

BUG CITY exhibition, Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2003

Infectious Creatures

by Doug Lewis

What is of particular interest to the bizarre relationship between “us” and “them” seems initially to begin from a comparison of necessities: desirable areas for nesting determine a constant source of provision and, perhaps most importantly, the fascinating world of procreation. “They” and “we” are not welcome at any time together, especially when our mutually exclusive paths cross. However, when “theirs” crosses “ours” within close proximity, we are moved to instant fits of anger and frustration often leaving us as mad as hornets, while keeping us as busy as a bee until that gleeful moment when “they” all just bugger off.

So why should “we” be so distraught during an invasion of irritating insects? Northrop Frye, in his Massey Hall Lecture Series, stated that “...insects [are] going on with their own business, but there’s nothing that responds to you: [they have] no morals and no intelligence, or at least none that you can grasp.” “We” recognize “them” as a threat to our entire way of life (food supply, economics, dwelling, all resulting in a threat to procreation – unromantic as this may be) and yet they don’t take time out of “their” hectic schedules to acknowledge “us.” Their lack of empathy antagonizes us even further: it is far easier to battle enemies that want to fight back, but the bugs go about their tasks and simply ignore us. “We” receive very little satisfaction when merely dispatching bugs dead; we prefer a war against them...and so, as unrewarding as this battle is, we begin with a dose of insecticide.

Possibly it is Hollywood that best mediates our fears of infestation, not the newest bug- zapper or chemical. Sci-fi film classics such as *Them*, *The Fly*, *Tarantula* and *Tremors* reveal the big screen filled with terrifyingly colossal bugs. In these sci-dramas, our societies and even our lives are at risk of being swallowed, stung and infected – “we” are sent scurrying in the streets (role reversal?). These “B” movies explicitly depict our panic by projecting radioactive insects onto the silver screen. “We” see “them” with their new and improved stature; “they” now see “us”...suddenly an adversarial respect takes place. They are no longer under boot, and we are nothing but a picnic. Giant bugs versus tanks and missiles, from New York

to Tokyo, to the smallest of wayside towns, no one is safe. Fittingly, with all the dollars and endeavours invested, Hollywood secured ticket sales, while intensifying our dread. Then, in reaction to our deficient social gusto over these sci-fi multi-peds, Hollywood decided to go for our funny bones. Animators leapt to their drawing boards/computers to save us from the creepy-crawlies by portraying images of “them” in our likeness, in a sincere, attempt to help “us” cope with “them.” Tinkerbell was perhaps the animators first stab at bug-to-human. Of course we know that she is a fairy – but she enthusiastically fluttered about Hook’s ears, distracting and enraging him; he was powerless against her unrelenting attacks. Walt Disney further personified “us” in the likeness of “them” with that top-hatted, cane-toting cricket, Jiminy.

Further socio-bug simulations are found in TV shows such as Fraggles and the made-for-BBC-television, Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass (available on DVD only). Upping the ante, animation companies such as Dreamworks (also to release Bee Movie in 2007) helped to bring Woody Allen’s 1995 movie Antz to life. Armed with new software to further render “them” in our likeness, Pixar’s 1998 effort A Bug’s Life made us feel virtually empathetic toward these gluttonous wall-crawlers. “We” constantly liken “them” to being either with us or against us; rarely though do we consider them as us. Perhaps treating “them” as we would our neighbours or guests would aid in modifying “our” attitudes toward these virulent pests.

Insects present a menace, which we deal with in a variety of ways. At every level of society, bugs can even affect our earnings. The constant threat of these insectoids keeps us scratching our heads, while all we can do is trust in technology to help us stay top dog in the eco-chain. Entire countries are losing this ancient battle: eight years ago the guava moth stowed away on a ship (likely from Asia) and made it to the shores of New Zealand. This imported variety is altering the lives of this southern hemisphere isle, consuming major fruit exports such as macadamia nuts, mandarin oranges and even kiwi at alarming rates. Much of New Zealand’s economy depends on fruit exports; this infestation is causing widespread panic and very real problems. Besides crops being decimated, the shipping industry has slowed to a crawl and jobs are being lost. Most importantly, New Zealander’s health is at risk: as soon as the moth was discovered, pesticides were sprayed in vast quantities. These agents, once publicized as safe by authorities, have lead to everything from skin cancer, respiratory illness

and even a small number of fatalities (though of course officials were not able to directly link the chemical agents used).

Across the pond in Australia, fruit fly infestations were reaching alarming numbers, damaging fruit in its early growth stages. Once again, technology became the immediate solution. Genetic engineers in England were approached to develop a solution to these micro-pests. What followed for “them” (the Mediterranean fruit fly) was the genome of the male being altered, that the hybrid species was unable to breed viable offspring. These sorts of knee-jerk incidents are worldwide (in Canada, specifically in the lumber or mosquito industries). The ecological damage done is irreversible and almost always originates in our wanting.

The irony in all of this is that our fear and our health worsens every time we react to “them.” Additional mediation between “us” and “them” is the World Wide Web. Here data, like a spider in its web, snares viral bugs that infect computers, often depositing a harmful brood.... “A virus is a self-replicating program that spreads by inserting copies of itself into other executable code.” <wikipedia.org>. Our constant craving to Google allows viruses such as the Love Bug access to our host motherboards. Antivirus software keeps our appetite for information safe by preventing infectious codes from inhabiting our mega-bites.... The Y2K bug created a similar hysteria comparable only to such sci-fi classics as *The Beginning of the End*. Our fear at the end of the last century can be likened to a cockroach found in the bedroom. One could say that the real bug and the virtual one both share the same host: “us.”

Another infesting worm, or “bookworm,” is the paper-eating insect with a voracity for vocabulary. In fact, bookworms are not worms at all. They belong to several different species of volume-gobbling beetles from the dermestid species. Their optimum habitat is a dark, dust-filled area, crammed with possibilities for feasting. These insatiable article-eaters find libraries to be the best all-night drive through. As they gorge, they not only eat page upon page: they are in fact eating our words, leaving them as the true consumers of pulp. The other more obvious consumer of the written word is the voracious book-reading bookworm: “us.” The beatnik William Burroughs once wrote, “Language is a virus... We must find out what words are and how they function.” If as according to Burroughs, words exist as a form of virus (e.g., catchwords), they likely reproduce like insects, at an

alarming rate. Offspring from either of these sources can be malignant or benign, but both result in a cause or an effect: fear and/or exasperation.

All in all – no matter how we are repulsed by the idea – bugs of all ilk will remain part of our conscience and eco-chain. Bugs are consumers and so are we; both fuelled by immense appetites. “Us” as well as “them” will stay inevitably linked to a chain of events, no matter how much that grates on our being.

Post-script: I finished this essay this morning...and as I was biking to work I kept thinking about that dermestid beetle consuming all our printed matter and what that might mean if such an event ever took place. As I was brooding over the prospect, a mosquito flew into my mouth and right down my gullet, leaving me with the bitter thought that I'd had too many bugs on the brain of late, and was beginning to find it all much too hard to swallow.