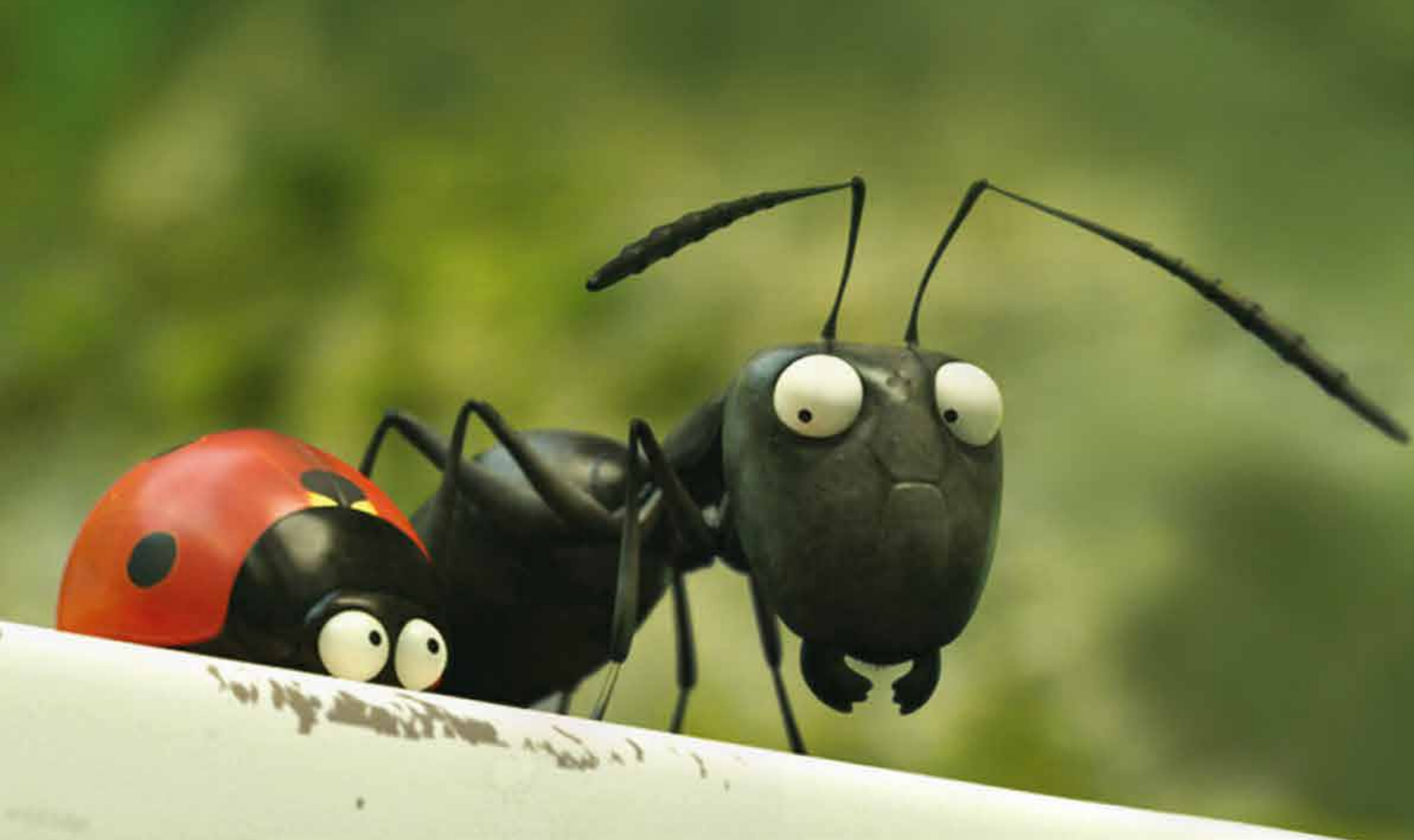




FUTURIKON
PRESENTS

MINUSCULE

VALLEY OF THE LOST ANTS



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PRESENTS

MINUSCULE

VALLEY OF THE LOST ANTS

In Stereoscopic 3D

A ilmby
Thomas Szabo and H el ene Giraud

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DISTRIBUTION

PRAESENS-FILM AG
M unchhaldenstrasse 10
Postfach 919
CH-8034 Z urich
info@praesens.com

Download the Press-kit on : www.praesens.com

PRESS RELATIONS

FILMB URO
Valerio Bonadei
Seefeldstrasse 22
8008 Z urich
Telefon +41 43 322 01 17
Mobile +41 79 653 65 03

SYNOPSIS

In a peaceful little clearing, the remains of a picnic hastily abandoned spark warfare between two tribes of ants. A bold young ladybug finds herself caught in the middle of the battle. He befriends one of the black ants, Mandible, and helps him save the anthill from the assault of the terrible red ant warriors, led by the fearful Butor. A fantastic journey at ground level...





ORIGINS

In the beginning, Minuscule was a short film, that was further developed by Futurikon for film and television. Writing for the film and the series started simultaneously. Broadcast on France Télévisions and in more than 100 countries, with more than 650,000 DVDs sold in France alone, the series of shorts episodes has become a favorite across cultures and for all age groups. After a much longer creative process, Thomas Szabo and Hélène Giraud have directed an 89 minute feature film, an epic adventure movie full of surprises and unusual plot twists... a bit like Lord of the Rings in the insect world! The movie is already distributed in more than 40 countries.



◊ INTERVIEW WITH HÉLÈNE GIRAUD AND THOMAS SZABO ◊

Minuscule is also an animated series for TV. When did you get the idea to make a feature length film?

Right from the start. We always thought Minuscule would be perfect for a feature film without dialogues. We wanted to make an action/adventure movie something like Lord of the Rings in the insect world with a singular style, the nature documentary about the insects world a bit like Microcosmos, but more quirky...

Have you considered the fact that some moviegoers will be discovering the world of Minuscule for the first time?

Absolutely, and we imagined a story that is completely independent from the series. We had to put ourselves in the shoes of a moviegoer who has never heard of Minuscule. In fact, when we started writing the film, the title we first came up with had nothing to do with the series. It was not called Minuscule, just Valley of the Lost Ants.

The series featured a wide variety of insects. Why did you decide to focus on certain ones (the Ladybug, Mandible, the black ant, Butor, the red ant) and make them the central characters of the movie?

The Ladybug was a natural choice as the main character. It was a recurring character and, to a certain extent, the symbol of Minuscule. Not to mention it represents an insect that is universally known and liked by both adults and children. The Ladybug as well as the black and red ants are characters that are very easy to identify with (which is not always the case for other insects). The red and black ants allowed us to develop the story we wanted to tell: a conflict between two groups of antagonistic insects triggered by a dispute over a box of sugar cubes. They are a bit like opposing armies.

The episodes of the series are minimalist fables and Minuscule - Valley of the Lost Ants is more like an epic adventure...

The episodes of the series are like haiku. These short Japanese poems leave the viewer free to interpret their meaning. The broadcast format (4 to 5 minutes) was perfect for this, producing fun and unusual shorts without music or intelligible dialogues. When we started thinking about how we would translate the world of Minuscule in a feature film we didn't want to make a movie that was just a series of sketches. We decided to make a 45° turn and tell the story of an epic adventure. It seemed obvious to us that the pace of the series wouldn't work for a longer film. That's why we had to leave behind the bucolic setting of the series, in Normandy, where it was shot, for the mountains of the Ecrins and Mercantour national parks, and switch from 16/9 to 2:35 Cinemascope. The film, while remaining true to the Minuscule universe, is the opposite of the series.

The pace of Valley of the Lost Ants is closer to that of a classic adventure movie. We follow the central character as he gets caught up, involuntarily, in a series of mishaps that force him to overcome a number of obstacles between point A and B...all this takes place in a unique world.



The principle of Minuscule resides in placing animated characters in real Backgrounds. How did the settings of the movie influence the script? Did the choice of the Ecrins and Mercantour national parks lead you to make any changes?

The technical principle is the same for the movie and the series. First we shoot real footage and then the insects are created with computer generated images. These images are included much later on in the process, with photorealistic rendering. Since we wanted to tell the story of an epic adventure, we needed a setting that corresponded to the scale and impressive scenery we were thinking of. We knew we would find such a place in the south of France. When we were writing the script we had a book with photos from High Provence and the backcountry and the French Riviera on the table. These images naturally became key references when we started scouting for locations. When we were in the region we realized that the wild protected areas of the Ecrins and Mercantour national parks were exactly what we were looking for ; we had found the right location. When we started working on the storyboard, we needed to preserve some freedom and never specifically define the backgrounds. It was during the scouting process that the sites were specifically selected.

The music has an important narrative function. How did you work on this dimension?

The music in the series didn't have a narrative role. It concluded the episodes in a relaxed and offbeat way, using the Romantic style of 19th century French composers. The music in the movie has a completely different function. It is based on traditional Hollywood scoring and accompanies the images from beginning to end. Thus, we called on around 60 musicians to record the soundtrack, whereas the music for the TV episodes was played by soloists.



We were inspired by Peter and the Wolf when we attributed, like Prokofiev, a special musical theme to each character.

Hervé Lavandier composed a wonderful score for the movie in this spirit. The Ladybug has his own theme, just like the black and red ants...

One of the recurring scenes in the series (the chase scene with the Ladybug and the flies) is featured in the movie. What does this cinematographic device mean for you?

The chase scenes, which are fun to imagine and shoot, echo those in Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin films.

Minuscule - Valley of the Lost Ants is full of other cinematographic references (from Star Wars to Psycho)...

These tongue-in-cheek references are a way of transmitting the DNA of the movies we love. They create a sort of connivance with the audience. We like to create several layers of meaning that are not necessarily meant for children.

Why did you shoot Minuscule - Valley of the Lost Ants in 3D? What does this contribute to the story? How do you deal with the depth of field, compared to the series, which was designed flat?

3D is a very useful tool when it comes to increasing the feeling of immersion in the image. At some points, you almost want to reach out and touch the ladybugs as they fly around... This new approach has been a very delicate challenge for us as writers/directors. The artistic decision to mix real footage and computer generated characters in a 3D world required much more work than if we had shot the film in a «flat» universe. However, 3D worked perfectly well when it came to shooting the signature frames of the Minuscule world, which is to say very long focal length shots that create a macro effect. The excitement of our characters' adventures and the intensity of their emotions certainly come across more strongly in 3D.



INTERVIEW WITH THE PRODUCER, PHILIPPE DELARUE (FUTURIKON)

How did this wonderful adventure start?

I have known Thomas Szabo and H  l  ne Giraud for many years. We have worked together often in the small world of French animation. In 2003, while we were working on another project at Futurikon, they shown me a short film with a slightly snarky title on the crazy life of insects. A frenetic and provocative ladybug, a stupid and stubborn spider, a timid centipede, a dreamy snail...This is the tiny world of Minuscule. I believed in the idea right away and I offered to fund a pilot episode for a series. We wanted each episode to be a full-fledged short film. We wanted the stories to be like fables or Japanese haiku. That is how the first season of Minuscule was born!

Why make a feature film based on Minuscule?

Simply because Futurikon needs to constantly move forward and support its writers' in their creative process. As soon as they had created the characters, they started imagining a longer story that would allow more viewers to discover this world. For the last 17 years, Futurikon has worked on 3 projects a year, but very rarely do any of them have the potential of becoming a full-length movie. Minuscule is one such project.

How do you shift approaches, from a series to a feature film?

The question really isn't formulated that way. Instead we needed to know how to adapt from what was originally a short film to a series as well as a film. As soon as I discovered the concept, I wanted to produce both. Writing for the film and the series started simultaneously. The script for the film took longer, because initially we came up with a story made of sketches. I was convinced that people wouldn't come to a movie theatre to see something they could watch on TV. So it took longer to develop the film, both in terms of writing and financing, whereas the series was out there much faster. Minuscule is a very personal project and it was impossible to entrust someone other than H  l  ne or Thomas with writing the script. So we had to wait until they were free from writing the series. And then we started all over again. Since the series was so successful, I gave them free rein. Six months later they came back to me with the script of an adventure movie in the insect world with one continuous story line.



In terms of production constraints, what did the shift from the TV screen to the big silver screen - and a much larger screen, considering the use of Cinemascope - change for you?

The production process is much heavier, requiring entirely different means. We're looking at a ratio, per minute produced, of 20 times that of the series. And while in terms of animation we had enough experience, we needed to master 3D and cope with shooting much more complicated real footage than for the series and learn to integrate various types of images through trial and error, using an industrial prototype approach.

Minuscule - Valley of the Lost Ants is out to conquer the world?

Having international ambitions was a question of principle. Reaching vast audiences is a noble goal that can only be reached with quality and originality. The aim is universal appeal based on the freedom of animation that is not affected by cultural biases. Minuscule is meant to be accessible for a broad audience worldwide and addresses children first and foremost, obviously, but not exclusively. Children are certainly not professional entomologists. And yet, in any country, when they are outdoors, walking in fields or forests, wherever they are, they can spend hours observing insects and making up stories about them... With Minuscule -Valley of the Lost Ants, their imagination will be aroused even more. Adults will be entertained by the film's offbeat humor, its aesthetics and references to classic movies.

THE CHARACTERS

Visually we didn't want the characters to be too realistic or «cartoonish» either. The aim was to achieve a delicate balance between realistic information, based on documentation, and a simplified design. The decision to forego the use of dialogues was based on the fact we wanted to produce something closer to a documentary than in classic animated films.

Real insects being what they are (they don't talk, or smile, frown, wink...) we wanted to preserve this lack of facial expressions and avoid «humanizing» them. They do sometimes have wide eyes with cartoonish pupils, but never anthropomorphic attitudes.

Hélène Giraud & Thomas Szabo



MANDIBLE

Mandible is the leader of the black ant colony. He takes the orphaned ladybug under his wing, offering him a home within his community. Together they will fight off the red ants.

THE LADYBUG

At the start of the story the Ladybug is young and reckless. This character tends to get caught up in complex and dangerous situations, but very quickly learns his limitations and discovers that even when you're very tiny you can accomplish great things.

BUTOR

Deceitful and stubborn, Butor is a ruthless character. His goal: catch up with the black ants and steal their precious sugar. Very quickly this will become a personal quest that will take on unexpected proportions.




◌ NATURAL SETTINGS IN FRENCH NATIONAL PARKS ◌

EXCEPTIONAL LOCATIONS IN THE HEART OF THE MERCANTOUR AND ECRINS NATIONAL PARKS

One of the artistic goals of the film is to reveal the magic of Nature: light, vegetation and minerals. The choice of real settings and a «3-dimensional stage» (shooting in 3D), is an essential component of the movie, as well as working on a very tiny scale, the scale of the insect world. To meet this goal, the writers chose the national parks of Mercantour and Les Ecrins. These areas are still well-preserved and offer a variety of high-quality and exceptional landscapes. They are home to many species of plant life and offer an infinite palette of colors, shapes... They are the perfect backdrop for the natural beauty the writers wanted to share with moviegoers.

The movie's narrative immerses the viewer in a changing natural setting with prairies, waterfalls, rocks... Since the dense forest sometimes opens out onto entire valleys, shooting in authentic natural settings is essential in order to get the desired result with each frame, so that Nature is depicted in a way that is as realistic and majestic as possible. Thomas and Hélène selected a very precise set of locations and spaces whose beauty and aesthetics served as the basis of their creative process. For them it was a real casting session!



◌THE KNOW-HOW OF ANIMATION MADE IN FRANCE◌

Minuscule is one of the rare animated movies produced essentially in France and entirely in Europe, benefiting from the know-how, craftsmanship and experience that is known throughout the world as the «French touch». The real footage was shot in national parks in the south of France and constitutes a tribute to the beauty of High Provence and the backcountry of the Riviera and international audiences.

◌AN ORIGINAL SCORE BY HERVÉ LAVANDIER, RECORDED AT AIR STUDIOS (LONDON)◌

The original music of the film was composed by Hervé Lavandier and recorded at the famous Air Studios in London, by an orchestra of 60 musicians conducted by Sir Alistair King. The latter has conducted the scores of many films including Shrek, Chicken Run and Harry Potter. This fantastic original music is a delicate creation calling on instruments such as the clarinet, flute and oboe. The purpose was to create a very rich sound. The music is also very lively, expressing a wide range of emotions within a very short timeframe.

◌A LARGER-THAN-LIFE VISION◌

AN OFFBEAT LOOK AT NATURE AND POLLUTION

All the objects present in the movie have a common denominator: pollution. A rusty soda can, a matchbox, a can of Butor bug spray, cotton swabs, toothpicks, or the multitude of items stored away by the ants and the spider..All these components are a fun and offbeat way of expressing the writers' view of our modern consumer society and its impact on our environment. These subtle references raise awareness while proposing a singular and original view of recycling...



MINUSCULE - VALLEY OF THE LOST ANTS: A SPECIAL PROCESS!

**ANIMATION + 3D + REAL SETTINGS
= A TECHNICAL CHALLENGE!**

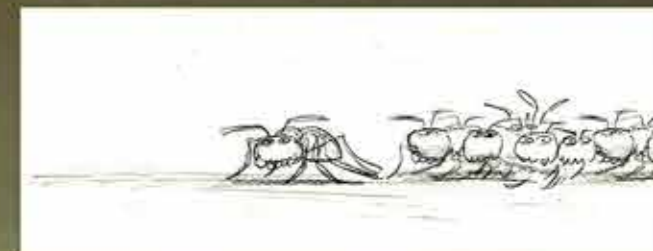
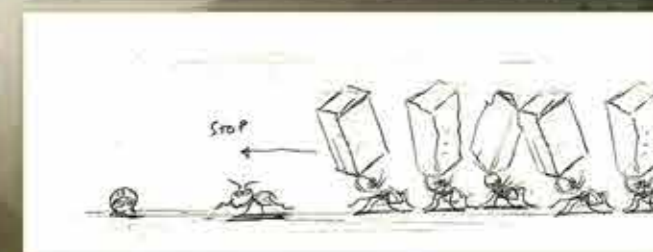
Due to the writers' singular approach (real settings, animation and 3D), *Minuscule - Valley of the Lost Ants* explores an entirely new territory, in terms of production, techniques and genre. It took 5 years to meet this challenge and assemble the parts of a puzzle that no one had seen before. It started with gathering the right experts for the technical design, who could make directing the film possible. These stages were a real challenge, as very few people in France had the right training for the demands of this type of project in 2008. An unusual process was initiated, involving a storyboard stage, experts in 3D, VFX and animation and then shooting real footage in natural settings and the studio, before finally re-composing all the shots in the movie.





STAGE 1 : THE STORYBOARD

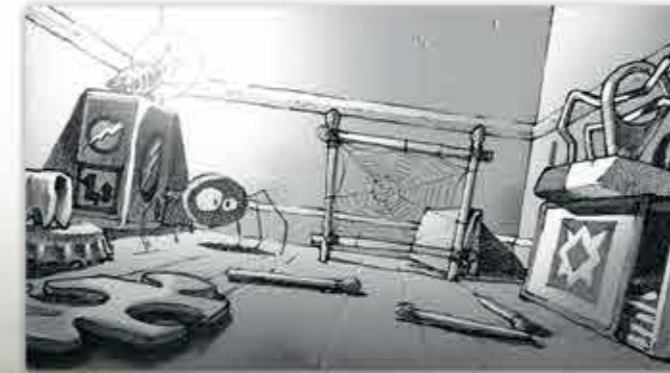
This essential step, the creation of a storyboard, lasted several months. Translating the script into drawings helped define the visual style of the movie.





STAGE 2 : THE LOCATIONS

Scouting for locations based on the storyboard was also an essential step. The sites had to correspond as closely as possible to the original drawings. The line producer, in charge of the natural settings, worked closely with the director, cinematographer and scene designer in order to approve each location.



STAGE 3 : EXPERTISES IN ANIMATION, SPECIAL EFFECTS AND 3D

The components in the image are either produced using real footage or CGI. The supervisor separates the CGI/real footage components in the storyboard and then the 3D specialist reviews this in order to determine the constraints and changes involved in creating the images.

STAGE 4 : GRAPHIC DESIGN RESEARCH FOR THE CHARACTERS AND COMPUTER GENERATED SETTINGS

Graphic research is used to bring the characters to life, as well as certain settings that were processed with CGI or created for the shoot.



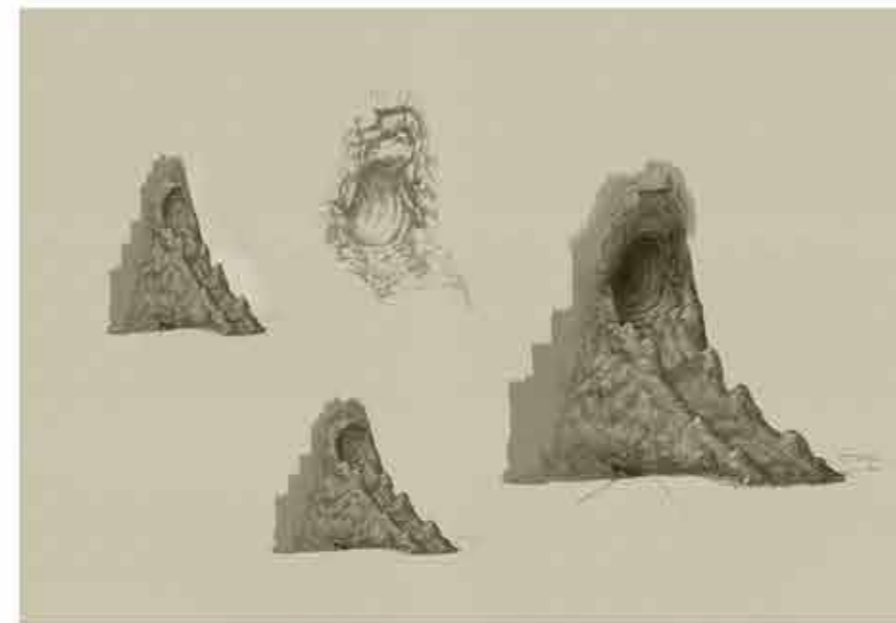


STAGE 5 : MAKING SETS AND PROPS

Graphic research is used by the scene designer, the head sculptor and prop designer to make the items required for the shoot.

STAGE 6 : SHOOTING IN 3D IN NATIONAL PARKS

The cinematographer and the technical team studied the storyboard to determine the technical means required for the shoot and to confirm the selection of special effects made with the production supervisor. Shooting in 3D involves two cameras. The machinery selected to support the cameras was heavier than on a normal shoot. The weight of the equipment was the object of special safety measures (mountain climbers) for hard to access locations.



STAGE 7 : SHOOTING IN A STUDIO

Some complex shots needed to be filmed in the studio. Models were built and real sound effects were created for this purpose.



STAGE 8 : SELECTING SHOTS AND EDITING

After the shoot, the rushes were processed by the 3D specialist, who viewed all the takes and eliminated those that were not suitable in 3D. The takes selected were edited with a system for real-time 3D viewing. The transitions between 3D shots required special attention so that they remained legible for theatre audiences.



STAGE 9 : ANIMATION AND INCLUSION IN REAL FOOTAGE

The edited images were then sent to the animation studio, along with the director's comments and instructions. At this stage the animators took control of the shots. Based on the storyboard and the director's instructions, they brought the insects to life, one image at a time, with 24 per second. Digital special effects (smoke, water, dust, explosions...) were created for those that could not be shot live. All the images of different sources were put together to make the final cut.



STAGE 10 : SOUND TRACK, SOUND EFFECTS, MIXING AND COMPOSITING

Once editing and animation were completed, the final stage consisted in creating the soundtrack that would bring the film to life. Original music composed by Hervé Lavandier provides a canvas and sets the pace for the action. Sound effects and design provide depth for each character and the action in each shot. Some sounds were recorded live outdoors (river, waterfall, wind...) while others were created from scratch.

AN ENVIRONMENT-FRIENDLY APPROACH

THE FIRST ENVIRONMENT-FRIENDLY ANIMATED FILM IN THE WORLD

Since one of the subjects of the movie is the discovery of the world we live in, the production team decided to adopt an environmentally responsible approach for the shoot. Significant work was done upstream to control the operation's environmental impact, using cartoon calculator as such as reducing distance between shooting location and using most of the time natural light. A series of specific points were anticipated when preparing for the shoot that helped significantly reduce its impact.

AN EXCEPTIONAL PARTNERSHIP WITH FRENCH NATIONAL PARKS

Our common desire was to promote respect and the will to protect Nature and the little creatures that play a fundamental role in our environment. We are aware of how fragile the ecosystem we observed in the natural parks is and the vital, little-understood, role insects play in it. Furthermore, the latter have a negative image with most audiences (spiders bite, earthworms are dirty...). This special partnership is based on the fact that the movie and French National parks share many of the same values: emotion, wonderment, respect, sharing, knowledge and awareness of the need to protect the environment and support those who ensure this mission.

Our modern society offers few opportunities to transmit these values to younger generations and raise awareness about the tiny world around us. Here we joined forces to encourage «dreaming» and «loving» Nature, through the world of Minuscule, with the aim of promoting a new way of experiencing Nature that is both creative and fun, while addressing a message of awareness and respect for our fragile environment to children and their families. We humans are sensitive creatures and the need to protect biodiversity will be real if we open our hearts to Nature.

Minuscule is also a series of shorts created for television, produced by Futurikon and developed and directed by Thomas Szabo and Hélène Giraud. In real settings, in a prairie or by the sea, the madcap adventures of these little animated creatures have already won the hearts of 650,000 fans who have purchased the DVD and Blu-ray editions (seasons 1 & 2 combined, co-published by Éditions Montparnasse / Le Pacte).



TECHNICAL CREDITS

Written and directed by Thomas SZABO & Hélène GIRAUD
Based on an original idea by Thomas SZABO & Hélène GIRAUD
Produced by Philippe DELARUE
Original Music by Hervé LAVANDIER
Art director Hélène GIRAUD
Production FUTURIKON FILMS
Co-production NOZON PARIS
NOZON SPRL
ENTRE CHIEN ET LOUP
2d3D ANIMATIONS

With the participation of LE PACTE
LES ÉDITIONS MONTPARNASSE
TPS STAR

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Produced thanks to support from CNC

The Île-de-France region
The Provence Alpes Côtes d'Azur region
The Alpes-Maritimes department
The Poitou-Charentes region
The Charente department
The Walloon region
The Pôle Image de Liège audiovisual cluster
ANGOA-AGICOA

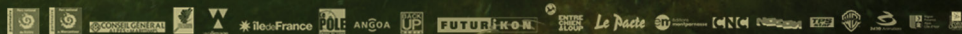
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MINUSCULE

VALLEY OF THE LOST ANTS



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