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# *16:9* in English: The "Wondrous Truth" of *Microcosmos*

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**Claude Nuridsany's and Marie Perennou's 1996 film about insect life, *Microcosmos*, poses several problems for prevailing theories of documentary cinema. If we think of documentaries as films that present arguments about human affairs or human history, *Microcosmos* simply does not fit the category. *Microcosmos* also suggests that it is a mistake to think of documentaries as films that reorganize and compress reality into narrative form. The film minimizes dialogue and the presence of human beings in the world being documented, presenting us with gorgeous images divorced from any context and organized associatively rather than as a narrative or argument. The use of time-lapse cinematography and slow motion, the flattening of space through camera placement and shallow focus, the chemical manipulation of color (the film includes almost no digital "tricks"), and the sheer physical alienness of the creatures we are watching push the film closer to abstraction and stylization than realism. If the abstraction of the film separates it from *cinema verité*, we nonetheless do seem to recognize something of the real world in the images presented on screen.**

## "Fuzzy Boundaries" and "Wondrous Truth"

In his book, *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film*, Carl Plantinga argues for the necessity for distinguishing between nonfiction and fiction films, pointing out that not only does categorization have theoretical and practical use value, it is also central to the way human beings make sense of the world around them. He writes that there are no necessary and sufficient conditions, no essential features of a film that make it a documentary beyond the assertive stance it takes toward the world it presents and the extratextual indexing, or labeling, of the film as nonfiction. In general, he points out, people agree on what to include in the documentary category and what to exclude, but he also says that "[s]ome categories have fuzzy boundaries." According to Plantinga, we are justified in recognizing the category of nonfiction film even if some films seem stuck somewhere between fiction and nonfiction, just as we are justified in distinguishing between old and young people even though "in regard to a 35-, 50-, or 65-year-old, we are less certain" about where to slot them (p.12).

Fig. 1. Snails in love.

It is likely that viewers can still determine whether a film is a documentary or a fiction film even in many cases where the lines between reality and artifice are blurred, the film does not look like a typical documentary, or is indeterminately indexed. This is the case because we can and do apply a number of tests about a film's veracity simultaneously whenever we watch one. Though a film's indexing might leave us uncertain about its documentary status, we can still apply our schemata for fictional and avant-garde films, as well as for various sub-genres of documentary such as the nature film or what Plantinga calls the "poetic documentary." If the movie does not seem to clearly fit any of these categories, we might ask common-sense questions about the film and its relationship to the real world such as, "Does this ever happen?" or "Does this look staged?" Watching a film is not something that we do passively or without thinking, and we cannot divorce the act of watching a film from all our other experiences of the world. It strikes me as perhaps a little too tidy to say that we can only recognize that a

film is about the real world if some extratextual source informs us that that is the case. Certainly, indexing is important, but I am convinced that we bring a lot more to bear on the films that we see. This is precisely the case with *Microcosmos*, which most viewers can recognize as being about the real world in spite of its affinities with both fiction and experimental film and its unclear indexing.

The goal of the film is not so much to teach or to argue through showing as simply to show. Nuridsany and Perennou (both of whom are biologists) seem to want us to look at the natural world in a new way, or perhaps to see a part of the world that we cannot see with the unaided human eye. As Nuridsany puts it, the film is "a return to science-fiction movies: the same exoticism, the same excitement in the face of the unknown […] However, the difference lies in the fact that we show the 'wondrous truth,' not the wonders conjured up by our imagination. What we regard as the most banal life forms on our planet are actually living in a fantastic realm" (quoted in "Cannes 96"). The film is, then, a project about defamiliarization through abstraction, but that abstraction is only partially created by the filmmakers—something of the weirdness of this world is actually out there.

### No Argument—No Problem!

In *Representing Reality*, Bill Nichols claims that one common trait of documentaries is that they advance arguments about the world (p. 111). Carl Plantinga argues that Nichols places far too much weight on the idea of argumentation in documentary and this leads him to overlook a number of key films, including Joris Ivens' *Rain* (1929) and Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982), both of which depict the real world but make few if any claims about it. These "poetic documentaries" are organized according to formal principles rather than argumentative or narrative logic (p. 103).

*Microcosmos* seems to be one of these poetic documentaries. It is organized episodically and topically, each segment flowing into the next via associative editing rather than as part of an unfolding argument or storyline. With no overarching narrative to link parts of the film together, the filmmakers rely on graphic matches, dissolves, time-lapse cinematography, and an artificially imposed dawn-to-dawn time frame to bind segments together. Within this structure, we see several mini-narratives: a grasshopper is killed and eaten by a spider, two snails mate sensuously, a dung beetle rolls a ball of fecal matter along the ground until it gets stuck on a thorn, and a rainstorm plunges an anthill into chaos. Throughout the entire picture, filmed reality is manipulated in order to create formal patterns and envelop us in Nuridsany's "wondrous truth." (fig. 1)

Graphic similarity serves as the organizing principle for much of *Microcosmos* (fig. 2-3). Early on, images of dew link shots of grass, a ladybug, and a spider web. A dissolve from another shot of dewy grass to an image of a bee cleaning its proboscis introduces a new element into the unfolding formal system. As the sequence continues, we see more images of insects and water as an ant pokes around in a dewdrop and a droplet of water on a leaf evaporates, and before long we again see insects cleaning themselves (fig. 4-7). Shortly after this we see another time-lapse image of a weed coiling around a sapling, apparently feeling around for a "foothold" and looking very much like another insect. A shot of an inchworm walking along followed by another shot of the weed (another graphic match) makes the connection clear (fig. 8-9).

This sort of visual play is prominent throughout the film. Shortly after these early sequences, time-lapse images of an unfolding flower are matched with the curling antennae of a butterfly. After the snails finish their copulation the camera tracks across intertwined plant stems and dissolves to what at first appears to be the moon (perhaps to heighten the sense of romance) but which turns out to be a caterpillar pupa. Later on, cracks in the earth are matched with a procession of wooly caterpillars that split off into two lines, eventually merging back into one like lanes of traffic. During a pheasant's raid on an anthill we see an extreme close-up of one of its eyes followed by a shot of the ocular entranceway to the ants' lair, shot from within (fig. 10-11). Much later, after the sun has begun to set, a close-up of furry caterpillars chewing away on a leaf is matched with a shot that pans across some fernlike plants.

Fig. 2. A thornbush.

Fig. 3. A graphic match. Dew is introduced into the formal system.

Fig. 4 . A dewy spider web.

Fig. 5. Dew on a stem.

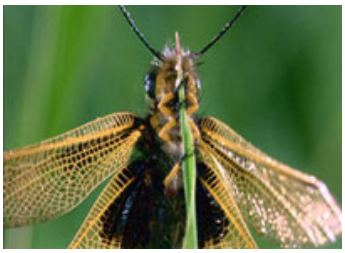

Fig. 6. Glistening wings.

Fig. 7. A drop of dew is consumed.

Fig. 8. An inchworm and ...

Besides graphic matches, the camera also frequently pauses on images of the natural world transformed by lighting or camera placement into abstract forms. During the snails' sex scene, their undulating bodies create interesting S-shaped patterns as they fold together. In a segment focusing on the child-rearing habits of the Polist wasp, the screen is at one point taken up entirely by small octagons filled with larvae. This recalls an earlier shot, a "bee's-eye view" of the world rendered as seven-sided shapes. Shots of the glistening, oddly beautiful mosquito that emerges from the pond just before the movie's conclusion, elongated by its own reflection, can be appreciated on formal terms alone. The incredibly shallow depth-of-field created by shooting close-ups of such small animals often results in backgrounds that are little more than washes of color. At a few different points in the film the camera moves along with insects as they fly. Taken with a miniature remote-control helicopter equipped with a tiny camera, the shots keep the insects in tight focus, but everything around them becomes hazy. The flowers surrounding a bee as it soars along become a pastel canvas of purples, blues, and greens, and the bee itself looks almost superimposed. The same thing happens to the dragonfly we see zip across the pond and its surrounding flora; again, the background looks like streaks of color and the insect like animation. In general, every shot of the film is absurdly beautiful. Insects are carefully lit so that their carapaces, antennae, wings, and legs practically glow, the camera moves slowly, almost sensuously, through the underbrush to capture this hidden world, and the lack of human voices throughout most of the movie seems to give its images more power.

Fig. 9. ... the graphic match of a weed in the subsequent shot.

Fig. 10. A bird's eye.

Fig. 11. An ocular entranceway.

Fig. 12. Time-lapse photography: the sun sets.

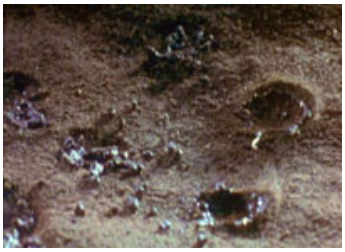

Fig. 13. Raindrops fall like bombs.

### Abstraction + Fictionalization = Reality?

What is it that this film is asserting about the real world? More important, *how* does it do this? Just because some viewers might recognize it as a poetic documentary this does not answer the question of how the film assures us that its referents exist in the real world. How can a film be so highly stylized and still retain some connection to pro-filmic reality? Again, I think prior experience with certain types of documentary, along with our understanding of how the world works can point us in the direction of an answer.

Throughout *Microcosmos*, the film's cinematographers play with physical reality in order to call our attention to things we would be unable to recognize in natural time and to heighten the beauty and strangeness of the insect universe. Early on in the film, at the end of the segment on insect flight, we watch a ladybug waddle across the ground, scramble over a shell, and walk into some grass. We witness the insect struggle to maintain balance on a thin blade of grass, flutter its wings and twist its body around, taking off into the air. After this, we again see the ladybug at normal speed as it starts to eat some aphids and eventually gets pushed off a leaf by the ants that are guarding the smaller insects for the honeydew they produce. Not only does slow-motion transform the movements of an otherwise ungainly little creature into a thing of beauty, but it also permits us to study the way the ladybug's outer wings remain static as its longer, iridescent inner wings flap forward and back. Similarly, time-lapse images of flowers opening or closing and jump-cuts showing us a larval wasp sealing itself up with its own secretions give us access to things we could not see with the unaided human eye (fig. 12).

Sometimes, the manipulation of temporal reality in *Microcosmos* is pursued for dramatic reasons. After we see a group of ants gathered around a puddle like lions at an African watering hole, they begin to pick up seeds, husks, bits of flowers, and other comestibles and carry them back toward their anthill. They move at a rapid pace as Bruno Calais' music picks up the pace on the sound track. As the ants move underneath the dead stalk of a plant the image shifts into fast-motion and we watch them race across the screen. During the film's rainstorm sequence, drops of water fall from the sky in slow-motion (fig. 13). The sound effects are also slowed and amplified, here, so that each raindrop sounds like a bomb striking the earth. As the rainfall hits the surface of a pond, we see a water strider twist and turn in a desperate effort to maintain its balance on the disturbed surface of the water. The raindrops smack against the backsides of a beetle and the body of a frog, churning dirt into mud that nearly buries one hapless insect. A dandelion is blown to pieces and a ladybug is sent hurtling into the air.

The filmmakers seem to be encouraging us to respond emotionally to such scenes. Our emotional reactions have to be understood in relation

to the broader goals of the film, however. As Nuridsany's statements about their intentions imply, the directors wanted to give us a sense of the insects' experience of the world. Though insects, as invertebrates, almost certainly do not have emotions, speeded-up and slowed-down imagery might also be seen as an attempt to make us think about the experience of time and physical reality at such a small scale. This would not involve imagining *a* world so much as imagining the experiences of creatures that we believe exist in *our* world. Moreover, these scenes of temporal distortion do not make up the entirety of the movie; most of the images we see were shot at twenty-four frames per second. It would be a serious mistake to take a few isolated shots out of the whole film and use them to prove that the movie does not bear any indexical connection to reality.

Viewers familiar with nature documentaries probably would not consider the use of slow-motion and fast-motion, the staging of scenes, or even the narrativization of animal life all that odd. All of these things have been going on for quite some time in films made for theatrical release, the science classroom, PBS, the Discovery Channel, and other outlets. Some critics of nature documentaries have viewed such techniques as a stigma on the genre. However, this sort of objection just seems to reformulate the misconceptions about the differences between fiction and nonfiction that Noël Carroll has addressed in several essays, and it may even rely on a misunderstanding about documentary that comes out of writings about *cinema verité* which stress the "unmediated" capturing of pro-filmic reality.*

* For an overview of these misconceptions, see Carroll, "Fiction, Non-Fiction, and the Film of Presumptive Assertion," in Richard Allen and Murray Smith, eds. *Film Theory and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 173-202, "From Real to Reel: Entangled in Nonfiction Film," in *Theorizing the Moving Image* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 224-252, and "Nonfiction Film and Postmodernist Skepticism," in David Bordwell and Noël Caroll, eds. *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), pp. 283-306.

Perhaps a better approach to thinking about stylization and its relationship to assertion can be found in the writings of those who actually make nature documentaries. In 1946, filmmaker Oliver Pike recommended the use of time-lapse and slow-motion cinematography in his memoir/manual, *Nature and My Cine Camera*. "Slow-motion cinematography," Pike writes, "will reveal many of the hidden secrets of nature. The actions of birds when in flight, the movements of mammals while running or walking are nowadays better understood, thanks to these means" (p. 198). Time-lapse cinematography, he points out, also reveals "hidden secrets" about such facets of the world as plant growth. Not only do these devices render the world beautiful, according to Pike, they also permit scientific understanding.* When a film utilizes these techniques it does not imply a radical separation between referent and representation. A shot of an insect in slow-motion is still a shot of an insect. Other filmmakers, like Christopher Parsons and Andrew Langley, have made compelling arguments about the utility of controlled conditions and artificial sets in making macro-cinematographic films, and have pointed out that it is precisely such alterations of nature that allow us to more fully understand insect behavior. The depth-of-field problems of macro-cinematography force filmmakers hoping to achieve legible images to use a lot of light. Sets with bright lights and heat filters (to prevent the insects from undergoing too much stress) are required for a movie like *Microcosmos*, and their use is less an impediment to the real than our only means of accessing it.

*Perhaps because of the influence of *cinema verité* style on documentary theory, few film scholars have addressed the revelatory possibilities of toying with reality in this way. Interestingly, Rudolf Arnheim, writing before the rise of *verité*, did discuss manipulative cinematographic techniques in nonfiction films. In his discussion of I. G. Farben's *Miracle of Flowers* in *Film as Art*, Arnheim pointed out that "accelerated motion" allowed the filmmaker to show "that plants have expressive gestures, which we do not see because they are too slow for our minds but which become visible in accelerated pictures" (p. 115). Classical film theory has not enjoyed a privileged place in documentary studies, however, and most discussions of such techniques have occurred in books and essays written by filmmakers rather than academics.

Though these writers are discussing the relationship between the filmmaker and pro-filmic reality, we can re-articulate their points as statements about the viewer and the documentary film text. Each of these arguments suggests ways of approaching a poetic *nature* documentary like *Microcosmos* in terms of schemata about other texts and the real world. If viewers have seen other nature documentaries, it seems unlikely that they would necessarily presume that stylization prohibits films from taking an assertoric stance. Since macro-cinematographic films by necessity have to use a shallow depth-of-field, artificial lighting, and studio sets, and since many nature films make use of devices like slow-motion and time-lapse cinematography, viewers familiar with this sort of cinema would probably consider the use of these techniques in *Microcosmos* in relation to these generic norms. Perhaps abstraction is taken to an extreme in *Microcosmos* for poetic reasons, but insects and plants are still usually recognizable as such. A degree of artificiality in macro-cinema, moreover, falls within accepted conventions of filmmaking.

The points these authors make about filmmakers' inability to truly control animal behavior are instructive. If we apply schemata drawn from other texts to the films we watch, we also test hypotheses about the world we inhabit. I think we believe in the existence of these

insects partly because we know that invertebrates are *incapable* of performing roles, unlike human actors. Even though the credits of this film include a "cast list," we surely still assume that these lifeforms cannot act like anything other than what they are. Insects might act a certain way because the filmmakers chase them with shadows or withhold food from them for a certain period of time in order to make them hungry, but those behaviors are probably not going to be very different from behaviors caused by some configuration of similar but naturally occurring circumstances. Maybe the film does construct some composite creatures through editing, and perhaps at these moments we are imagining that these creatures are unitary beings. Even if that is the case, the overarching stance of the film might be said to be assertoric, since we nevertheless believe that all the beasts we see crawling around on the movie screen are living things that exist somewhere in the world and at least performed those actions shown in individual shots.

### Coda: On Indexing

The indexing of *Microcosmos* leaves it somewhat muddy as to whether the film should be considered a documentary or something else. *Variety*'s review of the film does refer to it as a "feature documentary about a day in the life of the bug universe," but it also includes a comparison to the fiction film *Babe*. Moreover, the reviewer claims that Nuridsany and Perennou "have made their docu into something much more interesting than a standard nature piece by turning the bugs into larger-than-life characters whose quirks, pastimes, and relationships are never less than riveting" and that "this all-natural ensemble piece delivers more dramatic punch than many a human pic" (Kelly 33). Nuridsany himself stated that "it's not a documentary; it's a true and fantastic tale" (quoted in Calhoun, p. 72). And Michael X. Ferraro says that the movie belongs in a "non-specific realm that bridges narrative and scientific filmmaking" (p. 80). *Microcosmos*'s tag line was "It's *Jurassic Park* in Your Own Backyard," and the video cassette box has a picture of a grasshopper wearing sunglasses on its cover, suggesting that it is a children's film (fig. 14).

Fig. 14. The DVD menu features cute, childlike drawings of ladybugs.

Because of this uncertain indexing, it seems as if we might be justified in calling the film something besides a documentary. But if we did this, viewers would not accept the film's intended assertoric stance, and the filmmakers' goal to get us to think about the real world in a new way might be compromised. This is why I think we need to consider the possibility that we test films against our knowledge of both other films and the real world in addition to taking up Noël Carroll's suggestion that we examine the intentions of "creators, producers, and distributors, etc." when we decide whether to call a film a documentary or a work of fiction ("From Real to Reel," p. 232). Even if someone decided to call *Microcosmos* fiction, it would not suddenly become a fiction film. It would remain a documentary because it retains something of the "wondrous truth" in its content and because viewers come to the film with knowledge about other films and the wider world.

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