

# “Buzz off!”: The killer bee movie as modern belief narrative

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Larry Danielson, in his examination of the use of contemporary legends in contemporary horror films, concludes with the observation that “popular cinematic art can both promulgate and reflect oral traditional plots and their motifs in contemporary circulation as well as the anxieties that create them” (Danielson 1979:219, emphasis added). I was actively avoiding doing some necessary research in early March 1995, when I tuned into the Rochester, New York, Fox television network affiliate, where much to my surprise they were broadcasting a new made-for-TV movie about killer bees, called *Deadly Invasion: The Killer Bee Nightmare* (USA, 1995, Rockne S. O’Bannon). Why? was my immediate reaction; why almost twenty years after the wave of rumor panics, belief narratives, and truly dreadful movies about killer bees, would anyone make another one? I then began to think about how Danielson noted that when we tell legends in different time periods, they often reflect the differences in cultural perspectives of the time periods in which we tell them. These lines of questioning are what initially informed the following study: a comparison of the different belief narratives about killer bees portrayed in the media, with specific attention to their cinematic narration, between the largest cycle of narratives in the late 1970s and the potential for a renewed cycle of narratives in the mid-1990s as exemplified by *Deadly Invasion*. It was the comment by Danielson that occurred to me while watching *Deadly Invasion*: what are the contemporary anxieties that inform this film, and how are these

anxieties different from the cycle of killer bee movies made in the late 1970s?

### **Two bees, or not two bees**

Writing almost ten years after Danielson, Gary Alan Fine notes a similar co-relationship between contemporary legend narratives and their reflection of contemporary anxieties:

Since folklore responds to anxiety, narratives deal with those issues that surround social transformations. Contemporary legends have changed as the social problems (and the perception of these problems) shift. [1993(1988):319]

It is not surprising then to discover that the fears reflected in the cinematic killer bee legend narratives reflect anxiety in contemporary society. By focusing on the changes to contemporary anxieties, changes to the narratives' classificatory position also occur. In order to assess the anxieties about killer bees from a contemporary perspective (1995-1996), I utilized two lines of enquiry: I put out a general enquiry on the email-based 'Folklore Discussion Group,' asking whether or not that group's readers (predominantly professional academic and applied folklorists and their students) had heard any stories about killer bees recently, and I conducted a more informal street-based survey wherein I approached people on the streets of St. John's, Newfoundland, with the same question and tape-recorded their responses. One of my 'Folklore Discussion Group' respondents replied with the following:

Sure . . . I know about killer bees. They were carried by boat from Africa to South America. They have slowly been flying from South America to the United States and have already been spotted in Florida. When I was a kid living in Louisiana, we were certain that the killer bees would soon be spotted in our area, and we would never be able to leave the house again ('Folklore Discussion Group,' n.p.).

Is the above narrative about killer bees a legend? The action of the bees being brought to South America, their subsequent escape, their movement northward, and their observation in Florida occur in a

regressive temporal displacement; the bees are the specific referents in the narrative, and although told as truthful, no one necessarily believed that once the bees arrived (if they have in fact arrived), "we would never be able to leave the house again." Modern belief narratives then, although "told as true," do not depend on total belief for their function. As Elliott Oring noted, legend "is concerned with creating a narrative whose truth is at least worthy of deliberation; consequently, the art of legendry engages the listener's sense of the possible" (1986:125).

Two men I spoke with on the streets of St. John's display this negotiation of the possible:

A: They originated in South America, I think.

B: Wasn't it the African bee that got released somewhere and then. . . ?

A: It worked its way through?

B: It wasn't its natural habitat; it sort of adapted and has intermingled with other native species of bees.

A: They're taking over! . . . What I've heard is that they just swarm for no apparent reason and where *generally* a bee won't do anything to you, unless you swat at it. . . . [personal interview].

What these two men's narrative demonstrates is one of the more fascinating aspects of these belief narratives: the mixture of information, often distributed by the media, and speculation. This issue of the combination of information and speculation within contemporary legend is especially relevant to the narratives about killer bees: although the original cycle of narratives petered out in the late 1970s, not long after the massive wave of media stories and films about the bees began, the impetus for the cycle's end was probably due to increased media proliferation that resulted in increased entomological information being released to the public to prevent widespread panic about the bees and their northward progression. However, as the above narratives show, almost twenty years later speculation about the threat of the killer bee persists.

If these kinds of films function as belief narratives, then surely their impact on legend diffusion would be great, based on the

sheer numbers of people this form of media reaches. This impact has been so great, in fact, that Mark Winston begins his book, *Killer Bees*, by referring to the bees as “the pop insect of the twentieth century” (1992:3). One of my Internet informants noted, “the border town of Hidalgo, Texas [where residents have recently spotted the bees] has a huge statue of a killer bee” (‘Folklore Discussion Group,’ n.p.).

Beyond *Deadly Invasion*, I chose to look at two films that were readily available on videocassette from the 1970s: *The Bees* (Mexico, 1978, Alfredo Zacharias) and *The Swarm* (USA, 1978, Irwin Allen), along with Jack Laflin’s 1975 novel also titled *The Bees*. These pop cultural media texts have been responsible for much of the hysteria surrounding the killer bee. Ostensibly, the films and Laflin’s novel are based on scientific evidence. However, the entomological evidence in these popular cultural texts has been exploited and distorted for entertainment purposes. In the section below, I discuss the scientific basis for these belief narratives. Both Zacharias’ film and Laflin’s novel (unrelated, but both titled *The Bees*), open with supposed “factual” information. First from the movie:

[Killer bees] without provocation attacked and killed countless animals and scores of humans. . . . At this moment, South America has been completely invaded. So far there are no means to prevent these deadly insects from taking over the entire Western hemisphere. [*The Swarm* 1978]

Laflin’s foreword begins in much the same way:

What gradually caused docile, domestic insects whose normal function was to gather honey [*sic*] and pollinate crops to become cantankerous assassins, prone to strike without warning, kill people and animals, spread terror throughout an entire continent? . . . [The bees] have spread like a brushfire over much of the South American land mass, hijacking and Africanizing *linguistica* hives wherever they came across them. Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, Argentina, parts of Chile and Peru all felt the presence of *adansonii* within their borders. [1975:1-2]

And even *Deadly Invasion* opens with similar “factual” data:

It is speculated that by the end of the decade killer bees could have spread across most, if not all of the continental United States. The following *could be* a true story. . . . [1995; emphasis in the original]

*Deadly Invasion* even goes as far as to append itself with a brief five minute "documentary," where bee wrangler Norman Gary explains what the real threat from the killer bee is: "only time they are a problem is when a hive is disturbed" (1995). What these excerpts explain is that belief in the premise of an impending killer bee invasion is essential to the narrative's impact and, in this sense, these narratives function as contemporary legends. Larry Danielson notes that films like these have a major role in the construction of legend texts: "the films forcibly remind us of the roles modern media play in the re-animation, intensification, and distribution of folk narrative" (1979:219).

Carl Lindahl states, "No longer considered simply 'a narrative set in the past and believed to be true,' the legend is now judged a debate about belief" (1996:69). Many of my Internet and interviewed informants made comments that also reflected the belief in the threat from the bees. One stated that "There are supposedly documented attacks, but it's not as great a threat as *That's Incredible* [70s TV show] likes to make it out to be" (personal interview). Another informant stated that:

I sort of believe [in them] a bit, but not to the extent that . . . I am sure that there are bees, or a genus of bees that are poisonous to people. Obviously people are allergic to bees, so ah . . . it may have originated out of that somehow. Bees do swarm and they do move . . . to a certain extent . . . and that's what I hear. I always interpreted it as just being a person's reaction to the sting as opposed to . . . the actual sting [being more poisonous]. [personal interview]

Others were more assured in their belief about the threat from the bees. "They swarm after you and, and, ah . . . kill you," said one person I interviewed, while another person was a bit more descriptive: "they come out of nowhere in these great swarms and when

they hit, you can't get away—you're dead basically" (personal interview).

### Bee-ing scientific

All honeybees are the same species of bee, *apis mellifera*; however, the "race" of bee can differ, and different regions of Eurasia and Africa have developed different breeds of the *mellifera*. Queen bees were brought from African colonies to Brazil because of rumors of this breed's increased honey production. We more properly name the killer bee the "Africanized" or Brazilian honeybee: the hybrid resulting from crossbreeding between African and European honeybees. Although both the Brazilian and European honeybee are essentially the same size and one's venom is no more toxic than the other's, the Brazilian honeybee is more territorial and more aggressive, which is why we have saddled it with the moniker "killer":

Without a doubt, the most alarming and best-known attribute of Brazilian bees is their aggressiveness. Individual stings are comparable to stings of other races of the species. But Brazilian bees, especially in the northern states of Brazil, differ dramatically from nearly all European bees in their great sensitivity to colony disturbance, their ability to communicate alarm within and between colonies, and their capacity to respond quickly by massive attack on intruders. [Michener 1973:524; also supported by Winston 1992:53]

Even from a few basic "scientific facts" about the "Africanized" honeybee (its increased honey production, its aggressiveness, its behavior, etc.), the ground seems ripe for further legend materials to begin to take seed (or should that be, pollinate) since the story of the Brazilian honeybee so closely resembles the enslavement and transportation to the New World of African peoples. Specifically with Irwin Allen's *The Swarm* (USA, 1978), the Brazilian honeybee seems to act as a metaphor for white paranoia about African-Americans in the U.S., which I will discuss later.

How the African bees came to Brazil is a story well documented with enough consistency in several sources that we could call it "true": Warwick Kerr, a Brazilian geneticist, heard about the

increased honey production of the African honeybee, imported some queens, and crossbred them with his own European honeybees (Michener 1973:523; Winston 1992:10 and 89-90; and even Laflin 1976:1). However, *how* these hybrid bees escaped begins to approach legend: somehow the bees escaped, went feral and spread across South America heading for (the implied greener pastures of) North America. Michener best tells the story of the bees' escape:

In 1957, however, a visiting beekeeper, not understanding the precautions in the apiary at Rio Claro against the escape of queens and drones, removed the queen excluder<sup>1</sup> at the hive entrances. Before his action was discovered, 26 swarms headed by queens from Africa had escaped. [1973:523]

Another version reads: "A visiting bee keeper accidentally tripped a lever and 26 swarms of the hybrid bees escaped, and quickly began to dominate breeding, reducing honey production and increasing ferocity" (*Fortean Times* 50:14). The *Fortean Times* piece shows how stories such as this one begin to take shape on their own and gradually become embellished, i.e., the bees' "increasing ferocity."

A further step toward rumor replacing science occurs in Zacharias' film *The Bees*. The opening sequence of the film is a reconstruction of the bees' initial escape from their Brazilian apiary. However, in this version, a poor Brazilian beekeeper and his son break into an American run apiary to steal honey and accidentally open the wrong hive. Dr. Miller exclaims dramatically upon discovering his "experimental" hives destroyed: "God dammit! Instead of robbing the domestic hives, they had to meddle with these *killer bees!*" (1978).

Perhaps the most ambiguous aspect of killer bee lore, which is most frequently iterated in these legends, is the ferocity of the attacks. Only one of my St. John's informants identified the fact that the bees first need to be irritated before they attack, but then, as he put it, "they go berserk" (personal interview). The seemingly unprovoked nature of these attacks is also repeated in the killer bee films, with greater or lesser degrees of provocation. For example, Zacharias' *The Bees* features three provoked attacks: a wayward basketball rolls into a heavily infested cave, a child maliciously throws a baseball at

a hive, and a pedestrian walks under a boardwalk only to stumble upon a hive. The film also has two totally unprovoked attacks: the swarm initially lands on a crowded beach and eventually decides to attack an equestrian club. This film is quite unlike the other two films which have either totally unprovoked attacks because the bees (somehow) want to take over the state of Texas (*The Swarm*) or which have entirely provoked attacks: car horns blasting too close to the hive, amp feedback and loud rock music in too close proximity to an Africanized apiary, and one dumb kid who takes a couple of shotgun blasts to some hives (*Deadly Invasion*). Other news, and news-related sources, confirm the provocation needed for "killer" bees to attack, even if that provocation is unintentional. *The Fortean Times* has reported the bees attacking funerals (78:10) and schools (50:14). Some reports focus on the sheer number of stings. For example, "One man, agonized by a thousand head stings, shot himself dead," and another report mentions more than 300 stings (both reports *Fortean Times* 61:17). Likewise, the three attacks mentioned in Kohut & Sweet's *News From the Fringe* were all unintentionally provoked attacks, from lawn mowing to insecticide sprayings (1993:198). The informants I spoke with in St. John's were all under the impression that these bees attack totally unprovoked, except the one informant above who identified that the bees first have to be disturbed in some way before they attack.

### A bee for all seasons

What are the contemporary anxieties that these films reflect? Although these narratives are all about the threat to the United States from the Africanized honeybee that ostensibly should classify these narratives as, according to Brunvand, "Animal Stories/Legends" (cf. Brunvand 1986, 1989) or "Contamination" stories (cf. Brunvand 1981, 1984, 1986), their individual anxieties reflect a difference in their taxonomic positions.

For example, Zacharias' *The Bees* reflects the concern that various interest groups, from big business to the government, are illegally smuggling the bees into the United States. The business concerns, from increased honey production to the cosmetic industry's

desire for the African royal jelly, pre-empt any safety concerns for the public health. The film does have a wonderful sense of irony, perhaps unintentionally: Dr. Miller's widow (also a Dr. Miller) smuggles the bees into the U.S. herself, for scientific purposes only, but hidden in her cosmetics bag. Another concern reflected in the film's depiction of the bees' initial release in Brazil is some government official in the Department of Agriculture who is personally siphoning off funding from the killer bee project, which makes the acquisition of the proper equipment impossible. The film seems to argue that if the government was not quite so corrupt, Dr. Miller would have had the equipment necessary to prevent the poor beekeeper from accidentally releasing the bees. Zacharias' film, then, classifies the killer bee narrative as business and professional legends (the smuggling of the bees into the U.S.) and legends about governments (that ecological disaster occurs from government greed) (cf. Brunvand 1984, 1986, 1989), or perhaps as a synthesis of the two motifs into a more complicated narrative. The film also has a third legend motif, treated incidentally: Dr. Miller (the widow) is mugged while in a New York City elevator. The potential thieves open her make-up case and are stung to death by the hidden bees, introducing a sense of the "Crime Legends" (cf. Wachs 1988) category to the fold. *The Bees* reflects a variety of anxieties of the post-Watergate America: that big businesses operate outside the law and are creating health risks for the public, that government officials are often corrupt and pilfer funding, resulting in ecological disasters because of insufficient equipment, and even the anxiety about urban living and crime.

*The Swarm*, however, reflects a different series of anxieties. The main legend classification type that the film reflects is Brunvand's "Business, Professional and Government Legends" (cf. Brunvand 1989), specifically a sub-group which can be identified as "Military Legends." The central *agon* of the film is the battle between the American military and the legions of bees that are making their way across Texas. Most of the film takes place at a nuclear missile silo, which is where the bees first attacked. Throughout the film, the word "war" is used concerning the attempts to deal with the bees; in fact,

*militarismus* is the worldview that dominates the entire discourse of the film. This is almost the same discourse that dominates Laflin's novel, *The Bees*, which likewise deals with the military's attempts to stop the advancing bees in Central America. In both cases, the contemporary anxiety of Americans regarding their military losses in Vietnam never seems too far away. Implicit in these narratives is the idea that the United States needs a military victory to counter their defeat in South East Asia. Seen racially, the bees could even be seen to represent the Viet Cong themselves—the bees' yellow and black markings representing both the racial stereotyping of East Asians as "yellow"-skin colored and the black of the Viet Cong uniforms. These military victories over the bees can therefore be seen as symbolic victories against a Vietnamese that the American military machine could not defeat in reality.

The bees of *The Swarm* are no respecters of Middle American values, either—furthering the symbolic equation between the bees and the Vietnamese. Applying William Bascom's "Four Functions of Folklore" to this film reveals the underlying anxiety of this narrative. Ostensibly, *The Swarm* is an action-adventure movie with a huge Hollywood cast that is intended to be "just entertainment," but whenever "just entertainment" is presented before us, ideological analysis needs to be done to assess the deeper play involved, which the other three functions begin to reveal. The question of validating culture (Bascom 1965:292) in this film is specific to the military and the ideological position that the army exists in reality to protect American citizens from invading foreign armies which have no respect for the American way of life, as exemplified by the Maryville Flower Festival, characters like schoolmarm Olivia de Havilland and Mayor Fred McMurray, and that the controversy over the military's actions in Vietnam was an anomaly. *The Swarm* seems to posit that the military's "real" role as an institution is to protect the continental United States from killer bees, although the actual rhetoric the film uses reflects a different fear that I will discuss momentarily. The use of such a contemporary threat as the killer bee to justify the military's existence also has some pretense at "educating" the American public on the nature of these insects (Bascom 1965:293). Unfortunately the film continues to feed the hysteria over threats by

a good deal of “misinformation,” specifically regarding the venom the Brazilian bee’s sting delivers. The killer bees in *The Swarm* can deliver “venom deadlier than anything we’ve known” (1978); three stings can be fatal. As far as this belief narrative is concerned, the final of Bascom’s four functions of folklore, “maintaining conformity” (1965:294-295), functions as a synthesis of the other three functions: do not criticize the military, the film says, for it exists to protect you from invaders, and there is one such invader currently on its way to your hometown, and without the army, you will die. Apparently director Irwin Allen misjudged the “approved norms” of the “group,” for the film died a miserable death at the box office in 1978 and won the dubious honor of being considered one of the worst films ever made by Michael and Harry Medved in their *Golden Turkey Awards* (1980:153).

One final topic needs to be discussed concerning *The Swarm* and its reflection of contemporary anxieties, and it is an anxiety I personally find disturbing. I have already discussed how the killer bees in *The Swarm* may be symbolic of the Vietnamese who defeated the United States in the 1970s. But beyond this level of signification there is yet another racial and racist subtext to the film: I said above that the Brazilian bee (the killer bee) is the hybrid of the European honeybee and the African honeybee and that another equally appropriate name for this insect is the “Africanized” bee. Unfortunately Stirling Silliphant’s screenplay for *The Swarm* does not quite get the reference accurate, and the resulting errors reflect an anxiety less about the threat from the bees than about African-Americans in the United States. Perhaps we could restate this battle as the WASPs vs. the bees. On at least two occasions, characters in the film make the following reference: “by tomorrow, there’ll be no more Africans” (1978). Another moment refers to “the war against the Africans.” This rhetorical slippage is further aggravated by the fact that the only African-American I could spot in the film was a single extra in the back of a crowd scene; certainly not one African-American actor was given a speaking role, denying a voice to an entire race—a race who is being rhetorically confused throughout the film with the killer bees themselves. Unfortunately, the racial aspect of *The Swarm* is not an isolated incident. Mark Winston’s otherwise

excellent book contains a comparative diagram; a white figure represents the European bee, and a black figure represents the Africanized bee, although there is little difference in the actual appearance of the two bees. What this analysis leads toward is the identification of the racial associations of the killer bee anxiety.<sup>2</sup>

The belief narratives display an explicit fear of a foreign invasion, explained most directly by one of my interviewed informants in St. John's who made the comment that whenever she thinks about the killer bees entering the United States, she imagines "wetback bees" trying to cross the Mexican-US border illegally (personal interview). Thus, the killer bee narratives also seem to suggest a profound fear of unwelcome immigration from Latin America.

How have these narratives changed in their perception of the anxiety toward killer bees almost twenty years later? I have shown that there is still a great deal of misinformation regarding the real threat posed by the Brazilian honeybee in the public perception, but how has this focus changed in the cinematic treatment of the bees? *Deadly Invasion* is really a streamlined "Animal" or "Contamination" narrative, although there is a hint of a generic horror tale since the bees lay siege to a house for the final half of the film. I believe this focus is significant: both *The Bees* and *The Swarm* use the invasion of killer bees to decimate society and create a panic about their impending arrival (as explored above). *Deadly Invasion*, on the other hand, cannot posit that the bees are going to destroy the American way of life when they arrive since they have already arrived in the southern United States and have not destroyed civilization as we know it. Those fears of Latin American immigration and implied racist discourses are not present in the later film. What is under attack in *Deadly Invasion* is not the United States by a foreign army of insects, but the family. The Ingram family has moved to a quiet rural California town that has a killer bee problem. Although, we are told, the bees will not bother human beings unless their hives are disturbed first, kids, being kids, disrupt an Africanized hive. The angry bees then attack the local boys who run and take cover in the Ingram farmhouse. In fact, the structure of *Deadly Invasion* is closer to a contemporary legend structure than the other films were. In

*Madly Invasion*, Alan Dundes' "Interdiction-Violation-Consequence-Attempted Escape" morphology (quoted in Barnes 1996:4) plugs easily into an analysis of this film. The "interdiction" follows the moment that we discover the bees in the American idyll of Blossom Meadow, California, by the placing of killer bee traps. The local beekeeper delivers the interdiction: "You have to give them [the bees] a reason to sting you. If you're comfortable with bees, they'll be comfortable with you." As Barnes notes, "the Interdiction phase in such campus horror legends is most often only implicit, doubtless because of its strong didactic force for tellers and listeners" (1996:4). The *violation* of the interdiction is young Tom stupidly blasting the Africanized hives with a shotgun, and the *consequences* are that the bees attack, in this case the nearest point, the house that the hero, his family, and young Tom are holed up in. The bees lay siege to the house, forcing the family to initiate the final aspect of the pattern, attempted escape. Eighty-five minutes later (plus time for the commercials) the film ends.<sup>3</sup>

As Barnes notes, it is the dénouement in contemporary legend that is vital to an understanding of the culture that produces it:

What is true for this text is true for thousands of such texts: as it makes clear, the climactic moment in the urban legend may be defined effectively as the moment when the listener discovers the presence of hidden plot functions, functions that have been deliberately suppressed and withheld for reasons which are ultimately formal and generic. In other words, legend plots, like mystery plots, are often *elliptical*. . . . [1996:5]

Although it is implicit in Barnes' article, we need to contextualize the climax in contemporary legends as reflecting the culture in which the narratives are presented. Here, the suppressed function becomes explicit in the documentary appended to the film: that killer bees are not the invading armies of Genghis Khan, laying waste to everything in their path, but with the proper knowledge and information, which the film makers have seen fit to supply (an ideological position to be sure), one can escape a killer bee attack and even prevent further ones. This is not just a question of the change in times increasing the available material about the bees, as much as it is that those belief

narratives, even those that purport themselves as “fictionalized truth,” can be told which are based on a reasonable amount of factual material (*Deadly Invasion*’s opening statement: “the following could be a true story. . .”). Cinema, as Victor Turner noted, is subjunctive:

Most cultural performances belong to culture’s “subjunctive” mood. “Subjunctive” is defined by Webster as “that mood of a verb used to express supposition, desire, hypothesis, possibility, etc., rather than to state an actual fact, as the mood of *were*, in ‘if I *were* you’.” [Turner 1984:20-21]

Ritual, carnival, festival, theater, film, and similar performative genres clearly possess many of these attributes. Ergo, cinema, like legend, is a negotiation of the possible while fully recognizing the self-reflexive nature of its medium. Legends, particularly legends *in film*, are a negotiation of the possible (Oring 1986:125; Lindahl 1996:69) in the subjunctive mood (Turner 1984:20-21).

Finally, it appears that *Deadly Invasion* has not had that great an impact on the popular perceptions of the threat from killer bees. None of the informants I either spoke with or communicated with via email watched the 1995 movie, possibly due to the memory of the poor quality of the killer bee movies of the late 1970s.

## Conclusion

Ironically, as way of a conclusion, although *Deadly Invasion* remains the only “killer bee” movie to be produced recently, the late 1990s saw a Hollywood revival of the “disaster genre.” The disaster cycle of movies in the 1970s—from *The Poseidon Adventure* (USA, 1972, Irwin Allen and Ronald Neame) to *Airport ’79—The Concord* (USA, 1979, David Lowell Rich)—includes the original “killer bee” movies.<sup>4</sup> The 1990s experienced a kind of cinematic revival of this genre, but, as we saw with *Deadly Invasion*, the contemporary anxieties the films reflect are very different. The 1970s disaster films focused on how a natural disaster affects society, or a representation of that society through a cross-section of characters, while the 1990s disaster movies focus more on “the family,” exploring how these natural disasters affect a specific family, or ersatz-family. Maurice

Yacowar, back in 1977, wrote the only scholarly article I could find on the genre. Although his taxonomic schema is too broad for what makes up a disaster movie (I would limit classification to the first two of his eight "Basic Types": the "Natural Attack" and "The Ship of Fools"), it is a useful schema. Most of the disaster movies from the 1970s, and their revival in the 1990s, fall into the "Natural Attack" category.<sup>5</sup> Yacowar further divides the "Natural Attack" category into two subgroups, "attack . . . by natural monsters" (either real or fantasy) and "attack by the elements" (1995[1972]: 262). Movies like the "killer bee" flicks and more recent films like *Independence Day* (USA, 1996, Roland Emmerich) fall into the "natural monster" category, whereas *The Towering Inferno* (USA, 1974, Irwin Allen and John Guillerman), *The Poseidon Adventure* (USA, 1972, Irwin Allen and Ronald Neame), and *Earthquake* (USA, 1974, Mark Robson) and more recent films like 1997's *Dante's Peak* (USA, 1997, Roger Donaldson) and *Volcano* (USA, 1997, Mick Jackson) are "attack by the elements" type movies. Although the anxiety of the disaster film, specifically the "natural monster" type with "its conception of human beings as isolated and helpless against the dangers of the world" (Yacowar 1995:271), has remained conservative, we see a dynamic aspect emerge in the genre's recent revival regarding the hero's motivations.<sup>6</sup> In *Deadly Invasion*, the primary motivation for Ingram is to protect his family from the bees. This is different from the 1970s disaster films, specifically the killer bee movies, in that the primary motivations were for self-, rather than for societal-, preservation. The family again is the locus for primary motivation in *Dante's Peak* and *Volcano*, and in *Independence Day* and *Daylight* (USA, 1996, Rob Cohen); the latter is especially noteworthy for Sylvester Stallone's own son, Sage, has a supporting role alongside his famous father. This locus on the family is different from the 1970s manifestation of the genre, which Yacowar characterizes as "that people must unite against calamity, that personal or social differences pale beside the assaulting forces in nature" (1995:271).

In conclusion then, not only do the killer bee movies of the 1970s and 1995 reflect the contemporary anxieties of the culture that produces them, they feed the legend conduit at the vernacular level

influencing the very real fears that people have about this insect. Perhaps most intriguing for me, these films, when approached as modern belief narratives, display what Barre Toelken has called conservatism and dynamism across at least two generations (1979:35). Despite being products of "so-called" *mass-culture* or *mass media*, some popular film genres, particularly these killer bee movies, reflect contemporary anxieties much as contemporary legends do. They also demonstrate the plot structures of oral horror tales, and they demonstrate dynamism and conservatism. More and more popular film products need to be studied by folklorists to highlight these cultural concerns.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Queen bees are slightly larger than worker bees and, in order to keep the hive in one place, the queen bee must remain in the hive. The "queen excluder" is a small doorway which enables the worker bees to leave (to collect pollen), but prevents the queen from leaving.

<sup>2</sup> In related research, see Cynthia Erb's book-length study (1998) on *King Kong* who likewise racializes non-anthropomorphic representations.

<sup>3</sup> One report in the *Fortean Times* reports that the killer bees "take half an hour to calm down again, unlike the four minutes for their European cousins" (*Fortean Times* 61:17). If the siege sequence is shot in real time (that film-time equals action-time), then *Deadly Invasion* is further accurate in its representation of the killer bee threat, for the siege sequence only takes about 25 minutes of screen time.

<sup>4</sup> Stirling Silliphant, the screenwriter of *The Swarm*, also wrote *The Poseidon Adventure* and *The Towering Inferno*, two of the biggest disaster movies made (both in terms of budget and box-office). Irwin Allen, the director of *The Swarm*, also directed *The Poseidon Adventure*, its sequel, *Beyond the Poseidon Adventure* (USA, 1979), and *The Towering Inferno*.

<sup>5</sup> I cite "The Ship of Fools" category to suggest a differentiation between most of these films and the *Airport*-type movies.

<sup>6</sup> Gone are the huge casts, in keeping with contemporary Hollywood practice, in favor of one or two leads and a huge supporting cast. In 1970s disaster films, according to Yacowar, "The entire cross section of society is under threat, even the world, instead of a situation of individual danger and fate. . . . Often the stars depend upon their familiarity from previous films, rather than developing a new characterization. Plot more than character is emphasized, suspense more than character development" (1995:268-269). This was a dimension that *Independence Day* director Roland Emmerich attempted to revive as well. "We like the structure of those films [1970s disaster films] because they keep you guessing; you never know who is going to survive . . . when you have a movie with a big action star, you know his or her character will triumph. In our movie, everybody's fate is up in the air. Audiences will definitely be surprised as to who survives—and who doesn't" (*Independence Day* [n.p.]). Emmerich is not quite honest here: once the primary alien attack is over, pretty much anyone who is going to die is already dead, and although some major stars appear in supporting roles, the two heroes of the film are clearly Will Smith and Jeff Goldblum, based on the screen-time Emmerich spends on these characters and the development of their stories.

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### **Filmography**

- Madly Invasion: The Killer Bee Nightmare* (USA, 1995). Starring Robert Hays and Dennis Christopher. Directed by Rockne S. O'Bannon. 85 min.
- The Bees* (Mexico, 1978). Starring John Saxon and John Carradine. Written, produced and directed by Alfredo Zacharias. 83 min.
- The Swarm* (USA, 1978). Starring Michael Caine and Henry Fonda. Based on the novel by Arthur Herzog. Screenplay by Stirling Silliphant. Directed by Irwin Allen. 156 min.