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**BETWEEN**  
**SCIENCE FACTS AND SCIENCE FICTION,**  
***AN ALIEN EMPIRE***

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*Cover : M.C. Escher "Möbius Strip II" (1963)  
with a bit of help from Franck Philippeaux*

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*To Buzz Lightyear,  
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# 1

## Setting the stage

### "Making more insects"

It obviously takes place in outer space. We can see stars and meteorites all around, a satellite crossing through. Suddenly we land. Through the thick whitish lay of what ought to be the atmosphere, we approach a blue planet. And a confident, assured voice confirms what we had guessed : "North America. The Mississippi River". So it takes place on our planet after all. This voice is going to tell stories for next half an hour, except for when it is interrupted by some music. We indeed hear some nice music.

Now, the music accompanies the flight of some insects in the moonlight. A bit later, it suits some computer-issued images to show a beautiful chain of round pearls - a molecule.

At one point we are taken inside a computer. A fatty insect - a "woolly bear" - "lives a peaceful life" inside. A wasp is running after it. We follow the pursuit. It started with an image of a computer screen : some insects, drawn as cartoon characters, move in a fake landscape and produce funny squeezes and beeps. We figure it is an animated game when we glance at the user playing from a remote point of view. We alternatively see what happens inside the computer and what is on the screen : the races are parallel. Finally, the "real" insect, inside, gets its prey and sting it. Outside, on the computer screen, a cartoon-ant jumps on an other and knock it out with a big stick. **(Image, p. 1)**<sup>1</sup>

An other scene takes place in a garden. A man plays music, while insects in his garden play on their own. They are not aware of each other, and yet they seem to play together.

Later on, we see a truck driver on the road, in the middle of a picturesque desert landscape. He is drinking a beer. He throws the bottle through the window, keeps on driving. But the bottle lands on a spot filled with Jewel Beetles. The problem is, males jewel beetle recognise the females because they are "orange, big and dimple" : the males beetles are "attracted by simple good looks". Therefore to a male jewel beetle, the bottle of beer is irresistible. We see how a bunch of beetles is climbing on the bottle and desperately trying to mate it, while the "real females are ignored". **(Image, p. 1)**

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<sup>1</sup> Images are to find in the Appendix

The final segment shows a flock of flies escaping from a fridge. They developed from living bait maggots kept in the fridge - because the fuse blew during the fisherman's absence. We see the horrible result in slow motion so that we can measure the dramatic tension of the moment. The voice takes a tragic tone to remind us that insects are here to stay, repeating that they are "more insects, making more insects, making...".

## **Aims of the thesis**

All these scenes - and there are more - are taken from *Replicators*, the second episode out of six, from a British television series called *Alien Empire, a journey to the world of insects*, recently diffused in Europe.

This series deliberately intermingles different codes. Stories are told, images are shown, but it is not easy to say at first what they refer to. *Alien Empire* really 'doesn't look like anything else'. *Alien Empire* is a television series, it is a work addressed to a public. Taking the film as the object of my analysis I hope to understand a bit better what it says to this public. I am not considering here the making process of the film, no more am I taking into account the supposed intention of the makers nor the production imperatives. What interests me is the context of the film as received, not as conceived.

The first aim of my analysis is to answer the question "what is it?". In other words, I want to delimit the cultural connotation of the series. What televisual status can be given to it? Is it a science fiction film, is it a documentary about insects? I will first extract what *Alien Empire* takes from the science fiction culture. However, I will then argue in favour of a documentary status for the series. The relationship between these two genres (fiction and non-fiction) may indeed be conflictious. If, as Renov puts it, the documentary form "*struggles to find its place within the supposed conflict between truth and beauty*" (1993:11) then I am heading to discuss the place *Alien Empire* found in this conflict. The *truth* part will conduct me to look closer at the place of science in the series. This will be my third step toward a picture of an *Alien Empire* identity. In the last part I propose to interrogate its place in the society that watches - recalling that *Alien Empire* is a television series, a message sent to the people.

## ***Alien Empire, a case study***

The BBC series *Alien Empire* has been broadcasted twice, in 1995 and 1996 on the public British channel BBC 1. It is composed of six episodes of thirty minutes each, showed at the pace of once a week (in 1996, it was diffused every Thursdays at 9 in the evening). Each episode can be watched independently, treating a distinct theme about the topic. Being part of a series, the *Alien Empire* episodes share common features. They all start with the same opening sequence, and have the musical track in common. The structure is similar throughout the episodes. Every starting sequence is about some interaction between humans and insects. Then the episode goes

from the 'human world' to the 'insect world', each sequence telling short stories where humans hardly appear or have a secondary place. At the end, the episode takes a rather dramatic tone to emphasise the consequences of these anecdotes... on humans. Let us illustrate it with the episode I described above. *Replicators* starts with an invasion of flies on the Mississippi river. Then, about ten sequences are dedicated to little stories, telling about how this couple of insects encounter to mate, or how this female lays eggs. The final scene draws on the dramatic consequences of the mating activity of insects : "*Numbers. Sheer quantity...*"

Another piece of material that deserves to be cited is the book. In 1995 the BBC published a book entitled "*Alien Empire*" - and overtitled "*an exploration of the lives of insects*" - available for the public in (British) bookshops (for £ 17.99). The book (224 pages) heavily illustrated, is written by Christopher O'Toole, the scientific advisor of the series. It deals with themes similar to those of the TV series, but has a different organisation. I did not integrate the book in my analysis as such, but I gave it some interest in accordance with its advocated role : "*to accompany the television series*".

Being formerly a biologist, my research has a bias. I am not a layperson when faced to a discourse about insects. I consider it as an advantage. Absolute neutrality or objectivity toward one's object of analysis is not possible anyway. Rather than denying it, I chose to deliberately use my background to exercise my critical look upon the series. My results are influenced by it. They are issued from one of the multiple points of view one can choose to adopt when confronted to *Alien Empire*.

## **Analysing Alien Empire**

In order to analyse *Alien Empire* I will first consider every programme as a film, in the rough sense : a set of moving images combined with a sound track.

A film - any film<sup>2</sup> - is the result of a construction by a team. From the former idea to the end result, some rolls of images and a sound tape, the preparation of a film has to go through a succession of stages. This does not normally ( if the work has been done well enough ) clearly appear on the screen. It is a process involving time, technical devices, various competencies, and over all, that implies *choices*. Choices among the possible codes, words, images, sounds, rhythm... will be the result of a chain of negotiations that build the film. An incredibly wide amount of choices is possible at every stage, but only a single, definite option will be taken. These choices and the constraints that influence them constitute a specific world for a given film. A film is always a compromise - limitations are a bunch, not to mention the everlasting imperatives in terms of time and money.

The making of a film needs at least the three main stages, broadly defined by the preliminary research, the filming and the editing. Every phase can be subdivided *ad libitum*, and might involve distinct groups of people. In *Alien Empire*, the extensive use of sharp technical devices, such as computer animation or special cameras ( miniature cameras, endoscope, straightoscope as specifies the video cover ) required a specialised type of work, adding some extra stages to the more traditional filming. The ends credits mention for instance the members of the crew in charge of the "*digital effects*" or of the "*graphic design*".<sup>3</sup>

The editing is probably the most obvious step in the completed film. The editing ( or *montage* ) constructs the film by grossly sticking pieces from the shooting one after the other, in an apparently artificial way, in order to produce a certain meaning effect. The filmic analysis describes every shot to show this construction. To deconstruct the montage process, revealing some choices by isolating the succession of shots, is part of my methodological attitude towards the audiovisual material.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This applies to any film when what I am talking about is purely the artifact composed of a combination of images and sounds in order to produce a meaning effect, whatever its purpose, public or ideology is.

<sup>3</sup> The end credits render apparent the main steps of the film making, by explicitly citing the persons that took part to them - as well as the stages namely listed. For more details about *Alien Empire* case, Cf. appendix : *Replicators* ends credits

<sup>4</sup> I will not do here an extensive exposé about the methodology of the close viewing issue. For more details about the theory of film analysis, a good starting point is the collective work led by Aumont, *Aesthetics of film*, or his more recent *L'analyse des films*. The enlightened reader will yet keep in mind Aumont's statement : "*there is no universal method to analyse films*" (1989:29)

I have given a close viewing to the entire series, but the object of my *plan par plan* ( shot by shot ) analysis has been the one programme out of it entitled *Replicators*.<sup>5</sup> My material mainly comes from it, although I might refer to some of the other episodes when I judge it striking or particularly relevant. The six episodes are really part of the single *Alien Empire* series, which I consider as having, as a whole, a relatively stable identity. This identity is what I am aiming to describe in the following discussion.

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<sup>5</sup> Landmarks of this work are to find in the appendix, along with some other information about the material.

*And thus was the Empire forged.*  
( Douglas Adams, The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy, p. 87 )

## 2

# The construction on an Empire

Stating that a film is a particular construction leading to a more or less coherent world, I want to describe the *Alien Empire* one. As I will show, it appears to have the characteristics of an... Empire.

Let us take a guided tour in this empire. To do so, I will first examine the *cultural* grounds on which this empire is built. Related to it are its *politics*, which will be the object of my second point. I will then give my focus to the characters of the film, the *heroes* in this world. The next and last angle will deal with the power of the empire - its *authoritative* trends.

## The Culture

### *The world of Science Fiction*

The aim of this part is to grasp the cultural identity of the world built by the film. It is reflected by the choices made in terms of aesthetics, ranging from the shades of colours to the music. *Alien Empire* is also referring to the worlds of other films, indicating some possible cultural roots for the series.

## Aesthetics

### *Opening credits*

The opening credits, because it is the first message sent to the spectator, influence the first impression received from the film. They are of great importance in the setting of the world we are going to be taken to.

In each *Alien Empire* episode, the one minute of opening credits starts with an image of sparkling stars and stony shapes of meteorites spread in a dark background. A rapid movement is initiated

and we soon realise that what is moving is the title, "*Alien Empire*" coming from the lower part of the screen. **(Image, p. 2)** The distorted angles of the letters render an impression of perspective, that makes the title moving from laid to straight up in front of us as it gets closer to the centre of the visual field, where it stays still for about half a second. The spaceship-like title then moves away from the black sky, where planets and stony shapes stand. The camera moves to the left, taking the eyes to a spatial trip. The speed increases. A blue planet is in sight - Earth, we guess. Its image gets bigger and bigger. The image of a satellite rapidly crosses the screen, while a repeated beep is heard. **(Image, p. 2)** During this trip, a musical piece plays. It is an original one performed by the Munich Symphony Orchestra<sup>6</sup>. A violin note dominates, and the melodic motif suggests a rather volunteer movement. It gives a decided, determined atmosphere to the start of the programme. It prepares the coming of the title and subtitle of the series ( *Alien Empire*, followed by *a journey to the world of insects* ) on the outer space image as a self-affirmation, announced by the previous movement in space and music.**(Image, p. 2)** After the credits sequence ( two minutes later ) the title of the episode, "*Replicators*", literally appears on the screen. The typography has a square design, whereas the angles are slightly rounded, and the thickness of the letters is slowly filled in a metallic light blue. **(Image, p. 3)**

All these features of the opening scene makes its construction strikingly parallel to the one of a motion picture, *2001, A space Odyssey* by Stanley Kubrick (1968). Just like *Alien Empire*, *2001* begins in outer space, where the title appears from behind the shape of a planet. Just like the starting *Alien Empire* soundtrack, the musical signature of *2001* is borrowed from a classical piece ( among others, both J. and R. Strauss composers contribute ). *2001, A space Odyssey* is known as a stereotype in science fiction productions. Harvesting the benefits of thirty years of existence, it stands for The outer space movie.<sup>7</sup> By referring to it in its construction, the *Alien Empire* overture openly grounds the series in the science fiction culture.

### ***Other filmic marks***

**Colours** - The atmosphere created by the choices in light and shades of colours is a striking aesthetic component of the *Alien Empire* images. The whole series is bathing in a full rank of aggressive colours, in the sense that they are bright and straight, alternating with scenes in a rather dark background. The colours used are mainly a nearly fluorescent green, to frame the 'outdoor' scenes, as well as a fair amount of a cold, electric blue and red spotted throughout the shots.

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<sup>6</sup> The music of the *Alien Empire* series is composed by Martin Kiszko.

<sup>7</sup> It is the title that got the more votes within the list of "*Science Fiction films judged best or more significant*" (ref. *Anatomy of Wonder*, p.674)

Green is with no doubt the colour that dominates throughout the series ( not to consider the darkness ). It doesn't look surprising in a film about insects, when they evolve in an outside environment, garden or forest, made of vegetal. Yet this green touch is going a bit over the top in *Alien Empire*, in a flashy kind of way. The sequence about the Leaf Hoppers provides to the eyes an overdose of green. A couple of round and very green insects are standing on a round and very green bit of plant. The green rank is so extremely restricted that it is hardly possible to distinguish anything in this wholly green screen. We truly wonder "what can all that green stuff be ?"<sup>8</sup> (**Image, p. 4**). All this green leaves the visual memory filled with an impression of artificiality.

A later scene provides the same kind of impression - in a red shade, this time. Two Thai beetles fight on a branch. The setting merely displays, not insects, but some kind of made up creatures - or creations. This is radically constructed by the play on colours. The images show nothing more than shadows standing on the stage provided by the reddening background. The music reinforces very much all the tension of the moment and the issue of the combat, as well as the impression of artificiality given by the technological-like insects. (**Image, p. 4**)<sup>9</sup>

**Sound** - The composition of the *Alien Empire* soundtrack plays on two resources. As mentioned for the opening sequence, the first one comes from the classical genre - made up for the occasion, but still very conventional. The orchestra will emphasise important issues in the flow of the film. It will prepare, in a rather traditional way, the coming of an insect. In the sequence about the male walnut flies, we first see the first male while the text refers to its rival. Before the latter enters the scene, the suspense is stretched through the music. Right before the actual apparition of the second male, the tempo accelerates, the music gets louder. The setting of the 'heroes' of the action is made obvious through the musical wrapping.

The second set of sonorous items is constituted by synthesised sounds. These deliberately artificial sounds are at some points extremely present and underline again the reference to the technological and futuristic codes found in the science fiction genre. For instance the crackling steps, their spasmodic rhythm, illustrating the wasp running inside a computer, would perfectly match a robot strolling.

Many filmic conventions used in *Alien Empire* are borrowed from the science fiction genre. It impregnates the whole series with a particular culture, giving it a strong identity. This identity is made even stronger by the choices of the titles of the programmes. They constitute a world of references that directly send the experienced spectator to this one science fiction culture.

## References

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<sup>8</sup> Quoting Alice in her *Adventures in Wonderland* (Lewis Carroll)

<sup>9</sup> For the bluish version, see the walnut flies cf. **Image, p. 4**

The name of the series is very much its signature, the first information it tells about itself. It is carried along with the series itself as a flag. It is an outside mark and it must make clear its identity both in terms of style and of contents. The meaning of "*Alien Empire*" will be discussed in the next section, because, relayed by the whole construction of the series, it belongs to the 'politics' of the world of the film.

But, to an attentive film spectator, the association of the two words : *Alien* and *Empire* is pointing at at least two titles of formerly existing motion pictures of a great popularity. The first one, *Alien* is the title of one of the most popular science fiction films of the last decades, directed by Ridley Scott in 1979. It explores the theme of an alien form of life threatening the human crew of a spaceship<sup>10</sup>. The word *Empire* also refers to a famous science fiction film, *The Empire strikes back* (1980, directed by George Lucas), one of the *Star Wars*. The identifications might not be purely casual since they are pursued along every episode titles. I will rapidly list them<sup>11</sup>.

### 1. *Hardware*

This episode draws upon the physical features of the insects, their "*hardware*". The term refers to their outer skeleton, which is literally their hard part. *Hardware* is also the title of a British science fiction film<sup>12</sup>.

### 2. *Replicators*

The second episode of *Alien Empire* series deals with the great ability of insects to "*replicate*" - to reproduce themselves. The title, *Replicators*, recall the "Replicants" in *Blade Runner* (1992). The Replicants is the name of the *aliens* when they take the human form to reproduce themselves - to replicate. Let us note that *Blade Runner* was directed by Ridley Scott, just as *Alien* was.

### 3. *Battleground*

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<sup>10</sup> The video of the film was number 12 in the American Top 50 Rental films (year 1986) and is also cited as science fiction films judged best or more significant. Numbers of studies have been conducted about it, and many studies on other science fiction films rely on it, as an actual standard for the genre. ref. *Anatomy of Wonder*, p.674

<sup>11</sup> Source : CD-ROM Cinemania, Microsoft

<sup>12</sup> JP Telotte in his article *Enframing the Self : The Hardware and Software of Hardware*, sees the movie as "reflecting on our own "hardware" -that is, our technology and our technologically-based communication". It may be worthwhile to notice also that the same article makes mention of not only *Alien* (title of the series) but also of both *Blade Runner* (see episode 2) and *Metropolis* (title of episode 5) ! These films all belong to the same 'family' - to the same culture.

This part treats of the fight for survival and the quest for food. *Battleground* is again the title of a fiction movie.

#### 4. *Voyagers*

This episode shows how good travellers insects are, and how they eventually spread all over the planet. *Voyager* is the title of a *Star Trek* episode, but many science fiction works use the Voyage -in the space- if not the word, at least the theme.

#### 5. *Metropolis*

This chapter, about the social organisation of some insects, is undertitled "*Living together*". *Metropolis* is of course the classic film by Fritz Lang (1926). It draws the parallel between two worlds, the underground and the surface one (or the lower/upper ones), and contains also a warning about a technological threat.

#### 6. *War of the Worlds*

The last episode is the one where the two worlds meet, the insect and the human one. It is also a famous book by H.G. Wells adapted into a radio piece by Orson Welles. A film has been made out of it too.

The titles are heavily charged with a science fiction background. It offers to the whole series a specific key access that signs its very own style. It is not a mild choice, in the sense that the culture of the series is meaningfully rooted in the science fiction backyard. More than its culture, it is an actual cult to science fiction that impregnates the empire of the film in its politics as well.

## **The Politics**

### ***Defence in a hostile world***<sup>13</sup>

*Alien* (from Latin *alius*, other)

*Belonging to, characteristic of, or derived from another country, place, society, or person; not one's own; unfamiliar; strange*

*Being inconsistent or opposed; repugnant; adverse*

*A person who is excluded from some group; an outsider*

*Empire* (from Latin *emparare*, to command)

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<sup>13</sup> Title of a chapter of the *Alien Empire* book

*Supreme authority*  
*Extensive enterprise*

*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*

The choice of the two words *Alien* and *Empire* does not only recall some science fiction works, but also refers to two main themes in the traditional science fiction field. I want to examine now the implications of this choice on the setting of the *Alien Empire* world. Far from being just an outside catch, the terms are the reflection of the whole series 'politics'. I'll define the politics as the 'state of mind' that rules the world. It is "*the theory and conduct*" of a government, on the level of its "*affairs and methods*"<sup>14</sup>.

By the means of the words and figures of style displayed in the text of *Alien Empire*, a political trends is defined. To analyse this pattern of the series, I propose a short vocabulary survey to browse the principal leit-motives of the text in the series. By doing so I was struck by the coherence of the world built by the words. All along the text the same repertoire is extensively used. It is very much issued from the *Alien Empire* headline. It is not only a question of vocabulary, but it constitutes a whole metaphorical structure. The commonly accepted definition of a metaphor is "*the figure of speech that uses a word - or a phrase - to designate one kind of subject or idea in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them*"<sup>15</sup>. But the metaphorical figure is also supporting a conception of the world<sup>16</sup>. Describing *Alien Empire* in terms of a big metaphor does not (only) mean that there are some obvious resemblance between the insects in the outside world and some aliens. It is a deliberate way of describing, understanding, thinking, constructing the world of the film. It is again a choice that reveals a side of the empire thereby built.

Indeed, the entire series lies on a central metaphor, the one of an alien empire. It is made very clear by the full title of the series : "*Alien Empire, a journey to the world of insects*". The metaphorical proposition gives an image of aliens for the insects, while their world is seen as an empire.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ref. *Webster's Dictionary*

<sup>15</sup> Ref. *Webster's unabridged 3rd int. Dictionary*

<sup>16</sup> For a recent theory on metaphors see for instance Lakoff & Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*, 1980

<sup>17</sup> The "world" of insects is itself already a metaphor ; but the use of the word "empire" denotes a much stronger connotation. The journey as a metaphor for its concern, is highly structured through the camera treatment, the filmic construction of the film which I will not consider here.

I think that the few illustrations picked below are representative of the way the whole series keeps a hold on this particular representation of its advocated object.

*"In their looks and behaviour, insects are as close to an alien life form as any we are likely to find in the stars" (Alien Empire, book)<sup>18</sup>*

To present insects as aliens implies a referent : alien to what ? This referent is implicitly the humans. Indeed, the insects are presented as *"seeming so alien"* - because of their size ( they are much smaller than humans ), but also the way they look. They are directly compared to robots in the book, where they are *"the ultimate robots"*. In the series (*Hardware*), the vocabulary used to describe the physical attributes of the insects refers to the technical one. The technological comparison is another way of underlying their difference - their alien side - to humans. They are *"perfect miniature machines"*, and their structural characteristics ( having the hard part on the outside ) allow them to develop *"precision tools"*. They even have *"on-board computers"*.

But they are not *any* machines. They are thinking ones, some kind of anthropomorphised aliens. A spider *"thinks"*, this bat *"understands"*, the caterpillar *"doesn't know it yet"*, all insects *"have to solve problems in life"*, some other beetle *"doesn't mind"*, this wasp *"has plans"*, they can even *"get upset"*...

Insects also have, just like some alien invaders from outer space, an incredible ability for reproduction. The *Replicators* episode is entirely devoted to showing how good insects are in 'replicating', in other words, in producing huge numbers of other aliens. Insects are then, says the narrator, *"making more insects"*. It sounds a bit industrial. To replicate means to copy ; it applies to copy *machines* for instance. Insects function like a big factory producing robots at a very high pace. The induced metaphor of invaders is highly exploited throughout the film. A vast proportion of shots shows an imposing mass of insects, by countless numbers, reinforcing the feeling of invasion. This impression is strengthened by an accompaniment of continuous swarming noises and motion. **(Image, p. 5)**

Such a high production force of new insect leads to *"vast numbers"*. Insects constitute an *"empire"*. An empire, as suggested by the definition quoted above, describes a force which can concern not only space (*"Insects have invaded every corner of the human world"*) but power. The power of insects, including a warrior-like one, is a very recurrent theme throughout the series. For instance, insects develop *"powerful weapons"* or *"chemical weapons"*, and they even *"evolve nasty weapons just for fighting duels"*. It is also possible to *"unleash the real power of insects"*. The text often sets up different forces opposing each other, and there is always a fight at stake. It can be a combat between two *"rival males"* to get to mate with a female. Or it is the struggle of a caterpillar to survive the hundreds of *"parasites inside"*. Or again, it will be the war

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<sup>18</sup> Although I am aiming here at an analyze of the film, I took this quote from the book published by the BBC as a surrounding material. The logic of the book, starting from the alien argument, is very much in phase with the film. Let us remark that in this citation, the pronoun *"we"* underlines with no ambiguity the alienity to *us* - humans. Yet in the film the reference is never direct.

to survive to the *"deadly chemicals"* made up by humans to suppress the insects, where insects *"take control"*.

Indeed the more stretched war is the one between *"the two dominant forces of the planet"* (*War of the Worlds*), that is to say, in the series, humans and insects... and in *Alien Empire* view the issue of the war is clear : *"humans will never be able to control this alien world"* (*Hardware*) - and *"Resistance is useless"* (*Replicators*) !

These few quotes draw a good picture of the general metaphorical frame used throughout the series. The description of the insect world relies on the concept of an empire of aliens, as non-human and evil creatures animated with a domination purpose and an invading will. They appear as gifted with high-technology features, capable of self replication and virtually impossible to evict. They are also and over all animated with a fighting determination. They rule wars, *"with no mercy"*. The *Alien Empire* series uses this specific set of images to describe the insects world : it is a picked out view showing a power-led empire based on war - it is a *"battle for survival"* at first, all about how to survive *"amongst all this competition"* (*Battleground*).

Such a setting can take its origin, once more, in the science fiction culture - the culture of the empire which turns into a cult. The politics of the empire made up by the film tends to render the aggressive feeling echoing the alien's one. Insects in the film want to invade the surface of the planet, conquer new territory, win wars. So does *Alien Empire* as a film : it wants to invade the surface of the screen, conquer the attention of the viewer, win the war of its eventually floating interest. It is performing a spectacle. Here are the actors.

## The heroes

### Scaling and the reference

At an early stage of my research, I was dissecting the shots, describing them in a classical way, in terms of their content ( what do we see ) their mobility ( the motion or absence of motion ) and... their scale. It was at first obvious that a shot showing for instance the head of an insect was defined as a close-up to an extreme close-up. I soon encountered a difficulty when the screen was animated with, say, a couple of insect fighting at some distance letting appear some vegetal around. Since we could easily distinguish the insects shape and even the details of their body and heads, the distance couldn't be that important. So it was still a close-up, from the point of view of a human spectator peeking at insects on a leaf. This is when I realised that the filmic analysis vocabulary was defined from a human reference, mainly aiming at framing human characters, as Aumont raises : *"a [more] general theoretical-ideological problem exists precisely because the scale itself is determined in relation to the human figure"* (1983, transl. 1992:28)

Indeed, in a traditional filmic analysis, the main object on the screen is the human figure, same as the viewer. So when it comes to analyse *Alien Empire* as a film, it turns soon inconsistent if not

incoherent to proceed the usual way. The figure on the screen is not a human one, but an 'insect' one. I can infer without taking too much chances that some devices to enlarge the image had been used. So most of the shots are, from my human point of view, serious close-ups. It becomes helpful if not necessary to re-frame my conception of the scales. I decided then to consider that a close-up is for instance the shot where I can see an the head of an insect filling the whole screen, and so forth. It means that I redefined my analysis from an 'insect point of view'. The scale of the *Alien Empire* empire has to be defined in accordance with its object, the insects. This is of course a matter of conventions used for the description, the size of the scales being tools for an analysis. But it also says something about the world constructed by the series.

Of course, my re-definition is partly due to the topic itself, to the fact that insects "*are so tiny*". Even though, I can think of possible options that could have been taken instead, still allowing me to name the scales the classic way. For instance, the series could have alternated some shots seen from a human scale and some very-close-ups of insects. It would have resulted in a very different world, where the spectator would have an idea of the actual size of the insects related to his/her own. If the look could wander from a shot of humans to a shot on insects, eventually incorporating both, showing interactions, the film would be recognised as comparable to any other (fiction) film - and so would be the definition of the shots. But such a device is not exploited in *Alien Empire*. On the contrary, we are always watching the insects world - the Alien Empire. The whole film is nothing but a claimed "*journey to the world of insects*". This idea of a journey seems particularly pregnant when it takes the viewer to a journey "*inside*". For instance, inside the body of a caterpillar parasited by some developing wasps. The notion of *inside* has something to do with the perspective from which the traveller stands. The outside/inside limits depend on where s/he currently is. Going *inside* a caterpillar to check how the wasps grubs develop mean that the viewer is standing from the caterpillar (or adult wasp) perspective, and not from the grubs one. Grubs are not insects yet, but only a growing stage ; from the insect perspective, grubs belong to an inferior scale, both in size and in development. The viewer is truly incorporated into the caterpillar's world.

It gives an impression of being 'locked' in a closed world, the one of insects. To precise this impression, I concentrated my analysis on the way the human figure is shot ( in the few shots where it appears ). The human action is actually always framed in a peculiar way. Very instructive in this regards are for instance, the two sequences out of *Replicators* about the fisherman and his fridge. The shots where the human ( fisherman ) first appears are taken from the ceiling, while he loads the fridge with the tray of maggots. Later, it's this time from a high angle from the floor that we observe his return, in the ending sequence. When he opens the fridge, we see only fragments of him, for instance his hand grabbing the fridge door. We never face a human figure as a whole, the screen never embrace a human being but instead, concentrate on insects. Humans intervene in this world less as human beings than as actions on this world. The viewer sees humans acting in the insects world, whereas insects are playing in a human film. **(Image, p. 5)**

## **Acting subjects**

A redundant characteristic appearing in the analysis of *Replicators* is that we seldom see groups of insects. Most of the time, we watch clearly *an* insect, individualised, existing as a character. The numerous very close-ups are literally speaking 'portraits' of insects. Quite often a couple of insects is literally performing before the camera, while the filmic construction suggests a dialogue among them. The classic editing strategy used then is the shot/reverse shot effect. It consists in matching two consecutive shots on the eyeline. As Aumont puts it :*"A first shot shows us a character looking something which is generally offscreen, while the next shot shows the objects ; if that object is a second character looking back toward the first, then we have a shot/reverse shot"* (1983, transl. 1994:56).

This editing effect is extensively used in *Alien Empire*, the characters being insects through the look of the spectator. For a start, we recognise it in all the sequences where two rivals encounter. The meeting of the male walnut flies, for instance, is based on this shot/reverse shot technique. The screen shows the first fly walking toward the camera ; next shot we see another one, still, facing the camera. The following shot comes back to the first insect, getting closer. Then again we'll see the second insect, slightly reacting to the approach of its rival by moving gently, getting ready. We are placed alternatively on each insect's point of view. This gives the couple of insects the status of movie characters as a whole : *"the shot/reverse shot... the most natural method by which a story can be told in the cinema"* (Aumont, 1983, transl. 1994:234).

So *Alien Empire* looks like a feature film, using technique of a classic Hollywood production, with a proper *mise en scène* of insects. Not only the editing techniques betray it ; the sound effect contributes to the construction of the spectacle too.

## **An (authoritative) empire**

### **Sound : the shock effect**

*Sound has an influence on perception : through the phenomenon of added value, it interprets the meaning of the image, and make us see in the image what we would not otherwise see, or would see differently.* (Chion, 1994:34)

In other words, the sound tells us what to see in the image. Watching the same program successively with and without the sound track is an enlightening thing to do. For instance, Kessler (193) shares his own experience of viewing different versions of *"Spanish Earth"* (Joris Ivens, 1937). Two of them differed from each other 'only' by the off-voice commentary. The same text was said by Orson Welles and then by Ernest Hemingway. The single difference between the *voices* is enough, says Kessler, to have *"an enormous influence on the way we read the film"*.<sup>19</sup> This general constatation about the role of the sound led me to pay a particular attention to the sound during my analysis. In *Alien Empire* a focus on the sound seemed of an even greater importance because of some of its singularities.

### *The voices of insects*

**Re-creation** - The first one originates from a simple constatation : the sounds most insects actually produce are virtually impossible to record. The size of the insects, the pattern of the acoustic waves, the life conditions in which they emit them... are only some examples of technical limitations. Nevertheless the film provides to the listener a rich soundtrack, and hardly any time is left to silence. Not only can we hear the narrator's voice but also an extremely present music. Besides, various sounds constantly fill up the air. We can recognise the noise of the wind blowing, the water in a mud being shaken, a fly buzzing, steps getting closer, a car engine starting, some beetles knocking against a beer bottle, a fuse blowing, the crunch of a worm chewing a plant... So for technical reasons, the sounds heard, at least when they stand for the ones emitted by the insects shown on the screen, had to be recreated. This is rather classic in (fiction) films *"most of the time we are dealing not with the real initial causes of the sounds, but causes that the film makes us believe in."* (Chion, 1994:28)

**Creation** - To recreate a sound an insect might have emitted and make it appear as realistic as possible is something admitted, broadly used in *Alien Empire* - probably as much as in any audiovisual production. But the *Alien Empire* soundtrack goes beyond this demand for realism : even when the sound doesn't echo as such in human perception, the film offers to the spectator sounds which are obviously *created*. And it is made clear in the commentary itself. In *Replicators* the fifth sequence deals with the way a male and a female of a given species manage to get in touch. In a garden, a couple of colourful insects are shaking around. Repeated buzzes and loud clicks are heard, and they answer to each other with their own rhythmic, that sounds like an alternative musical soundtrack, *"not that humans would recognise it as sound ; the moths music is pitched several octaves above human earring. Moths hear in ultrasound."* (*Replicators*). Later on, the commentary adds that the strange noises we did hear were actually *"a medley of ultrasonic clicks"*... Next couple on line are the greenish Leaf Hoppers : *"they transmit vibrations through their legs to the plant stems, and the sound is received by*

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<sup>19</sup> Frank Kessler, unpublished (1995)

*touch. In other words, Leaf Hoppers hear with their feet."* But the spectator indeed hears - with his ears - a musical dialogue of whistling sounds, strange cooing and funny creaking.

Not only has *Alien Empire*, as a film, the power of faking existent sounds. The spectator will have no chance to check how realistic they sound anyway. But the empire of the film is also able to make up inexistent ones ! And although "*humans are completely unaware that their garden plants are alive with secret music*", the *Alien Empire* spectator is perfectly aware that the programme s/he's watching provides the world of insects with a lively rank of croaking and warbling.

"*When the spectator hears a so-called realistic sound, he is not in a position to compare it with the real sound he might hear if he were standing in the actual place. Rather, in order to judge its "truth", the spectator refers to his memory of this type of sound, a memory resynthesized from data that are not solely acoustical, and that is itself influenced by films.*" (Chion, 1994:108) And in *Alien Empire* the spectator will also refer (unconsciously) to the memory s/he has of the *Alien Empire* series itself. The series offers a set of sounds that becomes familiar along the watching of the programmes. It is creating its own databank of sound, insidiously educating the listener a proper memory.

### ***Sounds and chase***

The second feature that directed my interest onto the sound in *Alien Empire*, is its role in supporting actions such as insect tracking. An striking example is provided by the sequence about the quest of a male moth for the female in a "derelict warehouse". She attracts him with scent, but it doesn't seem that easy for the male to find her. He's rushing all over : "*by flying upwind and tacking across the waves of scent, he moves in her general direction*". The close analysis of this sequence of almost three minutes shows that the chase is constructed with the extensive support of the soundtrack ( together, of course, with the editing and its very rapid rhythm in the alternance of shots : no less than 35 of them ! ). The quickly alternating images are linked by the movement of the symphonic music that follows the narrative. The melody unifies the various images of flight seen from different points in one single track. The music speed decreases slowly as the insect gets closer to its aim, until the music stops while he finally reaches Her. What happens to the spectator is that, since *the sound superimposed onto the image is capable of directing our attention to a particular visual trajectory* (Chion, 1994:11), his/her look is in a way less "attentive" than his/her ear is. The music by its unity and the commentary in telling what we ought to see dominate and drag the spectator on a chase, while the images are not interesting as such - their interest in terms of understanding what is happening in the story is secondary.

Another example can be taken out of a later sequence, when, inside a computer, a wasp is chasing a woolly bear, trying to find a path through electronic components. The sounds, regular succession of kicks remind some steps, and their rhythm and volume suggest the direction of the run away. This reconstruction of chases have some similarities with the eternal car pursuits of detective movies. The speed of the car and the multiple and sudden changes of direction would get anyone lost. But the sound synchronisation plays a role in the final coherence of the chase.

In both the case of the insects 'voices' or the one of the pursuits, not only the sound helps the construction of the film but it literally directs it. It supports the coherence of the narration, giving it an *added value*. Besides its very topic - insects - that renders the sound illustration a bit delicate, *Alien Empire* have a particularly strong and authoritative sound-effect.<sup>20</sup> The assured voice of the narrator contributes strongly to this impression of authority of the soundtrack. Not only his voice, for that matter.

## **The *Alien Empire* Emperor : God is a narrator**

During the opening credits of every episode of the series, little information are given. Even though the opening sequence lasts nearly one minute, it isn't provided with much written matter. First, the title appears, rapidly followed by the subtitle : *Alien Empire, a journey to the world of insects*. After that, the only thing we can read before the actual start of the film is :

NARRATED BY  
JOHN SHRAPNEL

### ***He knows it all***

This for sure gives a special place to the narrator. Even before the series begins, the attention is caught onto the fact that it is going to be *narrated*. This information indicates that the "*journey*" is truly a guided tour. Someone is going to tell a story about "*the world of insects*". Even though the speech is about insects as a whole, they are represented by some of them, which are the characters of different stories within an episode. Each sequence in *Alien Empire* sets a short story : the story of the Invading Mayflies, the one of the Lonely Moth, the one about the Fisherman and its Fridge... The narrator not only relates these stories. He ( for it is definitely a male voice : John Shrapnel's ) also takes charge of the narration on a more general level. For instance, the narrator will first say about one single moth, the one we see on the screen, that "*she's just a bag of eggs*". Right after that he will reach an universal level, when he adds "*most insects lay hundreds of eggs...*". The narrator is not simply telling stories ; he brings them all together in order to hold the discourse on the whole world of insects.

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<sup>20</sup> Various remarks from happy (and benevole) contributors to my work spontaneously underlined it. One of them, Edel, had nothing else than the soundtrack of *Replicators* recorded on an audio tape, and that was asked to concentrate on the speech. She emitted a "it's crazy !" that could apply not only to the sound but also to the text itself - but since they were not then separated, I would consider her spontaneous cry as a general comment. Peter, a "normal" spectator ( in the sense that he watched to the programme with both sound and image ) described for his part the impression coming from the sound as a "shock effect".

He starts *Replicators* talking about "a continuing story, unbroken for nearly four hundred million years". This gives him an absolute and rather broad awareness of the story time scale. His privileged relation to time also applies on future ; the narrator does have some predictive skills. He knows what will happen. In the Mayflies sequence he affirms it : "tomorrow, they'll all be dead". The narrator has an universal knowledge of the *Alien Empire* empire. This knowledge concerns the time axis but also the spatial dimension. He can talk about anything whether it takes place inside Sydney opera or on the tip of a moth's antenna. He will comment from any place he's looking at - with the most natural voice. A quick look to the lines of the narrator's text in *Replicators* is enough to check it. He knows. The tenses he uses are the ones of the certitude, not some hesitant conditional. He knows what happened in the past ("the beetles were in danger of extinction"). He knows exactly what's going on right now ("he moves in her general direction"). And he is positive as well about what will happen ("the caterpillar will never complete his own transformation"). His undoubted knowledge encompasses the entire empire. He seems even gifted with ubiquity. For instance the narrator knows what happens both inside and outside, at the same moment. The late sequence about the wasp parasiting the interior of the caterpillar is a good illustration. The caterpillar - outside - "gorges itself" while the wasps grubs - inside - "absorb all [this] nourishment". This sequence gives the amazing impression that the narrator can follow what happens both inside and outside the caterpillar, having a privileged place whereas the caterpillar itself "doesn't know".

### ***Power of the narrator***

All these features : power of seeing it all, omniscience and ubiquity are the qualities that define Chion's *acousmètre*.<sup>21</sup> Yet, Chion adds that the "voices of clearly detached narrators" (1994:129) are not to be considered as *acousmètres*, because, unlike the latter, they are not "implicated in the action, constantly about to be part of it".

But in *Alien Empire* the narrator's position oversteps the classic one. This strange place within the *Alien Empire* world comes from the fact that we hear the voice of somebody we do not see. It is a way for the narrator to be both present and absent from the screen. I think that he is different from classic narrators, story tellers or luminous explainers. No more is he an actor as such of the film. I would define him as a kind of *acousmètre* because he definitely stands *on the edge of it all*. He is on the border of being inside the *Alien Empire* world though he still speaks from outside of it. He is almost part of it when, for instance, he has some kind of power upon the narrative. During the first part of the sequence about the fisherman, the narrator simply suggests a possible event. "If" he says "a fisherman put a tray of maggots in a fridge (...) and if, just after he left for the airport a fuse blew, the fridge would warm up nicely...". Then, he quietly explains how big an amount of developed flies it would result in, but this was an hypothesis, a

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<sup>21</sup> The definition given by Chion is the following :

Acousmètre (from acousmatic and être ["being"]) : a kind of voice-character specific to cinema that in most instances of cinematic narratives derives mysterious powers from being heard and not seen. (Chion, 1994:221)

fantasy, - even though we actually see the fuse blowing. And when the next sequence starts, a totally different scene is set ( about the male moth chase for his female ). It's only at the very end of the episode that we suddenly remember about this suggestion of the narrator's. He doesn't say a thing, but now we *see* what he's been describing earlier. All he said earlier is now on the screen, his prediction realised. Everything is happening exactly like if the narrator, by a simple evocation, had the power to render real the events he has set up in imagination.

### ***The position of a God***

The position of the narrator regarding the worlds he's declaiming about is a floating one. He is again, on the edge. The narrator designates both "*Humans*" and "*Insects*" from outside these worlds, avoiding to mark any difference of status in his speech. In the text they are treated in an equivalent way. He is pointing at them, as if he was watching them from a external stage. He does not include himself in Humanity by using the *we* pronoun. Neither does he mark any sympathy or closeness to the insects. He keeps the "*complete neutrality*" that narrators are supposed to "*pretend before the 'truth' of the story*" (Aumont, 1992:86). From wherever he speaks, he obviously knows about all these worlds, even though he doesn't belong to any of them. His voice and speech reflect the supreme power of authority. He is not in the human world, and he is not in the alien empire : therefore, being neither human nor alien, he occupies the ideal position of a God. Like Silverstone was putting it, about another BBC production<sup>22</sup>, the commentary voice is the one of someone who has "*a mystical relationship with the whole earth it dwells upon*" (1985:179). The narrators knows and can see everything ; he seats in an abstract place, somewhere above the empire he is ruling. He has the power of an emperor, and the absolute aura of a God. His speech "*will provide data, facts about the world not evident from the images. Through the provision of this information, and through its accurate provision, the commentary voice claims authority for the film as a whole.*" (Silverstone, 1985:144)

*Alien Empire* is performing a spectacle. It takes its cultural origins in the science fiction field, fiction *par excellence*. But here the actors are insects. And a God-like narrator occupies a blurred place. He is explaining what is going on, with an absolute knowledge of it all. The *authority of the film as a whole* does not only come from its coherent *mise en scène* and powerful commentary. *Alien Empire* is not a science fiction film. It is a film about insects. The film has the authority of its anchor to reality. Indeed, I am heading in the following chapter to define *Alien Empire* as a documentary, as opposed to a (science) fiction film.

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<sup>22</sup> Silverstone gives a fairly supportive account about his participant observation study on *Horizon*, a BBC documentary (which also takes the form of a series) in his book *Framing Science, the making of a BBC documentary*, 1985



# 3

## Documentarising *Alien Empire*

### The contract

Up to now I have considered *Alien Empire* only as a film ; it is now time to (re)introduce its reception. Let us consider the film as a message sent to a receiver : its meaning effect depends on the interaction with the latter, the spectator. A more or less active implication - "*the role of the reader*" in Eco's words, "*the share of the spectator*" in Aumont's<sup>23</sup> - of the receiver of the film-message is necessary. This participation can be conceptualised by a contract, or a pact, that the receiver of the message ( i.e. the film ) would implicitly sign up whenever s/he decides to enter within the space of communication created by the message, its sender and its receiver. As soon as the spectator decides to watch a film, s/he has to agree on an audiovisual contract. Chion reminds us that since any film is constructed out of moving images stuck with a succession of sounds, the pre-requirement is to accept to see them altogether as a coherent production :

*"The audiovisual relationship is not natural but rather a sort of symbolic pact to which the audio-spectator agrees when she or he considers the elements of sound and images to be participating in one and the same entity or world."* (1990, transl. 1994:222)

### Fiction or Non-Fiction ?

#### *Good question*

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<sup>23</sup> Borrowed from the title of Eco's book (*The role of the reader*, 1979) and from the title of Chap. 2 in Aumont's (*L'image. Chapitre 2 : La part du spectateur*, 1990)

Such an audiovisual contract first prevents the spectator from deconstructing the world of the film. The nature of the contract will then define the way the film is perceived and how it is understood. My aim is not to stretch the specific role of the reader. To know what a spectator actually considers as the enunciator goes far beyond my study. Odin himself is aware of the impossibility for the theoretician to really grasp this side.<sup>24</sup> It would have involved a drastically different research design. An extended survey of the different groups constituting the actual spectators would be another interesting study, which is not to be completed in this dissertation. But I can try to grasp the possible and plausible contract offered to the reader and presuppose that if the spectator is attending to the spectacle in normal conditions s/he has accepted it. And of course, it is always possible to break the contract, at any moment - including during the viewing<sup>25</sup>.

Here my main concern is to distinguish between fiction and documentary films - the documentary being defined as "*a film which is not a fiction*"<sup>26</sup>. Fiction and non-fiction seem to be the two categories a film can possibly belong to. But of course the boundary is blurred between these two - this is why I need this chapter : to define a documentary is not always that simple.

I showed in the previous part that *Alien Empire* display many of the features of (science) fiction film, to construct its own world. Thus every documentary, albeit claiming its reference to reality, is constructed just as any other audiovisual production is. This is exactly what allowed me, in a first stage, to conduct the filmic analysis of *Alien Empire* as I would do for any other film. Renov argues that documentaries contain fictive ingredients in their "*style, structure and expositional strategy*". Among them, some are found in *Alien Empire*. I'll cite for instance the "*character 'construction' ; poetic language ; emotionalising narration or musical accompaniment ; the exaggeration of camera angles, camera distance, or editing rhythm.*" (Renov, 1993:198). As I treated before, the *character construction* in *Alien Empire* appears through the *mise en scène* of insects. This includes the scaling (*camera distance*) designed to frame them, and only them - the main characters. I also mentioned *the editing rhythm* which is part of the fictive strategy especially in the case of the shot/reverse shot trick. Concerning the *poetic language* and *emotionalising narration*, let me give an illustration here. One ought to recall that *Alien Empire* sets another world, a miniature one, inhabited by tiny creatures - just like some dwarves or goblins. This sequence, taken out of *Battleground* underlines the coming of "*The Giant Damsel Fly*" (that is, a dragonfly) by some sweet music and a nice guitar riff. Dedicated to Her apparition, the sequence lasts much longer than the average ones. She is depicted as a heroin, "*6 inches*

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<sup>24</sup> "Le théoricien est sans prise devant les réactions individuelles et imprévisibles des lecteurs" (1984:275)

<sup>25</sup> To deconstruct the world of the film, I redefined my audiovisual contract with the film as a research contact.

<sup>26</sup> Burch, N, "*Two recent British films and the documentary ideology*", in *Screen*, 1978, Vol. 19, n°2, p. 122

long,... ". She is truly the central character of a fairy tale, as indicates the sparkling halo around her and her glowing wings. The music sounds very jolly and soft while she truly performs an "aerial ballet" in the middle of this episode.

### ***The documentarising reading***

So how is it possible to distinguish between the *fictive ingredients* necessary to a documentary and the fiction itself ? The theoretical debate about fiction and non fiction film is far from being solved. To frame my own approach, I chose to use Odin's, which he qualifies himself of "*semio-pragmatics*". The pragmatics side is particularly seducing because it is possible to put it in resonance with my case study. Odin is also very fruitful here because he (re)integrates the film in its context, trying to understand how it "*functions in a given social space*" (1995b:227). His basic assumption, specially relevant for my case, is that *there is no documentary film, but there is only a 'documentarising' reading*. In other words, what characterises a documentary is not inscribed within the film itself, but depends on a particular "*mode of reception*"<sup>27</sup>. Nothing can be found in the film that would strictly label it as a documentary. Thus the film can create the conditions for a "*mode of production of the documentarising reading*" or "*process of documentarisation*" ( I encountered both translations for his French neologism : *lecture documentarisante* ). The film contains some marks, some indications that can *programme* the documentary reading<sup>28</sup>. What kind of marks can be recognised as such indications? Basically, anything in the film or in its reception context that leads the spectator to presuppose that the film has a *real origin* rather than a fictive one. A documentary is a film that has its origin in the reality. Anything in or around the film that allows the spectator to elaborate a *real enunciator*, rather than a fictive one is a documentarising indication. The documentarisation indications constitute a "*framework of cultural constraints*" (1995a:213), because they depend on the cultural habits. For instance, a film shown in a classroom is more likely to provoke a documentarising reading than if the spectator has paid his ticket to see it in a comfortable movie theatre. The cultural constraints are infinite ; since they are cultural they of course vary accordingly. Another particularity of these constraint is their 'volatile' aspect. They don't order a documentarising reading, they suggest it or direct it. They are "*extremely flexible, and easy to evade*" (Odin, 1995a:214). Once again, the reader has the possibility to refuse the contract at any stage.

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<sup>27</sup> To quote Eitzen, another theoretician of documentary. Cf. his article *When is a Documentary ? : Documentary as a mode of reception* (1995)

<sup>28</sup> It is important to note that the documentarising reading can be blocked at any time. Basically, any film can be considered as a fiction or as a non-fiction ! But some are more strongly leading to a documentary reading than other. To Odin there are "*degrees of documentarity*".(1995b:229)

Constraints to programme a documentarising reading can come from the film itself, from the reader's attitude towards it, finally from the institutions<sup>29</sup> surrounding the projection (or diffusion) - and from the interactions of them all. I will sort out the most relevant indications, within *Alien Empire* and its context, that programme a documentarising reading of the series, in spite of its strong fictive component. I'll distinguish between three classes. The first one is what makes *Alien Empire* 'looks like a documentary', the constraints internal to the film, what openly refers to some more classic documentaries. I will then consider what anchors the series to the reality - how the film is grounded in everyday life. My last paragraph will argue on the role of the institutions, which might ultimately point as science as a possible enunciator.

## It looks like a documentary

Many *internal indications* can be thought of to define a documentary programming within a film. In this paragraph I will only list some of the ones found in *Alien Empire*. They come from different characteristics of the series, such as the content of its credits or the construction of its very structure.

The opening credits of *Alien Empire* are seemingly constructed in order to introduce a science fiction film. But a closer look to both opening and ending credits is likely to direct toward a documentarisation reading<sup>30</sup>. *Alien Empire* credits illustrate the "*absence of actors'names*" (Odin, 1984:271). In this case an absence is used as a mark. This absence reveals the spectator's expectative, when watching a fiction film, to see actors'names on the screen. This expectative comes from the norms we know concerning the fiction film : they are typically *cultural constraints*.

*Alien Empire* fits the documentary form also because of its length. A documentary is at first "*usually a short or average footage film*" (cited in Odin, 1984:276). With a 30 minutes size for each episode, *Alien Empire* indeed belongs to the short footage category.

Another explicit constraint of *Alien Empire* is the form of its title. "*A journey to the world of insects*" is referring without too much ambiguity to a documentary. The title proposes to show to the spectator something that exists in the reality, that is not fictive ( as I will develop shortly ). The *journey* is also the formal strategy used to build the film. It is part of the narratives techniques recognised by Aumont as often resorted to in documentary film : "*we can cite dramatisation (...) a voyage or itinerary approach (...) Within documentaries, short stories often serve to retell a life or various adventures by using a character who gives a semblance of coherence to information gathered from quite heterogeneous sources.*" (1983, transl. 1992:78-79). I

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<sup>29</sup> What Odin calls 'institution' accept a broad set of actants. For instance, the documentarising reading can be programmed by the institution of science, of pedagogy, of history, sociology... Basically the institution is defined by the context in which the film is sent - or received.

<sup>30</sup> See the what appears in the series credits, transcripts in Appendix

showed in the previous section how *Alien Empire* variously exploits all these techniques. Insects are the characters whose stories are told about, with indeed a fair amount of dramatisation.

In *Alien Empire*, the story telling is sometimes fed with a "*commentary of the explanatory type*" (Odin, 1984:272) which is an obvious criteria for a documentary, besides the actual presence of a narrator. For instance in *Replicators*, during the sequence on how the female moth attracts a male, the text adds "*the scent consists of long molecules with a particular shape*". This sentence has an explanatory structure ( whether or not it provides significant explanations is another matter, Cf. part 4 ). Another way of interpreting the commentary, particularly focussing on the voice and phrasing, is to see it as being some on-line news report. The narrator explains what event he's following : "*all afternoon they've risen out of the water*". Or he names what we see : "*this is a moth*", introducing the main actor of the happening. The narrator ensures the mediation between the event and the people he informs about it. It could for instance a direct-life documentary programme, from our special reporter to The World of Insects.

These structural components of *Alien Empire* are some of the internal indications that make it 'looks' like a documentary. It would certainly not be a sufficient conditions to provoke a documentary reading, if it were for the grounded reference to reality.

## **It comes from reality**

### **I can see it so it is real**

#### ***Les Insectes existent, Je les ai rencontrés***

Let me recall the title of the film : "*Alien Empire*". It is linked, as I showed earlier, to the world of science fiction and to the whole metaphorical structure of the film. But I want now to focus on the reasons of the choice of the "*alien*" term. It stands for the insects ; insects are considered as alien ( to the humans world ) because they are smaller. In the film discourse, the main legitimisation appears to be a matter of size. They are aliens *because they are so tiny*. Having accepted this explanation, a question remains. If what makes insects deserve any interest comes from their size, ( and also from their number and ubiquity, but this could fuel the same debate to ) why not making an exciting series about viruses or bacteria, since they share the same features ?

To answer I would suggest that the choice of the subject has something to do with its visibility : if you can't see it, it doesn't exist. Hence, every one has truly seen insects before, has probably been bit by mosquitoes, bothered by bees during a picnic, been scared by an oversized spider sitting in the bathtub... or opened wondered eyes staring at a butterfly. So the *Alien Empire* spectator knows what insects are, s/he knows that they do exist in the real outside world. Therefore s/he is more likely to believe that what s/he's watching has more to do with reality than with fiction. *Alien Empire* is rooted in the real world, that is to say on the visibility of insects. This is the starting point to allow the spectator to *documentarise* the series. I see it as a necessary step to documentarise the series. Insects as a topic functions as an anchor to reality. The former choice of the object of the film plays a role in its reference to reality. Silerstone writes : "*The plausibility of a*

*documentary film lies in its naturalisation, in its internal coherence and in its matching reality to a reality which 'everyone knows'.*" (1985:178)

And *everyone knows* that insects are a reality, living animals rather than aliens.

### ***The origins of the images***

Not only the nature of the images ( they show insects ) but also what the reader can infer from their origins, is pointing at reality. The artefact, the means that produced the film may also allow the documentarising reading. When watching a film, the spectator knows that ( in most cases ) the images shown come from the record of a camera, a technological artefact that has been manipulated by a cameraman. Might it sounds trivial, nevertheless to obtain an image of an object through a camera, the object had to stand before the camera. *"It is because we **know** that the image is an imprint, a track [...] that we **believe** that it represents adequately this reality, and that we are ready to eventually believe that it says the truth about it."*<sup>31</sup> (Schaeffer, cited in Aumont, 1990:83, emphasis in the original)

Oudart puts it in his own terms. An image, photo or film is likely to offer to the reader an *effet de réel* (real effect). According to him, *"the spectator believes, not that what s/he sees is the real itself but that s/he sees **had existed, or could have existed, in the reality**"*<sup>32</sup> (cited in Aumont, 1990:82, emphasis in the original)

Both accounts recall that the spectator has a culturally induced knowledge about the image and its origin. This knowledge plays a role in the way s/he will read the film, as opposed to a written text for instance. Of course, we know that an image can lie and doesn't speak for itself - far from it. Yet, the aura of the filmic image is still a component of the construction of the enunciator.

The spectator naturally presupposes that the images are on the screen because a camera recorded them, through some manipulation - say, with the help of a cameraman. The reader may infer that *"the cameraman was on the spot where events took place : he saw them with his own eyes."* (Odin, 1984:269)

Some sequences of *Alien Empire* construct an obvious fiction. Thus others suggest that the cameraman was there and shot the images almost by chance, and that everything *"would have happened in the same way if the director and the camera had not been there"* (Odin, 1995:217). This is for instance the case in the first sequence of *Replicators*. The Mayflies invasion is presented as a yearly event. *"It's happening again"* says the narrator. *"People here dread*

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<sup>31</sup> "C'est parce que nous savons que l'image photographique est une empreinte (...) que nous *croyons* qu'elle représente adéquatement cette réalité, et que nous sommes prêts à croire éventuellement qu'elle dit la vérité sur elle."

<sup>32</sup> "Le spectateur croit, non pas que ce qu'il voit est le réel lui-même, mais que ce qu'il voit *a existé, ou a pu exister, dans le réel*"

*this kind of day at this time of year"*, he adds. This event is possible to predict. Therefore, it is plausible that this time, a cameraman had planned to stand there in order to record it.

The filmic images are the witnesses of something that had happened ( whether this something had been (re)created or not ). The origin of the images is part of the (cultural) constraints that can trigger the documentarising reading. This reading take place in a wider context where the institution enters the scene with some weigh.

## **Role of the institutions**

As mentioned above, the operation of reading a film results from the interaction of three actants<sup>33</sup>. One of them is the reader ; another one is of course the film itself. Finally, the third actant is the 'institution'. I will discuss its role now. The background production and the reception conditions enframe the reading of the series. The institution influences the context in which the film is sent - and received. Its role is primordial.

I will first remind that *Alien Empire* is a series produced by the BBC 1 (British Broadcasting Company) that gives it some kind of state backing, so to speak. The series is broadcasted on a national channel, it has therefore a huge rank of possible spectators<sup>34</sup>. On the top of this, the time scheduled, 9 p.m., is definitely one that allows a mass of people to watch, fitting in the prime time segment. We can also note that the *Alien Empire* programme has been broadcasted at least twice (in 1995 and in 1996).

One step ahead and we note that *Alien Empire* is produced by the *BBC Natural History Unit*, which already labels it as a *science* program. This origin appears on the end credits as well as on the video cover and the book. They are three sources of information that play an active role in the construction of the audiovisual contract. They provide the few cues that tell us about the program, the institutional background of its making and broadcasting. From the same sources we learn that Christopher O'Toole is the "*scientific advisor*" of the series. He is a biologist, specialist of insects for 30 years, working now at Hope Entomological Collections at the University Museum in Oxford. Finally, the end credits for each episode provide thanks to a long list of scientific institutions and organisations such as universities and museums. (see appendix for *Replicators*'list).(Image, p. 2)

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<sup>33</sup> "Tout acte de lecture apparaît comme une opération mettant en oeuvre un système interactif à trois actants : un film, une institution, un lecteur" (Odin, 1984:275)

<sup>34</sup> It would be a mistake to consider that the BBC audience is restrained to the British one. An example is my own : I watched the series in March 1996 from Maastricht, The Netherlands. Besides, as I am writing these lines *Alien Empire* is being diffused on the private French channel Canal+.

The structure of the film, the real origin of insects, finally the institutional backing create a "framework of cultural constraints" that operate on the audiovisual contract. A single one of these indications wouldn't lead to a documentarising reading. But the interaction of them all constitute a network of intertwined marks that allow the reader to consider *Alien Empire* as a documentary. Being a documentary on insects, the institutional environment is strongly supported by a scientific backing surrounding the film *making*. But what appears of it within the *watching* of the film ? This is what I want to discuss in the next section : the place of science in the film.

*They seem to come from the World of Science Fiction...  
They belong to the World of Science Fact.  
(Alien Empire, Hardware)*

## 4

# The place of science in *Alien Empire*

## The World of Science Fact

In my definition of *Alien Empire* as a documentary, or rather as a film that programmes a documentary reading, I have considered the role of the *institution*. Doing so, I chose to stick to Odin's perspective. He indeed gives a key role to the institution that frames the film. I will recall here that in Odin's theoretical framework, the *institution* is to be understood quite broadly. It is, basically, "*anything that is supposed be responsible for some aspect of the film*" (Eitzen, 1995:101). I will examine here what I consider to be the most influent institution, in the sense of institutional constraint that command a documentary reading. In last resort, in the reader's comprehension, the main institution responsible for the film it is pointed as *science*.

Of course, a bit before, the BBC 1 ( and more widely, television ) is the institution responsible at least for the making and broadcasting of the series. These are the most obvious aspects. But the BBC 1 as an institution has certainly had a determining role for many other choices, which are not the focus of the study. I am concerned here with the reality effect provided by the series. If the viewer is conducted to read *Alien Empire* as a documentary, then s/he is going to believe in the film. The role of the institution in this construction is what I want to explain now.

The relevant institution to construct a reality effect, to strengthen the belief of the reader is presented as the *scientific* institution. I listed previously the scientific surrounding of the making of the film, apparent in the end credits. There we learn that *Alien Empire* benefits from a *scientific advisor* and a *research team*. The making has dealt also, in one way or some other, with universities and museums, as testimonies the written acknowledgements from the BBC. This information is a first step to indicate that the institution possibly responsible for the serious, the grounded-in-reality aspect of the film can be at last, the institution 'science'. Indeed, *Alien Empire* is a documentary about insects. Due to this topic, the scientific background functions as a will of making the spectator believing in it. Insects are issued from the outside world, but they over all they are living creatures, whose systematic study is reserved to scientists - biologists, entomologists, researchers in Natural Science... All kinds of serious people. This is one of the reasons why, when watching *Alien Empire*, one is more likely to believe that what s/he's watching

has more to do with Science Fact than with Science Fiction, as the narrator himself frequently ensures :

*They seem to come from the World of Science Fiction...*

*They belong to the World of Science Fact.*

This direct reference to science fact is made several times throughout the series. It sounds like some self advertisement or legitimisation. And it is both. Before I dig this point further, I will first sort out what in *Alien Empire* come from "science fact". For the scientific surrounding does not solely appear in the credits. It is part of the film itself, quite obviously sometimes. The assertion of the narrator is supported by the material provided to the sight and offered to the ears. The images and the text contribute to reinforce the science-originated impression of the film, initiated by the credits and the topic. Various images, besides the insects ones, come with no doubt from science itself. For instance, an animated sequence shows the inside of a caterpillar. The drawing looks like a cartoon ; nevertheless it still shows a representation of the inner anatomy of the animal. We can guess some vessels, tubes and reticular structures that recall some diagram out of a biology schoolbook. **(Image, p. 5)** The same impression goes for the "*long molecules with a particular shape*". This sentence is already science connoted. It comments an image supposed to display a schematised molecule. This image can be read as a scientifically produced image. This reading does not only come from the represented itself. The style of the image speaks for this argument as well. No fancy background or fantasy colours supports it ; it looks *serious*, more a graph than an picture. Significantly enough the credits identify the source of the computerised images as being "*Science Pictures Ltd.*"

An other kind of serious image eventually fill the screen. For instance, the sequence where the narrator comments : "*each egg is a microscopic survival capsule, most are smaller than a pinhead*" is obviously illustrated with some images issued from electronic microscope, an indubitable track of the scientific origin of the images.

Some way of framing insects are also the mark of a will to show something that interests science. When the female moth emits a scent to attract the male, a close up shows only the last part of her body and lingers over it. The narrator adds that the scent is "*released from a gland on her abdomen*". Even if we do not perceive a thing, this precision given by the text justifies the close up. We now know that what we see is the moth abdomen. And we infer that it is spasmodically shaking because she is emitting the scent.

The couple of sentences just quoted are, for their part, textual marks of the scientific contribution to the film. In some occasion the lines of the narrator use some biology-issued vocabulary like "*pheromones*", "*molecules*", or "*hormones*". The names of the insects are also given thoroughly. They are not the Latin names, but they still contains some entomological precision. For instance, in this shot is not *any* moth, it is a "*vapourer moth*". At the end of the sequence in Sydney's opera, when the narrator talks about the loudest insects, he list some of them. We see none of them. But we hear their names. It renders them real, and labelled : "*double drummer cicadas, green grosses, yellow mondays, black princes, cherry noses...*".

The content of some images, the way they are at some point framed, as well as the vocabulary and some times the structure of the text, all of it provides some scientific hints, some bits of science spread in the film. But they are barely *marks* of science. They show that the discourse come from the scientific one, but they do not really provide any explanation. They do not give definitions. They don't bring any new scientific knowledge to the spectator.

## **Does *Alien Empire* ( aim to ) teach anything ?**

### **No didactical effects ( or so little )<sup>35</sup>**

If we look closer at how the previously described scientific facts are displayed, it becomes soon be apparent that they are nothing else but *marks*. Some particularities in their display have the result of a "*block of the pedagogic reading*".

The image from electronic microscopy is offered to the sight, with a nice rotative effect from the camera. But the spectator don't know what s/he sees. The definition of what is framed is not given - nor even the same of the object enlarged. Be it the detail of an egg of a given species ( which species ? ) or an aggregation of a thousand different eggs - we don't know. The fact that it is enlarged is not explicitly said either ; we just know that it is *microscopic*. But no scale is given. No information about through what means and under what conditions the images have been obtained is given. We are deprived of all contextual clues - but the aesthetic effect is a success.

The same remark applies for the ( rare ) numbers given to the curious spectator. "*It only takes half a dozen molecules to excite him - he could detect her a mile away*". We have no way to appreciate this information ; unless being particularly familiar with the molecular scale, we don't really know what it means. But it doesn't really matter, as long as we understand that it must be very few. Like in the case of the "*nearly four hundred millions years*", the numbers are here to provide an impression of something extremely big or small - but at any rate impressive. They are never given within their rank of acceptability or significance. They are not given as an information but as a testimony of scientificity. The discourse of the film come the real world of numbers, it shines with the label of science.

Concerning the contents of the documentary, it is also surprising how far is the film from a didactical will. *Replicators* for instance, the episode main object of my study, is treating of the

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<sup>35</sup> This judgement might sound a bit severe. The fact that *Alien Empire* doesn't really teach echoes in a filmic form B. Jurdant's theory about popularization of science. B. Jurdant sees the popularization of science as being the source of the myths of our modern 'scientific' and 'technological' societies. To him, popularization of science plays an epistemological role for the scientific community itself. For thorough details, see B. Jurdant's doctoral thesis, *Les problèmes théoriques de la vulgarisation scientifique*, University of Strasbourg, 1973.

way insects are *making more insects*. But it does not take up the traditional issue of the biology of insects reproduction. It doesn't mention different stages in the growth, or the different way of proceeding to lay eggs, etc. The *difference* issue is the problematic point in *Alien Empire*. The film doesn't talk about the differences because it gives an universal discourse ; it is interested by the common. The documentary never gives any rank, any referent, any scale, any limits of this scientifically originated facts. Limits of validity of the discourse are never ever specified. The context is put aside ; it is never possible to answer to the question : "what do I see and hear really apply to ?".

In its will to bring the discourse onto a general level, *Alien Empire* is clouding the issue. *Alien Empire* can possibly lead the reader to a confusion, from my biologist's eyes, in between insects as a whole and as one particular species, or one single insect representing of a given species. The spectator is never told from which level insects are considered. Of course when the narrator goes for instance "*insects have only one purpose in life: to make more insects*", it has to be from a global level, insects as the biological whole. The narrator in his speech constantly switches from the individual to reach an universal level ( cf. his God-like features, part 2 ) - the level of science. The narrator is talking about "*this moth*" or "*this wasp*", the one on the screen at the moment he speaks, but he then generalises to "*insects*" or at least "*most insects*". Quick shift, indeed - that doesn't really provide satisfactory conditions for the construction of knowledge.

## Spectacle first

Although the entire series is filled with 'memories' from science, such as the numbers, the images or the words it produced, the film doesn't allow the spectator to build a coherent representation of what the scientific discourse says about insects. At this stage one can wonder about the reasons of such a display of science fact, deprived of its context. Indeed why using science to reach a misleading effect concerning the information spread ?

The trail to follow in an attempt to explain this 'misconduct' of the film toward scientific information is to recall the particular efforts visible in the *mise en scène*. The whole film is not aiming to teach but to entertain, to amaze the spectator. The microscopic images are not informative - but they have a great aesthetic appeal. The numbers 'don't speak' - but they impress. They render stronger the attraction of the story. The entire series is manipulating the spectator's gaze rather than his/her cognitive aptitudes.

The strategy chosen to show insects reveals this quest for the spectacularisation. Insects have a central place in the film. The fact that they are individualised truly equals to set them on the stage. This is also why they are designed by their name. *The woolly-bear* is a subject ; *some grub* would be an object. The same effect comes from the systematic and extreme anthropomorphisation in the insect description. The terms used to speak of their act, for instance, contributes to give them an actual role in the film. A male will *challenge* another ; that makes him a hero. Insects are actors. They gain some character - they becomes characters of the film, as showed earlier (part 2). The spectator is watching subjects, actants, and not anymore objects of a discourse ; they are science *facts*, acting facts. Through the look of the spectator, the entire film is

a spectacle. Everything participates to the spectacular, up to scientific imagery. The aesthetics is always a priority.

In *Alien Empire* science has a secondary interest. But it still has a crucial role. Science fact enhance the interest of the spectacle, and at the same time science itself is the spectacle. *Alien Empire* truly blinds the spectator with science - literally speaking. Despite its subjects and its reference to science fact, *Alien Empire* is not aiming to increase the spectators' knowledge in biological matter. It is again and before all, a spectacle. This documentary performs before it informs. However, the role of science stays central. It is not a way of instructing the viewer. But science is here part of the strategy aiming to render the spectacle attractive in a stronger sort of way.

## Science sells

### ***Alien Empire* is its own advertisement**

When the narrator puts it this way "*they seem to come from the world of Science Fiction, but they belong to the world of Science Fact*", it sounds like a commercial argument a catch to the attention of the spectator, to remind him/her that what s/he is watching is the reality anyway. Some short pre-views of the series have also been broadcasted widely using the these very types of arguments - it *was* some advertisement of the series then. The *science fact* origin is a recurrent argument within the series. Here is for example a variation on this theme, from the *Battleground* episode : *Individual insects can't reach the size of a monster from the World of Science Fiction. But working together, an army of ants behave like a single giant creature, a monster from the World of Science Fact.*

That insects ( the aliens ) truly come from science fact is stretched as a selling argument - like some brand or shampoo argues that their tremendous efficiency has been *scientifically proved*. In *Alien Empire*, science - or rather, the scientificity of the series - is a selling argument at the same rate than poetic language or dramatisation are. The rhetoric of the text is itself close to the advertising style. Striking formulas, a bit exaggerated, are countless. Insects are, for instance "*the original world travellers*" (*Voyagers*). A catchy sentence like "*insects have invaded every corner of the human world, including the depth of their imagination*" sounds to me as going over the top in a lyric sort of way. *Alien Empire* is its own advertisement, within the series itself.

### **The absolute aura of a God**

The main reason why *Alien Empire's* central selling argument is its scientificity is a way of using the aura of science. The aura of science is ( supposed to be ) big enough so that the spectator believes in what s/he sees and hears. A fact is something known, accepted as true. A science fact is therefore a fact coming from the dominant, accepted discourse about the representations of reality - at least the reality of insects. *Science fact* means in the public consciousness, "absolute truth", due to "*the privileged status of scientific conclusions*" (Hornig, 1990:12).

This is why *Alien Empire* can use Science (Fact) as the warrant of its truth, to Science Fiction ; fact is opposed to fiction to allow *Alien Empire* claims its status as a Science Non-Fiction film. And the God-narrator stands for the voice of this absolute and undoubted knowledge about the world. Like science, the narrator gives universality to his discourse. It is a discourse that knows about past times ( i.e. like science in geology ), about future ( i.e. like science in predictive medicine ). The knowledge of the narrator has no space limits, no scale obstacle - like science deem the infinitely big or small. And, like science, the narrator, an acousmêtre, gains his power from his ability to act on the world he is talking about.

The film asserts that *science fact* is here once and for all, obvious track of the fixed reality out there, telling the unique possible version of the truth about it : the scientific one. What is dramatically forgotten is the determining importance of the context in the making, the construction of this truth. Scientific truth, like others versions of the truth, is a consensus. Science is a system that works with some rules and that tries to understand the world, and some of these rules are social. Susan Hornig recalls it in her article about the construction of scientific truth in an American TV documentary : "*Scientific truth, like other versions of reality, is socially constructed; the maintenance of our belief in its truthfulness is socially accomplished.*" (1990:12)

*Alien Empire* is not concerned by the relativistic aspect of scientific truth ; to convey its own truth the world of the series needs to lie on the everlasting myth of science. Wearing the bright stamp of scientificity *Alien Empire* airs its warranty of authenticity. It claims its reference to reality, with the ultimate credit of *science fact*. The public can't doubt about the reality of its origins. It is a science-non-fiction-film, a science 'faction' work. Be it a documentary, it is not anymore in the Latin sense *docere*, to teach. The main question remains. *Alien Empire* is both a spectacle and a documentary. What does it say after all through these embedded styles ?

"Now - have I built up any coherent pictures of things yet ?  
No.

Nevermind, hey this is really exciting, so much to find about,  
so much to look forward to, I'm quite dizzy with anticipation..."  
(Douglas Adams, *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, p. 99-100)

## 5

# What is this world all about ?

So, up to now, what did I see in *Alien Empire* ? This television series is a documentary about insects, performing a spectacle at first - this is the *fun* side. I show that it had no possible didactical effects. The use of science is merely witnessing the *serious* side. Both fun and serious, fiction and non fiction, spectacle and documentary, *Alien Empire* seems to strongly resist any attempt of defining it. Like the *Horizon* series ( on the same channel ) a decade before, *Alien Empire* on its own is an *entirely distinct kind of cultural work*.<sup>36</sup>

What are the possible consequences and origins of its resistance to definition ?

And "*how come Alien Empire is such a slippery beast ?*"<sup>37</sup> This is rather symptomatic. To direct toward a diagnostic of the 'slippery' symptoms I propose two axis of reflection. *Alien Empire* may be a documentary on insects. But it can be seen as a discourse about *us* - humans. And a second trail is taking shape when we remind that *Alien Empire* is also a discourse issued from television.

## It is all about *our* world

A first hint to diagnostic *Alien Empire* can be offered by deeming at it through an apparent contradiction within it. Let us pay a bit more attention to the way the *alien* term is justified by the text. It lies at heart of the legitimisation of the whole metaphor proposed (or rather, imposed) by the series, insects as aliens. I showed earlier that the choice of insects may come from their

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<sup>36</sup> They are Silverstone's words to define *Horizon*, a(nother) BBC documentary (1985:167)

<sup>37</sup> Formula borrowed from Douglas Hofstadter : "*How come truth is such a slippery beast ?*" in his *Metamagical themas*, 1985

visibility : they are part of the everyday life, and thus they are as the subject of the film a reference to reality. The text gives its own argumentation to the interest insects deserve ( 3 hours-plot dedicated to them, prime time and on a national channel ). It comes from their *alien* side. I will quote once more this profession of faith from *Hardware*:

*Because they are so tiny, the world is a very different place to insects, and they've had to solve life's problems in a very different way than bigger animals (...) Living in a miniature world make them as different as humans as it's possible to be. It's these differences that make them seem so alien.*

*Because they are so tiny, they live in a miniature world.* This reasoning shelters a paradox. If insects are tiny, logically enough our world should be huge, giant to them. Kids are tiny as well. To them, the adults'world is probably made of over-dimensioned tables, too high windows, and jungle-like gardens. This is the reason why the reference from where the narrator speaks has to be the human world. From a human being perspective, it is indeed a miniature world. We, humans, are truly gazing at their world. But at the same time, we are gazing at *our* world. A miniature has to be the miniature of something - a bigger world. The world *miniature* implies a smaller version, a reduced copy from a model. We are left with no choice : the insects world is set as being a miniature version of the human world.

The human world is the standard from which the miniature insect one derives. So after all, the discourse is about nothing else but ourselves ; insects are defined by, rather than their alienity, their likeness to humans. In some instances, the narrator talks about the "*human equivalent*" of the insects behaviour. The text is truly executing a translation from their world to ours ( or is it the other way round ? ). As when the soundtrack performs some inexistent sounds - to the human ear. In our world, it would be heard - so this sequence has to be auditively illustrated, in a will of over-realism. The world of insects is a projection of the humans one. It appears again in the extreme and deliberate degree of anthropomorphisation. Insects, just like us, form couples, they mate, they give their young "*maternal care and attention*" or "*the best start in live*". They even have rivalry. "*Females never have time for losers*" says the straight voice of the narrator talking about male flies competing for a female.

Finally, the use of editing techniques such as 'eyeline match' also denotes the fact that "*Referent'R us*"<sup>38</sup>. Because such a construction for the film makes the reader see it as a fiction film - about human. Insects are not only characters in the sense they play but they have a status equivalent to the human character in a motion picture. The same rules apply. "*This editing strategy is one of the strengths of the classical narrative and especially classical Hollywood cinema (...) All of this reinforces the illusion for each spectator that s/he is simultaneously the centre, the source, and the unique subject of the emotions produced in the film.*" (Aumont, 1983, transl. 1994:234)

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<sup>38</sup> For Nichols, it is a dominant feature of the 80-90ies documentaries that he calls "*performing documentaries*" (1994:96)

In *Alien Empire*, these Hollywood techniques are extensively used - remember that the deal is 'spectacle first'. A hard work is done so that the spectators feel like they are "*the centre, the source, and the unique subject of the emotions produced in the film*".

What can possibly be the emotions of a film that displays a world view of a defensive society, a "*hostile world*" which is shaped by the metaphorical structure of the film ? For this is the world view proposed by the series to the spectator. The audience is invited to enter the spectacle through this door, the one of an aggressive world where war reigns. However it does so with the caution of a certified ( by science ) reference to reality. *Alien Empire* is constructed as a strongly coherent fictive world, but is still programming a documentarising reading of a domination world. A world that can ultimately be seen as the projection of *ours*. The spectator is looking at itself. Not to forget that the spectator which I have individualised until now doesn't exist as such. It is of course not this abstract entity I am manipulating as a research tool, but ultimately the society itself. *Alien Empire* is a televisual programme that gives the society a look on... itself.

## The medium is the message

This leads to my second hint in the attempt to escape from the slippery question of defining *Alien Empire*. This hint is provided by television itself. Three decades after MacLuhan, we can still assert that *the medium is the message*. The film does not transmit any information. During six episodes it seeks to convince, to entertain, to amuse... The viewer is gazing at a constructed, spectacularised world about nature, but s/he is not *understanding* it.

To teach something about the biology of insects might not be *Alien Empire's* role. But the series makers have made a choice, giving *their* version of the science version of reality. This engages their responsibility. The sender of a message - be it a book, a film, a speech - should try to measure as well as possible its implications. *Alien Empire* is a message addressed to the mass. This series is using the aura of science to give the series some valuability or quality mark. It is possible to imagine TV series that would adopt a deliberate relativistic view, and allow its spectators to doubt, wonder, interrogate about their system of values - having a point of view ! Of course, if the sender has to shoulder a responsibility toward the context and implication of the message, it is at shared expenses with the receiver of the same message.

Indeed, we can wonder how often does happen the "*felicitous case*" when the viewer *realises that what the secret thought of the sender to the viewer is : "I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure you release that what you heard is not what I meant"*<sup>39</sup> ?

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<sup>39</sup> Eco, *Can Television teach ?*, 1979, p.16

Should we go as far as suggesting the delivery of a *television licence*<sup>40</sup> to mature viewers ( the ones that can watch TV in the *felicitous* state described above ) ? As a driver licence certifies our ability to use the device 'car', a television licence would allow us to use the artefact 'television'. Safety, respect, priorities and responsibilities rules would have to be settled. I wouldn't go that far. But I would gladly join Eco<sup>41</sup> to give any viewer some preventive advice :

*Don't switch off your television, switch on your critical freedom.*

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<sup>40</sup> Idea freely brainstormed by Baudouin Jurdant ( personnal communication )

<sup>41</sup> Eco, op. Cited, p.24

# 6

## Postface

### *What about... insects?*

In this postface I would like to shortly review what influenced my analysis. This is the place where I want to allow myself to be as self reflexive as can be. This is also the time to confess my biases and prejudices -at least the conscious ones.

My initial motivation for taking *Alien Empire* as a case study for this thesis was twofold. On the one hand, I was curious about the topic itself -insects- because of my former training in biology, as I have said earlier. On the other hand my interest originated from the fact that, as many, i am "*a person suspended from narratives*" (Aumont, 1990:217). This can also partly explain my interest toward insects at all. It comes from the fact that I have learnt to watch them, and to understand their behaviour a bit better -because I received passionate explanations from passionate researchers. They were telling stories, and at the time I believed them because they were *scientific* stories. The same thing happens in *Alien Empire*. The series is telling us stories about insects.

What I was wondering about, and have tried to track along my work, is whether the story told is believed or not, and what were the conditions that render possible such a position for the viewer. My culture has certainly influenced my research. But as I want to believe, it can also be seen as an advantage. The critical review of the material is of course triggered by the STS approach, which claims, and it is a strong point, to be pluridisciplinary. As a result, the series suddenly started to come to life as I was writing about it. It became animated with its own will. It was the will I assigned to it. I even used *Alien Empire's* own metaphor, and nearly got myself lost in a meta-system of crossed empires. It seems that I anthropomorphised *Alien Empire* as much as *Alien Empire* anthropomorphised insects...

Talking about insects, let us give us a bit of room here. They were one of the starters of my analysis. They seem to have been manipulated through the research that was precisely aiming to deconstruct the way the series was manipulating them... This is why I want to give these few lines back to them. To let my message become: watch insects!

But not on a TV screen.

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# Appendix

## images

p. I



Computer Screen



Beetles on a Bottle



Beetles on a Bottle

p. II Title  
Subtitle  
Satellite

p. III



Episode Title

End Credits  
Alien Empire Logo

p. IV  
Green



Blue

Red

p. V Vast Numbers  
From Above  
Inside

## **text**

### **video cover**

ALIEN EMPIRE

INSIDE THE KINGDOM OF THE INSECTS

### **transcript of the credits**

- *Alien Empire* opening credits (cf. images, p.II)

ALIEN  
EMPIRE

A journey to the world of insects

Narrated By  
John Shrapnel

- · *Replicators* end credits (cf. images, p.III)

*Still :*

Producer  
Rupert Barrington

*Then, moving :*

Photography  
Rod Clarke

Additional photograph  
Glen Carruthes

Music composed by  
Martin Kiszko

Music performed by

Munich Symphonic Orchestra

Conductor  
Harry Rabinowitz

Script  
David Helton

Script Consultant  
Victoria Coules

Film Editor  
Martin Elsborg

Dubbing Mixer  
Graham Wild

Dubbing editor  
Angela Groves

Digital Effects  
Anna Newton  
Sciences Pictures Ltd.

Graphic Design  
James Hall  
Rachel Irons

Production Manager  
Elizabeth Toogood

Research  
Wendy Darke  
Ian Gray

The BBC wishes to thank  
Australian Museum, Sydney  
Imperial College at Silwood Park  
Sydney Opera House  
University of Arizona, Tucson  
University of California, Riverside  
US Department of Interior

Jennifer Balz  
Nancy Beckage  
Randy Hunt  
David Morgan  
Max Houlds  
Neils Naish  
Daniel Papaj  
Mark Sanderford  
Mark Steingraeber  
Steve Wilson

A BBC PRODUCTION IN ASSOCIATION  
WITH THIRTEEN/WNET

*Logo (cf. Image, p.III)*

## Replicators sequences

· sketch

TIME (MIN:SEC)	SEQUENCE SHOTS	DURATION	NB OF (MIN:SEC)
00:00 00:57	#0 Opening credits	00:57	
00:57 04:38	#1 Mayflies	03:40	36
04:38 06:49	#2 Eggs (Moths1)	02:11	15
06:49 08:14	#3 Fisherman - Start	01:25	17
08:14 11:06	#4 Chase in a Derelict Warehouse (Moths 2)	02:52	35
11:06 12:44	#5 Ultrasounds (Moths 3)	01:38	21
12:44 13:56	#6 Vibrations (Leaf Hoppers)	01:12	19
13:56 15:50	#7 Sydney	01:54	25
15:50 18:02	#8 Jewel Beetles on a Bottle	02:12	25
18:02 19:19	#9 Walnut Flies (Rivalry 1)	01:17	12
19:19 20:41	#10 Thai Beetles (Rivalry 2)	01:22	14
20:41			

22:40	#11	Inside a Computer	01:59	31
22:40				
26:46	#12	Parasites Inside	03:59	30
26:39				
28:05	#13	Fisherman - End	01:25	27
28:32		End Credits	00:28	

### · · short description

#### Opening credits

Planets and stars in a dark background. "Alien Empire" as a title appears on the screen. "A journey to the world of insects" follows. A satellite enters the visual field. Music plays. Approach of a blue planet, surrounded by a white misty layer. This cloudy zone gets closer, the movement slows down, the music stops. Going through it leads to a familiar landscape. Start of the narrative : "North America. The Mississippi river". We get closer and closer, until the point of view changes from above to frontal.

#### Seq#1 - Mayflies

It starts with some images of a lot of insects, obviously dead, littering a yellow truck in some isolated side of the river. Every shot gets closer so that we can see the amount of dark insects immobile. They are Mayflies, and that this invasion, dread by people here, occurs once every year : when mayflies, alive for only a day, have to mate. Shots of the surroundings alternate with shots of masses of moving insects. We see a close-up of an insect pouring eggs in the water. To introduce the theme of the episode, this first sequence ends by saying that every insect has, just like these Mayflies, only one purpose in life which is to mate. "Replicators" appears on the screen.

#### Seq#2 - Eggs (Moths1)

The atmosphere calms down to introduce a lonely moth. She is a female left by her male after they mated. She is consciously laying regular rows of eggs. As a gentle music starts, some computer animated images that show us, we guess, the microcopic level of an egg and of other kinds of eggs. We don't know exactly what it is - but it is moving and has a certain aesthetics appeal.

#### Seq#3 - Fisherman - Start

This sequence takes place at a fishermen shop where, on the outer window, stands a couple of flies. The commentary says how good they are in replicating themselves. Then we are inside a room where a man load a fridge with a tray full of bate maggots. The narrator says that if during this fisherman's week away, the fuses blew so that the fridge warm up, the tray of maggots to grow into flies and to mate. We see a storm ; the fuse is obviously blowing - the light in the fridge is off.

#### Seq#4 - Chase in a Derelict Warehouse (Moths 2)

Not all the insects are as numerous as flies are, so others have troubles finding a mate. Next sequences (#4 to 8) will show how a male and a female of a given species get to reach each other to mate.

The first example is about the quest of a male moth in a derelict warehouse. She advertises herself with a chemical released from her body but it doesn't seem so easy for the male to find her, he's flying all over. We see some animated images that supposedly represent the "molecules" some chains of round forms, moving nicely with a soft music. At the end he finally reaches her.

#### Seq#5 - Ultrasounds (Moths 3)

Now in a garden, we see some other insects emitting sounds. These sequences (#5 and #6) are based on shot/reverse shot editing technique, which go from a character to the second one (resp. the male and the female trying to get in touch). First, we actually hear repeated and loud clicks - the insects we see communicate in ultrasounds.

#### Seq#6 - Vibrations (Leaf Hoppers)

We then see some other images of insects and hear some noise, but this time they "transmit vibration through their legs to the plant stems".

#### Seq#7 - Sydney

Starts with a view on Sydney opera, we hear a singer. Inside the opera, the repetition of an act is set ; some green plants make part of the decor. But the singer is disturbed by the noise of insects (drummer cicadas) hidden in the plants. The assistants fail to locate them because cicadas are "ventriloquist" - so that the singer just gives up her work.

#### Seq#8 - Jewel Beetles on a Bottle

Last example in the ways of finding a mate deals with male attracted by "simple good looks". We follow the story of the jewel beetles. The males are attracted by the females because of the way they look : orange and dimple. Exactly like... a bottle of beer. We see a bunch of male jewel beetles unsuccessfully trying to mate a bottle of beer thrown away before by a truck driver passing by.

#### Seq#9 - Walnut Flies (Rivalry 1)

This sequence deals with male rivalry for a female. To avoid the combat, two males walnut flies take "each other's mesures" by touching. The bigger is considered the winner.

#### Seq#10 - Thai Beetles (Rivalry 2)

Two Thai beetles fight for a female, on a plant stem at dusk.

#### Seq#11 - Inside a Computer

We are now inside a computer, where a wasp is chasing another insect, a woolly bear. The wasp will sting it to paralyse it, and then lay eggs on its body. The sequence alternatively shows pictures taken from the screen of the computer : it is a game with animated insects, making funny noises.

#### Seq#12 - Parasites Inside

Back to a garden, we now see a big blue caterpillar eating leaves. A wasp arrives and attacks it to inject her eggs. We are then inside the caterpillar : thanks to animated images, we see some strange shapes moving around, while hearing the now familiar music. The eggs develop inside and escape through the caterpillar ; we see many little white grubs emerging from the dead blue caterpillar.

#### Seq#13 - Fisherman - End

Back to the fridge in the dark room. The fisherman walks in back and gets to open the door of the fridge. The images slow down. Numbers of flies come out and the fisherman drops his pipe. Still in slow images, the fall of the pipe ends on a journal whose cover represents Alien Empire sign : an big insect shadow dominating the planet. The voice reminds us that insects are here to stay, repeating that they are "more insects, making more insects, making...".

## **Replicators: transcript of narrator's text**

### *Opening credits*

**Seq #1**

*End of Music*

*Wind*

North America, The Mississippi River,  
It's July, and the afternoon is still, and very hot  
People here dread this kind of day at this time of year  
they brace themselves  
because it's happening again

All afternoon they've risen out of the water  
Mayflies invade the city in their millions  
in their billions

For the last year, they existed as grubs,  
feeding in the mud at the bottom of the river  
building up energy for this one day  
at dusk they take to the air

*Music starts*

This is a dance of life and death  
There's only one reason to fly : to mate  
and this is their only chance

tomorrow, they'll all be dead

They can't even eat  
adult Mayflies have no mouth parts

with only enough energy to fly once and mate  
they crash onto the water surface  
pouring up their cargo of eggs as they die

from this final act comes a stream of new life, a continuing story  
unbroken for nearly four hundred million years

and in that four hundred million years  
the biggest problem mayflies have faced is a recent one  
Humans have built cities on their river

Cities with bright lights that draw them away from the dugs??  
so that they die without ever laying eggs

*Steps*

The night leaves a scene of devastation

*Music stops*

Their bodies litter the roads and bridges  
and clog-up machinery

Less than a day after they emerged from the river,  
every single mayfly is dead  
they had only one reason for living, and many of them failed

it all seem so pointless, even tragic, but each mayfly was just an insect, being an insect, its only  
purpose in life to make more insects  
more  
and more  
and all insects are as dedicated to this cause as mayflies

This is a moth

at least mayflies get to fly  
but a female vapourer moth doesn't even have wings  
she's just a bag of eggs

she mated once, with a passing wind male  
who then flew away, leaving her to spend her whole adult life in an area no much bigger than a  
postage stamp

*Music starts*

Most insects lay hundreds of eggs in the hope that a few will survive

every egg has its own fleeting moment of maternal care and attention  
but once in place, the eggs are left to hatch, or not, by themselves

But even though their mother is probably dead by now,  
she had given them the best start she could  
each egg is a microscopic survival capsule

most are smaller than a pinhead  
yet every different kind of insect egg is a unique and intricate sculpture

Vast numbers of eggs insure against disaster  
but if it weren't for these disasters,  
insect would overwhelm the planet.

*Music stops*

**Seq #3**

Flies for example breed every few weeks  
if this pair was a breed and if all their descendants survived and bred for a year  
the resulting ball of maggots would be as big as the earth  
... more than enough big for a whole nation of fishermen  
but nature has a way of keeping things in check  
predators, competitors, disease  
flies die like flies  
it's only when humans meddle with nature that they then unleash the real power of insects :  
to make more insects  
if a fisherman say, put a tray of maggots in a fridge, expecting the cold to keep them subdued until  
he got back from holiday

and if, just after he left for the airport a fuse blew

the fridge would warm up nicely, and there'd be nothing to stop all the maggots turning into bluebottle flies  
in a matter of days, each one of these will produce a thousand new maggots  
an unpleasant welcome home  
with such huge numbers, mayflies and bluebottle flies have no problem finding a mate  
but it's not that simple for every insect

### *Sounds*

**Seq #4**

a derelict warehouse in North America is a huge, three dimensional space  
so how can a lone silk moth hope to find a mate here ?

Silk moths have been introduced from the rain forest of Asia  
a place just as big and complicated

and there, they developed a system that works however complex the surroundings

She advertises herself with scent, a special chemical, a pheromone  
released from a gland on her abdomen

### *Music starts*

The scent consists of long molecules with a particular shape  
these are only recognized by this kind of moth  
they fit like a key and a lock into special receptors on the male moth's antenna

his antennae are so sensitive, it only takes half a dozen molecules to excite him  
he could detect her a mile away

by flying upwind and tacking across the waves of scent  
he moves in her general direction  
as he gets closer, the scent gets stronger  
and the waves turn into a flood  
she could be anywhere here  
it seems like she is everywhere

he's overwhelmed  
he knows he's very close  
but he has to find her as best he can

### *Music stops*

They do finally get to mate  
but scent is most effective over long distances

at short ranges it can be confusing/

**Seq #5**

*Sounds*

/which is why this pockadock (polkadot) moth/

*Music starts*

*Music lower*

/in the deep south of the United States has developed a short range system as well  
a male moth homes in on the female scent

she avoids any last minute confusion by switching to a finer signal  
a beam of sound

Not that humans would recognize it as sound  
the moths music is pitched several octaves above human hearing  
moths hear in ultrasound

she gives him precise directions with a medley of ultrasonic clicks  
as he closes in, he clicks back

the problem with broadcasting sound though,  
is that some predators can also tune in

these brightly coloured moths are very poisonous  
they don't care who else hears their broadcast

*Sounds stop*

but more appetizing insects  
need a secure channel

*Music louder*

*Music stops*

*Sounds*

**Seq #6**

Leaf hoppers aren't poisonous  
so when they use sound  
it has to be as private as a phone call

they transmit vibrations through their legs to the plant stems  
and the sound is received by touch

in other words, leaf hoppers hear with their feet

the males move from plant to plant  
calling and listening for females of their own kind

*sounds*

they're not distracted by sounds in the human world  
and humans are completely unaware that their garden plants are alive with secret music

*Music*

*Music*

**Seq #7**

Some insects are not as shy  
their songs are so amplified that humans can't fail to hear them

the world's loudest singers live in australia

distant relatives of leaf hoppers, cicadas

*Music stops*

a cicada sings by clicking membranes in his abdomen, back and forth  
his song can be heard half a mile away

but to a predator wanting to hunt him down  
his song seems to come from a different bush  
he's not only loud, he's a ventriloquist

once they get going some cicadas can sing at one hundred and twenty decibels  
enough to drown out a pneumatic drill

*Music starts*

*Music stops*

Double drummer cicadas are the loudest insects in the world  
but not far behind are green grosses, yellow Mondays, black princes, cherry noses and they all live  
in Sydney  
no wonder that in the din of summer many people move away for the season

**Seq #8**

Some insects use vision to find a mate  
they're attracted by simple good looks

a female jewel beetle flaunts her golden dimpled wing-casing  
which is irresistible to a male  
she's also big, which to him, is beautiful

but in recent years, males have discovered other distractions

*sounds*

for a male jewel beetle, it's the simple things that are exciting  
if it's orange, and dimpled, it's just what he's looking for

and enormous  
this must be a super female  
a jewel beetle goddess

certain beer bottles have just the right colour and texture

all the males in the area are besotted

*sounds stop*

the real females are ignored

with so many males on the bottle, the beetles were in danger of extinction  
until the breweries began redesigning their bottles  
hoping the males will spend some time with their females

**Seq #9**

a male walnut fly also has a simple goal in life

he has to lay claim to a blemish on the surface of a walnut  
it's not easy, other males will challenge him

every male knows that a female fly needs to lay her eggs inside the heart show  
but she can only pierce the casing through a soft blemish  
the male that controls the blemish will be guaranteed to visit from a female sooner or later  
there is no room for a rival

these two males could just fight over it,

but the bigger one would win. So, why just don't take each other's measure, decide who is bigger, who would lose, and avoid the intervening violence

The dispute is settled and no-one gets hurt

## Seq #10

Real males in the insect world do resort to combat  
and evolve nasty weapons just for fighting duals

### *Music*

Outside a temple in Thailand, deer horn stag beetles clash head on for the honour of claiming a female

but the fight isn't just a brawl  
it's a ritual every bit as formal as anything inside a temple

there are rules to follow  
the first to dislodge his opponent is the winner

his prize is the female  
and she gets to mate with the champion  
females never have time for losers

### *Music stops sounds*

## Seq #11

for most insects, choosing the strongest male and laying vast numbers of eggs is enough to win the game of survival

but some are much more inventive than that

to an insect, even a computer is just somewhere warm and safe  
a carpet beetle grub or wooly-bear, lives a peaceful life, feeding on dust particles  
but there is something else here as well

this wasp has plans for the woolybear

it can run, but it can't hide  
the wasp stings the woolly-bear not to kill it, but to stun it

once it's paralyzed, she drags her still living trophy to a safe hide away

this wasp is a more caring mother than most insects  
she lays one egg on a helpless body and leaves it to hatch

## Seq #12

wasps have turned exploitation into a fine art  
they nourish their young at someone else's expense

this hawkmoth caterpillar doesn't know it yet, but it's about to become a walking incubator

the female wasp hi-jacks the caterpillar  
resistance is useless  
as soon as she finds somewhere soft enough she will inject her precious eggs

the inside of the caterpillar is mostly liquid  
so her eggs will be cushioned and safe from the outside world

she can leave them. the caterpillar will take care of them from now on

it gorges itself, trying to stock up food reserves for the time when it becomes a moth  
but the wasp eggs have hatched into grubs  
and they absorb all the nourishment the caterpillar can provide

as fast as the caterpillar lays down fat around its gut, the wasp grubs devour it  
and then, they take control  
they release a chemical that imitates one of the caterpillar's own hormones  
one that stops it from beginning its transformation into a moth

instead, it keeps on eating and growing  
until it turns into a super giant, a huge eating machine  
that just manages to keep up with the ravenous appetites  
of the parasites inside

*Music starts*

eventually, when they've taken all they need from the caterpillar,  
they release chemicals to paralyse it  
and they riggle through the body wall

their first task in the outside world is to spin their silken cocoons  
to begin their transformation into wasps

the caterpillar will never complete its own transformation  
but for one caterpillar's body, hundreds of wasps have been given life

*Music stops*

**Seq #13 and end.**

Insects may be small, and each individual seems vulnerable on its own  
but they have one thing going for them :

Numbers  
Sheer quantity

there are simply  
so many insects

as each insect's purpose in life is to produce even more,  
whatever happens to the rest of the world, insects are here to stay

there's always been lots of insects, making more insects,  
making more insects, making more insects...

MUSIC.