

BBC Wildlife Documentaries in the age of Attenborough

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Chapter 7. From Oxford to Bristol and back. The invention of scientific wildlife television

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CHAPTER SEVEN

From Oxford to Bristol and back. The invention of scientific wildlife television

Abstract

In the 1960s, two scientists from Oxford University, Niko Tinbergen and Gerald Thompson began using film as part of their scientific practice. The NHU in Bristol quickly got wind of their work and started collaborating with them to develop a new approach to wildlife television-making. Tinbergen, the founder of ethology, brought intellectual foundations to it, creating with Christopher Parsons stories of wildlife informed by the theory of evolution. Thompson provided a technological edge which enabled the Bristol producers to renew the kind of objects they were showing in their programmes. These two collaborations also led them to further define their identity as experts in wildlife television-making.

In the 1960s, the epicentre of creativity and innovation in wildlife filmmaking stood in Oxford. Gerald Thompson, an entomologist, and Niko Tinbergen, a zoologist, both lecturers at the University, had each independently developed an interest in filmmaking, as much as a research tool as a means of communicating scientific research and its results to wider audiences—students and the interested public. Their motives were diverse, ranging from the idealist view that it was scientists’ social duty to communicate with non-scientists,¹ to more commercial projects. In this latter case, as Tinbergen put it, producing films for the BBC was a means of raising the funds necessary to make as many free copies of educational films as possible available to schools. Niko Tinbergen was eager to make his ethological studies of animals in the wild known outside academic circles. Gerald Thompson, who had specialised in applied entomology, mostly studying insect population in Ghana in the 1940s, had in the 1960s turned to investigating the use of film as a tool for research. His ambition

¹ Niko Tinbergen, personal letter to Christopher Parsons and John Sparks, 7 September 1968, p.1 BBCWAC WE8/600/1.

then was 'to bequeath to posterity a hundred educational films that won't be bettered in fifty years'². In both cases, the main emphasis was on the behaviour of animals, which was also the NHU's stock in trade. But by looking at behaviour from the perspective of the Darwinian theory of evolution, the Oxford filmmakers could construct compelling narratives, absent from the more descriptive, natural historical approach favoured thus far in such programmes as *Look*. In addition, taking advantage of their privileged cognitive status as certified scientists, these newcomers in the field of wildlife filmmaking adopted an approach to filming animals which authorised and valued intervention and the use of controlled conditions insofar as it enabled them to distil the essence of the specific behaviour they wanted to depict on film. With more cognitive clout, unencumbered by the ethos of non-intervention, the cornerstone of amateur naturalists' filmmaking, these scientists obtained footage the latter were unlikely to get, unless they were very patient and very lucky. Their interventionist approach enabled scientists to produce films faster than such wildlife cameramen as Eric Ashby, at a lower shooting ratio, using less film than was the norm for this type of filming.

Oxford filmmakers' transformative influence on the NHU in the late 1960s conjugated with an increased pressure within the BBC to drive production costs down, to encourage programme-makers to develop new standard of practices in wildlife television making. The second half of the 1960s witnessed a profound remodelling of the corporation's organisational architecture, and of the rationale underlying the way it functioned. Until the mid-1960s the ideology of public service broadcasting drove BBC operations and broadcasting was conceived of as an instrument of public betterment. After 1967-68 a logic of corporate management borrowed from the industrial and commercial corporate world took over, sustained by the increased valuing of the notion of professionalism inside and outside the corporation (Burns, 1977). These institutional changes occurred in response to the financial pressure the launch of BBC2 in 1964 and then of colour television three years later had placed on the corporation. To compensate for these large infrastructural investments the BBC needed to increase the licence fee but found little support in government circles where it was perceived as 'extravagant'. The 1967-68 reorganisation

² Jeffery Boswall, memorandum: 'Contract with Thompson for 3 "Looks"', 17 February 1967, p.2. BBCWAC WE13/1,071/1

along lines conventional, even traditional, in large industrial organisations—notably turning Television and Radio into ‘product divisions’—was partly motivated by the need to diffuse this kind of hostility. But it was also a form of cultural alignment of the corporation with its competitors at a time when commercial television kept securing larger audiences than the BBC (Burns, 1977). From this perspective, embracing an approach to wildlife programme making informed by science and authorising a more interventionist approach made sense economically as it enabled to bring the cost of programme making down. The Oxford filmmakers provided executives and managers at the BBC with arguments to change the approach to filmmaking prevailing at the NHU. Notably the work produced at Oxford helped justify moving wildlife television away from amateur natural history and towards science.

A close collaboration with the Oxford filmmakers forced the NHU into articulating its identity as a centre of expertise for the production of wildlife television programmes destined to non-specialist audiences, as opposed to scientific filmmaking. To maintain its existence as an entity the Bristol unit asserted its status as an obligatory passage point for scientists willing to address, through broadcasting, non-professional audiences and communicate with films about animal behaviour. Simultaneously, Tinbergen, Thompson and others in Oxford, conceiving of their collaboration with the NHU as a source of income, treated the NHU as a client, unsettling the balance of power which had prevailed between the Bristol Unit and its external contributors thus far. With the scientists at Oxford, the balance of power could potentially be reversed, placing the Bristol broadcasters in a subservient position. This forced them to become more assertive of their own expertise in programme making to remain on an equal footing with the scientists. Many of the early films the Oxford academics produced for the NHU examined parasites and their relationship with their hosts, looking at how evolution of the host drove that of the parasite and vice versa. This is also a good metaphor to understand what turned out to be the tumultuous relationship between the Oxford filmmakers and the NHU.

Signals for Survival: breaking new grounds in wildlife television

Ethologist Niko Tinbergen, based at the department of Zoology at Oxford University since 1949, had started in the late 1950s to use a motion picture camera for his research on

animal behaviour, to the extent that he credited some of his findings to the films he had shot in the field (e.g. Tinbergen, 1960:2; see also Mitman, 1999:71). At the same time as Tinbergen was developing his use of film as a research tool, he had also become adept at using these research films as teaching aids, showing specially edited versions to his students at the end of lectures, 'after I have told the basic story at leisure'.³ At first, Tinbergen's use of film as a teaching resource was limited to filming patterns of behaviours. However, in 1962-63, he began using film not only to document his findings but also his research methods, producing what he called 'research-in-action' films. This development coincided with the moment when Tinbergen was conducting research projects in the nature reserve of Ravenglass, in Cumbria, with a group of students (Shaffer, 1991; Kruuk, 2003). This is also at that time that Tinbergen entered a close working relationship with Hugh Falkus, which would lead to a collaboration with the NHU spanning over a decade.

Hugh Falkus, angler, hunter, naturalist, natural history writer, professional filmmaker and occasional contributor of the BBC NHU, lived in a cottage near Ravenglass. At the time, he was producing a series of short episodes on life in Cumberland for Border Television, a local television station part of the ITV network. Having heard of Tinbergen and his students' research at Ravenglass, Falkus paid them a visit. Out of the encounter came four programmes for his series *Five Minutes with Hugh Falkus*. This first contact with television led Tinbergen to see the then still relatively new medium as a good way of making his work known to larger audiences, attracting public attention to the nascent discipline of ethology (Kruuk, 2003). Tinbergen also got very taken by Falkus' personality, and together, the two men decided to embark in the production of half-hour films depicting Tinbergen's research and to approach the BBC NHU with them, taking advantage of Falkus' acquaintance with Christopher Parsons. The first two films coming out of this collaboration, 'The Gull Watchers' and 'The Sign Readers', were transmitted in June and December 1964 respectively as episodes in the series *Look*. Both films depicted the research taking place at Ravenglass, on the social life of gulls, featuring some of the experiments Tinbergen and his students conducted, such as introducing tame crows, hedgehogs or stuffed foxes in the gull colony to test the birds' reactions to intruders.

³ Niko Tinbergen, personal letter to Christopher Parsons, 16 August 1968, BBCWAC WE8/600/1

Following the transmission of the second one, 'The Sign Readers', which showed how Tinbergen and his students interpreted animals' tracks and traces, Jeffery Boswall, who that year had taken over the production of *Look* from Chris Parsons, sent a letter of feedback to Tinbergen. Praising Tinbergen's on-screen performances—'Each of your own performances I and my colleagues enjoyed and admired'—Boswall congratulated him on the very high professional standards of both films 'from the artistic and scientific stand-point', qualifying Falkus and Tinbergen 'a powerful contribution of whom the audience must see more'. Yet, he also remarked that both films, 'from the technical stand-point, were a fraction below par'. As Boswall explained:

one or two of your shots were a fraction grainy. No problem should arise from the simple fact that you use colour and not black and white, because colour in our experience translates very acceptably into black and white. But it is vital, as I am sure you already appreciate, to keep the original in absolute pristine condition and to copy directly off that when making a black and white dupe neg. I gather from John Martin that for some reason this wasn't possible and that he had to dupe off a *print* from your Ektachrome original.⁴

In the words of Robert Reid, head of the science and features department at the BBC, writing in *Nature* on the relationship between television producers and scientists, the 1960s were the days 'in which television constantly bared its breast and its methods in self-analytical dramas, documentaries and comedies' (Reid, 1969: 456). To provide Tinbergen, and other scientists involved in filming, with explanations on the methods and processes of broadcasting was part of the same movement as producing *Unarmed Hunters* (1963 – Chapter 5). In this instance, though, these explanations were meant to convey to Tinbergen a notion of the technical constraints associated with television broadcasting, which set television apart from other film-based media, such as educational cinema.

Although quite cajoling, Boswall's letter was meant to impress on Tinbergen the idea that if he wanted to be involved in television broadcasting, the medium had to take precedence over other channels of communication and distribution, more habitual to him. This implied adopting elements of the professional culture of television broadcasting. As Robert Reid was

⁴ Jeffery Boswall, personal letter to Niko Tinbergen, 12 January 1965, BBCWAC WE8/600/1

proclaiming in his 1969 piece in *Nature*, if a scientist wanted to take responsibility for producing a programme and carry this 'new role well, he has to acquire the professional skill and experience of a producer, and devote a producer's time and energy to his programme. He will cease to be a scientist' (Reid, 1969:458). Tinbergen's main outlet when he started collaborating with the BBC, was the production of educational films, circulated to schools and universities, in addition to the films he used in his own classes. As Tinbergen explained to Nicholas Crocker 'Having only very limited funds available for this, the production of a television film for the BBC is for me a tool, a lever by which the production of such films has become possible.'⁵ However, to broadcasters, the visual interpretation of a subject in order to produce a television programme was an activity of its own, different from the production of teaching films. Although to the external person it seemed simple and straightforward, 'no two programmes present the same problems and no simple formula can satisfactorily describe all the processes in which the producer has to be involved' (Reid, 1969:456). To educate Tinbergen in these matters, Boswall relied on Falkus, who had an experience of working for television, and to whom he ascribed the task of conveying the broadcasters' 'viewpoint and outlook',⁶ which differed from that of the producer of educational films. As these exchanges show, collaborating with Niko Tinbergen provided the NHU with an opportunity to further develop the cultural space of scientifically informed wildlife television, distinguishing it, this time, from the kind of educational cinema Tinbergen was involved in.

Following the broadcasting of the first two programmes, Boswall encouraged Tinbergen and Falkus to work on two further films for *Look*. One would eventually evolve into *Signals for Survival*, the award-winning episode of the series *The World About Us*—of which more later. The other one, 'The Beachcombers', was broadcast in November 1965. Its central figure was the Herring Gull, 'the arch-beachcomber', Tinbergen and his students only coming in 'as its colleagues, who look with admiration at his efficiency, ... doing some amateurish beachcombing of [their] own'.⁷ The gull was contrasted and compared with other animals—fox, badger, hedgehog, curlew—who also made a living from what they found on the beach in Ravenglass. In the *Radio Times* billing that announced the programme, Tinbergen and his

⁵ Niko Tinbergen, personal letter to Nicholas Crocker, 2 May 1968, p.2. BBCWAC WE8/600/1

⁶ Jeffery Boswall, personal letter to Niko Tinbergen, 12 January 1965, BBCWAC WE8/600/1

⁷ Niko Tinbergen, personal letter to Jeffery Boswall, 25 November 1964, BBCWAC WE8/600/1

students were characterised as ‘professional naturalists’. This labelling is part of the NHU’s effort to contradistinguish themselves and their programmes from the amateur natural history which had dominated their practice until then (See Chapter 5). Tinbergen was already enjoying a degree of notoriety in Britain as the main proponent in the country of Konrad Lorenz’s new approach to studying animal behaviour. Labelling him a professional naturalist was a rhetorical strategy to peg the new wildlife television developed in Bristol to ethology, defining it in the public sphere as the professionalization of natural history. It also legitimated wildlife television’s almost exclusive focus on animal behaviour, at the expense of other practices of natural history, such as collecting and classifying, conversely casted as amateur ones. The relationship between Tinbergen and the NHU was one of mutual exploitation. It helped Tinbergen gain public support for his work. It enabled the NHU to renew wildlife television. It lasted for as long as the two parties could each find an interest in it to forward their respective objectives.

This collaboration reached a climax in 1968, with the film *Signals for Survival*. Presenting the social life in a colony of Herring gulls, and the way the birds communicate by voice and posture, it was two years in the making. A collaboration between Tinbergen and Falkus, the project began as an all-film *Look* programme, but was eventually considered for the new BBC2 series, *The World About Us*. Produced by Christopher Parsons, *The World About Us* had been created by David Attenborough as a replacement to *Life* (Chapter 6). This series also served to introduce a new format of wildlife television programme, the uninterrupted 50-minute transmission of a film, without studio sequences hosted by a trustworthy personality. Showing colour films, *The World About Us* contributed in advertising the value of wildlife filmmaking as a means of exploring and knowing the natural world, and of linking between scientists and non-scientists. *Signals for Survival* fitted well in this project. Mostly shot by Niko Tinbergen and Hugh Falkus, the film rested on Tinbergen’s research over the previous twenty years and a close collaboration between the two men:

Our joint film on *Signals for Survival* was preceded by first my own twenty years’ hard work, then by Hugh and me discussing endlessly what it really was in my story that was so exciting; then by sketching out a script; then by continually adapting the

story, and clarifying it, as we saw what we wanted and what we could (and could not) hope to show.⁸

To Tinbergen, making *Signals for Survival* was a means of fulfilling what to him was every scientist's 'urgent social duty' to reach 'the non-professional public'. Simultaneously, he 'consider[ed] this film just as much a "publication" as an article in a scientific journal',⁹ and thus as an intervention in the scientific field via television. Commenting on his film work for the BBC Tinbergen stated: 'Don't think that we believe for a moment that we have done something perfect; but we do think that we are doing something of a new kind, and on a high level.'¹⁰ For the BBC, to broadcast *Signals for Survival* was to participate in the scientific conversation, simultaneously enabling a scientist to address his peers and allowing non-specialist audiences to stand as witnesses to this conversation.

However, although Tinbergen provided most of the footage and conceived of *Signals for Survival* as his—and Falkus'—film, broadcasters in Bristol saw it for a very large part as the result of the work of its producer, Christopher Parsons. For whereas Falkus and Tinbergen had shot good footage, to producers at the NHU 'they're not that fantastic *in TV terms*'.¹¹ The broadcasters suspected that neither Tinbergen nor Falkus '[were] very aware of other film makers in this field [natural history filmmaking]', hence their limited understanding of the medium for which they were working. When it came to editing the film and constructing its sound-track (essential for a film presenting the way gulls communicate by voice and posture), Tinbergen was absent from the editing room. In the autumn, Parsons, Falkus and David Aliband, the NHU's film editor, met to work on the final stage of production. Aware that the film's success depended for a large part on the accuracy of the sound track—'not only for scientific purpose but also in order to create a sense of realism, of actually being *in* the gull colony'—the three men engaged in what Parsons later described as 'the most careful and detailed pieces of post-synchronisation yet undertaken on a wildlife film at Bristol', recreating the sounds of the gull colony and matching every call and wing-beat to

⁸ Niko Tinbergen, personal letter to Christopher Parsons and John Sparks, 7 September 1968, p.2. BBCWAC WE8/600/1

⁹ Niko Tinbergen, personal letter to Christopher Parsons, 7 July 1969, BBCWAC WE8/600/1

¹⁰ Niko Tinbergen, personal letter to Christopher Parsons and John Sparks, 7 September 1968, p.5. BBCWAC WE8/600/1

¹¹ Richard Brock, handwritten note to Nicholas Crocker, n.d. [May 1968] (original emphasis). BBCWAC WE8/600/1

the action in every film shot (Parsons, 1982:262- original emphasis). In July 1969, *Signals for Survival* was the BBC entry for the Italia Prize, one of the most prestigious international awards for television programmes, which it won, in the Documentary category. The BBC flew Tinbergen, Falkus and Parsons to Mantua, where the latter received the prize on behalf of the Corporation. David Attenborough, as Controller BBC2, wrote to congratulate Tinbergen:

I was delighted when the decision was taken that *Signals for Survival* should be the BBC entry for the Italia Prize, for I truly believe that it is not merely a superb natural history film, different only in degree from many others, but a substantial step forward in the whole genre. ... It has brought the BBC a great deal of prestige, and I must not only congratulate you but also thank you.¹²

With *Signals for Survival*, the NHU was claiming new territory, decidedly establishing its new brand of wildlife television, not anymore informed by amateur natural history or big game hunting, but by science. On his part, Tinbergen saw his film winning the Prize as a part of his ongoing effort to advertise ethology as scientifically legitimate : ‘Since our science is still fighting (with success so far, but not with as complete success as I wish) for “recognition”, I must use the publicity which being entered for the Italia Festival means.’¹³ However, just as Tinbergen had been sidelined during the postproduction for the film, so was he when the BBC communicated about getting the award. The press release, reprinted for instance in *The Times*, announced that the Italia Prize had gone to the BBC for ‘a programme on seagulls, directed and narrated by Mr. Hugh Falkus’.¹⁴ Tinbergen took issue with such communication strategy, writing to Huw Weldon, Managing Director of BBC television, ‘we were all a little taken aback by the B.B.C.’s own announcement of the Italia Prize. It said everywhere “the B.B.C. announces the awarding of the Italia Prize etc. to *their* film ‘Signals for Survival’”, or words of that extent, with a remark about seagulls or something’.¹⁵ David Attenborough, tasked with replying, explained that

¹² David Attenborough, personal letter to Niko Tinbergen, 25 September 1969, BBCWAC T41/434/1

¹³ Niko Tinbergen, personal letter to Christopher Parsons, 7 July 1969, BBCWAC WE8/600/1

¹⁴ *The Times*, ‘Italia prize for BBC TV film’, 23 September 1969, p.6.

¹⁵ Niko Tinbergen, personal letter to Huw Weldon, 25 September 1969, p.1. BBCWAC T41/434/1

The Italia Prize is, in a quite specific sense, a festival in which the participants are not programme makers but broadcasting organisations. The winner, therefore, is never an actor, a director, a writer or a composer, but always a broadcasting organisation.

...

Needless to say, when the Award is given, it is, in practice, seen quite clearly to belong to the person or the team who created the prize-winning programme, and we always do our best to make sure that this is apparent by flying the creators out to Italy if we win an Award. In addition, we do our best to make it absolutely clear in our Press Releases where the credit lies. In this particular instance, we stated quite clearly that the programme was introduced and photographed by you, directed and narrated by Hugh Falkus, and presented by Christopher Parsons. The Press, however, in its need to simplify and shorten, simply said that the BBC won the Documentary Prize, and this, though unfortunate because it is so crude a statement, is nonetheless in a technical sense correct.¹⁶

To carve out the cognitive territory for its own kind of wildlife television, the NHU was eager to appropriate the science but keep the scientists at bay, thus ensuring that wildlife broadcasting visibly remained in the hands of the broadcasters. Scientists could participate but had to do so under the visible leadership of professional filmmakers and broadcasters. If they wanted to become broadcasters, they had to cease being scientists and become experts at producing television programmes.

The decade long collaboration between Tinbergen and the NHU contributed in bringing into existence a renewed approach to wildlife television. With his films offering Darwinian interpretations of animal behaviour, looking at the adaptation value of patterns of behaviour, Tinbergen successfully demonstrated how wildlife filmmaking could extend beyond the spectacle of the amateur natural history pursuits of collecting, observing and aesthetic enjoyment, to embrace a scientifically informed analytical approach to animals. Staging himself and his students at work in his films of 'research in action' he also added a new character to the repertoire available to wildlife filmmakers to tell stories about nature, that of the field scientist. The NHU's collaboration with Tinbergen, a scientist interested in

¹⁶ David Attenborough, personal letter to Niko Tinbergen, 1 October 1969, pp.1-2. BBCWAC T41/434/1

filmmaking, also helped establish a boundary between the broadcasting institution and scientists, locating the authority over the broadcasting of wildlife television within the broadcasting institution. As the case of Tinbergen shows, scientists eventually were only able to provide the raw material on which broadcasters could exert their expertise in programme-making. In this relationship, scientists had to learn to work with broadcasters and to understand the culture of broadcasting, centred on the necessity of addressing non-specialist audiences. But whilst Tinbergen, with his studies of animal behaviour informed by the Darwinian theory of evolution, brought scientific clout and an intellectual grounding to the NHU's output, another Oxford academic who developed an interest in filming, Gerald Thompson, provided the NHU with a technical expertise and ingenuity which the Bristol unit was lacking. Thompson enabled the NHU to forward a lab-like approach to filming which complemented the type of scientific wildlife television they were developing at the same time.

The NHU finds the future of wildlife television in Oxford

Bristol's relationship with Gerald Thompson had begun in 1960, when Thompson together with his assistant Eric Skinner, had entered, and won the BBC – Council for Nature natural history film competition with their half-hour entry depicting the plight of the Alder Woodwasp (Chapter 5). The film had provoked a lot of excitement at Bristol. Here was a filmmaker who could claim genuine expertise of his topic—insects, and who could produce original footage of never before seen animal behaviour. The winning entry in the 1960 competition, the film was to be broadcast as a *Look* episode. However, the transmission was stalled by a disagreement between Thompson and the NHU about the payment the former should receive. The dispute was foretelling of what would be a major aspect of the relationship between the NHU and the filmmakers in Oxford over the years, the latter consistently refusing to let the NHU dictate the rules of the relationship, especially financial ones. Eventually, after Thompson managed to extract £150 from the NHU (on top of the £500 prize), having gone as far as writing directly to Kenneth Adam, the Controller of Programme, Television, the film was transmitted. And although the NHU could have been expected to blacklist Thompson as a trouble-maker, on the contrary they tried to put the disagreement behind them and start on a new footing. This shows that the broadcasters in

Bristol perceived Thompson's potential contribution to wildlife television as vital to the future development of the Unit.

After the woodwasp film had been broadcast, Eileen Molony, the series producer, wrote to Thompson a conciliatory and most flattering letter, praising the film and celebrating the way it had been received by audiences: 'the larger section [of viewers] thought the programme evidence of a fine piece of research combined with superb photographic skill.'¹⁷

Summarising the Audience Research Report for the *Look* programme in which the Woodwasp film had been shown, Molony asserted through her letter the BBC's role and status as arbiter of television programmes' quality and value. Thompson in his reply, although striking a tone of bonhomie, was keen to emphasise that he did not rely on the BBC to get a sense of the value of his film effort. Not shying away from stereotypes, he shared his own anecdotal evidence of good reception by local audiences, 'a group of trainee nurses at a London hospital ... only interested in the mating scenes!' or the local postman who 'stopped and remarked "baint you the two gennelmen who were on Television....?", apparently he was an appreciative viewer!'. Thompson concluded his letter revealing that he did not own a television set, suggesting some lack of interest in, or at least some distance from the medium, but that he was 'seriously considering getting [one]!'. However, building on the good audience reception of the woodwasp film, Thompson in the same letter emphasised his keenness for further collaboration with the BBC: 'Presumably the audience reaction was sufficiently encouraging to give hope for future insect programmes?'. As if trying to whet Molony's appetite, Thompson then described his new filming project: 'we are trying to complete a short ... film on "Tiger Beetle". The T.B. is predatory both as grub and beetle; it's a most voracious beast, a veritable tiger of the insect jungle. The result may be too horrible for presentation to the public!'.¹⁸

Shortly before Christmas 1961, Thompson eventually paid a visit to the NHU in Bristol, taking with him some of his footage. His goal was to create a relationship with the NHU whereby he would supply the Bristol Unit with close-up material and work closely with the Bristol filmmakers as they shot the wide-angle, long shots and other establishing sequences to go with it. His ultimate aim was to raise money to finance a small laboratory in which to

¹⁷ Eileen Molony, Personal letter to Gerald Thompson, 14 June 1961, BBCWAC WE21/68/1

¹⁸ Gerald Thompson, personal letter to Eileen Molony, 16 June 1961, BBCWAC WE21/68/1

produce film sequences for a range of commercial contacts dealing with educational films, visual teaching aids, etc. From this vantage point Thompson conceived of his initial collaboration with the NHU as a way of getting funds to invest in new equipment. Collaborating with the Bristol unit was for Thompson a means and not an end. If another solution presented itself that could help him sell his film as well, he did not conceal his readiness to change tack. For example, when upon hearing that Peter Scott was contemplating developing an insect film studio at Slimbridge, he mused and wondered whether a better solution from a financial point of view would be for him to join force with Scott and run the film side of the project under the Slimbridge label.¹⁹ Yet, at this early stage the NHU was his only concrete source of income and Thompson, upon returning to Oxford, left behind a list of 12 programmes or film suggestions about insects. Molony passed it on to Christopher Parsons, who then arranged a visit to Thompson's in Oxford, 'to talk about the whole question of future television programmes on insect life'.²⁰ Early in January 1962, Parsons made the trip to Oxford with John Burton, the NHU film librarian, and a keen amateur entomologist.

During the visit, Parsons paid particular attention to the technical details of Skinner's and Thompson's film set-up, which he called their laboratory. To Parsons, Thompson was first and foremost a scientist doing film as part of his scientific practice. What he witnessed convinced Parsons that the kind of specialised filming Thompson and Skinner were engaged in represented the future of wildlife filmmaking, and that the NHU should secure their collaboration without delay. Reporting to his colleagues in Bristol, he insisted on the material means Thompson and Skinner had at their disposal, marvelling at the efficiency it allowed: 'a subject can be brought into the laboratory and filmed in three to four minutes'.²¹ To Parsons, the two men had 'tremendous advantages over any other film-maker' trying to do the same kind of work. Their ready access to the metal and wood workshops at the Institute of Forestry, where they could modify at will second hand equipment to suit their needs, meant that they could constantly and quickly adapt their filming methods to overcome specific problems posed by their subjects. And the housing of their filming studio

¹⁹ Eileen Molony, memorandum to Head of West Region Programmes, 8 January 1962, BBCWAC WE21/68/1

²⁰ Christopher Parsons, personal letter to Gerald Thompson, 21 December 1961, BBCWAC WE21/68/1

²¹ Christopher Parsons, 'Thompson and Skinner – Commonwealth Forestry Institute', memo to HWRP, 16 January 1962, BBCWAC WE21/68/1

in the same building as their place of work meant that they could devote as much time as they wished to their filming. What he saw in Oxford convinced Parsons that Thompson and Skinner were going to be in a very short time 'the leaders' in insect, or macro-cinematography, and that the NHU could not 'afford to let them work for the other channel [ITV]'.²² Desmond Hawkins, who by then had become the Head of the West Region Programmes, took Parsons' analysis seriously and within weeks, Thompson and Skinner got offered a contract to produce three films for the NHU over the course of three years, to be delivered by the end of 1965.

These films were to be part of Parsons' effort to include complete films in the *Look* series, as Peter Scott's involvement with the programme was progressively phased out. Anxious to check on Thompson's and Skinner's progress, Parsons, in December 1962, went to Oxford again. There he found the 'finer studio equipped for macro-photography in the country'²³ and the two filmmakers entertained him with footage he judged to be 'the finest examples of macrophotography' that he had ever seen. Moreover, all the footage Parsons was shown was in colour. In 1962, the question was not whether the BBC would broadcast in colour but when, and wildlife broadcasters had begun stockpiling colour material to prepare for the transition. Finally, in keeping with his original impression, Parsons' visit convinced him that the work for which the two men had been contracted would be finished much sooner than their contract with the BBC stipulated. Judiciously showcasing their technical ingenuity, Thompson and Skinner succeeded in convincing Parsons that their work and expertise would soon be indispensable to the NHU. He accordingly concluded his report with an exhortation: 'I feel that we must hang on to them at all costs'.²⁴ Many in Bristol agreed with Parsons. At the end of 1963, Patrick Beech, assistant of Desmond Hawkins, rated their work as being of 'the highest quality and to have considerable value over an extended period'.²⁵

The production of their first films had been a learning process for Thompson and Skinner under Parsons' guidance. His regular trips to Oxford, as well as their visits to Bristol to

²² Christopher Parsons, 'Thompson and Skinner – Commonwealth Forestry Institute', memo to HWRP, 16 January 1962, BBCWAC WE21/68/1

²³ Christopher Parsons, 'Thompson and Skinner', memo to Nicholas Crocker, 10 December 1962, BBCWAC WE21/68/1

²⁴ Christopher Parsons, 'Thompson and Skinner', memo to Nicholas Crocker, 10 December 1962, BBCWAC WE21/68/1

²⁵ Patrick Beech, Colour Fund, memo to A.C. (Planning) Tec., 18 December 1963, BBCWAC WE21/68/1

discuss the editing or the recording of the commentary were so many occasions, from Parsons' perspective, to explain to them the processes and requirements of the medium and train them to work for television. For instance, after Thompson had sent the material for the *Look* programme on the Tiger Beetle, Parsons had to re-cut the film. In a letter to Thompson he detailed:

What I have done basically is to shift a lot of the seasonal scenes from the beginning to the middle of the film, and also to use some of the sequence of the tiger beetle's world in the second Spring sequence. This has enabled me to break up the close-up sequences with seasonal and habitat shots rather more than was possible with your original order.²⁶

But as much as they learned about programme-making, so did Thompson and Skinner also become bolder when handling the NHU. By the time a new contract came up for negotiation, they became more assertive about what fees the NHU should pay them as well as how the rights for their films should be put down in their contracts. This however did not go unnoticed, as it became increasingly understood in Bristol that the Oxford filmmakers saw the NHU as primarily a source of income, and an outlet for publicity. When Thompson wrote to suggest that the establishment of a new contract should be postponed, Parsons noted on the margin of the letter before passing it on to Crocker, the unit's head: 'I feel that if we let the contract go until summer 1965, T. and S. will have more bargaining power. I suspect they are hoping that more money may be available then or that prices will have gone up'²⁷. Accordingly, the two men were offered a new contract quickly. And with it, their point of contact with the NHU changed.

As Christopher Parsons was moving onto new projects, notably a series of programmes with Gerald Durrell, dealing with the Oxford filmmakers became the responsibility of another member of staff at the NHU, Jeffery Boswall, who, in 1964, had become the producer for *Look*. Whereas Parsons had approached his role with Thompson and Skinner as a nurturing one, Boswall adopted a more antagonistic attitude, consistently fencing off the territory and

²⁶ Christopher Parsons, personal letter to Gerald Thompson, 27 November 1964, BBCWAC WE21/68/1

²⁷ Chris Parsons, note to N. Crocker on letter from G. Thompson to C. Parsons, 14 November 1964, BBCWAC WE21/68/1

putting forward the NHU's expertise. In his correspondence with Thompson, Boswall insisted that television broadcasting was first and foremost about communicating with non-specialist audiences, and repeatedly asserted his, and the NHU's property of skill in addressing these audiences. The way this relationship developed indicates that although the NHU producers were eager to marry science with natural history filmmaking and felt that they had found in Thompson a good source of technical expertise to turn filmmaking into an actual participation in the sciences, they were also convinced that broadcasting should not become subservient to science, and should remain in the hand of broadcasters. In this view, broadcasters were experts and broadcasting was their field of expertise. This evolution is in line with the notion discussed earlier that in the first half of the 1960s NHU broadcasters, like their colleagues across the BBC, were keen on developing as a profession and on being perceived as professionals outside the corporation. It also shows that NHU's broadcasters' self-fashioning as professionals was happening at the same time as they constructed a closer relationship with the scientific world. In doing so they established the separation between scientists and broadcasters which Robert Reid asserted as natural in his 1969 piece, when he claimed that if a scientist became a television producer, she would 'cease to be a scientist' (Reid, 1969:458). Looking at the relationship between the Oxford scientists turned filmmakers and the broadcasters in Bristol shows that the latter actively enforced this distinction, which is far from being a given, to fashion and maintain their own social identity.

The exchanges between Boswall and the Oxford filmmakers, quite abrasive at times, show that as scientists were developing their capacity for communicating their research to non-specialist audiences, so broadcasters in Bristol were positioning themselves and their institution as necessary mediators between scientists and lay publics. On 20 September 1965, Boswall paid his first visit to the Oxford film unit. It would be an understatement to say that Boswall and Thompson did not "click". Upon his return to Bristol, Boswall penned a rather a bilious handwritten note:

A tough character! Very very money minded. I suspect a disillusioned academic! Now sees his immortality preserved in his teaching films. Is 48 intends to retire at 60 (not 67) set up studio at home and train 20 year-old son as film-maker.

Really only interested in TV as a source of money. Expects to be “free of it” when enough money coming in from educational sales. Certainly doesn’t “believe in” TV in any sense.²⁸

This “belief in” the medium, at the core of broadcasters’ professional identity, entailed a conception of television as an end, and not simply a means. Not sharing in this belief was to negate broadcasters’ identity. In subsequent letters to Thompson, Boswall elaborates on what such belief entails. Central to it is the notion of popular presentation. As a mass medium, television is meant to reach large audiences. As such its mode of address is necessarily popular, as opposed to a specialised one. Thompson visited the NHU on 20 December 1965. There he had a thorough discussion with Boswall about the requirement of the medium, in Boswall’s words ‘the “pop” (but not *unscientific*) requirements of a LOOK’.²⁹ In this meeting, at which both Peter Scott and John Burton were present, the main topic for discussion was a film Thompson was planning on “the cabbage and its enemies”, examining the various parasites living on the vegetable. Trading ideas with Thompson, in successive letters, about the form the film should take, Boswall further defined the popular approach broadcasters in Bristol were taking to presenting natural history topics on TV. This correspondence enables us to capture at an early stage of its formation, what would become the dominant culture of wildlife television in subsequent decades.

As a scientist specialising in macro-photography, Thompson valued most the close-up shots he could get with his equipment, making visible what the unaided eye could not see. From his perspective, filming fitted into science as one additional means of revealing the hidden truths of nature. Thompson’s performative understanding of the medium implied that a film was primarily a means of demonstrating the cameraman’s ability to show things. By contrast, Boswall was concerned with how ‘the interest of the general viewer might best be secured’.³⁰ To broadcasters, film was primarily a mode of address. This difference in understanding entailed a reversal of perspective:

²⁸ Anonymous, ‘Notes on discussions with GH Thompson Oxford 20th Sept 65’, BBCWAC WE21/68/1. Boswall later referred directly to the note indicating that he is the author.

²⁹ Jeffery Boswall, personal letter to Gerald Thompson, 11 February 1966, BBCWAC WE21/68/1 (emphasis in the original), p.1

³⁰ Boswall to Thompson, 11 February 1966, p.1 BBCWAC WE21/68/1

going through the notes I took on the day, I see we agreed to drop the emphasis on the Cabbage and its enemies, and to concentrate on the Large White as a potential hero. You had in mind certain coverage of this creature; John [Burton], Peter [Scott] and myself had some additional ideas for the melting pot, arising from audience considerations.³¹

Thompson was entranced with his capacity to provide close-up shots of insect life, to the extent that he could not conceive of a film as more than a collection of such shots. Yet, as Boswall was explaining to him, an accumulation of these nuggets was in fact undermining their value and interest, even making viewers uncomfortable as they created a feeling of forced proximity with the animal.

The essential – and unique – strength of your stuff for the series is that fabulous close-up-ness, of course. But it does pose a bit of a problem in claustrophobia after a while. If we treat the story as a chronological one, how often can we pull back wide to relieve the intimacy – and indeed remind people just how close we are getting?³²

Boswall is offering a lesson in controlled enthusiasm for the technical feat, and in the economy of film, whereby high-value shots, like gems in a jewel, are best valorised when encased in less remarkable sequences. To elicit interest for the story Boswall suggested drawing on the mundane, on potential viewers' everyday-life experience:

I still like the idea of the housewife finding a caterpillar in the kitchen, and despite this the husband sorting one out from the cabbage on his plate. Also, we can hardly do a show about this particularly well-known pest without showing one gardener painstakingly removing them, while another relies on dusting with an insecticide.³³

Finally, Boswall remarked that programmes focused on one species presented the difficulty of finding ways of introducing other organisms: 'One of the difficulties of a single-species

³¹ Boswall to Thompson, 11 February 1966, p.1 BBCWAC WE21/68/1

³² Boswall to Thompson, 11 February 1966, p.2 BBCWAC WE21/68/1

³³ Boswall to Thompson, 11 February 1966, p.2 BBCWAC WE21/68/1

LOOK is always how legitimately to work in other organisms.’³⁴ Using the ‘enemies’ approach, and a dose of chummy flattery, Boswall suggested a series of ‘rigged’ shots:

How about putting lots of dead Cabbage Whites on a bird table and filming one bird – butterfly in bill – in mid-shot (with table out of shot, of course)? To feed one to a nestling would be easy, presumably. One could even plant one on the edge of, say, a Reed Warbler’s nest and press the button immediately after the bird picks it up? John thinks it might be possible to ‘rig’ a dragonfly eating a Large White, by presenting one to newly-emerged Aeshna. Kid’s stuff to T. and S., no doubt.³⁵

With the change of interlocutor, the tone of the relation between Oxford and Bristol had evolved. Whereas Parsons had been much willing to secure Thompson’s and Skinner’s collaboration at all cost, Boswall was much more eager to maintain a clear balance of power. To provide a counterweight to the Oxford filmmakers’ cognitive authority, stemming from their being professional scientists, Boswall first put forward the NHU’s expertise in producing television programmes. However, as a scientist doing specialised filming who knew that his technical expertise was precious to the NHU, Thompson was not ready to submit to Boswall’s hectoring. His initial response was to distance himself from the filmmaking considerations laid out by Boswall, emphasising his knowledge of nature to reassert his control of the relationship:

I feel that Eric [sic.] and my job this year should be to film the ‘guts’ of the programme, the life history of the Large White and of Apanteles, that much maligned parasite which is really the hero! ... in the light of what we get this summer we can decide (a) whether to go ahead with the programme (b) if so, how to round it off. I do not wish to become involved in mass rearing of butterflies, for several reasons, not least the horrible smell of the caterpillars! I do not fancy arranged shots unless i) I know for certain that the end product really does take place in nature, ii) the time spent is not exorbitant.³⁶

³⁴ Boswall to Thompson, 11 February 1966, p.2 BBCWAC WE21/68/1

³⁵ Boswall to Thompson, 11 February 1966, p.2-3 BBCWAC WE21/68/1

³⁶ Gerald Thompson, personal letter to Jeffery Boswall, 15 February 1966, BBCWAC WE21/68/1

Boswall let the issue subside. Meanwhile, Thompson seemingly lost interest in the prospect of working for *Look* and began planning for an ambitious filming expedition to Jamaica to take place in the summer of 1967. In order to get the expedition funded, he approached Chris Parsons at the NHU to offer the BBC to contract him and his crew to the tune of £7,000, on the agreement that they would film enough material for three fifty-minute colour shows for BBC2.³⁷ As had become usual with Thompson, the negotiations first stumbled on the questions of rights and ownership of the film material. But in January 1967, Thompson, in need of money, brought up the Cabbage butterfly film again, urgently requesting Boswall to come and visit him at Oxford.³⁸ Boswall travelled to Oxford on 13 February 1967. What he saw there did not quite meet his expectations in terms of progress, as Thompson could only show him his trademark macro-cinematography footage. Despite the quality of the material, 'It is of compelling intimacy, and high interest value so far as it goes. No-one else we know can produce stuff like it',³⁹ Boswall remained unsatisfied with it as far as the grammar of television went:

It does, however, by its nature, and by the fact that you tend to suggest somewhat academic animals, bring with it certain problems in popular presentation. The need for wide angles, to remind people of just how privileged a view they are getting, the need for a faster pace than may be necessary for other purposes, the need to relate to the ordinary person's experience, etc., etc.⁴⁰

In the meeting, Thompson questioned Boswall's expertise and authority as a producer, and so the latter felt compelled to assert both, exemplifying the central role of the producer in the professional culture of wildlife television as it was developing at the NHU in the 1960s:

I am *not* unsympathetic to the viewpoint of the cameraman-director, but I am employed as a producer. And if material offered is not of suitable content, in my judgement, then I must say so. If I'm consistently wrong, I'll get the sack, and rightly. But in the case of the Cabbage White stuff filmed so far, superb though it is in certain

³⁷ See for example, Christopher Parsons, 'Thompson and Skinner: Jamaica expedition', memo to Miss Mimi Cooper, TV Enterprise London, 26 August 1966. BBCWAC WE21/68/1

³⁸ Gerald Thompson, personal letter to Jeffery Boswall, 17 January 1967, BBCWAC WE13/1,071/1

³⁹ Jeffery Boswall, personal letter to Gerald Thompson, 17 February 1967, p.3. BBCWAC WE13/1,071/1

⁴⁰ Jeffery Boswall, personal letter to Gerald Thompson, 17 February 1967, p.3. BBCWAC WE13/1,071/1

ways, it could not of itself by any stretch of standards or generosity be the exclusive basis for a 25-minute LOOK.⁴¹

This exchange shows that as they were developing a relationship with another professional body—scientists—wildlife broadcasters defined their own professional standards and their identity as encompassing both television production and natural history skills. In his exchanges with Thompson, not only did Boswall continuously emphasise the exigencies of broadcasting. He also provided Thompson with repeated evidence of his mastery of scientific knowledge, naming animals using Latin binomials, or highlighting the NHU's connections with the networks of science. For example, offering suggestions on how Thompson could represent on film the migration of the Large White, Boswall noted:

I hope very much that you will be willing to take up the challenge of this migration business. John [Burton] who has written papers on insect migration, and Robin Baker, of the Zoology Department at Bristol, who is spending three years on the migration of *Pieris brassicae*, would both be very willing to advise on how the thing could be most economically achieved.⁴²

Addressing Thompson as a cameraman rather than a scientist, Boswall presents the NHU as a node in a network from which the cameraman can get scientific advice. Reversing the relationship of cognitive authority, Boswall signals that if the NHU can sort out the science, scientists can't sort out addressing audiences.

These contests of authority did nothing to improve an already thorny relationship. In a long memo summarising the state of the situation with Thompson after two years, Boswall shared his view that the relationship was worsening, as he could not get the scientist to share the broadcaster's standpoint. Thompson, he explained to Nicholas Crocker, 'is *not* interested in the thing we are *exclusively* interested in: popular television presentation'.⁴³ Instead, Thompson saw his relationship with the NHU as him shooting educational films which he hoped the NHU would find adaptable to television, rather than shooting a film to

⁴¹ Jeffery Boswall, personal letter to Gerald Thompson, 17 February 1967, p.3. BBCWAC WE13/1,071/1

⁴² Jeffery Boswall, personal letter to Gerald Thompson, 17 February 1967, p.3. BBCWAC WE13/1,071/1

⁴³ Jeffery Boswall, 'Contract with Thompson for 3 Looks', memo to Editor NHU, 17 February 1967, p.1. BBCWAC WE13/1,071/1 (original emphasis)

the NHU's requirements that he could subsequently adapt for schools. To Boswall it was evident that Thompson saw the NHU as a means and not an end. The conversations between Thompson and Boswall highlighted the incommensurability of their understanding of film. Where Thompson saw 2 minutes worth of film, Boswall saw only 45 seconds: 'he seriously suggested this week that the hatching of Cabbage White pupae from their shells which they then eat was worth all of the 225 ft. (2'24") he showed me. It is worth 45 seconds at most'.⁴⁴ In this memo as in previous correspondence, the broadcaster establishes a strong boundary between scientists and broadcasters, suggesting that their interests diverge, and that the latter's expertise, based on a belief in the necessity to address popular audiences, takes precedence over that of scientists.

Conclusion: Finding in Oxford intellectual and technical foundations for scientific wildlife television

In the 1960s, the NHU found in two Oxford scientists who'd taken up filming, Niko Tinbergen and Gerald Thompson, key allies whose approach renewed wildlife filmmaking in Britain and enabled the NHU to further develop its own brand of scientific wildlife television. Tinbergen contributed intellectual foundations with his films intended to popularise the new science of ethology, based on the concept that patterns of behaviour had an evolutionary significance. Gerald Thompson, with his assistant Eric Skinner, developed a brand of technically specialised filmmaking that publicly transformed the camera into a laboratory instrument, and the television screen into a window on the laboratory. To broadcast Tinbergen's and Thompson's film work enabled the NHU to cast more light on their association with the scientific world and raise the cognitive profile of wildlife television. The advertising coming out of Bristol for the programmes based on those scientists' film work shows a keenness to use scientists' involvement to present the filmmaking apparatus, in which television was included, as a means of exploring the natural world and producing new knowledge about it. For example, the billing in the *Radio Times* for the tiger beetle film, shown in a *Look* episode in June 1965, emphasised Thompson's

⁴⁴ Jeffery Boswall, 'Contract with Thompson for 3 Looks', memo to Editor NHU, 17 February 1967, p.1. BBCWAC WE13/1,071/1 (original emphasis)

camera's positive contribution in renewing spectators' visual perception of nature: 'Natural history film-makers are opening up a new world—a world of strange, fascinating, and sometimes terrifying creatures. Seen through the naked eye they are tiny and harmless, but in close-up they are monsters.'⁴⁵ However, in this piece, Thompson and Skinner are presented as filmmakers working in a scientific research institute, rather than as scientists doing camera work. To broadcasters at the NHU it was important to enforce the notion that one could not be at the same time a scientist and a broadcaster, and that only the latter could take charge of broadcasting and offer the kind of spectacle television viewers expected from the medium.

Tinbergen and Thompson not merely influenced the development of wildlife filmmaking at the NHU, though. Through their use of film as a research and teaching tool, they also fostered a culture of filmmaking as part of scientific practice in the academic milieu in which they evolved, the Zoology department in Oxford University. As such, both were instrumental in the establishment of a film unit specialising in biological filming there, Oxford Scientific Films (OSF), Tinbergen and Hugh Falkus as associate members,⁴⁶ Gerald Thompson as a founding one. The NHU, because they enabled Thompson first and then the other founders of OSF, Peter Parks, John Paling and Sean Morris, to establish their credentials as specialised filmmakers, were equally instrumental in the foundation of OSF. In return, these scientists turned full-time filmmakers, through their collaboration with the NHU, contributed to solidifying the shift in Bristol from an approach to wildlife television informed by natural history to one informed by science. The 1972 *Horizon* film *The making of a natural history film* captured this symbiotic relationship, which is explored in the next chapter.

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⁴⁵ *Radio Times*, 10 June 1965, p. 23.

⁴⁶ Niko Tinbergen, personal letter to Christopher Parsons, 7 July 1969. BBCWAC WE8/600/1

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