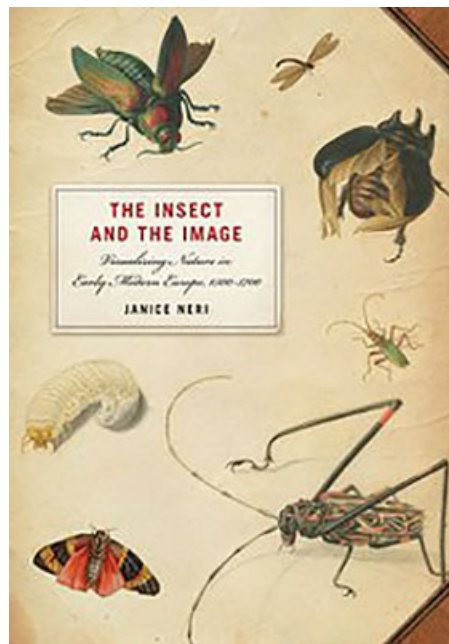


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Bugging Foucault

Janice Neri. *The Insect and the Image: Visualizing Nature in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1700*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. xxvii + 233 pp. \$82.50 hc, \$27.50 pb.



Janice Neri's 2011 *The Insect and the Image* uses tiny critters to make big claims. Even the subtitle, *Visualizing Nature in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1700*, doesn't quite contain the scope of her argument. Indeed, this slim volume holds a store of fascinating facts and pictures, elegantly arranged to recount how insects inched from the margins of medieval manuscripts and into the centers of naturalist drawings, still life paintings, needlework designs, and microscopic illustrations. Through these emerging media, they became features of curiosity cabinets and display cases, and they found new habitats within private collections, museums, universities, and other repositories of knowledge. They also traveled through incipient networks of exchange and commerce promising Europeans access to exotic treasures from around the world. In fact, Neri reveals, a small selection of bugs helped spin these global webs by casting nature as a commodity, an alluring assortment of consumable items.

Neri coins the phrase “specimen logic” to explain this evolution and describe how sixteenth-century image makers — from artists and artisans to amateur and professional naturalists — began rendering insects in precise detail on otherwise blank backgrounds, a pictorial strategy favoring bugs that could be “depicted or displayed as objects, those that possess clearly defined edges or contours and whose surfaces are visually distinct” (xiii). Dürer’s 1505 *Stag Beetle* signaled the shift. Armor gleaming and mandibles raised, it looms large in the absence of visual referents and seems to rear its head right off the stark vellum.



This lone beetle became the prototype for a genre that, with heightened concern for accuracy and three-dimensional effects, blurred distinctions between physical specimens and their representations. It also spurred developments of new materials and practices, including “cutting and pasting,” which happened literally (by moving images) and virtually (by copying across contexts and media). Within a growing culture of curiosity, the wunderkammer became a site in which images and objects could function interchangeably — with cabinets containing collectibles as well as pictures, and pictures depicting cabinets of collections. At the same time, image makers “capitalized on the appeal of insects to feature them as spectacular illustrations in their publications — projects that were also intricately tied to the constructions of their own complex professional identities” (181). Through this dual construction process—of creatures and creators — nature became decontextualized while artists and scientists arose as “gatekeepers to a strange and fascinating new world” (xi).

The Insect and the Image displays the development and consequences of specimen logic over five chapters arranged in two parts. After an introductory section on theory and method, it proceeds thematically and chronologically, focusing on an assortment of humans: the miniaturist painter Joris Hoefnagel, naturalist physicians Ulisse Aldrovandi and Thomas Moffet, polymath microscopist Robert Hooke, and illustrator businesswoman Maria Sibylla Merian. Part I covers 1580 to 1620 and includes a chapter on early still life; Part II concentrates on the later seventeenth century when, though no longer novel, bugs were still “exotic objects around which professional personae and new visual strategies were formed” (xxvi). Here Neri explores “new worlds” — under the microscope and around the globe — as well as innovations in technology and decorative art. Her conclusion tracks specimen logic into the nineteenth century, in images that “reflect the parallel expansions of Europeans’ knowledge of the natural world and the global reach of European political power along with the spread of international commercial and trade networks” (182). This period also saw a widening, often gendered, split between professional and domestic spaces. As Neri puts it, “the approach to nature as a collection of rare and precious objects moved out of the [scientific] mainstream and into the living room” (189).

Specimen logic relies on Michel Foucault’s notion of “screening,” the narrowing processes through which he believed nature is ordered and knowledge produced. For Foucault, Neri explains, “natural history texts ‘screened’ certain aspects of nature in order to make others visible, and this screening process defined both the scope of natural history and the character of the description — in other words, *what* could be described and *how*.” As she quotes from *The Order of Things*, “natural history did not become possible because men looked harder and more closely.” Instead, they used their “ingenuity, if not to see as little as possible, at least to restrict deliberately the area of its experience” (4). Neri professes to “firmly ground” her work in Foucault’s “archeological approach to studying the past” (xvi), a somewhat surprising stance given his rejection of foundationalism. Still, like many others, she criticizes his sharp distinction between the eighteenth-century “Classical age” and the Renaissance, as well as his focus on texts at the expense of images. More importantly, she demonstrates how screening the natural field began much earlier, when images makers started “to parse the insect world into small units that could be easily comprehended and reproduced ... in efforts to limit the scope of the natural world similar to those that Foucault sees operating in eighteenth-century natural history texts” (22-23). This selective approach was, in fact, “already a part of sixteenth-century practices relating to picturing the natural world.” Not until the eighteenth century would natural history texts “catch up

with visual images, notably their very narrow focus on a restricted number and type of structures" (189). Thus, one of Neri's larger implications seems to be that Foucault's own screens, so focused on *les mots*, unduly narrowed his field of vision.

Though Foucault never articulates a theory of visibility per se, Neri notes how his work has inspired thinkers seeking to understand "the processes by which subjects become visual" (xvi), and she relies on a range of their theories. Informed by foundational visual culture scholars like Svetlana Alpers and Jonathan Crary, she also draws on historians of science, including Pamela Smith, as well as on Claudia Swan and Londa Schiebinger's somewhat comparable work on botanical imagery. This interdisciplinary approach places *The Insect and the Image* "at the methodological intersection of the history of science, art history, and visual culture" (xv), a juncture that enables a complex set of questions: "Why did people become interested in insects, and why did visual representations take this particular form at this particular time? Why was 'precision' valued and what did it mean? Why did specimen logic dominate, how did it come to be accepted, and what were its implications and consequences?" (xvii). Neri's answers draw on alternative concepts such as "image" and "knowledge" to describe "the meaning and function of objects and practices that fall outside of the traditional confines of art and science" (xxvii). While observing how early modern bugs have been analyzed in many fields—from entomology to literature to religion—she digs deeper to unearth the "conditions under which it was possible for insects to emerge as subjects" (xvi). It was upon these "conditions of visibility," she insists, "that later musings on insects were founded" (xiv).

Foucault sought to expose political and social conditions that, as he reflected in a late interview, "are not very apparent, have been forgotten, or have become habitual. They are part of our most familiar landscape, and we don't perceive them anymore" (11). Neri follows suit, and her rigorous focus on marginal elements of the landscape reveals many "unseen social, cultural, and historical processes at work in their production" (xiii). Her narrow lens thus captures a paradoxically wide angle, illuminating how "material practices and ideas surrounding ... the representation of nature intersected with global movements of peoples, plants, and other objects" (xiii).

One category missing from this taxonomy is animals. On the one hand, the absence is predictable. As Laurie Shannon mentions in *The Accommodated Animal*, the word rarely

appeared before the seventeenth century, when creatures were differently sorted and, as Neri shows, the very classification of insect included a range of beings from frogs to worms. Like Foucault's madmen and criminals, early modern bugs hovered in liminal spaces among organic beings (like plants or snails) and inanimate objects (like shells or coins), while disrupting distinctions between the quick and the dead as living organisms, killed specimens, and lifelike images. On the other hand, however, Neri's missing animal is conspicuous, particularly in light of her references to intersectional fields that, like visual studies, extend Foucault beyond his original parameters. She notes, for example, Julie Hochstrasser's postcolonial unmasking of "violence visited by Europeans upon inhabitants of the Spice Islands" in Dutch still life (xiii), Natalie Davis's feminist connection "between Merian's gender identity ... and her 'ecological approach'" (141), as well as Merian's own unsettling comments on best breeding practices for enslaved Africans. Her only nod toward the treatment of nonhuman animals, however, comes in a footnote to dated articles on the medical history of vivisection (216n71).

With so much recent scholarship on early modern animals and her own Foucauldian "ground," such a thorough screening of Human Animal Studies (HAS) must have been hard for Neri to sustain, especially as she applied elements of Foucault's dismantling of human subjectivity to beings now called animals.¹ Always already objectified, Foucault's subject exists only through representation, an antihumanist position crucial for theorists — from Giorgio Agamben to Donna Haraway to Erica Fudge — who disrupt conventional distinctions between *Homo sapiens* and other life forms. After noticing an introductory section called "Insects as Subjects," as well as the title of Part I, *Insects as Objects and Insects as Subjects*, I eagerly anticipated some discussion of HAS issues, but Neri left me hanging. If, as she shows, insects emerged as subjects only through their objectification, I kept wondering how these bugs differed from their human representatives. Aren't we all subjected to subjectivity according to Foucault? After reading and rereading, however, I began to sense these questions were out of bounds. As Neri remarks in her definitive closing sentence: "The consequences of this metamorphosis, of nature rendered into a collectable and a commodity, extend beyond the narrowly constructed borders of this book" (190).

Still, the animal lingers.

Though incidental to her thesis, Neri includes some unsettling details. Joris Hoefnagel, we learn, faced a common paradox: "in order to thoroughly examine a specimen it was first necessary to subdue and in most cases kill the creature ... the specimen that exists

in nature is not as animated as the imaginary creature fabricated by the artist" (22). We also hear Merian instructing a student that to "kill butterflies quickly ... one must hold the point of a darning needle in a flame, thus making it hot or glowing red, and stick it into the butterfly. They die immediately with no damage to their wings." This technique preserves "the insect's delicate structures from the violence of its own death" (161). Less relevant but more disturbing (for mammal readers anyway) is the Royal Society's ordering of Hooke "to perform respiratory experiments on live dogs," a duty that left him "so distressed by the animals' suffering that he refused to repeat the experiments ... though he was eventually compelled to carry them out" (138).

Such vivid marginalia may be the best Neri can do, within her strict archeological parameters, to convey the unfortunate consequences of specimen logic for insects and other animals. Because their conditions of visibility depended upon being constructed as "an exotic, alien inhabitant of a nonhuman world" (xv), the only bugs we can see are already images. As such, they can only be approached in their otherness, by tracing their emergences, transformations, and effects. To her credit, Neri maintains a similar archeological distance with humans (though they appear to have more agency, especially in crafting their personae). We hear, for example, how Hooke's humble origins and possible disfigurement from smallpox may have "contributed to his social status as an outsider" in the Royal Society (106) and how Merian, as a divorced businesswoman, "remained a somewhat unstable commodity within the cultural economy of natural history" (166), but Neri refrains from speculation on their subjective experiences. Foucault might say that Neri's archeology stops short of genealogy. In other words, she lays out specimen logic without confronting its enabling structures of domination, including the human-animal divide upon which it depends. In fact, just as specimen logic relies upon a clear distinction between human image maker and animal subject, so too does its description. Allowing "the animal" entrance to *The Insect and the Image* would disrupt the ontological status of its humans, and the artists and scientists themselves might disappear. And yet, as Neri cannily admits, "limits, too, have their limits" (26).

Animals aside, when it comes to crafting professional personae around bugs, *The Insect and the Image* proves the practice alive and well. Timely in Neri's career as well as her field, the book has carved a tiny but powerful niche in the industry of Foucauldian scholarship while weaving its way into other areas. So far, it has received positive

reviews in *Renaissance Quarterly*, *Isis*, *Archives of Natural History* and *Early Popular Visual Culture* (to name just a few journals) and has been put to use in newer work across disciplines, including Dániel Margócsy's *Commercial Visions: Science, Trade, and Visual Culture in the Dutch Golden Age* (2014) and Ohad Nachtomy and Justin Smith's *The Life Sciences in Early Modern Philosophy* (2014). It's even creating some buzz in HAS circles, with citations in *Animals on Display: The Creaturely in Museums, Zoos, and Natural History* (2013), edited by Liv Emma Thorsen and Karen Rader, as well as in the new *Routledge Handbook of Human-Animal Studies* (2014). And it made the list of noteworthy books in the newsletter of the Institute of Animals and Society.

Foucault saw himself as an agent of change. "How can you imagine that I think change is impossible," he asked, "since what I have analyzed was always related to political action? All of *Discipline and Punish* is an attempt to ... show how a new way of thinking took place" (14). As I consider *The Insect and the Image*, I'm intrigued by its own conditions of visibility as an academic artifact, and I wonder what further thoughts and actions it will inspire. Will its black and white reproductions of colorful insect images disrupt or reinforce the logic of specimens? Perhaps both. Like a very curious cabinet, this book displays images of "seemingly timeless beauty" (xiii) in order to showcase their otherwise hidden production processes and so uncovers something of what Foucault calls the "history of the present." Minnesota University Press claims, on their website, that by "revealing how sixteenth- and seventeenth-century artists and image makers shaped ideas of the natural world, Janice Neri enhances our knowledge of the convergence of art, science, and commerce today." What to do with such enhanced knowledge remains a question for readers beyond Neri's narrow borders. This reader looks forward to deeper explorations of the animal issues she sidles around.

Note

1. A few of many titles: *Early Modern Zoology: The Construction of Animals in Science, Literature and the Visual Arts*, edited by Karel Enenkel and Paulus Johannes Smith (Leiden: Brill, 2007), *A Cultural History of Animals in the Renaissance*, edited by Bruce Boehrer (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009), and *Beasts and Beauties: Animals, Gender, and Domestication in the Italian Renaissance* by Juliana Schiesari (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2010).

Works Cited

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