attached to both super-natural beings and those associated with ‘natural selection’ and narratives of evolution. Each work echoes the idea that fairies are so small and agile that they are beyond ordinary perception, whilst suggesting that these beings are entirely plausible hybrids of human and insect. In gallery installations, we are forced to view the ‘swarms’ of fairies by peering, uneasily and with one eye, into a magnifying glass. From being hazy specks viewed with the naked eye, when magnified they are transformed: rather than appearing delicate or ethereal, they are shockingly large, monstrous creatures. Our response when having to encounter other beings at such intimidatingly close range is one of trepidation, even fear or horror. Adjusting to this new point of view, we oscillate between fascination and repulsion, or between exhilaration and alarm. The effect echoes the magical changes of scale and proportion which Alice undergoes. Yet the artist’s games with perception and scale serve serious purposes; in demanding our closest attention, Farmer inverts the terms on which the sublime is



Tessa Farmer

Swarm, 2003-2004, plant roots and insects, dimensions variable-insect scale

normally understood. When the microscopic is read as massively enlarged, we feel a combination of incompatible sensations – of intimacy and terror. Unexpectedly, our senses are overwhelmed by a still life, rather than by a landscape. Farmer reverses our power relationship to other species, as though inverting Gloucester's lines in *King Lear*: "Like flies to small boys we are to the Gods / They kill us for their sport". Here, the fairies are predators, godlike in form, agility and strength; and we are passive observers, in awe of their blood-sport pastimes.

Being invited to attend to the most infinitesimally small details of the 'natural' world evokes contrary sensations. At first, we feel like investigative scientists with magnifying equipment examining a new species. Quite soon, we become akin to Romantic visionaries exploring the outer reaches of our ordinary sensory thresholds. The fairies' can bring to mind William Blake's double-edged view of natural life. Individually they recall the protagonist of Blake's 'Ghost of a Flea', where animal life seems characterised by blood-thirsty aggression and malevolence. Yet as a totality, Farmer's work brings

to mind Blake's desire "to see the world in a grain of sand" by opening our imaginative flood-gates. Being half mammal and half skeleton, Tessa Farmer's fairies occupy what seems to be a visionary, transitory state between life and death. Unlike the Wrights' fairies, Farmer's are barbarous, violent creatures, waging war on each other and upon the animal kingdom that surrounds them. The artist herself notes: "the fairies' macabre appearance echoes their disconcerting behaviour. On peering closely into the 'Swarm', sinister scenes of abuse and bewildering chimeras emerge as we become absorbed into this almost apocalyptic vision." The animating force behind even these, the smallest of all creatures, would seem to be belligerence and brutality, Farmer suggests. Nevertheless, a bittersweet humour underwrites her practice. Though we might view them as the unintended fruits of malign laboratory experiments, we cannot fail to be aware of their riotous absurdity. Her alchemical transformations of ordinary matter into vivid, enthralling life give shape to things as yet unknown, inspiring empathy and apprehension, wonder and anxiety in equal measure.

# IN CONVERSATION WITH TESSA FARMER

*Tessa Farmer, the 'fairy godmother', speaks to Antennae about her little creatures; the care and painstaking attention to detail that goes in the process of her creations; her love for insects and her current artistic-scientific research at the Natural History Museum in London.*

*Questions by Giovanni Aloï and Eric Frank*

## **W**hen did you meet the first fairy?

I think it was 1999 in my mum's garden in Birmingham. It was lying inside a red tulip, like a fetus – quite large, about 7cm long. I showed it to my brother who thought it was real and was quite disgusted by it.

**No surprise he thought it was a real fetus! Your creations present the viewer with an accurate anatomical representation that is almost disturbing.**

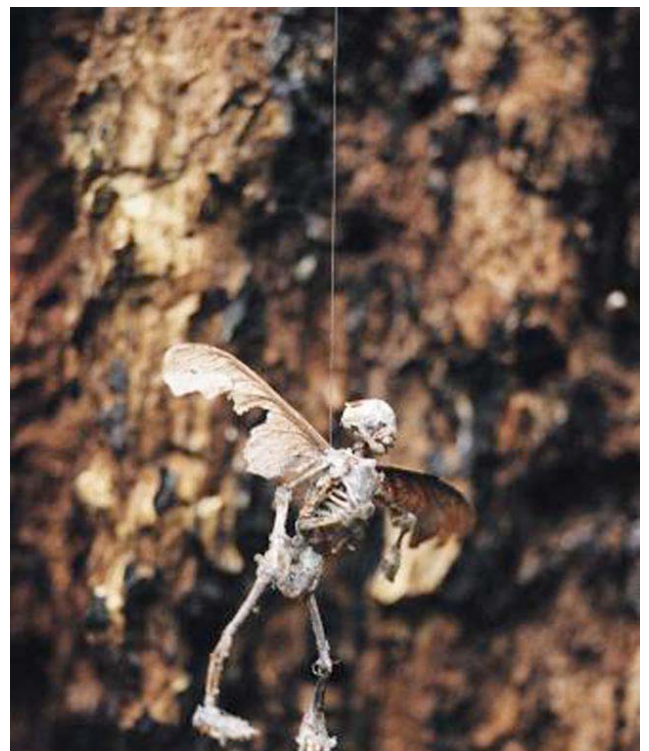
As part of the first year of my BFA at the Ruskin, Oxford University, we studied human anatomy – learning how to draw the human skeletal form, how to observe a life model and draw their skeleton rather than their body – I little like x ray vision I suppose. Simultaneously I was making sculptural work out of natural materials, making subtle interventions in the environment. To get to grips with the human skeleton, I built a small skeleton (about 50 cm tall) from twigs and bark stuck together using a glue-gun. It was autumn, and it was made with the intention to sit it on a seat that had been carved out a tree trunk in Magdalen College grounds. After this I built a life size skeleton, and having got to grips with the form and the process made the first fairy – the fetus skeleton in the tulip. It grew wings when I was foraging for twigs and came across leaf-skeletons which immediately suggested themselves to the purpose.

**The main theme of your work is informed by the behaviour of social insects; in your installations, fairies are an unstoppable army of evil. Why are they usually up to no good?**

The first swarm of fairies appeared in 2000 in Oxford (in my degree show). These were about 6

cm tall, with leaf skeleton wings. There was a swarm of around 70, flying around and cavorting in a basement room in the art school. They were mischievous, but not particularly nasty, although I suspect evil intentions may have been apparent even then. I had in mind a swarm of locusts on a flight of devastation, or a swarm of angry wasps or bees attacking a human intruder.

When I realised the skeleton in the tulip was a fairy, I began reading about the history of fairies and discovered that contrary to the flower fairies I had grown up with, earlier fairies were born from a fear of blank spaces and darkness - associated with demons and believed to be the souls of the dead or fallen angels. They were linked to disease, the dead and death.



Tessa Farmer  
Early Fairy, 2000.





**Tessa Farmer**

Swarm, 2003-2004, plant roots and insects, dimensions variable-insect  
scale



**Tessa Farmer**  
The Desecration of the Swallow, 2007, dimensions variable-insect scale

"Changelings were only one manifestation of their power, and the fairies' general connections with parasitism were even more anxiety provoking, for they suggested evils as subtly amorphous and ambiguous as fairy nature. In the minds of the folk, moreover, fairies were linked to other evils - to disease, to death and the dead, and to witches. And they were all around. The invisible powers crowded the lives of the rural people of Scotland and Ireland".  
 (p.150, *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and the Victorian Consciousness*, Carole G Silver, Oxford university Press 1999)

### Is there a specific moment in history that sees fairies becoming small?

Shakespeare was responsible for the miniaturisation of fairies to insect size winged creatures. The fairies in *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer's Night Dream* are less complex, more benign beings. Miniaturisation has an effect of sophistication and civility – there is a transformative effect as everyday things become remarkable; intense observation and microscopic detail can reveal new worlds. Michael Drayton (a contemporary of Shakespeare) wrote 'Nymphidia – the Court of Fairy' 1627, which has been very influential for me in terms of its imagery and the fairies' interaction with insects. *Nymphidia* tells the tale of the fairy king's rampage on finding out the fairy queen is having an affair. I made two pieces inspired by this poem – the first, 'Nymphidia' in 2005, was an attack on a wasps' nest, and the second 'The Court of Fairy' 2006, was a piece of architecture built from animal bones and insects, inspired by the social structure of termite mounds. (My fairies reached insect size in 2003, and since then they have continued to shrink. the smaller they become, the more 'sophisticated', and the more powerful.)

*“This palace standeth in the air,  
 By necromancy placed there,  
 That it no tempests needs to fear,  
 Which way soe'er it blow it ;  
 And somewhat southward toward the noon,  
 Whence lies a way up to the moon,  
 And thence the Fairy can as soon  
 Pass to the earth below it.  
 The walls of spiders' legs are made  
 Well mortised and finely laid ;  
 He was the master of his trade  
 It curiously that builded ;  
 The windows of the eyes of cats,  
 And for the roof, instead of slats,  
 Is covered with the skins of bats,  
 With moonshine that are gilded.” \**



Tessa Farmer  
 Swarm, 2003-2004, plant roots, insect parts and spider, dimensions variable-insect scale

**It has been said about your fairies that “They acknowledge the nastier side of childhood imagination and represent the antithesis of the Victorian notions of fantasy they seem to emulate.” Do you agree?**

The Victorians yearned for romance and fantasy in an ugly world overwhelmed by the industrial revolution. Sugar-plum sweet images of fairies were commonplace, but there were also paintings of darker, more complex fantasies. It has been said my fairies are like little boys who pull the legs of spiders. I suppose you can defend them, saying that by pulling apart insects they are learning about their structure, but I think it's just cruelty, and having the power.

My brother used to frazzle ants with a magnifying glass and the sun, and also pick tadpoles out of the pond and squash them between his thumbs. And these are just the activities I saw! I dread to think what else went on...he did have a chemistry set in the garage so I imagine a few insects found there way in there too... My sister and I never partook, I think it's a male thing – I was always quite squeamish around insects, which seems odd as now I am obsessed with them!

**The 16<sup>th</sup> Century poetry of Michael Drayton, Richard Doyle's paintings and**



Tessa Farmer  
Swarm, 2003-2004, plant roots, insects, dimensions variable-insect scale

**Arthur Machen’s supernatural horror fiction are sources of inspiration behind your fairies. How do these characters inform your work?**

As well as the pretty wispy fairies widespread in Victorian Fairy paintings, many showed insect sized fairies tormenting the creatures around them. Richard Doyle's 'In Fairyland' is a series of illustrations of impish fairies in the undergrowth. On closer attention, there are scenes of cruelty towards the birds, insects and snails that serve as their mounts. Another example is the paintings by John Anster Fitzgerald.



Richard Doyle  
Teasing a Butterfly, Illustration from 'Princess Nobody' by Andrew Long 1884. 2003-2004,

At this time cruelty towards animals was more acceptable than fairy cruelty towards mortals. Representations of evil were displaced onto more culturally tolerated formats. These scenes are very influential – in my pieces I am trying to create similar scenes – glimpses into fairyland - encompassing small narratives e.g. 'The Parade of the Captive Hedgehog' is inspired by 'The Triumphal March of the Elf King' by Richard Doyle.

Arthur Machen was my great grandfather – I wasn't aware of his writings until a member of the Friends of Arthur Machen came across some of my work (through my Grandmother) and wrote to me asking whether I had noticed the similarities between some of his stories and my work. As I went on to learn, Machen wrote supernatural horror stories intertwining mythology, forces of nature- a recurring theme is the interpenetration of our world and 'another world.

Arthur Machen creates with words that which I anticipate through sculpture. Machen believed that imagination rather than intellect was the vital portion of the soul of man; his aim was to restore the sense of wonder and mystery into our perception of the world, by revealing the beauty hidden beneath the crust of commonplace things. He had a firm belief in another world beyond the shadows of this one, and strove to rend the veil, thus communicating the sense of this secret reality. Having discovered his writing I felt that I had found not only an ally, but also a guide into another reality."

Machen believed in sinister fairies, or 'the little people' - they appeared in short stories such as

'The White People', 'Out of the Earth' and 'The Shining pyramid' and were responsible for abductions, murders and rapes. They lurk in subterranean dwellings under the hills in the wildest and remotest countryside; beyond the boundaries of the known, in the darkness of our past. Their closeness to physical nature links them with the bestial and the wild. Their need and desire for human energy forces them to abduct humans, sometimes babies, replacing them with changelings. In 'Out of the Earth' such creature, who wreak havoc in a quiet seaside village, are only visible to children and the child-like; "He peered over the green wall of the fort, and there in the ditch he saw a swarm of noisome children, horrible little stunted creatures with old men's faces, with bloated faces, with little sunken eyes, with leering eyes. It was worse than uncovering a brood of snakes or a nest of worms."

**The attention to detail in your work borders the unbelievable. The miniscule rib cages, skulls and perfectly formed pelvises drive the viewer to suspect, even if for a few seconds, that the fairies are as**

**real as the insects included in the installation. How do they come to life and how long does it take to create one?**

I started making them with small twigs stuck together with a glue-gun, and using leaf-skeletons as wings, then to make them smaller I used the veins of the leaf skeletons as bones. Then I came across roots which really are perfect material as they can be so fine, but still strong and quite flexible. I build up the skeletons by sticking pieces of roots together with superglue. The skulls are made from tiny clumps of earth drenched in superglue, carved into a cranium shape, then the facial bones are added. They don't have teeth, kneecaps or all the finger/ toe bones, but this leaves room for improvement which is always a good thing! I hope to make them smaller, to try making them under a microscope... I'm not sure I would want them to become invisible to the naked eye though... there is that element of magic when the viewer sees them and takes a while to notice what they really are, if this happens at all – sometimes people don't see them, which I think is quite nice, as it reflects the fact that some people can see fairies, and others can't!



Tessa Farmer  
The Terror, 2006, plant roots, insects, dimensions variable-insect scale

**In your work fairies are presented as simply being part of the portion of natural world that has yet to be classified. You are currently working at the Natural History Museum in London to research the history of development of the fairies. How is your research going?**

Having access to the entomology collections at NHM is amazing, it's such a shame that more collections aren't on view to the general public. They have millions of specimens, and these are awe inspiring. I am particularly interested in parasitic wasps, and I think herein may lie the answer to the origin of my fairies. There are around 6000 different kinds of parasitic wasps in the UK, most are tiny ( a few millimeters long), and generally people have no idea about them and the often disturbing behaviour they employ to procreate.

This is an opportunity to investigate the fairies and inform their next developmental stage – The project will culminate in an exhibition in October comprising an installation in case, drawings and a stop motion animation. The idea is that the fairies have infiltrated the museum and the

collections... I was talking to a zoologist yesterday about pests, and they have big problems in mammals as there is a pest for everything! Insects that eat the fur, insects that eat the labels, others that eat the skin – they have industrial deep freezers that all organic material must go into before going on display, including the fairies that I will show at the museum. I did a test freeze at -40 degrees centigrade, and I'm happy to say the fairies survived. I was quite worried about how the temperature would affect the superglue, but hopefully this won't be a problem.

**Half-human, half-insect, the fairies always seem to have the better over other insects and small mammals. What drives them?**

I know, I think they are due an encounter with a feasible enemy. I suspect once the fairies start attacking humans, they may be in a for a challenge. At the moment, they're just too successful, I suppose it's that winning combination of human intelligence and insect 'intelligence'.

The driving force though is my 'quest'



Tessa Farmer

Swarm, Detail: Crane-fly Torture, 2003-2004, plant roots, insects, dimensions variable-insect scale

for knowledge' to find out more about this species and my ambition as ' a creator' (I do worry sometimes that I enjoy too much the scenes of violence and torture that I create. I am a quiet, gentle person, but perhaps I have deep-seated anger issues!

**The fairies have also managed to infiltrate the collection of Charles Saatchi. What are the storage and shipping requirements for your installations? Do you to install them in person?**

I'm very lucky because I get to travel a lot – I have to install the pieces wherever they are shown, and I always carry them with me. It's quite time consuming, but to be honest I enjoy having a continued relationship with my pieces.

I pack the fairies in plastic containers with small compartments inside. I've had no problems with customs, except in Germany where I always get stopped and searched, Invariably the security staff

run off screaming – it's quite funny. I also get to meet a lot of people, and when someone buys a piece I enjoy meeting them, seeing their collection and being able to explain more about the fairies.

**Are you interested in insects as much as you are interested in fairies?**

I think the idea of fairies is inherent in our history, and in a way fewer people know much about insects which makes them very alien. The scope is quite overwhelming. There is so much to learn about... Insects are the way forward for me – never ending inspiration. I think once you start learning about, and observing the insects around you, it makes you feel quite privileged to have this insight into a world that few can properly 'see'

**Where do the insects and other animals involved in your work come from? In conversation, it appears clear that you talk about the fairies as they really exist.**



Tessa Farmer  
Parade, Snakeship, 2006, plant roots, insects, bones, dimensions  
variable-insect scale

## Do they?

I collect them from the streets in summer, from greenhouse, windowsills etc - all dead already. I don't kill anything, and although I can see the importance of collecting insects for scientific purposes, I don't think this can be justified for art. I have a network of family and friends who also collect for me. Sometimes I buy from eBay – my best buy was a jar of wasps a couple of years ago. My stuffed hedgehog also came from eBay, and I have bought a few old insect collections. However I resist the collections of exotic insects from Indonesia as these have been hunted and killed for the purpose. I enjoy the random nature of collecting, learning about what I find, or is given to me, and how this can inform the development of the fairies. The fairies are very real to me, I am definitely obsessed, or should that be possessed? – I suppose 8 years is quite a long time to be pursuing one line of work, but on a scale it's nothing, and I get excited thinking maybe 20 years ahead, and where the fairies will be then.

*\*Michael Drayton's "Nymphidia" (1627) from A Sixteenth Century Anthology. Arthur Symons, Ed. London: Blackie & Son, Ltd., 1905. 290*

*Tessa Farmer was interviewed by Giovanni Aloï between June and August 2007 © Antennae*



Tessa Farmer

Desecration of the Swallow (detail), 2007, plant roots, insects, bones, swallow, dimensions variable-insect scale



## Tessa Farmer

*Little Savages*

*Natural History Museum, London*



**6 October 2007 – 27 January 2008**

Tessa Farmer's work involves highly detailed mise-en-scenes of plant roots, bones, insects and animals engaged in ferocious battle. Her creations are located in a space between preservation and perversion: the reality of the taxidermist pitched against an alternative world of fantasy, in which bloodthirsty fairies launch invasions and declare their supremacy over a host of worthy opponents. Farmer's fairies are rooted in Gothic and Renaissance folklores that recognise a darker sense of purpose – harbingers of destruction rather than Disney-topped confections.

In June 2007, Farmer began a residency with the Natural History Museum. Working with experts from a variety of specialisations within the Department of Entomology, she entered into discussions with Gavin Broad, Stuart Hine, Jan Beccaloni, David Goodger, Andy Polaszek and Sharon Shute. She has devoted much of her research to the parasitic wasp, which habitually invades and devours other creatures in order to survive and prosper.

Work produced in response to new information and ideas gathered and exchanged will be shown in the Museum Central Hall in Bay Eight. Farmer has produced a sculptural installation for the vitrine, in which her minute fairies stage a gruesome sortie, reminiscent of the parasitic wasp, on a fox in a bid to use its body as a host for future generations. Drawings produced during the residency echo Farmer's experiences in the lab: developed with the aid of a microscope, there is a sense of 'legitimacy' to many of these fraudulent, deviant drawings that suggest the hand of the scientific illustrator. A stop-motion animation, developed as a collaboration with Sean Daniels, reveals a 'behind the scenes' version of events within the Museum's storage areas. Away from the public eye, out of the view of the scientists, a new landscape has emerged: littered with bones and insects, a single fairy lures a long horned beetle out from a 'cave' and a gathering horde of fairies overcome their prey.

The residency and exhibition are documented in a catalogue, featuring commissioned texts from Bergit Arends, Jane Neal, Gavin Broad and Stuart Hine. A discussion between entomologist Gavin Broad and Tessa Farmer will take place during the exhibition period.

Tessa Farmer received an MA from the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, University of Oxford. She was selected for *New Contemporaries* in 2004, and has shown at firstsite, Colchester, Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland and in Parabola's *Repatriating the Ark* at the Museum of Garden History. Her work will be shown at the new Saatchi Gallery in 2008 and the Museum of Old and New Art, Tasmania in 2009.

*Little Savages* is curated by Danielle Arnaud, Parabola. The residency would not have been possible without the support of Bergit Arends, Curator of Contemporary Arts and Mandy Holloway, Zoology Enquiries and Public Access Co-ordinator at the Natural History Museum, London. The residency is funded by Arts Council England, David Roberts and the Natural History Museum. For more information about *Little Savages*, please contact: Danielle Arnaud, [danielle@parabolatrust.org](mailto:danielle@parabolatrust.org), 020 7735 8292



*Parabola* is a commissioning and curatorial body dedicated to the production of contemporary art and critical debate. Through its exhibitions, publications and events, *Parabola* attempts to invigorate dialogues between different groups and disciplines, from architecture and new technologies, to museological practice and the interpretation of histories.

# THE CONTEMPORARY UNEASINESS WITH ENTOMOLOGY DISPLAYS

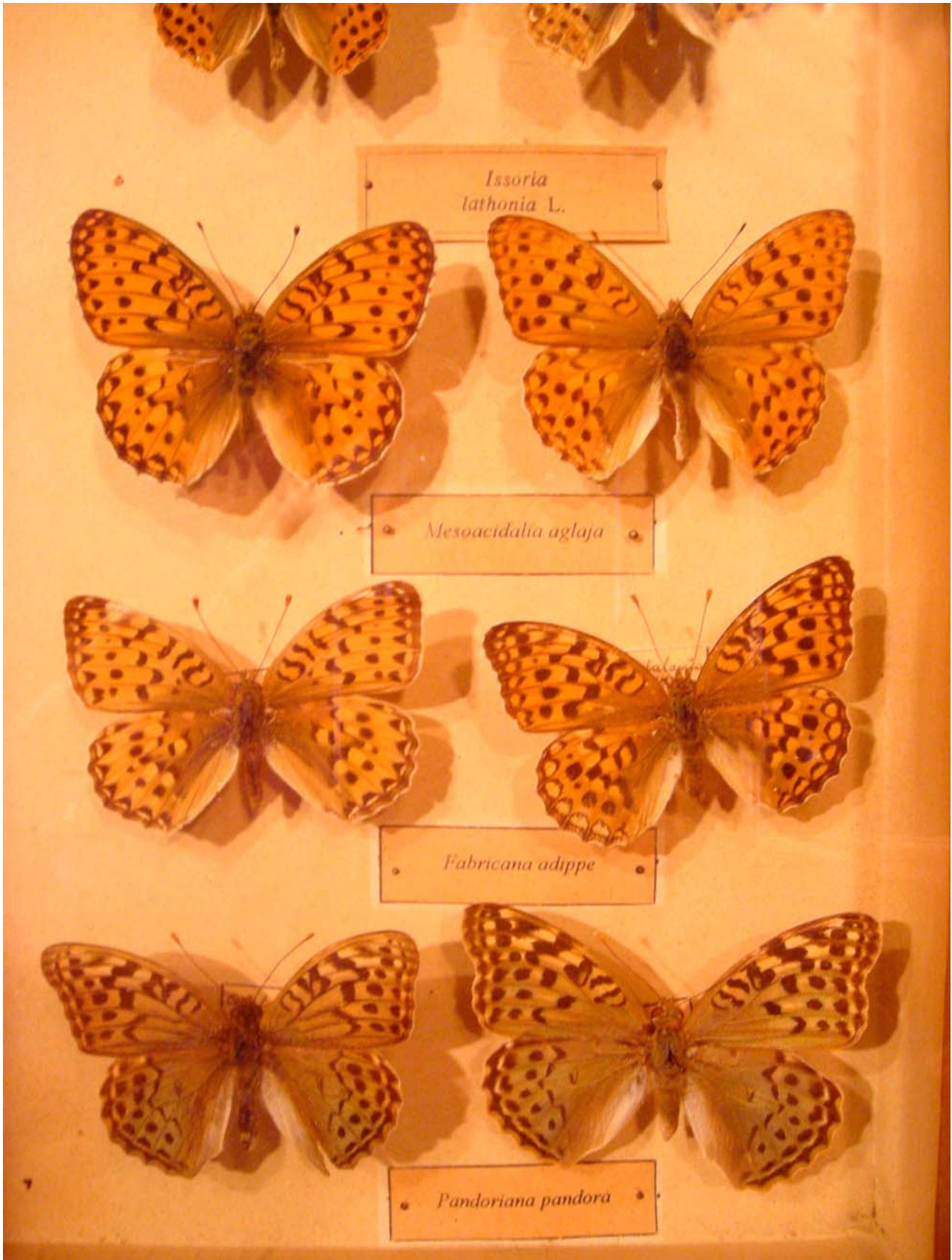
*Entomology display cabinets are consistently disappearing from Natural History Museums around the world and are being replaced by a number of exhibiting alternatives. With a little concern Antennae asked some of the most influential entomologists to explain the current trend.  
Text by Giovanni Aloï*



Entomology Display Cabinets  
El Museo de Ciencias Naturales de Ciutadella - Barcelona

**D**uring a recent trip to Barcelona I had the opportunity to visit the local Natural History Museum: El Museo de Ciencias Naturales de la Ciutadella. This is a relatively small museum with its comprehensive collection housed into one large room. It is particularly noticeable that its exhibiting space is filled with old fashioned display cabinets. The organisation of the collection belongs to the old tradition of the Natural History Museum; so old it does not even have a diorama behind its collection of birds of prey. Here specimens are organised on shelves, too close to each other to create a scene and too stiff in their posing to evoke a sense of naturalness.

Ironically, in this incredibly well preserved museum, of all the rare specimens housed between its four walls it is the entomology display-cabinets themselves that will soon be extinct. The cabinets and cases on display, as you would expect, contain a range of insects traditionally secured with a long pin inserted through the thorax. Just below each specimen, a paper tag (at times handwritten) bears the scientific name of the insects. Although a vast number of specimens in the cases has bleached, muting the metallic colours of beetle's elytras and taking the sparkle off of butterflies' wings, the presence of the collection seems to command interest and respect from its visitors.



Insect collecting is a very old 'love at first sight' affair with its history embracing the amateurish and the scientific with equal intensity. Part of the fascination might lie in the time-resistant quality of the exoskeleton, which can retain shapes and colours for a long period of time.

Most importantly, insect collecting gives the opportunity to gaze at these magnificent beings close up. In the cabinet, dead but seemingly alive, insects essentially retain their more objectified essence: that which some people like to describe as the jewel of nature's design and architecture.

As I child I remember endless winter afternoons spent gazing at the entomology cases in Milan's Museo di Storia Naturale, soaking in the overwhelming sense of awe and amazement in front of the tropical butterflies exhibit. Today, my encounter with entomology display cabinets may be reminiscent of childhood memories therefore filling the cabinets with more than just dried specimens. The encounter with this old fashioned method of display also brought me to consider the role of entomology display cabinets in contemporary exhibits and to wonder why this traditionally scientific format seems to have been abandoned in order to be replaced with much lighter exhibits, some of which go by the name of 'Creepy Crawlies'.

This shift seems to have become the trend at least over the past five years. In the most extreme of cases, Entomology sections of museums have been replaced by 'Creepy Crawlies' exhibits so that the category 'Insects' is no longer featured along with mammals, birds, fish etc. The Natural History Museum in London has already replaced their great cabinet exhibit with a Creepy Crawlies 'interactive experience' and so has the Field Museum in Chicago. Both museums once housed some of the greatest entomology exhibits open to the public.

'Creepy Crawlies' exhibits have quickly conquered the museum-world presenting a series of expedients designed to entertain kids and alleviate the pain of parents. More similar to mini amusement parks than to museum exhibits, all 'Creepy Crawlies' buzz with lights and sounds, and are full of buttons to push and holes to gaze through. Each technological advancement featured in these exhibits is meant to deliver a piece of information about the mysterious world of the undergrowth; yet it seems that kids enjoy them far more for what they really are: insect-themed mini-amusement parks. They run around, they scream as they chase each other, bash buttons, spin handles, and rarely pay any attention to the educational reward that springs from these actions.

These exhibit displays are clearly targeting a very young audience leaving us wondering to what extent these new approaches reflect a need to attract bigger crowds in order to receive more public funding.

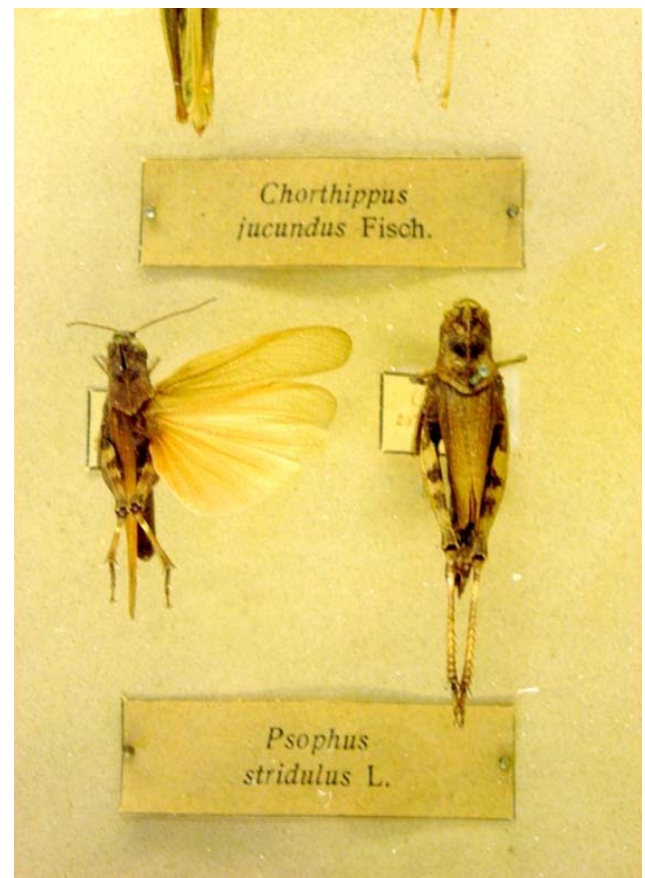
As a child you may think that 'Creepy Crawlies' exhibits are a lot of fun and that the Natural History Museum is a great place to visit; as an adult you leave the museum feeling that an institution dedicated to studying and presenting life on earth has grossly misrepresented the most abundant and diverse group of beings leaving on this planet.

Great part of my uneasiness with this shift toward child-entertainment lies with the term 'Creepy Crawlies' itself, which seems to carry a range of negative connotations and deep vagueness about the

class it is trying to represent. The website of the Natural History Museum in London advertises the exhibit as follows: 'Satisfy your curiosity about ants, hawk moths, termites, hermit crabs – and thousands of their relatives'.<sup>1</sup> This suggests that the phylum in question is that of the Arthropods or in other words the exhibits bring together all creatures that the uninterested eye recognizes as creepy because of their crawling habits.

The argument here becomes manifold: is this another example of dumbing down? ; what role does the need for public funding play in the spreading of 'Creepy Crawlies' exhibits around the world?; are entomology display cabinets to be considered completely obsolete and redundant?

To bring some light over these issues Antennae contacted a number of entomologists working in Natural History Museums around the world and collated a range of responses on the subject. Our survey highlighted that it was a convention for a Natural History Museums to have on show 'entomology display cabinets' to the public. These were generally withdrawn from the exhibiting areas between 10 to 20 years ago and seem to have been replaced by a number of other exhibiting solutions including 'Creepy Crawlies' exhibits.



<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nhm.ac.uk/visit-us/galleries/green-zone/creepy-crawlies/index.html>



**Lepidoptera Cabinet**

Original El Museo de Ciencias Naturales de la Ciutadella, Barcelona.  
Giovanni Aloï©

Professor Simon Tillier of the Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris confirms: "The Entomology collection has been suppressed in the nineties. Some insects are exhibited as parts of the demonstrations in the Grande Galerie de l'Evolution, but there is no specific entomology (nor any other taxon-oriented) section.

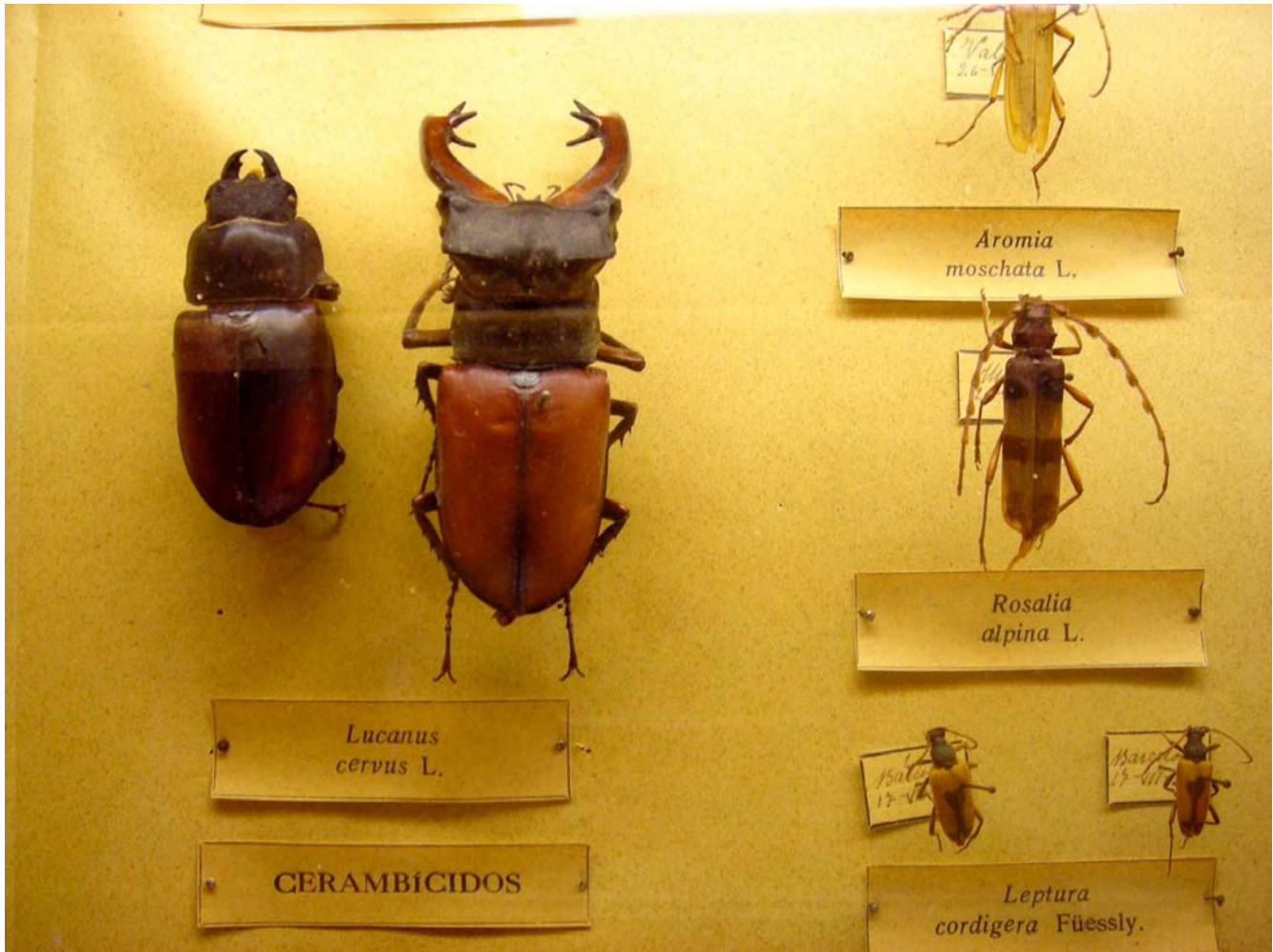
Dr Randall, of the American Museum of Natural History in New York told us about a radically different approach taken by the museum that has incorporated the still popular format of the butterfly house: "The museum now has a live

new permanent exhibit on insects and other arthropods, following two very successful temporary exhibits on beetles and butterflies, respectively.

Our questions about the removal of the traditional exhibit of entomology display cabinets allowed for the surfacing of issues which are specific to the entomology exhibit.

Petra Sierwald at the Field Museum in Chicago told us that:

a) Museum administrators, the public and exhibit



butterfly exhibit that has been open 6 months per year for the last 6 years. The exhibit includes an introductory area dealing with the natural history and systematics of Lepidoptera. All species used are farm raised, as we have not permits to raise exotic species or to maintain their hosts". Similarly, the Smithsonian Institution has set up live exhibits involving primarily live butterflies, and an associated exhibit on co-evolution, which includes many moths and butterflies as well as plants, hummingbirds, etc."

The Harvard Museum of Natural History constitutes a rare exception with the opening of a

developers often do not know enough about the arthropods to initiate exhibits.

b) Insects (and other arthropods) are small and hard to put on display in a compelling way. Some insects look really good alive, but preserved they are not pretty (useful for research only).

c) Many arthropod researchers are faced with an enormous diversity and research load, (true for many other invertebrate groups as well). It is hard to get some of these researchers to spend time on an



exhibit project.

At the American Museum of Natural History Dr Randall says: "We have lobbied to produce a permanent entomological exhibit at our museum. But, in spite of its inherently appealing nature from the point of view of attracting the public to visit the museum, we have not been successful in moving forward. The reasons are no doubt associated with the high cost, in excess of \$20 million and the competition from other subject areas that are less costly to mount and maintain, or produce greater short term revenues".

Interestingly, the totality of our sample believes that the traditional exhibit of entomology display cabinets is still relevant to the contemporary concern of the Natural History Museum and that it also still is a useful informative tool for the public. According to Simon Tiller, "Taxon-specific sections may be of interest to the public, particularly if exhibiting representatives of taxa of interest for them. Regarding insects, probably pests and common EU insects would be of interest, but this hypothesis

would need to be tested with samples from the public".

Niklas Jönsson at the Naturhistoriska Riksmuseet in Stockholm, believes that "There must be an entomological exhibition that shows how an actual insect collection looks like. I think this is important in the work of recruiting new entomologists, and also to show the public how diverse insects are both from a national and international point of view".

Nikolaj Scharff from the Natural History Museum of Denmark supports the traditional display of cabinets although he admits that: "There are no resources available to make such exhibits. Interactive exhibits are fine, but nothing can beat the real things (specimens) that we store in the entomology collections". Coming from the same angle, John W Wenzel at the Museum of Biological Diversity in Columbus Ohio adds that: "The only people who do not value entomological displays are adults who are not very connected to nature. Indeed, many adults admire our insects and they cannot tear themselves

away from the displays even as they claim that insects are "ugly".

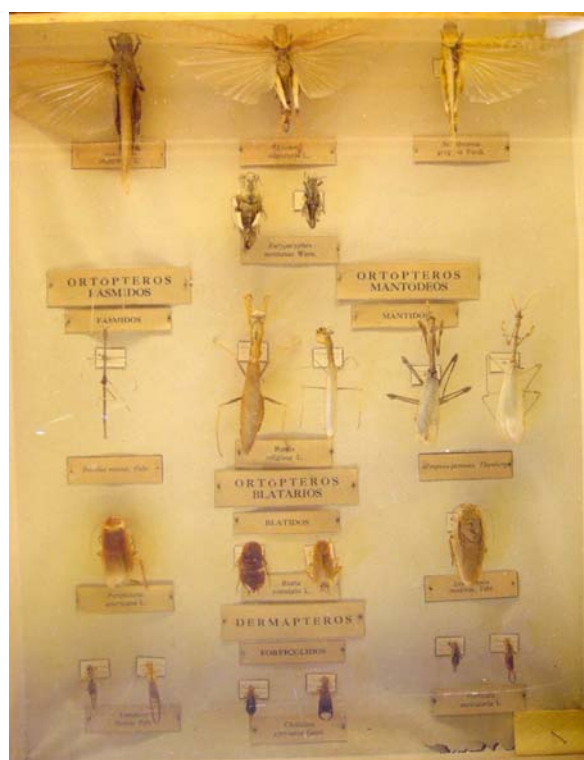
Our survey also highlighted the fact that very little communication seem to take place between the Exhibitions Departments and Entomology Departments of Natural History Museums around the world. This may also explain the low quality from a scientific point of view of these exhibits. The collections used for scientific research are still behind the scenes at museums as Petra Sierwalds reassures us: "Many Natural History Museums have gigantic entomology collections, counting millions of specimens (The Field Museum has about 12 million specimens as far as I remember). Most of such collections are open to the scientific public. Any bona-fide researcher (can be an amateur, does not need to be a professional entomologist) can come and study in our collections, most can also borrow. However, our scientific collections have never been and most likely never will be open to the general public. These large collections are never on display, the light would bleach the specimens."

The range of responses collated over our survey shows that Natural History Museums are addressing the problematic presented by entomology exhibits in different ways. One element that clearly plays a key role in the disappearance of entomology display cabinets lies in their inherent cost. Because of the abundance of new and not yet classified species entomology display cabinets tend to become outdated relatively quickly because of the need to constantly update them with new discoveries. In accordance with the contemporary trend at the forefront of Education programmes which sees the 'interactive' and 'comprehensive' aspects of learning as predominant, it could be argued that entomology display cabinets only allow for a very partial type of engagement. Pinned to the base of the cabinets, insects are displayed next to each other in ordered rows that facilitate taxonomic considerations (along with demonstrating surprisingly wide ranges of variations) rather than engaging with the life cycle of the species and contextualisation. It also seem clear that in one way or another Natural History Museums are trying to move away from an objectifying and one-directional encounter with insects and are making efforts to bring the group to life within the museum environment. It could be argued that the substitution of display cabinets with live displays, literally try to do just that.

The popularity of live displays along with the introduction of 'handling sessions' where visitors are invited to let insects crawl on their hands and arms also suggest that a hands on type of approach could bridge the abyss called entomophobia.

Similarly, handling live arachnids has long been used as a therapeutic practice in the treating of arachnophobias.

This further suggests that the format presented by the display cabinets is no longer considered sufficient to the widened and new educational scope of the Natural History Museum. The purely aesthetic appreciation of insects through the glass of cabinets could be seen as the main obstacle to a deeper understanding of the group. But one is left to wonder if the new solutions implemented by the Natural History Museums really help to convey a more comprehensive picture about insects.



*Antennae would like to thank El Museo de Ciencias Naturales de Ciutadella – Barcelona, and in no particular order for taking time to participate in our survey: Dr John W Wenzel - Museum of Biological Diversity Columbus, Nikolaj Scharff - Natural History Museum of Denmark, Petra Sierwald - Fields Museum Chicago, Brian D. Farrell - Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Professor Simon Tillier - Museum National d'Histoire Naturellen, Paris, Randall Schuh Chair, Division of Invertebrate Zoology - American Museum of Natural History New York.*

*All images featured in this article taken by Giovanni Aloi © Antennae 2007*



# PUTTING A PIN THROUGH BEAUTY

*It started, for me, with the butterflies that flit their way through Virginia Woolf's writing, but that was only the start. Once you look, you see them everywhere: how about this novel, that film, those canvases covered with dead butterflies, done by that artist who pickles sharks? All shimmering at the edge of my vision, all fluttering for attention.*

Text by **Rachel Sarsfield**

My pleasures are the most intense known to man: writing and butterfly hunting

--Vladimir Nabokov

To begin with Woolf, then: she was always captivated with butterflies and moths, ever since learning to collect them as a child. As a writer, she repeatedly identifies the butterfly with her artistic pursuit of 'life', striving to catch the perfect word as you might hunt the perfect butterfly. Witness the fascination with 'life' expressed in her short story 'An Unwritten Novel' (1920), in which the narrator observes a stranger and makes guesses about her:

Have I read you right? But the human face – the human face at the top of the fullest sheet of paper holds more, withholds more. Now, eyes open, she looks out; and in the human eye – how d'you define it? – there's a break – a division – so that when you've grasped the stem the butterfly's off – the moth that hangs in the evening over the yellow flower – move, raise your hand, off, high, away. I won't raise my hand. Hang still, then, quiver, life, soul, spirit, whatever you are of Minnie Marsh. (*Complete Shorter Fiction*, p.117)

The protagonist of Woolf's third novel *Jacob's Room* (1922) is a young butterfly collector whose existence is as ephemeral as his specimens' (he is killed fighting in World War I), and who proves as elusive a subject as Minnie Marsh. The novel's narrator most directly relates lepidoptera to life with the following statement: 'It is thus that we live, they say, driven by an unseizable force. They say that the novelists never catch it; that it goes hurtling through their nets and leaves them torn to ribbons' (*Jacob's Room*, p. 137). Both here and elsewhere, the

key notion is 'unseizable', as Woolf consistently uses lepidoptera imagery to present her view that life is as intangible as a flitting butterfly. Take her 1925 essay 'Modern Fiction', which criticises authors who focus on material things to the exclusion of character and 'life', and which compares Arnold Bennett to an unsuccessful butterfly-hunter:

Can it be that, owing to one of those little deviations which the human spirit seems to make from time to time, Mr. Bennett has come down with his magnificent apparatus for catching life just an inch or two on the wrong side? Life escapes; and perhaps without life nothing else is worth while...Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide. (*Essays* vol. IV, pp. 159-60)

Here, Bennett's technique is envisaged as a deluxe butterfly net ('magnificent apparatus for catching life') that always lands 'just an inch or two on the wrong side', like a child chasing butterflies, earnestly swiping down a net that never quite traps its prey. So, like a deftly dodging insect, 'life escapes' the net of conventional fictional forms, 'and without life nothing else is worth while'. In pursuit of this elusive 'life or spirit, truth or reality' (compare Minnie Marsh's butterfly-like 'life, soul, spirit'), Woolf's fiction contains several characters who embody this notion of the artist as bug-hunter: or as I call them, the 'insect artists'.

These characters, who are closely connected with lepidoptera, and even display figurative ‘antennae’, represent the difficulty of artistic creation. The first of these, Charles Steele, appears at the start of *Jacob’s Room*. Painting the beach where Jacob and family are holidaying, his brush quivers with annoyance when Jacob’s mother shifts position: ‘Like the antennae of some irritable insect it positively trembled. Here was that woman moving – actually going to get up – confound her!’ (p.4). This moment foreshadows the consistent textual correlation between butterfly imagery and the narrator’s own struggle to capture Jacob as a subject.

Woolf’s next insect artist, Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), also displays ‘antennae’ when painting: ‘she kept a feeler on her surroundings lest someone should creep up, and suddenly she should find her picture looked at’ (p.22). Moreover, butterfly imagery is key to the vista she toils to depict throughout the novel, which she describes first as ‘the light of a butterfly’s wing burning on the arches of a cathedral’ (p. 54) and later as ‘one colour melting into another like the colours on a butterfly’s wing; but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron’ (p.186). Aptly for such an oxymoronic marriage of elements, Lily finds her vision infuriatingly unseizable, repeatedly eluding her ‘in that moment’s *flight* between the picture and her canvas’ (p.23, my italics).

In Woolf’s next novel *Orlando* (1928), her spoof ‘biography’ of an ageless, transgender aristocrat, the eponymous O is also her most intriguing insect artist. First seen with his/her hand ‘coloured red, blue and yellow like a butterfly’s wing’ (p.12), in an echo of Lily Briscoe’s painting, Orlando proves more evasive than any butterfly. Seemingly immortal, capable of spontaneously changing sex, and an uncooperative subject, Orlando drives the narrator to distraction by doing literally nothing for a year but sitting and writing: ‘Orlando sat so still that you could have heard a pin drop. Would, indeed, that a pin had dropped! That would have been life of a kind. Or if a butterfly had fluttered through the window and settled on her chair, one could write about that’ (pp. 184-87). The items referred to seem arbitrary, but surely allude to the writer’s twin tools, the pin/pen and the butterfly, the author’s favourite emblem of ‘life’. However, the butterfly does *not* flutter obligingly in, while the pin, instead of securing it, ‘drop[s]’ uselessly to the floor.

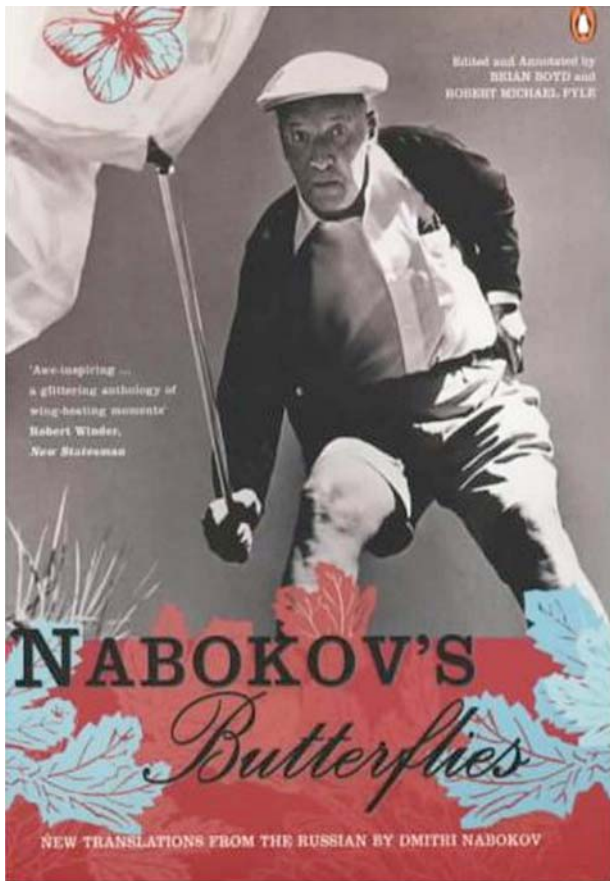
While this apparently signals the narrator’s inability to pin down Orlando, where such pinning does occur in the text, it is an extremely threatening and unwelcome thing. When Alexander Pope verbally attacks Orlando, it is noted that male

flattery ‘by no means signifies that he respects [a woman’s] opinions, admires her understanding, or will refuse, though the rapier is denied him, to run her through the body with his pen’ (*Orlando* 148-49). Although more successful, this pinning looks more like being ‘stabbed in the back’! This image later recurs in Woolf’s essay *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), where a misogynist academic is imagined ‘jab[bing] his pen on the paper is if he were killing some noxious insect as he wrote’ [p.28]). While the means of killing and pinning butterflies are not identical (as they are killed before pinning occurs), nevertheless the fixing remains analogous. Moreover, Woolf also regards such ‘pinning’ as damaging on an artistic level, as Orlando’s ‘biographer’ stresses:

Something...is always absent from the present – whence its terror, its nondescript character – something one trembles to pin through the body with a name and call beauty (p.223).

This statement is typical of the author’s belief that to define something linguistically, to ‘pin [it] through the body with a name’ is reductive, even destructive, much as the butterfly must lose its life before pinning can occur. However, this viewpoint places Woolf in something of a bind: for if she feels that writing cannot pin life down successfully, then how can she possibly succeed as an author? Her late essay ‘Craftsmanship’ (1937), a reflection on language that imagines words themselves as butterfly-like, reveals her inability to surmount this problem, when she states that modern authors are failing because ‘we refuse words their liberty. We pin them down to one meaning...and when words are pinned down they fold their wings and die’ (*The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, p.132). Indeed, Woolf’s final novel *Between the Acts* (1941) – published shortly after her suicide – is centrally concerned with the failure of artistic communication and the disintegration of language. (It is perhaps no coincidence that one of Woolf’s suicide notes contained the statement: ‘you see I cant [sic] write this even, which shows I am right’ [*Letters* vol. VI, p.487].)

Thus it seems that Woolf set herself an impossible task: that of pinning down the figurative ‘butterfly’ subject without, paradoxically, extinguishing its vital spark through the very act of defining it. She never succeeded in solving this self-set problem, for while recognising the injurious nature of such ‘pinning’, she was unable, as a writer, to imagine anything beyond it. But to broaden the discussion beyond Woolf’s output, I’m inspired to ask what her successors have done with the same trope, and what the butterfly signifies in contemporary culture.



Nabokov  
Original front cover of the book *Butterflies* re-released in 2001 by Penguin.



'The Collector'  
Original DVD cover (released in 2002) of the original film released in 1965 courtesy of Columbia Tristar.

Have we succeeded in transcending pinning, and if so, what alternatives have been found?

One of Woolf's literary successors is Vladimir Nabokov, whose well-known bug-hunting obsession likewise inspired the proliferation of lepidoptera in his writing, a tendency that is particularly marked in *Lolita* (1955). On several occasions, these insects seem to comment on the heroine's position, most poignantly when narrator Humbert Humbert collects Lolita from summer camp, free to seduce her following her mother's accidental death. In the camp office, he notices a 'gaudy moth or butterfly, still alive, safely pinned to the wall' (p.110, *The Annotated Lolita*, 1991). This insect pointedly mirrors Lolita's situation at that moment, 'pinned' with no way out.

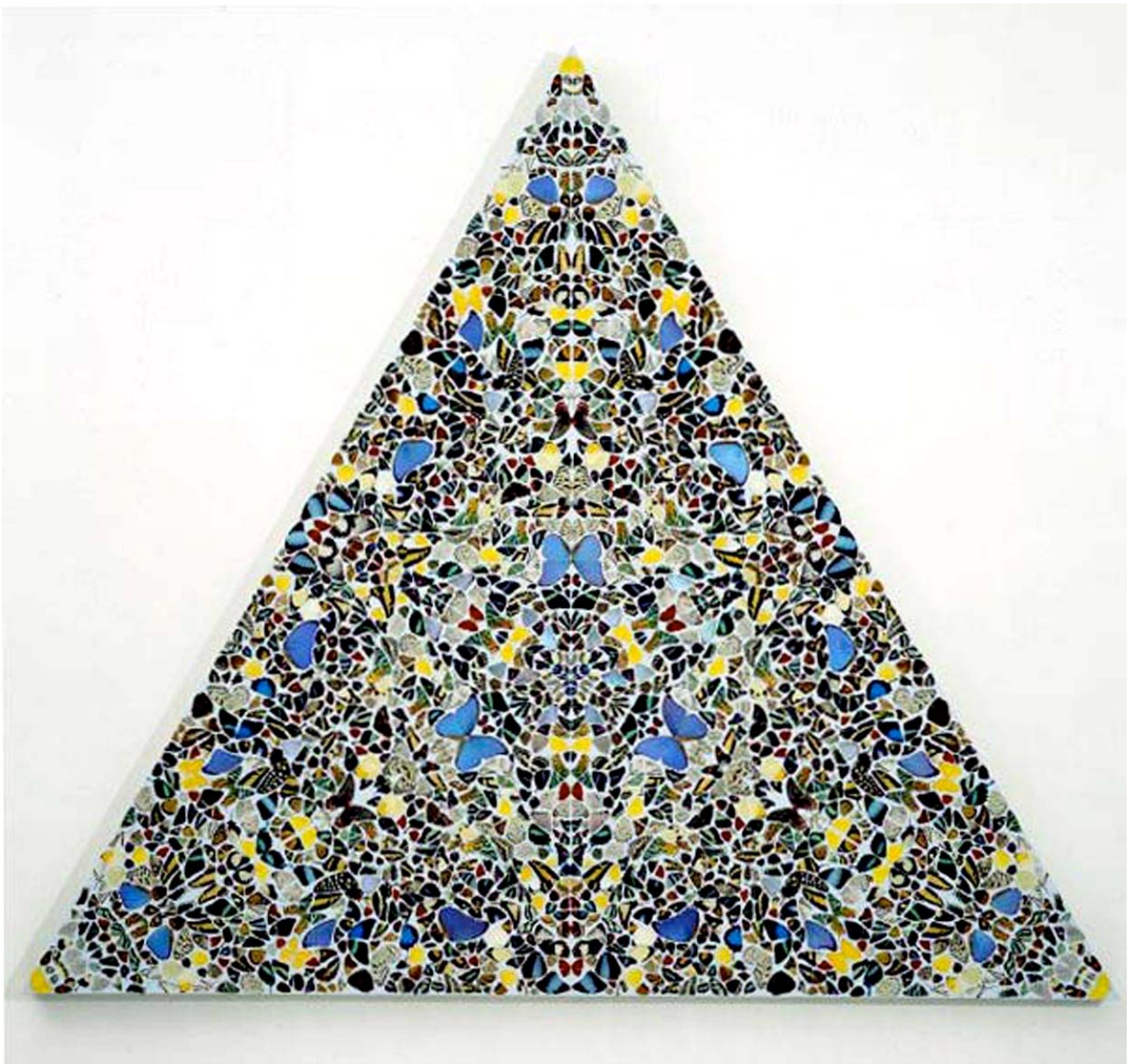
Indeed, Lolita seems fated to be pinned in more than one sense: as well as being literally captured and kidnapped by Humbert, he is also driven to pin her artistically. When refusing to describe the seduction scene, he states: 'Anybody can imagine those elements of animality. A greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets' (p.134). Humbert's desire to convey the fleeting pubescent bloom that obsesses him matches his creator's (and Woolf's) butterfly obsession. However, as a dedicated real-life collector, Nabokov shows no compunction about

snuffing out Lolita with his pin/pen: although she eventually escapes from Humbert and later marries, she nevertheless dies in childbirth aged only 17.

Another lepidoptera-inspired narrative of obsession is John Fowles's novel *The Collector* (1963), in which bug-hunting clerk Frederick Clegg kidnaps and imprisons Miranda Grey (assisted by the chloroform normally used on his butterflies), ultimately causing her death from neglect. Both see his 'collection' in lepidopteral terms: while Clegg calls it 'the best thing I ever did...like catching the Mazarine Blue again or a Queen of Spain Fritillary', Miranda astutely remarks, 'I know what I am to him. A butterfly he has always wanted to catch' (p.31). Moreover, she recognises the inherently destructive nature of her 'pinning': 'I am one in a row of specimens. It's when I try to flutter out of line that he hates me. I'm meant to be dead, pinned, always the same, always beautiful. He knows that part of my beauty is being alive, but it's the dead me he wants' (p.203).

Mahmoud Salami observes:

By making Clegg a collector of butterflies, Fowles demonstrates...the special paradox of collecting in the name of love. Clegg's real tragedy is related to the fact that he, as a



Damien Hirst  
Amazing Revelations, Collage of Butterfly Wings, 2003

free man, possesses and kills his collected beings. Deplorably, he does not know that the value of the collected objects resides precisely in the fact that they must stay free and alive.<sup>2</sup>

However great Clegg's "tragedy", the situation is far more tragic for the one being pinned!

A domestic version of this pinning was presented in the BBC sitcom *Butterflies* (1977-83), via the scatterbrained and flighty central character, Ria. While not literally imprisoned, she is nevertheless pinned fast: a quietly unhappy

housewife with two feckless sons and a husband more interested in his butterfly collection (a-ha!) than he is in her. The presence of neatly mounted butterfly cases around the house hints that Ria is just one of husband Ben's many specimens, trophies meant for decorative purposes only. Above all, she is pinned by the limitations of her homemaker role, and indeed her lack of domestic skills, especially cooking (a running joke on the show) only erodes her confidence further. Interestingly, *The Penguin TV Companion's* entry on *Butterflies* judgements states that the family's lack of respect for Ria is 'partly fuelled, it must be said, by her poor housekeeping

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<sup>2</sup> Mahmoud Salami, *John Fowles's Fiction and the Poetics of Postmodernism* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1992), 61.

skills'.<sup>3</sup> This implies that she is to blame for her unhappiness – as if she has pinned herself!

The role of and attitude towards women in this last example now looks extremely dated, and it is equally true that the association between butterflies and 'pinning' – especially when portraying trapped, victim-like women – is now equally out of date. (Even so-called *Desperate Housewives* have a lot more fun than *Ria* ever did!) More recent uses of butterfly imagery in contemporary culture typically identify butterflies with freedom rather than pinning – but why has this changed?

The butterfly's shifting significance is surely partly due to changing attitudes towards nature, and greater awareness of ecology and conservation issues. People are actively encouraged to support lepidoptera (and wildlife generally): 'conservation begins at home', as one guidebook puts it.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, the popularity of 'butterfly houses' (the London Butterfly House, opened in 1981, being the earliest UK example), mean that exotic specimens that the Victorians only saw in display cases can be enjoyed as living creatures. Accordingly, literal pinning is becoming passé: many bug-hunters now choose to photograph the specimens they track down, rather than killing and pinning them.



'Corpse Bride'

Tim Burton, Bell Jar Scene, Collage of Butterfly Wings, 2005, courtesy of Warner Brothers.

But the other reason is undoubtedly the changing status of women. As we have seen, the colourful, flitting butterfly is usually associated with the feminine, and as women in the West have become ever more emancipated at home and work, could it be that the model of woman as a trapped, helpless butterfly is no longer relevant?

With this in mind, I am intrigued by controversial artist Damien Hirst's frequent use of butterflies in his work (which, like the cows in formaldehyde, diamond-studded skull etc., indicate an obsession

with mortality). His early installation 'In and Out of Love' (1991) juxtaposed a room filled with live butterflies with another hung with canvases, dead butterflies embedded in the paint. Hirst revealed his 'pinning' tendencies when discussing this piece with interviewer Gordon Burn:

Nabokov was a big butterfly collector, wasn't he?

Was he? I never knew... There's something sexy about it as well. It seems like something to do with girls. Kind of. Or an aspect of girls. Something about trying to put a pin through that kind of beauty. Trying to keep something beautiful like that forever.<sup>5</sup>

This desire to 'pin beauty', as demonstrated in his recent work 'Amazing Revelations' (2003) – composed of thousands of butterfly wings – prompted PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) to accuse Hirst of cruelty:

One has to wonder if Hirst was the sort of demented child who would pull the wings off flies for fun. He certainly has become that

sort of adult. Butterfly wings are beautiful on a butterfly but tearing small creatures to bits is not art, it's sadism.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas butterfly collecting was once perfectly acceptable, the modern response to 'put[ting] a pin through beauty' is to see it as both sadistic and a terrible waste of nature's resources.

By contrast with Hirst's death-obsessed artworks, butterfly imagery today most often celebrates the preciousness and fragility of life, never more so than in the late Jean-Dominique Bauby's 1997 memoir *The Diving-Bell and the Butterfly*. After a stroke left him almost totally paralysed, able only to

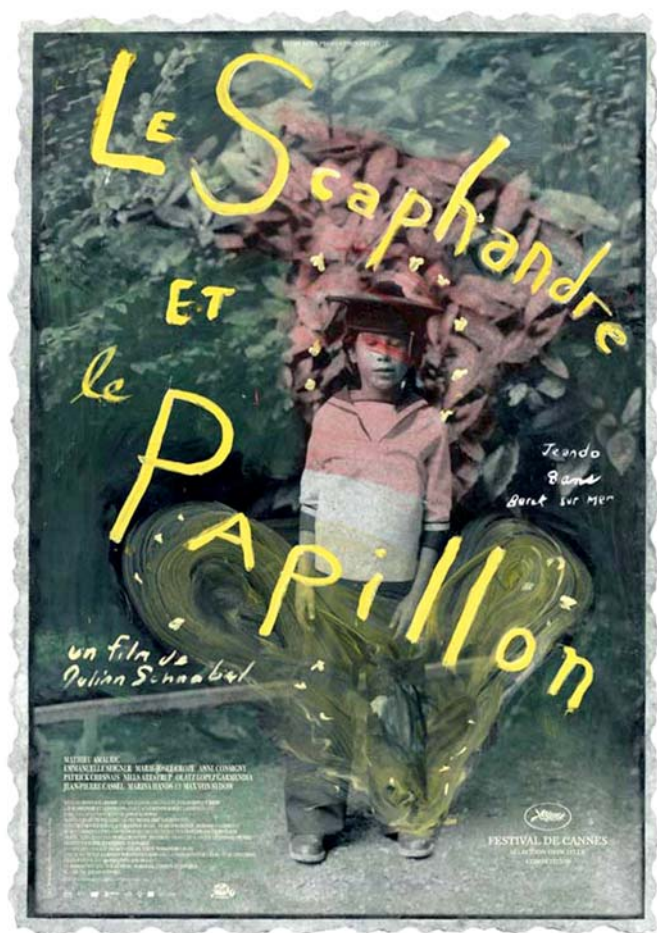
<sup>3</sup> Jeff Evans, *The Penguin TV Companion* (London: Penguin, 2006), 128.

<sup>4</sup> Helga Hofmann and Thomas Marktanner, *Butterflies and Moths of Britain and Europe* (London: HarperCollins, 2000)

blink one eye, Bauby 'dictated' his text with his eye as a frequency alphabet was read out (blinking each time the correct letter was reached) – a task that took an estimated 200,000 blinks.

The 'diving-bell' and 'butterfly' of the title refer respectively to his encasing paralysis and to the blinking eye that is his only means of communicating. The choice of a butterfly ('papillon') makes perfect linguistic sense, as in French 'papillonner' can mean 'to flutter' or 'to blink'. In addition, however, Bauby frequently refers to himself as a trapped butterfly, reporting that sometimes 'my cocoon becomes less oppressive, and my mind takes flight like a butterfly' (Bauby, *The Diving-Bell and the Butterfly*, p.13), and pondering on the final page, 'does the cosmos contain keys for opening up my cocoon?' (p.139) Surely this makes Bauby the ultimate real-life 'insect artist': simultaneously evoking and embodying the butterfly's qualities, becoming/writing the butterfly as he flutteringly composes his text, blink by blink. In a sense, he is writing himself back into existence, in defiance of the Paris gossip that he was brain dead: 'I wanted to prove that my IQ was still higher than a

turnip's' (p.90). Finally, the ancient idea of the butterfly as emblematic of the soul is still being updated, as in the animated film Tim Burton's *Corpse Bride* (2005). With the sad, betrayed figure of the undead Bride (murdered by her fiancé) as its central character, you might expect the film's butterfly imagery to follow the template of woman as pinned victim. Instead, while *Corpse Bride's* opening image is of a butterfly trapped in a bell jar (while hero Victor sketches it), he kindly lets it out the window once his drawing is finished. Victor's action prefigures the film's conclusion: having helped the Bride to get revenge, and thus to achieve peace, her trapped spirit is released, and in a beautiful and moving final scene, she dissolves into a cloud of the same butterflies. Despite *Corpse Bride's* gloomy 19th-century setting, Burton's modern take on the age-old butterfly trope – and the Bride's eventual liberation – ultimately reflects the reality of modern society, especially as regards the status of women. The genie won't go back into the bottle, nor the butterfly back into the jar.



'Le Scaphandre et le Papillon'

Original poster, 2007, courtesy of Phate Renn productions.

*Rachel Sarsfield* recently completed her doctorate on Virginia Woolf and insect imagery in 2004. Rachel has also worked on the archiving project helping to compile a searchable online index to the local Swansea newspaper in the 19th century, "The Cambrian". She also worked for Swansea Museum as a researcher and exhibition assistant.

'*Putting a Pin Through Beauty*' is a 'departure' from '*From the Chrysalis to the display Case*' by the same author, as featured in '*Insect Poetics*', published by Minnesota Press

5 "Hirst accused of sadism over butterfly collage", *Guardian* 15/08/2003, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,11711,1019117,00.html>> [accessed 24/05/2007]

6 "Hirst accused of sadism over butterfly collage", *Guardian*, 15/08/2003, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,11711,1019117,00.html>> [accessed 24/05/2007]

# A SACRED INSECT ON THE MARGINS

*The beetle is the one insect that managed to instate itself amongst the rankings of the gods. Yves Cambefort 's account traces the mystical life of the most sacred of all insects.*

*Text by Yves Cambefort*



Egyptian Beetle  
Carved on the wall of the Karnak Temple

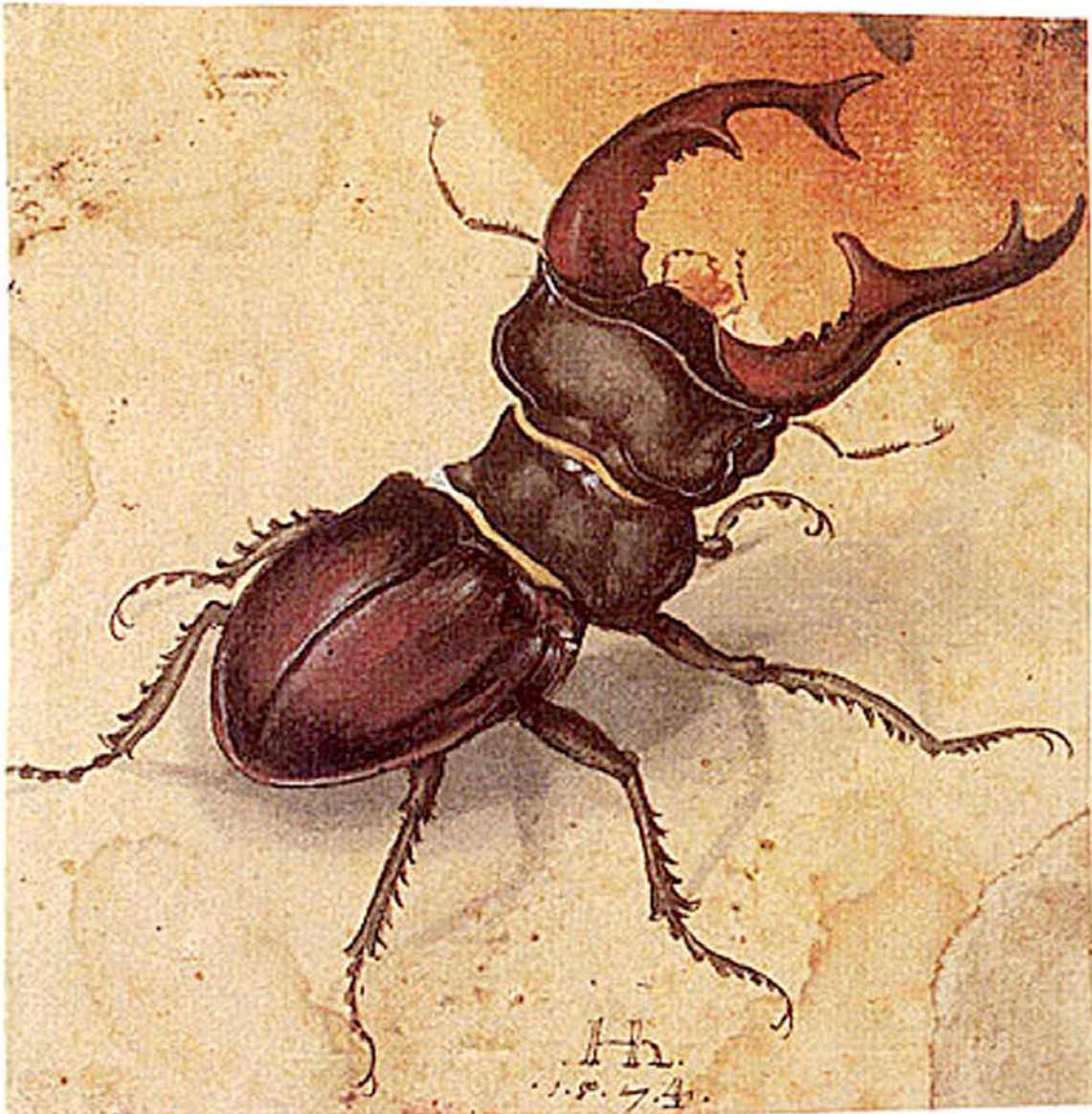
Even if pagan images had not been forgotten in the Middle Ages, the tendency to study pagan sources, in order better to understand both Christian religion and the structure of the natural world, was a characteristic of the Renaissance.<sup>1</sup> Some humanists, like Erasmus, went so far as to give more weight to pagan allegories than to Christian scriptures: “Perhaps we may find more profit reading poetic fables and looking for allegorical sense, than Holy Scriptures, if we content ourselves with the external [i.e. literal] meaning.”<sup>2</sup> The word “poetic” is here almost synonymous with “false,” as opposed to the “true” realities of Christianity, and “fables” refer to any text neither biblical nor historical. Our words “fable,” “fabled,” and “fabulous,” have the same root:

the Latin *fabula*, which had a much broader sense than our “fable.” Ancient Greeks, too, had no word exactly expressing our “fable.”<sup>3</sup> They usually said “Aesopian *logos*,” since Aesop was for them the most illustrious author of this literary genre.<sup>4</sup> In Aesopian fables, insects play their role despite, or perhaps because of, their small size: for the main characteristic of fables is the condensation of significant teaching into a small form.<sup>5</sup> This method became especially prominent in the Middle Ages, with the invention of the *exempla*, a sort of Christian fables.<sup>6</sup> The Renaissance followed with its *loci communes*, but also, in a more symbolic, allegorical style, with the invention of devices, *imprese* and other “emblems.”<sup>7</sup> In these productions, humanists have both hidden and discovered the

fundamental relationships, the shared elements they had found in pagan and Christian thoughts.

One of these emblematic elements, which regularly recurs in art and literature in the years 1500-1650, is an insect that had been placed by ancient Egyptians in the rank of the gods: the beetle.<sup>8</sup> The beetle is the smallest of these antique “gods” whose images never ceased to be present in

specifically the case of the so-called “sacred” scarab of the Egyptians, which belongs to a coprophagous genus of beetles.<sup>10</sup> Its unattractive habits bizarrely contrast with the scarab’s sacredness, and give the insect a disturbing, even dangerous character. But scholars have pointed the ambiguity of the holy itself, which is always vaguely sinister.<sup>11</sup> Here I shall explore the various connotations of the beetle in the



Albrecht Dürer  
Stag Beetle, Watercolour and Gouache, 1505

European art and thought. Contrary to all the other pagan gods, the beetle also possesses an authentic Christian significance, which gives it a unique, ambiguous, status. But this religious ambiguity is not the only one. Beetles, like many other insects, or perhaps more than most of them, may provoke uneasiness. Such discomfort is due to multiple reasons, but especially the fact that insects are often related to dirt, pollution and decay.<sup>9</sup> This is more

Renaissance, from Christian meaning in Dürer’s work, to pagan ambiguity in Erasmus, and, through coexistence of both Dürer’s and Erasmus’s heritages, to the emblematic works of Rudolfian Prague and its intersections with seventeenth-century science and literature.



## The Beetle's Christian melancholy

### *Dürerian margins*

Albrecht Dürer's Stag Beetle is probably the most famous artistic study of an insect ever made. According to its monogram and date, this watercolor—now in the Getty Museum, Malibu—was painted in 1505.<sup>12</sup> The German artist was thirty-four and at the climax of his life and talent. This particular subject had retained him during a brief period: around 1503-5, he introduced it in the three drawings of the Madonna with a Multitude of Animals (1503) and especially in the painting of The Adoration of the Magi (1505).<sup>13</sup> There is a small bronze of the Italian sculptor Andrea Riccio, representing a stag beetle of natural size, which seems almost exactly contemporaneous with Dürer's study: might one of these works have inspired the other?<sup>14</sup> Contrary to watercolor and

bronze, where it represents the principal subject, the stag beetle was introduced in the three drawings and the painting as a mere "marginal element," as it had already been the case in illuminated manuscripts as well as in large paintings of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. For example, the stag beetle was figured in the Book of Hours of Giangaleazzo Visconti (c. 1390),<sup>15</sup> as well as in the altarpieces of Stephan Lochner's The Saint Patrons of Cologne (1440)<sup>16</sup> and Michael Wolgemut's The Apostles' Departure (c. 1485).<sup>17</sup> Very often, these marginalia give a clue as to the true and profound meaning of the works.<sup>18</sup> So what was, in Dürer's mind—as far as we might imagine it—the beetle's meaning? Indeed, since classical times, the creature had been equated with the stag, venerated as a sacred animal whose horns could subdue the dragon, in the same way that Christ subdues Satan.<sup>19</sup> Various saints had seen a stag with a Christian cross between its horns,



Albrecht Dürer  
The Adoration of the Magi, Oil on Panel, 1504

especially Saint Eustathius, whom Dürer had depicted twice before 1505.<sup>20</sup> But the potential meanings of the stag beetle in Dürer's work were equally motivated by the beetle's close relationship with the sacred scarab (*Scarabaeus sacer*), a species restricted to the Mediterranean area. Among notable pagan sources, there was at least one outstanding text of which Dürer was aware: Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica*. This fifth-century Greek text had been famous since its rediscovery in 1419 and provided explanations of some ancient hieroglyphs that modern studies have confirmed in part. Dürer became interested in Horapollon around 1500 (maybe later) through his friend the Nuremberg scholar Pirckheimer, with whom he prepared an illustrated German version of *Hieroglyphica* for Emperor Maximilian (curiously enough, Dürer's supposed illustration for the scarab does not figure a beetle but a sort of milliped).<sup>21</sup> Horapollon described the scarab as *monogenes*, "only begotten," that is, a unique son, and *autogenes*, "self-begotten, unborn of the female."<sup>22</sup> The Greek word *monogenes* is likewise used five times in John's gospel and first epistle as characteristic of Christ, unique Son of one Father. The same word, in its Latin form (*unigenitus*), appears also in the Nicene Creed, the Latin *Credo*. But it is not clear whether "self-begotten" refers to divine filiation or to some sort of spontaneous regeneration, as in the case of the phoenix.<sup>23</sup>

We cannot speculate whether Dürer knew other pagan sources. The most important one, Plutarch's *Treatise on Isis and Osiris*, was published only in 1509, a few years after the aforementioned works of art. We do not know whether Dürer had heard (from manuscript sources) about this book, where Plutarch referred twice to the beetle, explaining that this species was honored by the Egyptians because it preserved a faint trace of the powers of the gods. In particular, the beetle's habit of rolling its dung ball backward, Plutarch said, resembled the way in which the sun seems to turn the sky around in the opposite direction when moving from west to east.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, an important Christian source was surely available to Dürer: Saint Ambrose of Milan's writings.<sup>25</sup> In at least five different texts, Saint Ambrose introduced the scarab as an equivalent for Christ, as in the following excerpt from his *Treatise on St. Luke's Gospel*:

[Jesus Christ] was on the cross like a worm, on the cross like a scarab. But how good a worm attached to the wood, how good a scarab shouting from the cross. . . . How good a scarab who changed into virtue the shapeless ordure of our body, how good a scarab who

exalted the poor from his dunghill.<sup>26</sup>

It is very likely that Dürer was aware of this sound basis for a Christian interpretation of the beetle, possibly in addition to that of Horapollon. Such an equivalence (stag beetle for Christ) is clear in *The Adoration of the Magi*. In respect to Horapollon's and Ambrose's texts, the beetle in this painting—which overtly depicts Jesus as a child—covertly alludes to the Passion and suffering on the cross of God's unique Son. Hence the "marginal" beetle changes an important, but anecdotal, scene of Jesus's childhood into a striking summary of the whole Christian faith.

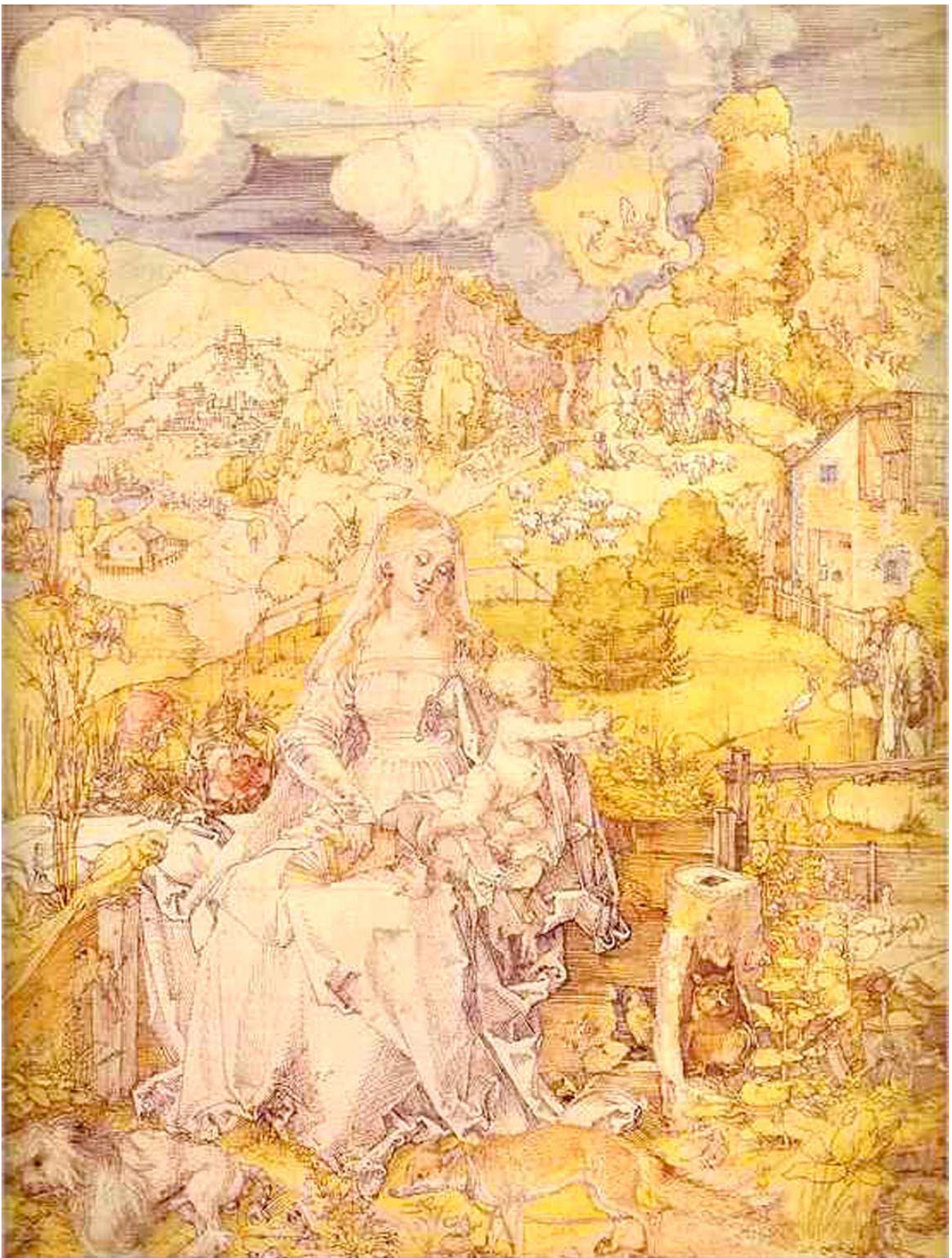
### **The Beetle Emblematic**

*Alciato, Camerarius, and others*

Another famous collection of *exempla* was the *Emblems* of Andrea Alciato (or Alciati).<sup>27</sup> This book founded the genre of emblem books, or *emblemata*, which became extremely favored in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>28</sup> The main difference between an adage and an emblem is that the emblem contained a picture. In fact, Alciato's original concept did not comprise illustrations, but they were introduced in the first edition, and from the beginning each emblem was composed of a title, an engraving, and a text (often poetry). As Alciato's book was published for the first time in 1531, it might have been influenced by Erasmus's *Adages*. The heroic beetle is to be found in emblem number 169, entitled *A minimis quoque timendum* (One ought to fear even the tiniest creatures), whose text reads:

The beetle wages war and provokes his enemy of his own accord; even though inferior in strength, he surpasses her in cunning. For he hides himself in secret and unknown in the feathers of the eagle, to reach his enemy's nest through the highest stars. By breaking the eggs, he puts an end to the hope of the young growing up: and, having avenged in this way the shame inflicted on him, he departs.<sup>29</sup>

The detail of the beetle hiding in the eagle's feathers is not included in Aesop's fable, and Erasmus makes slight allusion to it. But it is part of a widespread European tale, where the eagle's enemy is sometimes not the beetle but a small bird, the "petty king" (*regulus*), as opposed to the eagle, the "great queen." However "petty" (i.e., small), the little bird, as well as the beetle, acts as a male and "mounts" his big queen—a meaning perceivable also in Erasmus's text. In fact, beetle and eagle are not so different as it would seem at first sight. They may compose a



**Albrecht Dürer**  
The Virgin Among a Multitude of Animals, Pen, Ink and Watercolour on  
Paper. 1503

couple, a pair, bound by mysterious but profound ties. Returning to Horapollo, we find such a pair, or even a double pair: one of a beetle and a vulture, and another of a vulture and a beetle, “for the universe seems to them [Egyptians] to be made up of the male and the female.”<sup>30</sup> It seems then that Erasmus’s story is not merely about a rivalry between the small and the big; it might also refer to the eternal opposition between male and female. This opposition-conjunction reminds us of one of the favorite *topoi* of the Renaissance: *concordia discors*, which Nicolas Cusanus called *coincidentia oppositorum*.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, this coincidence of opposites is also present in the very beetle’s character, both the lowest of creatures and almost the only (mortal) one able to reach Jupiter’s throne.

In other books of emblems, the beetle is sometimes good, sometimes bad, according to the author’s sensibility and perception. For example, in his first volume of emblems (1590), the naturalist and poet Joachim Camerarius (1534-98) evokes together the rose, beetle, and Spanish fly.<sup>32</sup> The latter insect is not a fly but a beetle of a bright metallic green color. It has been used since antiquity to make medicines used for lubricious and lascivious purposes.<sup>33</sup> In this emblem, Camerarius refers to a classical *topos* according to which beetles hate, or even are killed by, “suave odors,” especially roses’ perfume.<sup>34</sup> On the contrary, Erasmus explained in the adage *Scarabeus* that—despite its generally bad tastes—“the beetle has a particular love for roses, and covets them above everything.”<sup>35</sup> This was drawn from Erasmus’s own version of Pliny.<sup>36</sup> But the passage is unclear, and Pliny’s modern editors generally understand, in accordance with most of the antique authors, that beetles are killed by roses,<sup>37</sup> an idea insisted on and moralized by Camerarius:

Destruction of the depraved:  
The Rose is death for the  
Cantharis.<sup>38</sup> Thus luxury and  
delights  
Enervate the spirit and terminate  
the man.

The engraving shows a rose tree, from which a beetle falls upside down. Then follows one page of commentary:

Cantharides, beetles and other insects of this sort like very much vile and sordid places, where they originate and delight. On the contrary, they faint and perish in suave odors. For this reason, beetles and cantharides getting into roses are told to collapse and die. In the same way, depraved and voluptuous men ruin not only their bodies, but

their spirits and souls.

In his third volume, Camerarius came back to the subject, this time comparing the beetle to the bee:<sup>39</sup>

The one’s salvation, the other’s  
destruction:  
As Rose is death for you, O Scarab,  
it is delight for you, O Bee.  
Virtue is joy for the good, and foe to  
the bad.

In a later collection of emblems, another author comes back to the heroic and virtuous beetle.<sup>40</sup> The engraving depicts the daring beetle flying up to Jupiter, who floats on a cloud cushion and holds closely his dear eagle. The title, *Animus nobilitat* (Spirit makes noble), is accompanied by eight verses that contrast body and spirit, earth and sky, and, according to the beetle’s model, exhort men to escape terrestrial heaviness. The beetle here symbolizes the highest spirit, as opposed to the basest earthly powers. This is in complete opposition to Camerarius’s opinion. But one cannot avoid thinking of a possible occult, more precisely alchemical meaning of this emblem, because the word “spirit” is very significant there, and Schoonhovieus’s book was produced at the peak of European alchemy.<sup>41</sup> But the word can refer to Christian Sacred Spirit as well.

### ***From Still Lifes to Entomology***

Joris Hoefnagel had a strong influence on some painters in the so-called Prague school, and he is likely to have played a major role in the creation of the genre known today as the still life. Already some of his works appears as small still lifes, arranging together flowers and insects, with a religious or moral (or emblematic) meaning. But the first authentic canvas of this genre is generally acknowledged to have been painted in 1603 by Roelandt Savery.<sup>42</sup> It is probably due to Joris Hoefnagel’s influence that Savery, a painter of the Prague school, introduced insects, and especially beetles, into his still lifes. After this first impulse, the genre—which sometimes merges with so-called vanity<sup>43</sup>—spread across Germany, Holland, and especially Flanders. During the whole seventeenth century, it was one of the genres produced by Protestant artists who no longer recognized saints and did not accept representations of God, Christ, or the Sacred Spirit.<sup>44</sup> Among the many artists who have produced these paintings and included insects in them, some have remembered Hoefnagel’s iconographic models of the stag beetle, and, before him, Albrecht Dürer’s. The German painter Georg Flegel has often figured the stag beetle, and other



Ulisse Aldrovandi  
De Animalibus Insectis Libri Septem, (Bologna, 1602)

beetles as well, in oil paintings and in watercolors, obviously with both Christian and melancholic meanings, which somehow give his still lifes the character of vanities.<sup>45</sup> The Dutch Jacob Marrell and Peter Binoit, both Flegel's pupils, must also be cited, together with Jan Brueghel the Elder, Otto Marseus Van Schrieck, Marrell's pupils Abraham Mignon, and Maria Sibylla Merian, as well as more recent masters, like Verbrugghen the Younger and Rachel Ruysch. In still lifes, the beetle returns to a marginal position. But when looking at a glorious flower bouquet, or a richly served table, we notice a crawling beetle, both surreptitious and obvious (especially in the best paintings), we immediately think about the transient status of creatures, including men, which are nothing more than "bubbles" compared with God,<sup>46</sup> but we also think of Christ, who is supposed to redeem and save at least some of these creatures.

In addition to gallery paintings in oil, most of these artists also produced watercolors destined for portfolios of the cabinets of curiosities. Some of these cabinets specialized in natural objects and became the first natural history museums. They also gave birth to the first natural history monographs, with the same purpose: ordering the world's data.<sup>47</sup> The first major entomological monograph that may be called scientific is that of Ulisse Aldrovandi, *De animalibus insectis libri septem* (Bologna, 1602).<sup>48</sup>



Thomas Moufet  
Insectorum Sive Minimorum Animalium Theatrum, (London, 1603)

The stag beetle is illustrated on page 451, but the engraving seems not to be derived from Dürer's model. In addition to Aristotle and Pliny, Aldrovandi quoted heavily from Erasmus. The second large treatise of entomology, published in London in 1634, under the title *Insectorum sive minimorum animalium theatrum*, is attributed to the physician Thomas Moufet (who had been dead since 1604). It has a long and complicated story, combining data gathered by the Swiss Gesner, the British Wotton and Penny, Moufet himself in the 1590s, all of that being assembled and published by the French-born physician Sir Théodore de Mayerne.<sup>49</sup> An English translation was published in 1658.<sup>50</sup> Even more than in Aldrovandi's book, Mayerne depends heavily on Erasmus and the emblematic books. He insists on the beetle's black color and noise, as well as its base habits, although the author adds some moralizing considerations directly drawn and interpreted from Erasmus:

When we see the beetle, though in the dung, alwaies clean, and his shell alwaies neat; compare him with men polluted and infected with stews and bawdy houses, and I shall ask which of the two is most cleanly? And I think it had its name *kantharos* a Beetle from *katharos* pure and clean

But, in fact, they are not always so pure:

Of all plants they cannot away with  
Rose trees, and they hate them as  
the destruction of their kinde; for  
they dye by the smell of them but on  
the contrary they take great  
pleasure in stinking and beastly  
places.<sup>52</sup>

Here Mouffet refers to the *topos* on the beetle's supposed aversion to roses, or rather on the danger the roses are supposed to pose for beetles, as we have seen. This is in accordance with his time's science, which had not yet been freed from obsolete knowledges of ancient times.

Around 1650 the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602-80) made an attempt to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphics.<sup>53</sup> While correctly supposing that the language was related to Coptic, he nonetheless failed in his interpretations of the signs.<sup>54</sup> Rather, he related the beetle hieroglyphic to what was familiar: Saint Ambrose's interpretation of the scarab as Christ:

What does the beetle's body mean, if not the Unique Son whom the Father has established as principle, rest, and end of everything, by whom everything is done, and without whom nothing is done? . . . Let those, who get nauseous by this comparison of God to the vilest, basest, most horrible and most stinking of all beings, remember that this merely expresses the human condition's baseness, which God's infinite majesty has accepted to dress.<sup>55</sup>

He accompanied this text with an engraving of a beetle showing the word "love" (greek *philo*, which he wrote *phylo*). At this point, the buckle is buckled. The sacredness of the beetle is permanently circumscribed by what French linguist Émile Benveniste has termed the positive and negative values of holiness. The first conveys a notion of "something impregnated by divine presence"; the other suggests "something forbidden to man's contact," and both are subsumed, Benveniste said, in the Latin word *sacer* (contrary to *sanctus*, which only conveys the favorable meaning). Dürer's Christian/pagan beetle, filtered through Erasmus and

the emblematisers, persists as "vile," "base," "most horrible," and yet full of grace. Shakespeare captures these diverse discourses in his plays: a reference to Erasmian *Scarabeus* is evident in *Cymbeline* (3.3.19-21)—"And often to our comfort shall we find / The sharded beetle in a safer hold / Than is the full-wing'd eagle"—and in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2.2.20-23), we find the beetle in rather bad company:

Weaving spiders, come not here;  
Hence, you long-legg'd spinners,  
hence.  
Beetles black, approach not near;  
Worm nor snail do no offence.

*The Tempest* suggests their occult potency when Caliban invokes his mother to threaten his master, Prospero: "all the charms / Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you" (1.2.339-40). The beetle, then, which appears both saint and sullied, familiar and dangerous, seems an authentic—even if marginal—résumé of sacredness. In 1758, when the first taxonomist, Carolus Linnaeus, named the most illustrious of the many species of beetles *Scarabaeus sacer* (a name it has maintained), he thus returned not only to the religion of the ancient Egyptians, but to all the discordant harmonies of the creature's symbolic past.

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- <sup>1</sup> Jean Seznec, The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art (original French edition, 1940; reprint Paris: Flammarion, 1993; New York: Pantheon Books-Bollingen, 1953).
- <sup>2</sup> “Immo fortasse plusculo fructu legetur fabula poetica cum allegoria, quam narratio sacrorum librorum, si consistas in cortice.” Erasmus, Enchiridion militis christiani, quoted in Seznec, The Survival of the Pagan Gods (1993), 118.
- <sup>3</sup> The word ainos, which seems the closest to “fable,” was no longer used in classical times. Daniel Loayza, introduction to his edition of Aesop (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1995, 20).
- <sup>4</sup> See Laura Gibbs, trans., Aesop’s Fables, a New Translation (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- <sup>5</sup> Malcolm Davies and Jeyarany Kathirithamby, Greek Insects, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, 1-16.
- <sup>6</sup> See, for example, Claude Brémont, Jacques Le Goff, and Jean-Claude Schmitt, “L’exemplum” (Turnhout: Brepols, 1982), fasc. 40 in Typologie des sources du moyen âge occidental.
- <sup>7</sup> Jean-Marc Chatelain, Livres d’emblèmes et de devises: Une anthologie (1531-1735) (Paris: Klincksieck, 1993).
- <sup>8</sup> Cf. Yves Cambefort, Le scarabée et les dieux (Paris: Boubée, 2006).
- <sup>9</sup> See Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (1966; Ark Paperbacks, 1985).
- <sup>10</sup> See Ilkka Hanski and Yves Cambefort, eds., Dung Beetle Ecology (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).
- <sup>11</sup> See Rudolf Otto, The Idea of the Holy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).
- <sup>12</sup> George R. Goldner (with the assistance of Lee Hendrix and Gloria Williams), European Drawings 1: Catalogue of the Collections (Malibu: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1988), plate 4, 287-90.
- <sup>13</sup> Fritz Koreny, Albrecht Dürer and the Animal and Plant Studies of the Renaissance (Boston: Little, Brown, 1988), esp. 112-27.
- <sup>14</sup> Berlin State Museum. Colin Eisler, Dürer’s Animals (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 124 and fig. 5.19.
- <sup>15</sup> National Library, Florence. Giorgio Taroni, Il cervo volante (Milan: Electa, 1998), 113.
- <sup>16</sup> Cologne Cathedral. Koreny, Albrecht Dürer, 112-13.
- <sup>17</sup> State of Bavaria Collection, Munich. Eisler, Dürer’s Animals, 120, fig. 5.1.
- <sup>18</sup> Michael Camille, Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). See also Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, “The Sanctification of Nature,” in The Mastery of Nature: Aspects of Art, Science and Humanism in the Renaissance (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 11-48.
- <sup>19</sup> Koreny, Albrecht Dürer, 113; Hans Biedermann, Dictionary of Symbolism: Cultural Icons and the Meanings behind Them (New York: Meridian Books, 1994).
- <sup>20</sup> Copper engraving of 1500/1503, with a complete stag; Paumgartner altarpiece (Munich Alte Pinakothek), c. 1498/1504, with only stag’s head on a banner.
- <sup>21</sup> National Library, Vienna. Eisler, Dürer’s Animals, 137 and fig. 5.61.
- <sup>22</sup> George Boas, The Hieroglyphics of Horapollo, with a foreword by Anthony Grafton (1950; Princeton: Princeton University Press-Bollingen, 1993), 48-49.
- <sup>23</sup> This is different from Aristotle’s idea of insects born spontaneously from larvae, themselves issued from rotting materials (Aristotle, History of Animals, 758a-759a). There is no original material or larva in the cases of both phoenix and Christ. Later on, a larval stage

d'Entomologie 35 (1992): 45-53.

<sup>24</sup> Plutarch, Isis and Osiris (Moralia 28), sec. 10 and 74. The apparent movement of the sun from west to east was taken from, and explained in, Plato's Timaeus, sec. 38d (comments in Christian Froidefond's edition of Isis and Osiris [Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1988], 317-18; and Albert Rivaud's edition of Timaeus, [Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1925], 55-56).

<sup>25</sup> In 1505 there had already been a number of editions of Saint Ambrose, including his complete works (Opera omnia), printed in Basel in 1492, reprinted in 1500. The Treatise on Saint Luke's Gospel was printed as early as 1476.

<sup>26</sup> Saint Ambroise de Milan, Traité sur l'évangile de Saint Luc, ed. and trans. Dom G. Tissot (Paris: Cerf, 1976), 2: 193-94 (translation mine). The worm of this text comes from Psalms 22:6 "But I am a worm, and no man," and the scarab from Habakkuk 2:11 in the Greek Bible (Septuaginta); the poor exalted from his dunghill is an allusion both to Psalms 113:7 and Job's book. See F. J. Dölger, "Christus im Bilde des Skarabäus: Der Text Scarabaeus de ligno in Habakuk 2, 11 nach der Auslegung von Ambrosius und Hieronymus," Antike und Christentum: Kultur- und Religionsgeschichtliche Studien 2 (1930): 230-40.

<sup>27</sup> There were about seventy editions of this work during the sixteenth century. Modern facsimile of the edition of Lyons: Mathias Bonhomme, 1551, in André Alciat, Les emblèmes (Paris: Klincksieck, 1997).

<sup>28</sup> The anthology of Chatelain, Livres d'emblèmes, mentions ninety titles.

<sup>29</sup> From the online translation of the Memorial University of Newfoundland (modified) at <http://www.mun.ca/alciato/e169.html>; Latin text and illustration from the Lyons 1551 edition in Alciat, Les emblèmes, 182.

<sup>29</sup> Boas, The Hieroglyphics of Horapollo, 52.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Jean-Claude Margolin, "Sur un paradoxe bien tempéré de la Renaissance: Concordia discors," Medioevo e Umanesimo 84 (1993): 405-32.

<sup>31</sup> Symbolorum et emblematum ex re herbaria desumtorum centuria una, a Ioachimo Camerario, medico Norimberg. (Nuremberg, 1590), 56-57, emblem XLVI, Turpibus exitium.

<sup>32</sup> At least in the European species Lytta vesicatoria L. (Meloidae).

<sup>33</sup> P. V. Taberner, Aphrodisiacs: The Science and the Myth (London: Croom Helm, 1985).

<sup>34</sup> Davies and Kathirithamby, Greek Insects, 85, quoting Aristotle, Aelian, Theophrastus, Plutarch, etc.

<sup>35</sup> Mann Phillips, 1964, p. 251.

<sup>36</sup> Pliny, book 11 of Natural History (Basel : Froben, 1549: 216), a reprint of Erasmus's edition: "Omnia [insecta] olei aspersu necantur. Vultures unguento qui fugantur, alios appetunt odores : scarabei rosam."

<sup>37</sup> For example, in H. Rackham's version in Pliny: Natural History (Cambridge: Harvard University Press-Loeb Classical Library), 3:608: "Omnia [insecta] olei aspersu necantur, vultures unguento (qui fugat alios appetunt odorem), scarabaei rosa."

<sup>38</sup> Symbolorum et emblematum ex volatilibus et insectis desumtorum centuria tertia (1596), emblem XCII, Uni salus, alteri pernicies.

<sup>39</sup> Emblemata Florentii Schoonhovii I. C. Goudani, partim moralia, partim etiam civilia, Goudae: Andream Burier, 1618, emblem LVI.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Alexander Roob, The Hermetic Museum: Alchemy and Mysticism (Los Angeles: Taschen America, 1997).

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, The School of Prague: Painting at the Court of Rudolf II (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); and Kaufmann, The Mastery of Nature.



- <sup>42</sup> Alain Tapié, Jean-Marie Dautel, Philippe Rouillard, eds. Les vanités dans la peinture au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle : Méditations sur la richesse, le dénuement et la rédemption (Caen: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 1990).
- <sup>43</sup> Charles Sterling, Still Life Painting from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century (New York: Harper and Row, 1981); Claus Grimm, Natures mortes flamandes, hollandaises et allemandes aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles (Paris: Herscher, 1992); Norbert Schneider, Still Life (New York: Taschen, 1994).
- <sup>44</sup> Kurt Wettengl, Georg Flegel, 1566-1638: Stilleben (1993; Ostfildern: Gerd Hatje, 1999). See also Kurt Wettengl, Maria Sibylla Merian, Artist and Naturalist, 1647-1717 (Ostfildern: Gerd Hatje, 1998).
- <sup>45</sup> Homo bulla (adage 1248).
- <sup>46</sup> Michel Foucault, Les mots et les choses (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).
- <sup>47</sup> See, among others, Adalgisa Lugli, Naturalia et mirabilia: Les cabinets de curiosités en Europe (Italian ed., 1983; Paris: Adam Biro, 1998); and Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150-1750 (New York: Zone Books, 1998).
- <sup>48</sup> Michael A. Salmon, The Aurelian legacy: British Butterflies and Their Collectors (Colchester: Harley Books, 2000), 95-98.
- <sup>49</sup> The Theater of Insects: or, lesser living creatures, as bees, flies, caterpillars, spiders, worms, &c. a most elaborate work (London, 1658; reprint New York: Da Capo Press, 1967).
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., 1011.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., 1005.
- <sup>52</sup> Joscelyn Godwin, Athanasius Kircher : A Renaissance Man and the Quest for Lost Knowledge (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979).
- <sup>53</sup> Athanasius Kircher, Prodromus coptus sive aegyptiacus (Rome: Typis S. Cong: de propag: Fide, 1636.)
- <sup>54</sup> Kircher, 239 (translation mine).
- <sup>55</sup> Émile Benveniste, Le vocabulaire des institutions européennes. 2. Pouvoir, droit, religion (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1969), 179-207.



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Armed Hover-fairy, plant roots, insects, dimensions variable-insect  
scale, 2006

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