

THE LADY BEETLE: A QUEER ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE
ON NATURAL HISTORY FILMMAKING

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. BACKGROUND 1
 Filmmaker Bio 1
 Filmmaker Artist Statement 1
 Film Logline..... 2
 Film Synopsis..... 3
 Crew 3
2. CONNECTION TO THE MATERIAL 4
3. HISTORY, CONTEXT, AND ARTISTIC APPROACH..... 8
 Research..... 8
 Connection to the Broader Field..... 13
 Artistic Approach..... 26
4. DISSEMINATION..... 30
 Distribution 30
BIBLIOGRAPHY 32

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND

Filmmaker Bio

Spence Scott is a filmmaker currently based in Bozeman, Montana, and raised in a small town in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. Spence developed a deep connection to nature early on, which inspired a creative journey combining his love for the arts with a passion for the natural world. He creates films that engage with science and natural history and is committed to exploring the intertwined relationships between humans and the natural world using traditional and experimental approaches. Spence holds dual bachelor's degrees in Drama Performance and Television Production & Studies from Hofstra University in New York and an MFA in Science & Natural History Filmmaking from Montana State University. At Montana State, Spence has explored various artistic styles, culminating in notable achievements such as his short film *Aracnophile*, featured at the Big Sky Film Festival, and his audiovisual essay on anthropomorphism in wildlife documentaries, presented at the Visible Evidence Conference.

Filmmaker Artist Statement

As a filmmaker who creates films that engage with science and natural history, I am deeply committed to exploring the intertwined relationships between humans and the natural world. My work explores traditional and experimental approaches to challenging conventional wildlife and conservation storytelling narratives and their ideological framework. I am particularly drawn to stories in which humans are not separate from nature but one of many

participants, shifting the lens away from human exceptionalism toward a broader ecological perspective.

Through my films, I seek to help audiences recognize themselves as part of the larger ecological web rather than dominators of it. This shift in perspective from control to interconnectedness is central to my filmmaking. It reflects both a personal fascination and an environmental imperative, as these stories can inspire a more harmonious and sustainable relationship with the natural world.

My creative approach is anchored in curiosity, empathy, and collaboration with the subjects I film, whether human or non-human. By immersing myself in their world, I hope to capture the subtle beauty of nature's complexities, offering new ways of seeing and understanding our shared environment. I strive to provoke thought and encourage audiences to reimagine their role within the natural world, ultimately fostering a deeper connection to the ecosystems we all depend on.

Film Logline

The Lady Beetle is a poetic essay film that intertwines the delicate artistry of filmmaking with the intimate world of ladybugs, inviting viewers to reimagine the natural history genre through a lens of self-discovery and identity. Blending nature, art, and a queer ecological perspective, the film challenges the traditional gaze, offering a contemplative journey that explores the connections between creation, observation, and the intricate lives of tiny, often overlooked creatures.

Film Synopsis

The Lady Beetle is a poetic essay film that journeys into the colorful, intricate world of ladybugs to explore intersections between nature, identity, and the art of filmmaking. Through the lens of queer ecology, this film reimagines the traditional natural history narrative, inviting viewers to question rigid, binary interpretations of the natural world. By focusing on ladybugs' adaptable, nonlinear lives, *The Lady Beetle* draws a delicate parallel to themes of self-discovery and the fluidity of identity. The film's macro cinematography disrupts conventional views of nature, guiding the audience toward a more reflexive, interconnected perception of ecosystems. Through this immersive and exploratory approach, *The Lady Beetle* meditates on the artistic process, revealing how our gaze shapes and limits our understanding of the world.

Crew

Spence Scott: Producer, Director, Editor, Cinematography

Leif Everson: Cinematography

CHAPTER TWO

CONNECTION TO THE MATERIAL

The decision to create *The Lady Beetle* stems from a convergence of personal, academic, and creative motivations. This project is not just a film; it embodies my lifelong fascination with the natural world, particularly insects, which has been a central part of my identity from a young age. Growing up in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, I developed a deep connection to the environment, where observing the intricate lives of insects was both a hobby and a form of personal exploration. This early fascination with entomology has matured into a broader interest in ecology, leading me to pursue a career where I can merge my love for nature with my creative aspirations as a filmmaker.

As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I have found a profound resonance with the principles of queer ecology. This interdisciplinary field merges insights from queer theory and ecological studies to challenge traditional binary views of nature, sexuality, and identity, emphasizing the fluidity, diversity, and interconnectedness of environmental relationships. It critiques heteronormative assumptions in biology and ecology, offering a lens through which natural systems can be understood as dynamic, inclusive, and resistant to rigid categorization.

For example, Timothy Morton describes queer ecology as a framework that dismantles the concept of a singular, fixed "Nature," instead viewing ecological and sexual relationships as fluid and constantly evolving.¹ Similarly, Matthew Gandy highlights the idea of heterotopic spaces—environments that resist categorization and embody ecological multiplicity—as central

¹ Morton, "Queer Ecology," 273-282.

to understanding how queer ecology reconceptualizes natural spaces and relationships.² These theoretical perspectives align closely with queer ecological critiques of anthropocentric and hierarchical thinking, calling for an inclusive, non-binary understanding of ecological systems.

Queer ecology speaks to subjective experiences of nature, allowing for new narratives that reflect diversity, adaptability, and resilience in both human and non-human life. In this context, *The Lady Beetle* represents an opportunity to explore these themes through the lens of entomology. With their vibrant and adaptive lives, ladybugs serve as a metaphor for the complexities of identity, behavior, and relationships in both human and natural contexts. This framing challenges traditional natural history storytelling by embracing the principles of queer ecology, which encourages audiences to recognize the interconnectedness and fluidity inherent in all life forms.

The choice of ladybugs as the subject of this film is deliberate. Ladybugs, with their vivid colors and diverse behaviors, are not only fascinating creatures in their own right but also serve as an ideal symbol for the themes I wish to explore. Their lifecycle, ecological roles, and interactions within their habitats provide a rich tapestry through which to discuss the broader implications of queer ecology.

Ladybugs undergo a remarkable life cycle encompassing four distinct stages: egg, larva, pupa, and adult. As described by Majerus, this metamorphic lifecycle highlights these insects' evolutionary ingenuity and ecological significance, offering a metaphor for identity as fluid and continuously evolving. During the larval stage, ladybugs are active predators, consuming vast numbers of aphids, ensuring their survival and making them invaluable in pest control. The pupal

² Gandy, "Queer Ecology," 727-747.

stage represents a transitional phase, during which the insect is enclosed in a protective casing while undergoing significant internal changes. Finally, the adult ladybug emerges, with its vivid coloration serving as both a warning to potential predators and an example of the diversity found in nature.³

Ecologically, ladybugs are indispensable predators in various habitats. They help maintain ecological balance by preying on aphids and other agricultural pests, contributing significantly to natural pest control. Their ecological role extends beyond predation; ladybugs are indicators of environmental health, with their presence often signaling a well-balanced ecosystem. Their dependence on diverse plant species for food and shelter further emphasizes the importance of conserving biodiversity. As Majerus notes, the adaptability and resilience of ladybugs across different environments showcase their importance in sustaining ecological harmony.⁴

Focusing on ladybugs accomplishes a shift in perspective by inviting viewers to engage with a subject often overlooked or dismissed as ordinary. Commonly associated with good luck and childhood curiosity, ladybugs are frequently underestimated in their ecological significance and complexity. By delving into their lives in detail, the film disrupts conventional views of nature that prioritize charismatic megafauna or dramatic predator-prey interactions. Instead, it emphasizes the beauty and intricacy of the minute and the every day, urging viewers to reconsider their assumptions about what constitutes ecological importance. This shift aligns with

³ Majerus, "Ladybugs," 547-551.

⁴ Ibid.

the principles of queer ecology, encouraging an understanding of nature as a dynamic and inclusive web of relationships rather than a rigid hierarchy.

Through this exploration, *The Lady Beetle* uses these insects as a metaphor for the interconnectedness, adaptability, and diversity that define natural ecosystems and human identities. Ladybugs inspire a reconsideration of nature's complexities and provide a powerful lens for challenging binary and hierarchical narratives about human and non-human life.

The success of *The Lady Beetle* is largely due to my access to both the subjects and the environments in which they live. Collaboration played a crucial role in this project. Dr. Jess Kansman, an assistant professor at Montana State University, studies ladybug ecology. She has her own greenhouse lab space filled with ladybugs at various stages of their lifecycles and interacting with aphids. She allowed me to use her space and insects for all my shoots. Dr. Kansman also acted as a general consultant on this project. Her vast knowledge of ladybugs and their biology proved to be a valuable resource for acquiring my subjects, learning more about them, and determining how to disseminate information about them. Dr. Kansman is also a member of the LGBTQ community! Therefore as a queer woman in the sciences, she has also been able to provide valuable insights into how queer ecology can be directly applied to ladybug biology and insect conservation.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORY, CONTEXT, AND ARTISTIC APPROACH

Research

The evolution of natural history filmmaking reflects a complex intersection between the representation of nature, the demands of visual storytelling, and the pursuit of scientific objectivity. From its early days, the approach has navigated the tension between the factual documentation of wildlife and the cinematic techniques designed to engage audiences. Initially, nature films were viewed as direct windows into the natural world, but as the genre matured, filmmakers increasingly adopted cinematic conventions such as narrative structures, slow-motion photography, and dramatic close-ups to maintain viewer interest.⁵ This shift toward cinematic storytelling led to a tension between accurate representation and the medium's inherent focus on action and spectacle. Bousé argues that the demands of film, with its emphasis on movement and dynamism, are often at odds with the slower, more static reality of nature, leading filmmakers to mold the natural world to fit these cinematic requirements. The result is a version of nature that emphasizes rare and spectacular events, such as predator-prey interactions and climatic extremes, which distort the viewer's perception of the natural world.⁶

Historically, natural history filmmaking has struggled to balance entertainment and scientific rigor. Early films, dating back to the silent era, often focused on themes like hunting

⁵ Bousé, "The Problem of Images," 3-36.

⁶ Ibid.

and animal conflict, using sensationalized narratives to captivate audiences.⁷ This approach prioritized dramatization over scientific accuracy, adhering to an older "truth-to-nature" standard that idealized nature rather than presenting it through a lens of "mechanical objectivity."⁸ Films like *The Struggle for Existence* (1925), for example, sensationalized animal conflict, framing nature as a perpetual struggle for survival, echoing popular cinematic tropes of the time.⁹ Efforts to incorporate more objective, scientific approaches, such as the use of microscopic photography in educational films like *Frogs, Toads, and Salamanders* (1932), did emerge, but even these productions continued to employ cinematic techniques designed to enhance viewer engagement.¹⁰

As the genre evolved, filmmakers like Germaine Dulac explored nature as a space for artistic expression, using rhythm, motion, and sensation to engage with the "more-than-human world."¹¹ The camera's indifference to human perception, celebrated by filmmakers like Louis Delluc and Jean Epstein, allowed for a more objective representation of nature, revealing aspects of the natural world beyond human biases.¹² This objectivity, however, has always been balanced against the need for narrative. Even in the early 20th century, programming practices at venues like the Vieux-Colombier cinema challenged conventional storytelling by presenting films that did not adhere to traditional narrative arcs, thus pushing the boundaries of how nature could be cinematically represented.¹³

⁷ Peterson, "Glimpses of Animal Life," 145-167.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Cahill, "Animal Photogénie," 23-41.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

The tension between objective documentation and narrative entertainment became even more pronounced with the rise of films like Disney's *True-Life Adventures* series. These mid-20th century films introduced a new level of narrative sophistication, using anthropomorphism and emotional storytelling to humanize animals and foster a deeper emotional connection with audiences.¹⁴ Disney's films, though groundbreaking in their appeal, also blurred the lines between scientific accuracy and popular entertainment, reflecting postwar ideologies of individualism and family values while adhering to narrative structures that mirrored human coming-of-age stories.¹⁵ Anthropomorphism, while criticized for distorting the reality of animal life, played a key role in making nature films more relatable and engaging for viewers.¹⁶

The representation of insects in filmmaking is a multifaceted exploration of nonhuman life, blending scientific accuracy, popular misconceptions, and environmental activism. Filmmakers have long used insects to bridge the scientific world and popular culture, oscillating between realistic depictions and creative distortions shaped by technological limitations and cultural anxieties. Berenbaum notes that insects in films are often portrayed with "sketchy familiarity" regarding their biological realities, where inaccuracies in physiology and behavior are common. For instance, films like the "big bug" movies of the 1950s ignored biological constraints such as the surface area-to-volume ratio, creating exaggerated representations of insects to tap into anxieties about uncontrollable nature, nuclear threats, and environmental

¹⁴ Chris, "The Wildlife Film Era," 1-44.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

degradation.¹⁷ Though scientifically flawed, these films symbolized more significant fears about ecological collapse and human interference with natural systems.

However, the portrayal of insects is not solely relegated to sensationalized horror or science fiction films. Filmmakers have worked closely with scientists in nature documentaries to offer more nuanced depictions. As Schultz-Figueroa observes, filmmakers and researchers often collaborated to produce educational and ethnographic films, creating a dialogue between cinematic methods and scientific theory. This partnership underscores how filmmaking can serve as a tool for documentation and public education, albeit with its complexities. Filmmakers must balance accuracy with narrative engagement, often leading to ethical debates about “nature faking,” where the realities of nonhuman life are manipulated to suit cinematic demands.¹⁸

Jean Painlevé, a pioneering filmmaker active during the early to mid-20th century, particularly from the 1920s to the 1960s, exemplifies how cinema can challenge anthropocentric views while maintaining scientific integrity. Painlevé’s films, renowned for their use of micro cinematography, delve into the lives of insects and other nonhuman creatures, revealing behaviors otherwise hidden from human perception. His work, especially in films like *The Seahorse* (1934), offered a more queer understanding of nature by highlighting the fluidity and diversity of life beyond human norms. As Cahill notes, Painlevé's films provided "another, untimely natural history of cinema" by decentralizing human perspectives and placing nonhuman subjects at the heart of both scientific and cinematic exploration. This approach allowed him to

¹⁷ Berenbaum and Leskosky, "Movies, Insects in," 668-674.

¹⁸ Schultz-Figueroa, *Celluloid Specimen*.

reframe these creatures as vital components of ecological systems, fostering a richer understanding of biodiversity and ecological interdependence.¹⁹

Technological advancements in cinematography have significantly enhanced the portrayal of insects, allowing for greater detail, accuracy, and a more nuanced exploration of their behaviors. *Microcosmos* (1996), in particular, exemplifies this shift by employing innovative macro photography techniques that capture insects' intricate and often mesmerizing activities without falling into the traps of anthropomorphism or sensationalism. As Lawrence and McMahon note, *Microcosmos* stands out for its technological achievements and its formal and rhetorical approach, which challenges conventional nature documentaries by refusing to impose human narratives onto insect life. Instead, the film invites viewers to engage with the natural world on its own terms, creating an immersive experience that transcends traditional documentary formats.

This approach represents a departure from earlier films like *Kingdom of the Spiders* (1977) and *Empire of the Ants* (1977), which used insects as metaphors for ecological imbalance and the consequences of human actions. By portraying insects not merely as agents of ecological catastrophe but as complex beings within their ecosystems, *Microcosmos* underscores the interconnectedness of all life forms and the importance of preserving the delicate balance of our environment.²⁰

Insects in filmmaking navigate a complex space where science, popular culture, and environmental activism intersect, but their cinematic portrayal is not universally progressive.

¹⁹ Cahill, *Zoological Surrealism*.

²⁰ Berenbaum and Leskosky, "Movies, Insects in," 668-674.

Traditionally, natural history films have often depicted insects through a lens that reinforces hierarchical relationships between humans and nonhuman life, emphasizing their role as subjects of scientific observation or as mere curiosities. This conventional "look" at insects reflects broader societal attitudes, positioning them within a hierarchy that privileges human perspectives and often marginalizes or oversimplifies their ecological significance. However, as Schultz-Figueroa suggests, there is a shift in some films towards a more inclusive representation, where insects are placed at the center of discussions on biodiversity and ecological health. This shift challenges conventional portrayals, encouraging viewers to reconsider their relationship with these "small and often overlooked creatures."²¹ The cinematic "gaze" directed at insects thus becomes a critical analysis point, much like Laura Mulvey's exploration of the male gaze in cinema, as it reflects underlying power dynamics and societal values. In this evolving context, insects on screen can symbolize the interconnectedness of all life, urging viewers to rethink their place within the broader ecological system.

Connection to the Broader Field

It is important to note that all sections of this paper will overlap, as the film is a natural history film and a film about filmmaking.

In the tradition of science and natural history documentaries, established techniques such as voice-over narration, objective framing, and anthropomorphism have historically shaped the audience's understanding of the natural world. These conventions often operate within frameworks of scientific authority and neutrality, presenting nature as a fixed, objective reality

²¹ Schultz-Figueroa, *Celluloid Specimen*.

that can be fully known through empirical observation. However, these techniques frequently reinforce binary, hierarchical perspectives, often depicting nature as passive, mechanical, and governed by rigid taxonomies. As Bousé observes, wildlife films tend to present a version of nature that conforms to the needs of visual media, prioritizing movement and dynamism over the stillness and serenity that often characterize real-world experiences of nature. This creates an image of nature shaped more by narrative and visual expectations than by the complexities of actual ecosystems.²²

One of the most enduring techniques in natural history filmmaking is voice-over narration, often delivered by a disembodied, authoritative voice. This technique positions the narrator as an omniscient observer, a stand-in for scientific knowledge itself. While this provides clarity, it also reinforces a one-directional transmission of information from expert to viewer, leaving little room for ambiguity or multiplicity of interpretations. Objectivity, a hallmark of the genre, is often presented as a tool for truth-telling. Yet, it tends to erase the filmmaker's subjective role in framing and selecting what aspects of nature are seen or left unseen. Bousé highlights that despite the authority given to the photographic image, wildlife films often rely heavily on formal manipulations like camera angles, slow-motion, and voice-over narration, which can distort the reality they claim to represent.

Anthropomorphism, the attribution of human traits to animals, is another pervasive device. While it makes animals more relatable and digestible to viewers, it can impose human norms and values onto the natural world, further reinforcing a binary and hierarchical view of species. For instance, the gendered roles often assigned to animals in documentaries reflect

²² Bousé, "The Problem of Images," 3-36.

human social constructs rather than the actual complexity of animal behaviors. Bousé notes that wildlife films often create animal characters by isolating individuals through close-ups and reinforcing them with voice-over narration, transforming animals into stand-ins for human narratives. This technique simplifies natural systems' inherent fluidity and diversity, reducing animals to characters in human-centered narratives.

Queer ecology serves as a theoretical framework that critiques traditional heteronormative views of nature, biology, and species by integrating concepts from both queer theory and ecological studies. This emerging interdisciplinary field challenges the assumption that natural processes and sexualities adhere to binary or normative structures. According to Morton, queer ecology investigates "the ways in which queerness, in its variegated forms, is installed in biological substance" and seeks to dismantle the concept of a singular, fixed "Nature." By deconstructing traditional ideas of nature, which often reflect binary and hierarchical frameworks, queer ecology creates space for viewing nature as fluid, dynamic, and inclusive of diverse forms of existence that challenge conventional norms.²³ For example, certain ladybug populations exhibit behaviors that disrupt binary assumptions, such as variations in reproductive strategies and fluid roles in their ecological niches, underscoring the natural world's inherent diversity and adaptability. This perspective emphasizes interdependence and fluidity, proposing that all life forms "defy boundaries between inside and outside at every level."²⁴

Queer ecology builds on foundational ideas from queer theory and posthumanism, both of which critique normative categories of sexuality, gender, and species. Oswin asserts that queer

²³ Gandy, "Queer Ecology," 727-747.

²⁴ Morton, "Queer Ecology," 273-282.

theory "go[es] beyond a sexual politics of recognition" by engaging with feminism, materialism, and post-colonialism. This approach challenges rigid binaries imposed on nature, such as the human/nonhuman or wild/domestic distinctions, thereby opening new ways to conceptualize ecological relationships. Thinkers like Judith Butler, through works such as *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, offer theoretical insights for queer ecological thought by conceptualizing natural and sexual categories as socially constructed rather than inherent.²⁵

Both Morton and Gandy emphasize the influence of critical thinkers like Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre, who explored heterotopic spaces—those that resist categorization and reveal the fluid, dynamic nature of identity and space.²⁶ These thinkers provide alternative perspectives on how nature, particularly urban environments, can be understood as "queer" due to their resistance to normative ecological frameworks. This challenges conventional ecological thinking and extends queer ecology's critique of rigid ecological norms.

In synthesizing ecological and queer thought, queer ecology intersects with other critical theories, such as feminist ecology, postcolonial ecology, and ecofeminism. Both Morton and Gandy critique earlier ecofeminist approaches for relying on binary distinctions and biological essentialism, which limit the inclusivity of ecological discourse.²⁷ By rejecting these binaries, queer ecology aligns with broader feminist, anti-colonial, and environmental justice movements, acknowledging that ecological degradation disproportionately affects marginalized communities. This framework not only challenges normative understandings of nature but also advocates for

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Gandy, "Queer Ecology," 727-747.

²⁷ Morton, "Queer Ecology," 273-282; Gandy, "Queer Ecology," 727-747.

the protection of marginalized spaces, particularly urban environments, fostering more inclusive and democratic forms of environmental activism.²⁸

A key aspect of queer ecology is its challenge to anthropocentric perspectives, which dominate traditional conservation and ecological discourse. By questioning human exceptionalism, queer ecology advocates for a more inclusive approach that recognizes the agency and significance of nonhuman entities. As Gandy notes, queer ecology “opens up a space of recognition for nonhuman forms of life, thereby decentering the human subject in ecological thought.” This decentering of the human subject aligns with posthumanist approaches that emphasize the interconnectedness of all life, dissolving traditional hierarchies between humans and the natural world. By doing so, queer ecology critiques conventional conservation practices and promotes an ethics that values biodiversity in a more holistic and inclusive manner. Queer ecology also prioritizes the preservation of wild spaces by advocating for conservation practices that respect the intrinsic value of ecosystems and their inhabitants rather than treating them as resources for human benefit. This perspective elevates non-human species as integral participants in ecological systems, deserving of protection and recognition for their roles in maintaining environmental balance.

This theoretical lens can be applied to natural science and history documentaries, offering a framework that critiques and expands the narratives traditionally portrayed. Documentaries that often adhere to rigid distinctions between human and nonhuman or that romanticize hierarchical relationships in ecosystems can benefit from queer ecology’s emphasis on fluidity and interconnectedness. Applying this lens to documentary filmmaking could challenge viewers to

²⁸ Gandy, "Queer Ecology," 727-747.

reconsider their assumptions about nature and species, offering a more inclusive and dynamic portrayal of the natural world that defies binary and normative structures. Through this approach, natural science documentaries can evolve to educate about ecosystems and engage with broader social and political questions regarding identity, power, and the environment.

The Lady Beetle enters into conversation with all of these conventions, specifically interrogating their implications through a lens informed by queer ecology. Queer ecology challenges the binary, hierarchical, and normative frameworks that are often imposed on both human and non-human life. In this context, *The Lady Beetle* subverts traditional documentary techniques by rejecting authoritative narration and objectivity in favor of a more fluid, subjective, and decentralized approach.

Unlike conventional nature documentaries that rely on a voice-of-god narrator to provide authoritative insights, *The Lady Beetle* uses voice-over narration in a subtle, reflective manner. Instead of directly delivering factual information about ladybugs, the narration invites viewers to think more deeply about what they see and hear. Through poetic cinematography, the film fosters a sensory experience that brings viewers closer to the complexity of these creatures. This approach aligns with what MacDonald describes as eco-cinema's goal of offering a "new kind of film experience" that encourages patience and mindfulness, fostering a more profound connection with nature. By sidestepping overt explanations and authoritative narration, *The Lady Beetle* disrupts conventional expectations, prompting viewers to question their assumptions about the natural world and embrace its mysteries rather than seeking to categorize or simplify them.

The use of macro cinematography—lingering close-up shots of ladybugs in their vibrant, tactile world—further underscores this decentralization of perspective. MacDonald notes that films like Peter Hutton's *Study of a River* (1996) or James Benning's *13 Lakes* (2004) offer viewers prolonged, meditative encounters with the natural world, demanding patience and sensory engagement. Similarly, *The Lady Beetle* invites viewers to slow down and immerse themselves in the natural world's intricate, often overlooked details, celebrating the diversity of life outside traditional narrative structures. The camera here acts not as a tool for dispassionate observation but as a means of engaging in an intimate dialogue with the subject, aligning with queer ecology's emphasis on diversity, variation, and the rejection of normative categories.

The Lady Beetle also challenges anthropomorphism by resisting the temptation to impose human-centered narratives onto the lives of the ladybugs. Instead of anthropomorphizing them, the film foregrounds their non-linear, adaptive behaviors, drawing implicit parallels to the fluidity and resilience found in queer ecologies. This approach reflects MacDonald's description of eco-cinema as offering an alternative to the consumption-driven spectacles of conventional media, as it invites viewers to engage more deeply and mindfully with the natural world's complexity. By avoiding reductive characterizations and allowing the ladybugs to exist on their own terms, the film aligns with queer ecological principles, which resist binary thinking and encourage the recognition of interconnectedness in all forms of life.

In positioning *The Lady Beetle* within the broader context of experimental and poetic filmmaking, examining how the film participates in a rich tradition of works that blur the boundaries between fiction and documentary becomes crucial. Experimental and poetic films often eschew conventional storytelling and traditional forms of representation, creating a

cinematic space where sensory experience, abstraction, and conceptual exploration come to the forefront. *The Lady Beetle* situates itself within this lineage by utilizing macro cinematography and a non-linear structure to reveal the complexity of a natural world often seen through reductive, binary lenses. The film not only reimagines how we view nature but also questions how documentaries and science films have historically mediated these views, offering an alternative, fluid perspective through the lens of queer ecology.

Traditionally, nature documentaries have been tied to the objective, the authoritative, and the factual—constructed as tools of education that convey "truths" about the natural world. However, these conventions often reinforce anthropocentric and heteronormative perspectives, framing nature through hierarchical and binary paradigms, such as predator and prey, male and female, dominant and submissive. By unraveling these conventions, *The Lady Beetle* challenges viewers to reconsider the relationship between observer and observed fiction and fact. It presents nature not as a static or fixed system to be categorized but as a living, dynamic interplay of forces full of ambiguity and interconnectedness. This aligns with the *Beyond Story Manifesto's* assertion that documentaries should not be constrained by conventional narrative forms that privilege human characters or linear cause-and-effect storytelling. The *Beyond Story Manifesto* is a collaborative declaration by documentary filmmakers and scholars advocating for the exploration of documentary forms that go beyond traditional storytelling, emphasizing the need for innovative, non-linear, and politically engaged approaches to better capture and reflect complex realities. As the manifesto emphasizes, "Storytelling is not the most or only effective form for documentary, as affecting as it can be. Not everything should be molded into a story."²⁹

²⁹ Juhasz and Lebow, "Beyond Story."

This broader view allows *The Lady Beetle* to engage in a more fluid and open-ended exploration of nature, echoing the manifesto's call to explore documentary forms that prioritize other organizing logic beyond storytelling.

At the heart of *The Lady Beetle* is a poetic sensibility that elevates the subjectivity of experience, the fragmentation of narrative, and the evocation of emotion and meaning through visual rhythm. The focus on ladybugs, often filmed in extreme close-ups, serves as a vehicle for re-envisioning how we encounter and understand ecosystems. This decision to present the insect world through such intimate, magnified imagery places the audience in a direct, almost sensorial relationship with these tiny creatures, reflecting a deliberate move away from the objectifying gaze often found in nature films. Instead, the viewer is invited to engage in a meditative experience, where the boundaries between subject and object, human and non-human, dissolve in favor of a shared fluidity and diversity.

In embracing queer ecology as its conceptual framework, *The Lady Beetle* further destabilizes the normative binaries that typically structure nature documentaries. Queer ecology, which seeks to dismantle heteronormative and anthropocentric biases in our understanding of nature, finds resonance in the reflexive and poetic forms of the film. By celebrating ladybugs' multiplicity, diversity, and adaptability, *The Lady Beetle* challenges viewers to think beyond rigid scientific taxonomies and embrace a more fluid and interconnected view of life. As Juhasz and Lebow argue, such documentary forms "must be adaptive to be most useful" and can offer opportunities to challenge cinematic conventions and broader ideological frameworks that shape our understanding of the world. In doing so, *The Lady Beetle* blurs the line between documentary and fiction, not by fabricating events or misrepresenting its subject, but by suggesting that the

"truth" of nature lies not in the neat categorization of facts but in the acceptance of complexity, diversity, and contradiction.

The Hellstrom Chronicle (1971), directed by Ed Spiegel and Walon Green, represents a fascinating case study in natural history filmmaking due to its unique blend of scientific content and speculative drama. The film presents a quasi-documentary format, interweaving factual footage of insects with fictionalized narration by a character, Dr. Nils Hellstrom, who warns of an impending insect takeover. This hybridization of fact and fiction positions the film at the intersection of documentary filmmaking, popular science, and ecological cautionary tales, making it a prime example of the tensions inherent in the genre.

In comparison to traditional natural history documentaries, *The Hellstrom Chronicle* follows a similar trajectory as films from Disney's *True-Life Adventures* series, which blurred the lines between scientific accuracy and popular entertainment.³⁰ The filmmakers employ cinematic techniques such as dramatic voice-over, close-up shots of insect behavior, and ominous music to create a sense of urgency and threat, distorting the viewer's perception of nature. These elements align with Bousé's observation that the demands of the cinematic medium often prioritize action and spectacle, which can lead to an exaggerated and sensationalized representation of the natural world.

However, *The Hellstrom Chronicle* diverges from a purely educational framework by embedding its message within a narrative of human anxiety about ecological imbalance and species supremacy. This approach echoes earlier "big bug" films of the 1950s that used

³⁰ Chris, "The Wildlife Film Era," 1-44.

exaggerated insect behavior to symbolize broader cultural fears.³¹ While the film ostensibly aims to raise awareness about the resilience and adaptability of insects, it also indulges in the melodrama of nature as a potential antagonist to human civilization, blending factual observation with dystopian rhetoric.

My approach to creating *The Lady Beetle* shares several key aspects with *The Hellstrom Chronicle*, particularly in how I incorporate elements of sensory engagement to evoke a deeper emotional and intellectual response from viewers. However, there are significant differences in how I align my work with contemporary theoretical frameworks, particularly queer ecology, and how I consciously subvert the anthropocentric and hierarchical frameworks that films like *The Hellstrom Chronicle* implicitly reinforce.

Similar to *The Hellstrom Chronicle*, my work embraces the visual spectacle of nature through macro cinematography and immersive close-ups. Both films utilize these techniques to make the often-overlooked world of insects more visible and engaging to audiences. However, while *The Hellstrom Chronicle* frames these visuals within a narrative of threat and domination, my approach aligns more closely with MacDonald's concept of eco-cinema, which emphasizes patience, mindfulness, and a non-hierarchical relationship with the natural world. By rejecting the notion that insects must be framed as either adversaries or heroes within a human-centered narrative, I aim to decentralize human dominance and encourage a fluid, open-ended engagement with the diversity of life.

Additionally, where *The Hellstrom Chronicle* utilizes anthropomorphic narration to build a sense of drama, my work consciously avoids the imposition of human traits onto non-human

³¹ Berenbaum and Leskosky, "Movies, Insects in," 668-674.

subjects. This decision draws from the principles of queer ecology, which challenges binary and normative categorizations of life.³² Rather than framing insects within a narrative of conflict, I explore their behaviors as adaptive, fluid, and integral to ecological systems, echoing Jean Painlevé's non-anthropocentric representation of non-human life.³³ This approach shifts the focus from human anxieties about nature to an appreciation of the interconnectedness of all species, allowing for a broader and more inclusive ecological discourse.

Furthermore, while *The Hellstrom Chronicle* relies on a dominant, authoritative voice to guide the viewer's understanding, I aim to disrupt this traditional narrative structure by allowing the images and sounds of the natural world to speak for themselves. Inspired by the *Beyond Story Manifesto*, I reject the need for a linear, human-centered story arc and instead allow the complexity and diversity of nature to unfold without the constraints of conventional storytelling.³⁴ This creates a space for viewers to engage with the subject matter on their terms, free from the rigid binaries of good versus evil or survival versus extinction that dominate films like *The Hellstrom Chronicle*.

The 1996 film *Microcosmos*, directed by Claude Nuridsany and Marie Pérennou, presents an intimate exploration of the lives of insects and small creatures in a highly stylized and poetic manner, offering a significant case study for the ways in which natural history filmmaking intersects with both scientific accuracy and cinematic artistry. In many ways, *Microcosmos* builds upon and challenges the conventions of natural history documentaries, a genre that has long navigated the tension between objective representation and narrative-driven entertainment.

³² Morton, "Queer Ecology," 273-282; Gandy, "Queer Ecology," 727-747.

³³ Cahill, *Zoological Surrealism*.

³⁴ Juhasz and Lebow, "Beyond Story."

The film eschews anthropomorphism, dramatic conflict, and narrative simplification in favor of an immersive, sensorial experience, allowing viewers to engage with the natural world in ways that differ fundamentally from traditional nature documentaries. My own approach to creating *The Lady Beetle* borrows from this model of visual storytelling while also diverging in ways to incorporate theoretical perspectives such as queer ecology, which challenge normative assumptions about nature and species.

Microcosmos represents a break from the anthropocentric gaze that often dominates nature films. Where many documentaries prioritize dramatic events like predator-prey dynamics or climatic extremes to maintain audience engagement, *Microcosmos* focuses on the minute, everyday actions of insects—such as the slow and deliberate movement of a snail or the rhythmic oscillation of ants working in unison.³⁵ This decision to depict nature in its more mundane and delicate forms, free from sensationalism, creates a meditative experience that emphasizes the interconnectedness and fluidity of life. By focusing on the beauty of the small and often overlooked, *Microcosmos* invites viewers to reconsider their relationship with nature, encouraging a more holistic understanding of biodiversity and ecological interdependence.

Microcosmos engages viewers in an experience of nature essentially free from narration, offering a sensory-driven portrayal that allows audiences to form their own interpretations. This technique resonates with my filmmaking philosophy, which seeks to decentralize the narrator's authority and instead invite a multiplicity of interpretations. As Cahill notes, filmmakers like Jean Painlevé, who also focused on insects and other non-human subjects, used similar techniques to shift the focus from human perspectives to the complexity of non-human life.

³⁵ Bousé, "The Problem of Images," 3-36.

Painlevé's work, like *Microcosmos*, utilized close-up cinematography to reveal the unseen intricacies of insect behavior, decentering human viewpoints in favor of a more objective yet immersive representation of nature.

In *The Lady Beetle*, I push the decentering even further by incorporating queer ecology, a framework that emphasizes the fluidity, interdependence, and complexity of species interactions, breaking down rigid binaries that traditionally frame both ecological and biological discourses.³⁶ While *Microcosmos* offers a visually captivating exploration of non-human life, my approach critiques and expands on this by foregrounding the ideological and epistemological frameworks that shape how we perceive the natural world. Specifically, I engage with the notion of reflexivity, challenging the viewer's gaze and the limits of knowing, invoking a sense of distance. Through this reflexive critique, I aim to disrupt traditional nature documentary conventions and invite the viewer to reconsider the spectacle of nature and the normative structures that inform how we categorize life. This aesthetic choice, a deliberate resistance to convention, critiques how the act of looking and the structures behind it shape our understanding of the natural world.

Artistic Approach

In *The Lady Beetle*, my formal approach to filmmaking intentionally blurs the lines between traditional documentary storytelling and poetic abstraction to reflect my thematic interests in nature, queer ecology, and the dynamic relationship between the human and non-human worlds. The cinematography embraces macro shots and extreme close-ups that center the

³⁶ Gandy, "Queer Ecology," 727-747.

viewer within the minute, often unnoticed world of ladybugs. This microcosmic perspective emphasizes a non-anthropocentric view of nature, aligning with queer ecological principles that challenge the human-centered gaze and resist binary thinking. In using macro cinematography, the film refrains from imposing a hierarchical or distant lens on the subject, allowing viewers to immerse themselves in the environment and experience the complexity of nature on its own terms.

One of the defining influences on my work is the tradition of poetic cinema, which prioritizes mood, abstraction, and emotional resonance over linear narrative structure. In sequences where the ladybugs traverse leaves and blades of grass, I employ slow pacing and long takes, akin to the meditative style found in films like *Microcosmos* (1996). These moments invite viewers to experience time differently, slowing down their own perceptions to match the non-linear, adaptive lives of the ladybugs. Their lives are non-linear in the sense that their behaviors and life stages do not always adhere to predictable patterns; their reproductive strategies can vary depending on environmental conditions, and factors like resource availability and seasonal changes influence their lifecycles. This adaptability reflects ecosystems' dynamic and cyclical nature, challenging rigid and linear views of biological processes. This method evokes a deeper emotional and intellectual engagement, encouraging the audience to contemplate the interconnectedness and fluidity of ecosystems rather than consuming the visuals through a conventional documentary lens. Employing a non-traditional, contemplative narration, *The Lady Beetle* moves away from a directive 'voice of god' approach, instead inviting viewers to reflect and engage thoughtfully with what they see and hear, fostering personal interpretation and connection.

Central to my approach is a reimagining of natural history documentary conventions. Rather than relying on a traditional authoritative voice-over, the film uses a contemplative, inquisitive voice-over that resists the impulse to neatly explain or dominate nature through human knowledge. This narration invites fragmented, subjective observations of the ladybugs, allowing ambiguity and diversity to emerge. This approach resonates with queer ecology's critique of rigid, binary structures and highlights a non-hierarchical relationship between filmmaker and subject. By shifting the role of the voice-over to one that prompts reflection rather than guidance, the film encourages viewers to engage with the imagery on a sensory level, fostering a more intimate and egalitarian connection with the subject matter.

The ladybugs are not passive objects to be observed but active participants in the filmmaking process. I approach them with a sense of curiosity and collaboration, filming their interactions with the staged environment in real-time. Their activity in the filmmaking process emerges through their unpredictable movements and behaviors, which shape the composition and flow of each scene. Rather than scripting or forcing specific actions, I allow the ladybugs to dictate the visual narrative, capturing moments that highlight their natural agency and spontaneity. This decision reimagines the relationship between filmmaker and subject, portraying the ladybugs as agents within their own ecological contexts. The close-ups and angles highlight their agency and individuality, subverting the traditional nature documentary's tendency to reduce non-human subjects to mere objects of study.

The film employs reflexivity throughout, both through sound and image, to further destabilize conventional modes of viewing and interpretation. Reflexive moments, where the filmmaking process is made visible or where sound and visual cues draw attention to the film's

constructed nature, remind the audience of their own role in the act of interpretation. This reflexive strategy disrupts the passive consumption of the film, encouraging viewers to become active participants in the meaning-making process. This not only challenges the anthropocentric gaze but also aligns with the film's broader queer ecological thread by questioning the boundaries between observer and observed, human and non-human. The reflexivity embedded in the film thus becomes a tool for promoting a more engaged and critical form of eco-viewing, one that acknowledges the complexities and interconnectedness of life beyond human-centered narratives.

Ultimately, the cinematographic choices in *The Lady Beetle*—from macro shots that magnify the insects' world to abstract framing that defies narrative linearity—emphasize life's fluid, interconnected nature. These techniques not only challenge anthropocentric perspectives but also invite viewers to experience nature through the lens of queer ecology, where diversity, complexity, and adaptability are celebrated. Through these formal choices, the film fosters a deeper understanding of the non-human world and invites reflection on our place within the broader ecological web.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISSEMINATION

Distribution

While serving as my MFA thesis project, *The Lady Beetle* is also a crucial piece in my evolving artistic repertoire. This work captures my exploration of poetic and experimental modes within the documentary form. My festival strategy is designed to position the film within a context that appreciates and celebrates its unconventional approach. I plan to premiere at the Chicago Underground Film Festival, which focuses on avant-garde and experimental cinema. This festival provides an ideal platform for the film's non-traditional narrative structure and visual style to resonate with an audience that values innovative storytelling. From there, the film will be submitted to the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival, a key venue for non-fiction work that challenges and expands traditional documentary boundaries. Given the film's natural history themes, the International Wildlife Film Festival and the Colorado Environmental Film Festival are good stops. These festivals attract audiences deeply invested in ecological issues, offering a space where my film can contribute to ongoing conversations about environmental advocacy through an artistic lens. The Animal Nature Future Film Festival is another strategic choice, given its focus on the relationship between humans, animals, and the environment—aligning perfectly with the film's exploration of these themes in a poetic manner. The film's personal and social dimensions also make it well-suited for festivals emphasizing diverse voices. Doc NYC offers a platform to engage with industry professionals and an audience that appreciates both traditional and boundary-pushing documentaries. Additionally, the film's queer subtexts make

NewFest and Wicked Queer stops on the festival circuit. These festivals are renowned for showcasing LGBTQ+ cinema, and presenting my film there will position it within the broader context of queer storytelling, contributing to the rich tradition of queer cinema.

This film is not only the culmination of my MFA studies but also a pivotal step in building my voice as a filmmaker. By engaging with festivals that reflect my work's thematic and stylistic diversity, I aim to establish a successful career while contributing meaningfully to the ongoing dialogue within documentary filmmaking.

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