



La Jungle de l'herbe (The Grass Jungle), Samivel, France, 1955

BELLY TO THE GROUND, LOOKING AT INSECTS

NOTES ON THE ENTOMOLOGICAL SCHOOL OF CINEMA

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“The photogénie of insects no longer needs to be proven.” Taking André Bazin’s assertion of the firmly established cinematic attractiveness of insects as a point of departure, this talk considers entomology (the study of insect morphology and behavior) as both a privileged subject and theoretical orientation for an important strain of filmmaking and criticism in 20th century France. From Etienne-Jules Marey and Lucien Bull’s fin de siècle chronophotographic studies to films by Jean Painlevé, Pierre Thévenard, Samivel, and contemporary filmmakers Claude Nuridsany and Marie Pérennou, the lives of insects have served as key subjects of natural historical inquiry and fodder for philosophical reflection (amplified by the surrealism of scalar interplays involved in filming them as well the tendency ethnology to veer towards fable). As a theoretical orientation, entomology provided a model of cultural analysis, such as developed with some irony in Bazin’s “Entomology of the Pin-Up Girl,” as well as the practice of cultural production trained to observe phenomena with a mixture of alien rigor and what Bazin referred to as “lucid humility”: a critical orientation merging an interest in *humus* (earth) with forms of clarity, cruelty, and love associated with both insects and their observers. Viewed from a present marked by a rapid decline in insect populations inaugurated in the postwar intensification of efforts to control the populations of pests and vectors, the entomological school of cinema offers experiments in perception—beginning from a position with one’s belly on the ground, looking at insects—for reconsidering the entangled worlds of mites and men.

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